Soulmaking (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:15:36

We've been using words like soul and soulfulness, and so let's take some time in this talk and the next few talks to explore what those words might mean for us, what they might mean for our practice and for our way of conceiving the relationship between those kinds of concepts and the Dharma. Let's open this up for exploration.

Probably most people, when they hear the word soul, tend to immediately conceive some kind of entity—the soul, a soul, some kind of thing which may not be material, but some kind of entity. Of course some people, especially some Buddhists, would immediately protest, saying it's not okay to believe in such an entity.

If we just slow down a little bit, even if one was using the word soul as indicating some kind of entity, there would still be, I would hope, the understanding that that entity is empty—empty of inherent existence. Knowing that, it's then okay to talk in those terms and to use the concept or the experience of that entity, just as Buddhists talk in the language of self and feel the self and conceive of the self, knowing either through experience or through doctrine that it's empty of inherent existence. But this doesn't stop us talking about it and relating to it and even having practices that are framed in terms of the self.

Just as we talk about and practice and think of and receive teachings about things like the five aggregates—body, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness—these too are empty. They do not really exist. They are entities that are empty, and we talk about them, we practice with them, we practice ways of looking that see them and regard them in certain ways. The processes that the aggregates are fundamental to, those processes are not real. The elements of the processes, the aggregates, the psychophysical constituents are entities, and the processes are, I suppose, a kind of entity in some sense—empty, empty, empty entities.

This is really important: not to jump on words like soul, because if one uses it with the flavor of an entity at times, that entity is always understood to be empty, just as self is understood to be empty. We use that word just as we use aggregates and all the rest of it.

But actually, I would like to more often use a word such as soulfulness rather than soul, to take it away from that problematic notion of an entity. Although, as I just said, I don't have a problem with that, I'd rather use a word like soulfulness and also soul-making, which is a word that came from the poet John Keats, I think, originally. Soul-making—you'll notice it's a verb. We make soul, one can make soul, or soul is made, so to speak: soul-making.

What does that mean, or what does it mean that soulfulness is made? What we're really talking about—what I want to emphasize here by shifting the inclination and at times the vocabulary—is ways of looking. That means ways of relating, ways of conceiving, and also ways of acting in the world. Let's call all of that ways of looking, relating, conceiving, acting—ways of looking that nourish, sustain, increase a sense of soulfulness.

So that's what we might say soul-making is: the increase, the growth and the fertilization and the nourishment and the support of soulfulness.

And what do we mean by soulfulness? What do I mean by soulfulness? I mean that richness of resonance in the psyche that involves meaningfulness—as I said, that's not the same as meaning. A pregnancy of meaningfulness, the emotional resonances that are often so subtle and so nuanced, not always, and often beautiful—these kinds of resonances of meaningfulness, emotional resonances of the heart, the heart resonating. This is part of soulfulness.

But also ideas—the resonances of ideas that are resonating. This resonating or quivering with or triggered by or opened by or associated with whatever is feeding that sense of soulfulness for us. Remember, this word idea is related to the Greek word eidos, and also includes how we conceive and how we see things—eidos, how we look. So that also is wrapped up in the whole rich, fertile complex of what soulfulness is: resonances with ideas, and also informing and shaping and directing and giving depth to the way we look and see and conceive. All this is wrapped up in it. In fact, depth as a whole is characteristic of soulfulness, I would say.

Beauty also is very wrapped up in or characteristic of soulfulness. As we said before, the range of beauty grows. So the heart, the being, the psyche, the eyes, the sensibility expand their range of beauty as the soulfulness grows, with the soulfulness. Beauty is a dimension, an aspect of soulfulness, of soul and soul-making.

And with all this, importance—a sense of something being important—is also central to a sense of soulfulness. So much so that we could say that what is soul-making, or when there's a sense of soulfulness, there is at those times a certain relationship with death, in the sense that what is soul-making gives us a sense of deep importance, almost of this thing that in some way echoes beyond, casts its image beyond my mortal span into death. We see life specie aeternitatis—in other words, from the perspective of eternity, beyond our death. When things are deeply soulful, they have that kind of resonance beyond our life, and they frame, they form, they shape and deepen our relationship with death and with our own death—and not in terms of belief. I'll come back to this.

Soulfulness or soul-making also has to do with seeing images, seeing or sensing images, but also with seeing life or seeing this or that experience or event or myself or my trajectory in life, my unfolding as image. So this seeing as image is also a very central characteristic of soul-making.

Love also—we've touched on this and we'll return to this—different kinds of love are very much part of soul-making and give soulfulness different flavors with each kind of love.

