Soulmaking (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:13:30

When hearing these ideas about soul and soulfulness and soul-making, it would be very understandable if a person wonders, "Is that the Dharma? Is that Dharma?" Very understandable.

We've said a little bit so far in different talks about the possible ways of conceiving of Dharma that might open up a space for images and fantasy and this whole imaginal practice. I want to say a little bit more about the whole relationship of Dharma, ways of conceiving the Dharma in ourselves in relation to that, and the relationship of that with images, or imaginal practice, and soul, soulfulness. So that whole network of relationships and possibilities—really, possibilities of conceiving relationship there.

Earlier I was emphasizing one very fertile, very fruitful way of conceiving of Dharma and Dharma practice: as practicing, developing skill in a whole range of ways of looking and developing flexibility of ways of looking, ways of relating, ways of conceiving. In doing so—traditionally, at least how I would like to think of Dharma practice traditionally, the tradition of Dharma practice—in practicing a range of ways of looking, one sees that certain ways of looking fabricate less. They fabricate certainly less papañca, they fabricate less dukkha, less suffering, they fabricate less sense of self, and they fabricate less perception. That means less actual appearance, less experience. I'm using those words synonymously: perception, experience, appearance.

One begins to get the sense of what is it in reality—the way of looking at any time, what factors within the way of looking tend to fabricate more self, more dukkha, more experience, and what fabricates less. One goes on this journey of understanding, understanding fabrication, which means understanding dependent arising very deeply. All of that brings an understanding of emptiness—not to stay in any state, not to stay in any one way of looking either, but through the flexibility and the movement that opens up of the perception, the changes in perception that are facilitated by the changes in the way of looking, one understands emptiness more and more deeply.

That might be a traditional way of understanding, or a way of understanding traditional Dharma. There's this range, this flexibility of ways of looking and the developing of the skill with that whole range of ways of looking.

We also delineated within that range three broad camps or directions of practice. One is actually quite a thin avenue—this idea of bare attention, which is a bit of a misnomer and a little bit misleading. Sometimes people think, when I'm practicing mindfulness, when I'm practicing this bare attention, this simple attention, and I'm being with things as they are—to misuse a phrase of the Buddha—when I'm doing that, then there is no fabrication. No fabrication is occurring at that point. I'm seeing in an

unfabricated way. I'm experiencing what is unfabricated.

To my way of thinking, that's definitely not the case. It's a real misunderstanding of what's happening there. It's a misunderstanding that will also lock down what's possible for us, both in terms of understanding and in terms of the range of experience. Rather, can we see this mode of bare attention or mode of simple mindfulness as one mode of practicing, one way of looking which fabricates relatively less—a little less than our normal modes of ways of looking as we move in the world every day if the mind is not trained? Bare attention is a sort of a degree, a slight decrease in how much fabrication there is in terms of self and perceptions. There is still some self being fabricated with bare attention. There's still some, definitely quite a lot of, fabrication of perception. There are still conceptions wrapped up in there.

So that would be one camp or avenue within this range of ways of looking that make up the Dharma.

Second, we said, is a whole slew of practices, a whole range of practices that actually fabricate a lot less than so-called bare attention. Deep emptiness practices, deep samadhi, deep mettā practices, all kinds of things will actually not construct—or deconstruct or dissolve—the sense of self. In that moment, in the moment of engaging certain ways of looking, the sense of self, the perception, the appearances themselves begin to desubstantiate, become less and less substantial and dissolve to different degrees, all the way down to total non-appearance of any experience, any sense of self, of subject, of consciousness, of knowing, of space, of time. There's a whole range there. That would be a second avenue—everything that's included, all the practices that are included in that fabricating, unfabricating really quite deeply.

A third group or avenue is fabricating—actually engaging in skillful fabrication of self and of perception. This third avenue opens the door, unlike the other two, unlike the bare attention, the unfabricating. Actually, this third avenue of practice—deliberate, skillful fabrication, creative, if you like—gives permission and gives space and potential for the use of images and imaginal practice and fantasy.

So the bare attention as a modicum of less fabrication, the deeper less fabricating or non-fabricating, unfabricating, and the skillful use of fabrication. In a way, any Dharma practice that we do can be placed in one of those three baskets. Why not have the whole range? We should have the whole range. There's something important and beautiful in having that whole range.

We said all that, and we've also mentioned that with that, running through all that, or alongside all that, is the recognition that we also bring fantasy to our perception and sense of what the Dharma is, what awakening is, who the Buddha was. So there is fantasy, mythos, image imbuing our conceptions and perceptions of all that—of Dharma, of awakening, of Buddha, of path. That's not a bad thing. That's part of skillful fabricating, in fact. One mode of skillful fabricating.

But given all that, then we can revisit, open up a little bit more, the possibilities for relationship of Dharma conception, conception of Dharma, and imaginal practice.

Because, for instance, regarding images of the self—or self-images, if you like—the very emptiness of the

self, the thorough, absolute emptiness of any self-image, means that no self-image, no self-concept or conception of what the self is, will be true ultimately speaking. All of them are empty. And that thorough emptiness of the self allows us, in fact, to play with self-images, with different self-images, without believing any of them.

