What is an 'Image'? (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:01:47

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

soulfulness, this soul making. I'm going to talk a lot more about what I mean by soulfulness and soul making.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And we could say we sense that they're real in some way, but their kind of reality is not the same as the

solidity of this chair or whatever. It's real in some kind of different way, but not unreal. So we're being a little more sophisticated and more nuanced in our whole conception of reality.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We'll elaborate on this later, but that can be a sense within or with an image. One has that sense of something shining through or having its origins or roots in something else, some other dimensionality, if you like, so that it's echoing, mirroring, or rooted or originating in that. It's as if the image and the experience of the image, or my being, my personhood, my life unfolding and its trajectories and events

and all that in my personality, is existing, if you like, on different levels at once that are mirroring each other, echoing each other.

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

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

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

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

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

If I share something—actually, some years ago when I was thinking about it, several people had asked me repeatedly, "Will you write a book about emptiness?" And I kept saying no. For some reason I began to somehow more seriously entertain the idea, but I knew it was going to be a huge amount of work, and I had also felt in some ways that I had put a lot of that out in talks, and I had moved on in terms of what I was researching and exploring and excited about and wanted to share and express.

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

Do the gods want it?

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

ambivalent. I didn't know.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

if we don't dismiss the image? What if we don't literalize it?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So that the past causes the present. Yes, of course, obvious. The present causes the present. We really need

to understand that. And we're entertaining the idea that in some way images may have something to do, imaginal figures may have something to do with or may contain within them some kind of *telos*. They're showing us something or pulling us towards or inviting us towards something—goading us sometimes towards something of what we are growing towards, if you like, what we are moving towards, our trajectory.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A few more things. When we're still talking about what's included in this, when we say image, it may be that an image is an actual myth. In other words, it's not just something arising just for us, but it may be,

for example, the myth of Christ and that whole—for me, I wasn't raised in that tradition. There's a real depth and freshness and beauty for me and moves me immensely. I never felt oppressed by it or bored by it because maybe I didn't grow up with it, I don't know. But that's, if you like, a myth—all that with the crucifixion and the resurrection and the betrayal and the mercy, the beauty of all that.

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

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

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

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

The other thing is the mixture within that myth of redemption, if you like, and suffering—in the Christ myth, in the Horus myth, if you know it. Beautiful. In the myth of Eros and Psyche and in the myth of Persephone, they're not so simple in terms of the relationship with suffering and freedom from suffering. I'm just saying that because that's so central in Buddha Dharma, this question of suffering and ending suffering—it's something I'm going to come back to. But often myths are not quite so simple in regard to suffering.

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

Corbin. So I want to come back to that, it's a very important question.

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

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

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

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

In papañca, everything is so damn literal. It just means what we think it means, and it's shrunken and small and concretized and literal. There's no soulfulness in it. There's no depth and resonance and beauty. The ego is very identified, taken very literally, and so it's all wrapped up in ego identity. It's very, if you like, lacking in other-dimensionality—in this depth and resonances, timelessness, cosmology. And of course, in papañca, there's contraction, generally speaking. There's not an opening out of the psyche or the energy body. The energy body is contracted, the psyche is actually contracted. It's very different than when memory becomes image. When a memory becomes papañca, quite a different experience.

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

Images can also, so to speak, cross-pollinate. In other words, we might, for example, read something or hear someone else's image or see something or someone or read a myth or hear a myth, and the image contained in what we see, read, or hear plants a seed, if you like, or becomes a seed. Maybe that becomes or joins an image that we already had, or gives rise—as a seed gives rise—to an image for us, becomes an image for us, or joins another image that we already had and makes a kind of combination. These things

are fertile and there's a possibility of cross-pollination. That's not wrong at all.

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

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

And as I said, sometimes it can be someone we just meet or just see on a film or something. One student was telling me they were actually quite down for a short period. And then they heard a woman speak—she was an activist. And they heard her give a lecture. I think it was even on the Internet, on YouTube or something. I can't remember. And the depression lifted immediately. Why? Partly because this activist was talking, the woman was talking, and her presence and her delivery and something coming through—she was seen as image, and it triggered the soulfulness and the aliveness of the soulfulness. It triggered a fantasy in the person listening. And where there is aliveness and soulfulness like that,

That kind of depression lifts. We come alive again.

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

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

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

We perceive that person materially and obviously human, a result of their past conditioning. Yet

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

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

This relates very much to tantra practice as it's practiced in the Tibetan tradition—practicing seeing this place or that person or one's own person as a Buddha, as a deity. The emphasis is on practice: one is practicing seeing in a certain way. This is actually how Buddhas see in that tradition. One practices seeing this or that or all things as divine. I'll return to this interface with tantra, the connections and differences, hopefully later.

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

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

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

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

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

It has another dimensionality to it. There are all kinds of possibilities there. We'll come back to this. But

the point is, eventually life can be seen as image more and more, or in and out of that perspective. And that could be just in relation to one's personal life, or more in relation to life in the sense of universal life around one and this world, or a mixture of the two.

But again, in that second one, in the sense of what happens to my view and my sense of this world around me right now, this moment around me right now in this hall—it's not necessary that an image in that respect is coming as a visual object, but it's how this here is seen. The way of looking at it renders it or sees pregnant within it already mythos, fantasy, sees it, feels it, senses it as image with everything that that means—not some other thing appearing spontaneously out of the psyche or deliberately, but this moment now seen as image, felt as image.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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