And again, necessity—that's something we'll return to—a sense of the necessity of this experience, this unfolding, this image, whatever it is. When it has that characteristic, that feel, that sense of necessity, there's soulfulness.

So all of that, and more probably, is what I'm trying to get at when I use that word soulfulness. And we're either nourishing it or not. It's either being made, that soulfulness, soul-making supported, or less so.

Now we could say, and actually it would be very wise to say, soul is undefinable. It's one of those what sometimes people call root metaphors, and as such, it's undefinable. There will be wisdom in keeping a sense of flexibility and plasticity and range in how we use that word. I think that's very wise and helpful. And so, just saying it's undefinable.

And at the same time, we could say for our purposes that soul is those ways of looking, those ways of relating and conceiving and acting that, as I said, nourish, fertilize, deepen, enrich, and support a sense of soulfulness, a palpable sense of soulfulness. So we can say soul is undefined, and we can also define soul as, rather than as an entity, as a whole range of ways of looking that feeds soulfulness. Now that definition may sound circular, but in a way it doesn't matter. It's leading us somewhere, potentially.

As an example of a non-soulful imagining or image, someone told me ages ago—actually another teacher—they were on a meditation retreat at the retreat center where they worked and had a senior position. They were meditating in a room on their own, and the heating pipes were making the noises that heating pipes do. They were meditating and hearing the sound of the pipes, and then began to hear voices from the sounds of the heating pipes. They heard those voices and started to listen closer and thought they heard another teacher and a friend discussing some problem with the retreat center. As if in secret, he thought in that moment that he could hear their voices in another room being carried to him through the heating pipes. And even at one point they said, "Well, don't tell him"—the meditator, the other teacher—as if they were trying to keep it secret.

Now, actually, that's more an instance of probably something like hallucination and delusion. It often comes when the concentration is too narrow, too tight, with too much energy. And it's what we call a kind of yogi mind manifestation. There is, in that kind of imagining, no soulfulness. There is no recognition, "Oh, this is an image." It's totally concretized. He thought he was listening to an actual fact, an actual situation, a concrete situation that was happening in real time in another room. There's nothing poetic there. So a very, very different thing there. There was no soulfulness in that sense.

Now, we all know maybe that kind of thing, certainly, but we also all know papañca, this Pali word, this kind of craziness of the mind, ego proliferation, the spinning of the mind, like a dog that's got a bone or chasing its own tail, just spinning and creating a mess of suffering and self-building. So all human beings

know that to some degree or other. And we can certainly say that is different than soul-making. We really want to get the sense these are two different things. Soul-making and papañca are different, even though papañca might involve imagination and fantasy.

In papañca, some of the differences between papañca and soul-making include the fact that in papañca, it's usually about ego reactivity as the dominant thing. The ego is very tight and caught up in its reactivities. So if it involves someone else, we're trying to get one up on this person or get some kind of revenge or something. It's so narrow in the vortex there. The self-view when there is papañca is completely literal. I just believe what I am thinking or how I am viewing the self. I believe that is the truth about myself in that moment. And if it's that I'm an idiot or I'm a failure or I'm ugly or whatever it is, a useless meditator, that's what I believe in. That self-view is also very, very central in what's going on in papañca. It all revolves around self-view.

Papañca, in contrast with soul-making, where the self-view is not literal. It's not to do with ego reactivity so much at all. There's not the centrality of the self and the self-view. Self-view is not being grasped at. There is not a preoccupation with self-view that characterizes papañca. All that's much, much looser and more spacious and more kind of see-through in soul-making.

In papañca we do not see, "This is image, this is fantasy." There's not that recognition. There is not in papañca a kind of diaphanous quality either to what is seen or the self or the image of the self. No light shines through that. There's no sense of something coming through that's perhaps divine or of another dimension, of depth. There's not much beauty in papañca. We're just in this vortex, tightly spinning and contracted, as opposed to the openness and the harmonization of energies and the sense of meaningfulness that characterizes soul-making. There's quite a difference between soul-making use of images versus papañca or hallucinations or delusions.

Now, I've said this before, but it's so important I want to emphasize it again. Soul-making happens or exists in relationship with images or experiences. Soul-making is in the relationship, or in the conscious working with images and experiences, and that relationship, that conscious working, includes the conceptual framework. So soul-making is in the relationship, is in the conscious working with an image or an experience or images or experiences—not in the images or the fantasies alone. So that's, again, helpful to have it as a verb, soul-making.

It's in the working with rather than it existing inherently, independently in this image. This distinction is really important.

Now, we could just leave it at that. But we could go a step further—though in a way, this becomes a tangent that I'll return to in later talks, I hope.

We could say that soul is that which views in ways that increase soulfulness, that feed and nourish and deepen soulfulness. Soul is that entity—if you want to use that term loosely—that views through ways of

looking which nourish, increase, and deepen soulfulness.