Rather than saying, "No, personality is empty, but the self really is a process," and then having a kind of implicit belief that that process is some kind of real thing—I've talked and written about this elsewhere; I don't want to go too much into it—but that then curtails the possibilities a little bit.

Or often one might come across teachings or believe that we always think of the self as some kind of puffed-up ego thing. Ego is equated with self in a negative way—some kind of big pride or grandiosity. And so we want to cut that, in that view. We want to cut that. Or we have a view: "Well, now I have an unhealthy self-image, and through practice, I want to replace that unhealthy self-image with a healthy self-image. And then once I've done that, then I can see that actually there's no self." So there's this sort of "unhealthy to healthy to no self" progression.

There are different models. One will come across different interpretations of what the Dharma is saying in relation to self. I would, as I said, rather open things up even more. All self-views are empty. None of them will be ultimately true. And that absolute thoroughness of the emptiness of the self allows us to play with infinite possibilities of self-view, with a multiplicity of self-images. And the key word is "play" there, and "multiplicity"—playing with that multiplicity through imaginal practice.

And even the idea or the sense that we can sometimes have with imaginal figures—that they have a certain kind of reality, they do exist in some kind of way; it's a different way than concrete reality, but they exist in some way and they shape our character in this life, or our essence in some way, that they flow through us and they shape what we express in life—even that kind of view has a place. It's okay, because even these imaginal figures—sometimes the word there is daemon, d-a-e-m-o-n—they are empty too. So knowing they're empty, I can entertain this sense and this idea.

Sometimes, again, in Dharma you would come across something that says the self—the nature of the self—is that it's the result of all past causes and conditions and ideas and events that I've come across. And all that connects together; that web connects together and gives rise to the self. And other than the self as a sort of confluence of past causes and conditions, the self doesn't exist. That is the true self.

And that's—in this view—that would be what dependent arising means and what it means to say the self is a dependent arising. It's dependent on past causes and conditions coming together and creating the self, which apart from that has no existence. That's given often as a meaning of what dependent arising means, and what it means to say the self is empty.

And so then, from that point of view, the idea of these imaginal figures existing somehow in some different mode of existing, or kind of reality—different ontological status, if you like—and shaping our life

and coming through in our expression, that wouldn't fit, because it doesn't fit this model of the self. It's just the confluence of past causes and conditions. If there are these eternal figures or timeless figures, that doesn't fit that.

But that view of the self—as just the past causes and conditions, and that's what it means to say the self is a dependent arising and empty—that's too narrow, I would say. A full Dharma understanding of what emptiness means goes way, way beyond that. That's one sort of direction into emptiness, to a certain level. Full understanding of emptiness goes way, way wider, multidirectional. We can see the emptiness of something from many different directions and much deeper than that.

So these imaginal figures—they may exist in some way, may shape my character and be expressed through me in my life. They flow through me in some way, or I channel them. They are empty also, just because they don't exist in time. Like anything, all things are empty because time is empty and everything needs time to exist in. So it's not only that things are empty because they're past causes and conditions. They can be empty in lots of different ways.

And all this—the thorough understanding of emptiness—what I'm really trying to say is: the more thorough and the deeper our understanding of emptiness, the more it can open out permission and range in terms of imaginal practice, and also conception. Because we know, "Hey, I can conceive that, because it's empty in another way. It's more fundamentally empty." So there's lots of space here in relation to self, imaginal practice in relation to self, and how it might fit with a broader Dharma conception.

But how about with regard to the whole question of ending suffering, or at least decreasing suffering, and the whole Four Noble Truths, which really are a way of saying there is suffering, and we're in the business of ending it or decreasing it? How about this whole idea of soul and imaginal practice in the service of soul? How does that, or what are the ways that might interface with this whole, very central conception in the Dharma—direction in the Dharma—of decreasing suffering, freeing from suffering?

Many people would wisely say that is what Dharma is: the Four Noble Truths in a nutshell, and we're in the business of ending, or at least decreasing, suffering. So how do images relate to all that? Well, it depends on how we use the images and how we conceive of the images. And there are options here.

So for example, here is some dukkha—some disease, suffering, or pain. One might let that dukkha constellate as an image, then work with the image of this dukkha, whatever it is—the image of heartache, loneliness, grief, or whatever arises. One can relate to that by holding and loving that image. This would be incorporating imaginal practice in a way that serves the direction of decreasing suffering and the Four Noble Truths.

Or quite simply, one might have an image of what is positive and beautiful—for example, Kuan Yin or a bodhisattva of compassion, or simply an image of loving light. Through practicing with that image, there is cultivation of the beautiful and positive. Just that by itself would fit nicely within the classical program of

the Four Noble Truths.

Again, we might place that image of love or beauty—that beautiful quality of heart—in contact with the dukkha, or bring that image through imagination into contact with the image of the dukkha. So there is the image of Kuan Yin contacting, embracing, shining upon, holding the image of the dukkha. All this is skillful use of imaginal practice that fits easily within the directionality and conception of lessening suffering found in the Four Noble Truths.

If, however, we bring in this conception of nourishing and deepening and enriching and firing up and supporting and opening soulfulness as a goal—if that becomes the thrust and direction of imaginal practice—then the relationship with ending dukkha becomes more complex.

In nourishing a direction of increased soulfulness in relation to a situation, experience, or image, we may not end the dukkha there. This loneliness, when we relate to it with a sense of caring for the soul and soulfulness and soul-making, may not completely end the dukkha. It may end some of the dukkha or dissolve some of it, but may not completely dissolve the dukkha of that loneliness.

Or this endless longing, this yearning or eros that might burn a little—what I've spoken about as pothos, the infinite longings—may not end. In caring for the soulfulness, I may not dissolve that endless longing that's part of it, or the image of loneliness. I may open up to it in a different way. I may give it place, as we've discussed. It finds a place. It finds its God, so to speak. But it may not end.

Maybe even some imaginal figures, as we've alluded to, may place demands on us. Those demands on the being are of different kinds and are not without a certain burden.

So what does the soul want? It's a different question than simply ending dukkha. What does the soul want? Well, it wants soulfulness. Souls want soulfulness. Souls want soul-making. And that includes fantasy, image, mythos—central to soul-making, to soulfulness. They don't necessarily want to end dukkha. That might be included, or a certain level of that might be included, but these can be different things in relation to any situation, experience, or image.

Even more complicated is when we put all this in terms of long-term goals—when we have this long-term aspiration of nourishing, deepening, opening, firing, enriching, supporting soulfulness. What's the relationship between that and ending dukkha or decreasing suffering? What's the relationship of that as a goal, as a direction, as an aspiration and movement, with the whole idea and fantasy of the Dharma? Complex. Complex and not necessarily easy to inquire into.

Let's go into this slowly. If at times soulfulness is my priority—rather than my priority being letting go or non-clinging or non-attachment or cultivating the positive or seeing that it's not-self or seeing the emptiness of this or that—if at times, rather than all those more traditional dharma intentions in approaching experience, soulfulness becomes my priority, then we can equate that with a kind of recognition.

There's already recognition that image and fantasy are present, and we're already honoring our need for them by making soulfulness a priority and understanding and working with that. But as we practice that way, with that recognition and making soulfulness a priority at times, it will have many openings and consequences.

Let me list perhaps five of them and explore them. As I recognize the presence of image and fantasy and honor my need for that—honor the need for soulfulness—as I do that more and more through practice and get a feel for it, it changes my vision. Literally it changes my ways of looking and perceiving things. And I begin to recognize what we've alluded to quite a few times already.

I begin to recognize the fantasies in everything that I care about. Everything that's meaningful to me, I recognize, is shot through with fantasy, with image, with mythos. It's imbuing everything that I love.

Including—I begin to recognize the fantasies that imbue my whole sense of the Dharma and my whole vision and conception of what awakening is, who the Buddha was, and my entire idea of ending dukkha or decreasing dukkha.

You can see, for instance, just historically, how the vision of all that varies dramatically. If we compare three streams of dharma—the more Vajrayana, tantric tradition has a very different fantasy and conceptual framework of what those things mean: ending dukkha, awakening, the Buddha. Compare that with more classical Theravadin teachings of ending rebirth and their view of the historical Buddha. And compare that with some of the more modern interpretations of Dharma—what I call more existentialist approaches. Again, the fantasy of ending dukkha, the fantasy of the self on the path, is completely different because the existential view says we can only end dukkha to a certain degree, doesn't embrace the whole rebirth framework, and so on. Three different streams with very different fantasies and conceptual frameworks operating.

I've talked about this in other talks and retreats, so I won't go into it again. None of that is bad. The only problem would be if I don't recognize that fantasy is running through all this. Really, really important.

Once I recognize that and truly begin to admit it and open to it—instead of either pretending it's not happening or admitting it but not recognizing how deeply and fully it imbues things and what the implications are—then actually it puts the Dharma on a different ground. We have a different grounding for Dharma, and it's grounded more in imagination and fantasy. Interesting. That's quite radical, I think.

What does it mean to have as our sense of the ground of the Dharma that it is already imaginal? And then this whole question arises: Why is it so important when we hear some teaching, or this person's teaching, or that teaching, and we read something, and ask, "Yes, but is that Buddhism?"

When we realize that the Dharma is grounded in imagination anyway—and as I'll point out later, also metaphysical assumptions—it's grounded very differently in that recognition. Fantasies are operating around dharma, around awakening, and also metaphysical assumptions.

Now, we could also point historically to how different Japanese or Chinese Buddhism is from Indian Buddhism. It's completely different. I'm not even sure the Buddha would recognize it as Buddhism. So there are historical, cultural changes which we can deconstruct and point to, asking, "Well, is that Buddhism?" That's a different approach. It's important, but it's a different track.

Already in the West, in terms of what we add conceptually and what we let go of in the cultural mindview—there are those kinds of historical changes. But I want to say something a little bit different. It has more to do with this recognition of fantasy at the basis of the grounding of what the dharma is, and also the metaphysical assumptions. The key word there is assumptions that we cannot get away from. If you pursue philosophical questions deeper and deeper and deeper, you get to fundamental questions about how we know anything, how we can trust what we know, about what's real. And somewhere we have to assume something. I can't get beyond having to make assumptions philosophically. And that's metaphysics, whether I like it or not.

So there's this strange reconfiguring, this tectonic shift—a grounding in the recognition that imagination is the ground of the Dharma, and metaphysical assumptions also.

Then we can start to ask: What is going on psychologically for a person when they're getting agitated about who or what the historical Buddha actually was and whether this or that is Buddhist? What's going on psychologically? What kind of fantasies are operating for that person around the Buddha historically, around Buddhism, around Dharma, around self? Something's going on in the psyche in relationship to all that.

And it hasn't quite recognized the grounding. It hasn't recognized that actually we can ground the whole thing in image. It hasn't realized that anyway there are metaphysical assumptions operating in any framing of the Dharma, of the path, of the goal, awakening—all the rest of it.

So there's this different ground, this recognition of fantasy, and that brings a different ground for the Dharma in the imagination.

And then another question emerges from pursuing soulfulness as a priority at times. It starts to open up other questions, and we start to realize: What is my fantasy? What fantasies are operating in this very question of how we conceive soulfulness and its relationship to the Dharma? And that includes the fantasy of the self.

So this whole question we're talking about right now—one could, and people do, very much try to say, "This is my interpretation of the Dharma, and this new concept probably comes from something Western in psychotherapy or something about childhood experiences," and they try to make a point that it's already within the Dharma historically. Or they say it's a more materialistic view, and again try to spin the history of the Dharma to claim, "This is what the Buddha was really trying to say historically." And so they place the whole thing in a...

I'm framing it as this is within the Dharma. And the self then is just kind of championing, rescuing the Buddha's original message, perhaps. And so one could try, I could try, if I was so inclined, to put all this talk of soulfulness in and try and present it as a more traditional dharma package that was already there, that I'm just kind of amplifying a little bit.

Or we could say, you could, I could say, this soulfulness, what we're really doing is expanding the dharma. We inherited this much dharma, this range, and now we're expanding it as is our right culturally. You and I talking about this business about soul and soulfulness and soul making are actually stretching what the dharma means. And that would be a fantasy. And then the fantasy of the self there is as a stretcher, as an expander.

Or another possibility is we're breaking out of the Dharma. That could be a fantasy of what we're doing with this talk of soulfulness and soul and soul-making. And then the fantasy of the self within that is as some kind of exploder of limits, exploder of tradition—an iconoclastic self, etc.

Different styles of fantasy of how we're conceiving the whole relationship of soulfulness with the Dharma, and wrapped up in that, as always, is a fantasy of self. But with any fantasy of a tradition or a trajectory or a path, it has to be engaging and enchanting to me.

So even if I try and put this—let's say I choose the fantasy of it's within the Dharma. It's already there. It was already there. I'm just highlighting it. Whatever fantasy I have of the Dharma there and of the self, that has to be engaging and enchanting to me. So do you understand? It's like the whole fantasy of this work and the conceptual work itself and also the fantasy of the Dharma. What is the conception? What is the framework of the Dharma that I'm engaging in? Is it engaging to me? Am I engaged by it? Is it enchanting to me?

Because I could go further and say: Is my fantasy of the Dharma big enough for the soul? Or will the soul outgrow the conceptual box and the fantasy box of the Dharma that I have right now? This is an important question.

So when I take soulfulness and this sensitivity to soulfulness and the desire to nourish it and support and, as I say, enrich and deepen and open, expand it and grow it, care for it—when that becomes, if you like, at least at times, the principal navigator, that sets us on an open-ended journey. It has no limits. Soulfulness, the increase in soulfulness, the deepening, the enriching of soulfulness is open-ended and without limit. And in part, that's because the psyche's desire for soul-making will keep opening and deepening the range of perception. I'm going to come back to this.

So when we take soulfulness as, if you like, the most important thing, and we navigate that way at those times, the psyche's desire for soul-making will open and deepen and expand the range of perception of self, of other, and world. And that expanding of the range of perception is part of soulfulness. And that's part of what makes this navigation by soulfulness, by sensitivity to soulfulness, open-ended.

The pace at which that deepening and expanding of the range of perception happens—the range of appearance and experience—the pace at which that happens is quite individual. I think it depends, if you like, on how much fire, so to speak, a person has, how fiery their soul is, how much eros runs through their soul and drives their soul. Some people are really quite fiery and quite quick. There's a lot of eros there. I'm going to come back to this soon. And so this opening of the perception of self, other, world, etc., this opening of more and more soulfulness, and this movement of soul-making that opens up that range happens quite quickly. They burn through quite quickly into new territory.

In other people it's very, very slow. In other people it barely seems to move much at all.

So when we take soulfulness as a navigator, we're in a way saying yes to the psyche's desire for soul-making. I'm going to come back to this. And that keeps opening a range of perception—perception, perception, experience—the range of experience of self, other, world, and that happens at different paces for different people.

But the question: is my Dharma framework that I'm operating in, is my fantasy or vision, if you like, my mythos of the Dharma, is it big enough? Or will the self outgrow it if I let soulfulness be what steers me, or the beacon, if you like, the pole star I'm moving towards, the direction I'm moving in?

So there's the recognition of the place of image and fantasy and the honoring of our need for image, fantasy, and soulfulness, and that expands into this recognition that that's everywhere—image, fantasy, mythos are imbuing whatever I care about—and then recognizing that actually through that, we can put the Dharma on a different ground, on imaginal ground.

And then there's the question, what is the fantasy of how I'm conceiving of the relationship between soulfulness and dharma and the self within that? And then there's the question: is my fantasy and my conception of the dharma big enough, or will the self outgrow it?

In all of this—I mentioned this before but I'll say it again—there can be a very different relationship to the teaching of the Four Noble Truths and clinging. Very often people hear that clinging causes suffering and if you don't cling then you will suffer less or won't suffer at all. And they try to make this non-clinging or lessening of clinging a way of life. They try to live that way, and very soon they're going to run into problems there. It becomes—sounds a little unkind—it becomes a little bit silly. It's impossible. It will not fit our life and it certainly will not fit our soul. To try to move through the world that way is a little bit unwise. It won't help the soulfulness. It's not very skillful.

Versus actually regarding this whole teaching about clinging and letting go of clinging and the whole, if you like, shorthand version of the Four Noble Truths—there is suffering, it's caused by clinging, I can release that clinging and have freedom from suffering or some degree of freedom from suffering—that's a shorthand version of Four Noble Truths. It's almost like a lens, a way of approaching things. Using that as a key.

So that shorthand version of the Four Noble Truths and the teaching about clinging and ways of clinging less, using that as a key that opens up the whole realm of perception. And that's related to this whole idea about fabrication, because it's clinging more centrally than anything else, and clinging in the wide range of what that means, that actually fabricates self and dukkha and perception of appearances.

So I start playing with this business of clinging and letting go of clinging and this framework or lens of the Four Noble Truths. And lo and behold, it functions like a key that opens up not just freedom at different times, but a whole deeper understanding of the fabrication of perception, the emptiness of all things through that. Rather than letting go of clinging as a way of life—a lot of people try and get into that, even unconsciously as a mode—rather using it as a way of practicing this decrease in clinging in different ways to different degrees and seeing that it functions as a key that opens understanding and opens perception.

One way or another, through emptiness practice, through imaginal practice or whatever, we begin to see that Dharma concepts—clinging and Four Noble Truths and this and that—they're not realities. They are not realities. Dharma concepts are not pointing to real things. They are ways of looking. A Dharma concept functions best when it is a way of looking. There's a range of ways of looking, not a single way of looking, but Dharma concepts offer—they each offer slightly different lenses, and even those lenses have ranges in them.

So Dharma concepts are not realities, they're ways of looking that bring freedom. And also, that bring freedom both in the future but also in the moment. Dharma concepts are ways of looking that bring freedom, but also that liberate other ways of looking, or that liberate our ability and our flexibility to look in different ways. So we pick up Dharma concepts, not as realities, but as tools, as lenses, as ways of looking. They bring freedom in the moment. We can see that and feel that. And through all that, it actually liberates more ways of looking. In other words, it opens up the perception. Dharma concepts bring a sense of freedom from dukkha, but they also open the perception. And this is crucial.

And that's a very different way of understanding the Dharma, what we're trying to do, what the central thrust and movement of the Dharma is. And as I said, I would feel it's more fertile in terms of what it then offers in relationship to imaginal practice and by allowing place and space for imaginal practice.

And so in relation to this, all this is still talking about the relationship of these ideas of soul and soulfulness and soul-making with the whole idea of ending or at least decreasing dukkha. So we have to have a slightly different way of conceiving of the Dharma than what may be normal to allow this kind of fertility.

Now, I would say that we can orient—one can orient this navigation of practice and practices taking soulfulness as our caring for soulfulness and soul making as what's helping to navigate us. We can orient that in a way definitely that eventually brings more and more really lovely sense of lightness into the whole sense of existence. More and more a sense of the transparency of things, the diaphanous nature of things, the beauty, different kinds of beauty, as I said, depth, sacredness.

We can orient this care for the soul, this care for soulfulness and soul-making, so that it does liberate in these ways and bring a freeing up and an opening of the range of perception. In a way, perception gets healed of its limitations, often limitations that we don't even realize because we're just so used to them and everyone in the culture seems to agree on them.

So one of the freedoms here is this freeing up of the range of perception, the healing of perception, and also in ways that we wouldn't get without taking our navigation through the care of the soul and the soulfulness and the soul-making. Because, for instance, just seeing in terms of just purely in terms of emptiness, the emptiness of all things or the oneness of all things or this and that.

It will give a universal sense—everything is empty or everything is one or whatever it is—but it loses the personal dimension. I'm going to come back to that hopefully in other talks.

So this healing of perception, this opening of the range of perception through imaginal practice and through caring for the soul and taking that as a principle navigator, allows the perception to open up in ways that beautifully bring together or include both the personal dimensions, the dimension of personhood and the universal, and have both together or can lean on one or the other.

So we can take soulfulness as what guides us and the care for soulfulness and soul-making as what guides us in practice. And eventually there will be a lot less dukkha, or we can steer it in that direction. But on the way, it may include the dukkha of certain images and certain fantasies. And we're just conceiving it in a slightly different way. We're saying soulfulness is important, is the primary thing, rather than ending dukkha is the primary thing, which would be a classically dharmic way of seeing things—always ending dukkha is what's most important, decreasing dukkha.

So the goal and the orientation may be conceived differently, but certainly it's possible to steer through the care of the soul and using that as the navigator principle into a lot of freedom, a lot of lightness and transparency, beauty, sacredness, freeing up of the perception in really broad and beautiful ways.

So we might ask, too, given all of this, everything we've said so far about soul and soulfulness and soul-making, let's move on and state that part of soul-making is in relationship to conceptual frameworks. Part of soul-making involves conceptualizing concepts. And we've said this before, but again, to stress it.

The question becomes: what conceptual framework, what conceptions, what eidos—to use that Greek word again—what ideas and ways of looking nurture, deepen, open, ignite, enrich and support and nourish soulfulness? What conceptual frameworks aid the soulfulness? So that becomes a question that is part of practice. Just as in a more traditional Dharma understanding, the question would be: what conceptual frameworks help us to decrease or end dukkha?

So again, I mentioned in other talks, all philosophical systems, if we're talking now about conceptual frameworks, all philosophical systems run into problems of one kind or another at some point, and they all will rest on assumptions. Eventually, we come to a place where we just are making assumptions. We

dig deeper and deeper and deeper and go, and we realize, oh, the system of philosophy rests on an assumption.

So one of the conceptual frameworks that really supports a sense of soul and soulfulness and soul-making is this idea which we've touched on already: that image, mythos, fantasy is primary. It's fundamental and primary. That is not something that we could ever prove, I don't think. It's impossible to prove it. I'm not even interested in proving it. I don't feel I need to prove it because there's no truth claim there.

If we turn the whole question around philosophically, what we can prove, and what I spent a little time doing, is actually proving perhaps the mistakes or exposing some of the assumptions or critiquing, say, the dominant views of the culture or any views that claim some kind of reality or truth. One can actually prove that any system or philosophy, even if it's dressed up as not a system, that claims some kind of reality or truth, one can critique it from a number of different directions. Oftentimes, especially nowadays, and even some presentations of modern Dharma will say, "I'm not interested in truth, truth is an oppressive notion," etc., etc., but still contain within them implicitly some notion of what's true and what's false, and lean towards often what's quite a limited version of what's true, while verbally rejecting the whole notion of truth and saying I'm not interested in that.

So one could philosophically, as I said, critique quite strongly dominant views that claim a certain reality or truth, usually implicitly, or dismiss imagination or images, imaginal practice, and this talk of soul as metaphysics. As I've said elsewhere, there's always a hidden metaphysics in those kind of notions. Always a hidden ontology, assumption about what's real, always a hidden epistemology, always a hidden cosmology.

So what if we really open up to that, recognize it, all that, and then just see what if we entertain this conceptual framework and see what happens? And by entertain, I don't just mean think it, I mean actually see through it, view through it. I'm talking about practice here in a way that affects perception. Practice is not practice as far as I'm concerned unless it affects perception. So a meditator is someone who plays with different ways of looking, relationships, conceptions, in ways that affect perception.

So we say, what if this conceptual frame, what if this one, and we sort of put it in and take it for a ride and see what happens. So philosophies and conceptual frameworks become more like doors—opportunities. That word actually is oportas, like portal or port. It's a bit related to the word for door, our word for door.

So rather than getting stuck in truth claims, we're actually very, very light and flexible and agile with conceptual frameworks, using them as doors opportunistically, as opportunities for what can come, what can grow and open up through this door. We enter through this door and a world opens up.

So in terms of we're asking now, what is it that supports and nourishes soulfulness? And one answer to that is the conceptual frameworks that we're entertaining and the relationship with conceptual frameworks.

And another aspect of what supports soulfulness is love. Love and desire and eros. And this is huge. I want to just say a little bit now. I've said before: where there is love, there image or fantasy or mythos is operating. So if a person feels like, "I'm not sure, where is the image in my life?"

Where is the fantasy? Look where there is love. Where there is love, there is image and fantasy or mythos. Or we could turn that around and say fantasy and image are part of loving deeply. They're necessary in loving deeply, especially when we're talking about personal love. Fantasy and image are beautiful, necessary parts of loving deeply.

But we could say a little more. We could say also that, or just state as axiomatic, eros is also part of soul-making. Eros is part of soul-making.

Now, what do I mean by eros? This is quite tricky. Again, I'd partly like to say eros is undefinable, and I think that's actually very wise. I'm not sure if we'll get to it this retreat, how much we can fit this in, but perhaps at another time in the future. There's something about that that's really valuable—to hold eros as an undefinable, very expanding idea.

But certainly by eros, when I use that word, or even erotic, I don't just mean the sexual. It includes the sexual, but not just that. Let's say for now, as a sort of springboard definition, loose definition, that eros is the desire for more connection. You can see how that could obviously include the sexual, but let's say for now, as a springboard definition of eros, it's the desire for more connection with another, with ourselves even, with something in the world, with whatever.

Now, this desire for more connection operates in relationship to anything we love or anything where there is soulfulness. And it desires, so to speak, to penetrate further the image, the desire to penetrate further what we love. I'm using deliberately sexual language, erotic language. The desire of eros is to penetrate further. It wants more connection. It wants to penetrate further, or you could say, in a more feminine mode, it wants to open more. Open more to what we love, or open up what we love even more.

So it wants to penetrate further into what we love for more connection. It wants to open up what we love. It wants to expand it. It wants to inseminate the image of the beloved. So the desire of eros is to inseminate the image of the beloved.

For example, one of the musicians I really, really love is Keith Jarrett. Some of you may know him. He's actually done a huge, broad range of work. I'm not crazy about all of it, but a lot of it I really love. And I love him. And I'm, again, like Eric Dolphy, so thankful for him. But in my image of him, and so in the love and in the image of him, that image, at this point, includes a kind of vague sense of, let's say, what or who he channels. And again, not using that word in too concrete or literal or tight a way as sometimes in the New Age does. But there's some vague sense there of what or who he channels through his music and through his dedication to music.

So in my image of him, he is more than human. The image makes him more than human in some way. You

understand? The image of Keith Jarrett is inseminated through the eros to open up, to expand, in this case, in this way. It's not just, I'm interested in more of his music, and I want to hear this, and I want to hear that. But it's actually what he is. The image of him gains depth. He's no longer just a human being. He is that, of course, just a human musician. There's something else with it, but it's vague. And I'm not taking it completely literally.

So this opening up of the image and the fantasy of someone or something that we love, that there is this eros connection with, opens up the perspective, enriches the perspective, and that in itself is an increase in the soulfulness, a nourishing, a deepening of the soulfulness. They're almost like one and the same thing.

There is a nourishing and a supporting and an opening and enrichening of the resonances and the range and the depth of the sense of sacredness. So all this goes together.

Now, in other words, my sense of Keith Jarrett as something coming through is something very sacred. There's a real sense of holiness there. In other words, or with that, if we're now with Greek words mythos and eros and psyche and so on, let's use another word, logos, which I'm going to use as conceptual framework. That also opens up.

In other words, I don't just think of him as a biological machine with amazing neural networks that can do all this incredible improvising and incredible dexterity of the hands, and ears trained in this way and that way. Yes, yes, all that. But wrapped up in the logos, wrapped up in the conceptual framework, wrapped up in the image of him, the eros, the love, expands more and more so that he becomes in the image more than human. And in the image it makes necessary then, I have to make room with the logos, with the conceptual framework, for a different dimension of sacredness beyond the human.

What I'm really trying to say is the eros and the psyche and the soulfulness and the logos, the conceptual framework, they end up fertilizing each other. The eros opens up the image, enriches the image, penetrates, it wants to penetrate further, it needs a space to penetrate into, so it has to impregnate the image of what we love, inseminate it, open it, expand it. And in doing that, it gives it other dimensions. That's part of expanding it. And those other dimensions, the mind, the conceptual framework needs to expand to accommodate and support those other dimensions that we sense in the image.

So the soulfulness, the sacredness, the conceptual framework, the image, the eros, these are all feeding each other. Because when there's more of a sense of depth now, let's say in this image sense of Keith Jarrett, then I love him more because I'm loving more than just the human and all his human challenges and the dedication. I'm loving even more than that. I'm including that, but even more. So there's more eros and more fertility of the soulfulness of the conceptual framework, the way these things grow together.

So images, fantasies, mythoi, they need to and they will contact life. We've talked a little bit about that. We'll talk more about that. And in so doing, they bring healing of different kinds. And they also

deliteralize life. So life is just this, just that. This is my story, as we alluded to earlier. The whole, if you like, imbuing of life with images and recognition that image and fantasy operate, it deliteralizes life. Soul-making comes into life and into experience and into the sense of self and other life, coloring life, ensouling life.

Objects, things, experiences are enriched, given depth, another dimension, if you like, if we use that word again without being too tight around it. And they expand the perception so the perception then is different of things because they have this other soul dimension to them. So through the love and because there's a different sense of things, a different perception of things, they're more in-souled, we love them more. The love is deeper. And that love, as I said, that eros wants to, it will by itself, expand further. It wants to penetrate further into this image, open this image up even more into greater depth.

So there is this mutual opening, a mutual inseminating of the eros, of the psyche and soulfulness, and of the logos, of the conceptual framework. Granting and giving soul to the world and souling. What is it to sense the world with soul? And this is actually open-ended. This mutual opening, this mutual insemination of eros, psyche or soul, and logos. Potentially open-ended.

What is it, though, we could ask, and we should ask, what is it that helps to open the soul in this way, the psyche in this way, the soulfulness, and what is it correspondingly that blocks the opening of the soul and the psyche, the soulfulness?

Well, very often what happens is we're stuck and clinging to one view, either one image, or more often we're not seeing something as an image, and we're literalizing it. This is reality. This self-image is true. That image of the other, we don't recognize its image. We're stuck in one view, not recognizing its image. And this whole fertility that's granted by the conceptual framework being open and having room for image and the growth of that, the mutual fertility of Psyche, Eros and Logos is blocked, is stuck.

Sometimes it's that, that we're clinging too tightly to one view. Or we don't see image as image, it's too literal and then the whole thing just grinds to a halt because it's too concrete. Sometimes what we need is to bring in or allow or hear from someone else a different way of storying something in our life.

where actually the soul and this fertilization process has gotten stuck and contracted, rigidified. You need to let in another image or see it through the lens of another image—this experience, or this image itself, or this history of mine. And that brings more freedom. It frees things up and also allows the soulfulness to grow. The soulfulness is nourished.

I remember—some of you will have heard me tell that story of the retreatant where I offered the image at some point when we were talking of the sacred prostitute in relation to her past and things that had happened and paths she had gone down when she was much younger. She was stuck in a certain way of looking, a certain view, clinging to a certain view of that past and of herself in that past that was bound up in shame and literalism. And by just suggesting another, actually just bringing another image into the field

as we were talking, a lot of freeing up happened and a re-souling, if you like, happened of the whole story. The shame dissolved.

So sometimes we're stuck in one image, taking it as real, and we need to bring in or have access to some other image, a multiplicity that opens things up.

Or, as I said, it might be that the conceptual framework, the logos, is too rigid. So this is our box of what reality is, or what the Dharma is, or whatever it is. And the box is too tight. It does not allow a deepening or opening of the perception. So I cannot see Keith Jarrett that way because I don't believe that. I just believe in human beings and neurological wiring, which because of neuroplasticity can be trained quite extraordinarily so. The logos has its limits and will not allow this deepening and opening and expanding of the perception of the image. And because of that, the eros cannot increase because it has only so much area to move into. This expanding of the image that's allowed with a wider conceptual framework or a looser flexibility with conceptual framework doesn't support the deeper movement and growing of love and the movement of the eros. There's a kind of infertility there because of the rigidity and the tightness and the smallness of the conceptual framework, the logos.

Again, just to point out, with the logos, with the conceptual framework, that is an aspect of soul that's involved. Where there is fantasy and love, logos is always involved. Conceptual framework is always involved.

For example, we might have a fantasy of practice, and we might love mindfulness. But wrapped up in that is actually a love of certain ideas wrapped up in the mindfulness itself. My idea of mindfulness, my logos of mindfulness, fantasy of mindfulness—they're all wrapped up together implicitly and explicitly.

So in my love of mindfulness, and my fantasy of practice, are wrapped up potentially ideas about simplicity—the beauty of simplicity. That's an idea. The idea that mindfulness is something simple. Or the idea that when I'm mindful, I'm being with what actually is. Now that's a huge idea that's dressed up as a non-idea, as an absence of idea. "No, no, no, I'm just being non-conceptual, I'm just being simple by being with what actually is." It's an idea, and I'm in love with that idea as part of my love of mindfulness. There's a lot involved in that idea, and it's dressed up, as I said, as a non-idea, as an absence of ideation.

Or maybe wrapped up in my love of mindfulness is the whole love of being versus doing. I love to be. I love to just be and drop doing. A lot of ideas wrapped up. I'm in love with that idea, and that idea itself has a lot of ideas within it.

Or it might be the kind of mindfulness that's really into this microscopic attention to appearances and penetrating them or perceiving them down to their elemental nature—moments of this or that or whatever. And again, wrapped up in my love of practicing mindfulness that way is also that idea of scrutinizing and dissecting things to their elemental nature, to their real nature.

So conceptual frameworks, logos, ideas are involved where there's fantasy and love, just to point that out.

This eros, psyche, logos—they're completely interwoven. You could say they're actually aspects of each other, of soul.

And again, to stress that when we cling to a certain logos or a certain conceptual framework, it will limit or prevent the opening of perception. Because it only has a certain range, it cannot entertain and give ground and support to a perception that does not make sense within that conceptual framework. So it limits and prevents the opening of perception, the opening of experiences.

The question is individually: how quick does the fire of eros burn and penetrate and open so that it needs a new logos and also new images or deeper or more fertile? How quick does that burn in us? It's very individual.

But all this—I'm saying it because it's all related to the relationship of soulfulness and Dharma and ways of conceiving Dharma. All this is related, wrapped up in there.

In a way, we could say exploring this very question of the relationship of soulfulness and Dharma is potentially itself also soul-making. It brings into the very exploration the ideas of soul and soul-making and conceptual frameworks, different ways of understanding the Dharma and eros—all that together in relationships. And it can be itself something that is soul-making.

Thank you for listening.

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Thank you for listening.

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