Compare this kind of definition with the Kabbalistic tradition of Jewish mysticism, where the soul, the human soul and mind, are regarded as fundamentally not separate from the divine. There's that entity that's not separate from the divine and divine perception. Therefore, because of this non-separateness, the human soul and mind and psyche is authorized—because it's not separate from the divine—and facilitated in its interpretations, both of holy texts and of life and the world and others and self. This openness of interpretation that we discussed before, this infinite interpretive possibility, becomes available precisely because the mind, the soul, is not separate from the divine. It gives the human range of interpretation authority and facility. It's actually helped because of having its roots in the divine.

Soul, in this definition, is that which views in ways that increase soulfulness. These kinds of interpretations, these ways of looking at texts or tradition or life or self or the world, are building soulfulness.

In the Buddha's tradition, there's the teaching of Buddha nature in the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions. This teaching gets interpreted in different ways and directions. Some people interpret it as simply saying that the mind is impermanent, there's nothing permanent there, and there's no fixed essence to it—in which case it's infinitely shapeable. So we have Buddha potential because there's nothing fixed in the mind and it's all impermanent, allowing it to change and be shaped eventually into Buddha consciousness.

Other times Buddha nature is seen more as a primordial wisdom awareness that already exists within us but is covered up. Similar to the Kabbalistic interpretation, this primordial wisdom awareness already sees things as divine and empty simultaneously. It sees self and other and beings and this world and materiality and the whole cosmos as divine manifestations—empty divine manifestations—without concretizing them or giving them independent existence.

This is what Buddhas know. This is how Buddhas see in the Vajrayana tradition. And this seeing, this primordial wisdom awareness, exists within us, within everybody, within every sentient creature, but it's covered over.

In that context, tantric practice is actually—or a large part of tantric practice is—skillfully mimicking this vision of a Buddha, this ultimate primordial wisdom awareness. One "fakes it till you make it." You practice seeing in that way, seeing how a Buddha sees, seeing empty divinity everywhere and in everything.

Again, relating it back—it's not exactly the same, but soul, Buddha nature, is that which views in ways that nourish, deepen, enrich, heighten, and support soulfulness.

Or in a more modern context of some modern psychotherapies—Jungian and post-Jungian—we say the mind or the psyche is imbued with archetypes and gods. They're part of the deep essence, if you like, or

fabric of the mind. The mind or psyche is rooted in the archetypes and the gods in that way. These archetypes then allow us to see through their lenses, or to be possessed by different archetypes, different gods, and they see in ways that again increase, fertilize, nourish, enrich, deepen, heighten, and support soulfulness.

There are quite a few different traditions that in some way echo each other here by saying something like: soul is that which views in ways that increase soulfulness.

But if that's too much—and we will return to those kinds of ideas later in the retreat, I hope—if that's too much, let's just say what I said before: soul-making is in relationship with images and experiences, not in the images and fantasies alone. It's in relationship with the conscious working with, which includes the conceptual frameworks. It's the conscious working with, the relationship with images and experiences. It's in that relating. That's why we use it as a verb.

Now let's go into this a little more. I've said, and I really want to make this fundamental to the whole structure supporting this entire investigation: What is Dharma practice? Or how can we see Dharma practice in a way that ends up being most fertile, that opens up the most possibility?

I would say: Dharma practice is the practice of many and varied ways of looking. And again, that phrase "ways of looking" includes conceptual framework and relationship, and ways of acting. Dharma practice is the practice of a whole range—the development of skill and flexibility and facility and range—of ways of looking.

It seems to me that any conception of the Dharma that doesn't open up to a range, that wants to either explicitly or implicitly make Dharma a practice of just this way of looking or just this way of conceiving, when it wants to shrink it down like that away from opening up this range and flexibility of many ways of looking—anything that tends towards singularity, implicitly or explicitly—will quite quickly run into either philosophical problems or dead ends, ethical problems or dead ends, or dead ends in practice and perception. That's a whole other subject.

But let's say this: Dharma practice is the practice of many different ways of looking and the development of that skill and range and facility.

Now, within that range of ways of looking, we could delineate three broad possibilities, or three camps if you like.

The first is actually the one that most people are most familiar with—what's come to be called "bare attention." It's not a phrase the Buddha ever used, but this kind of simple mindfulness, what's come to be regarded that way, forms one strand.

Actually, in a way, it's a misnomer. It's a helpful tool to think about bare attention—that we can actually be with things directly, barely, in that kind of stripped way, as if that were really possible. But it's not,

because that kind of looking still includes all kinds of assumptions and conceptions wrapped up in perceiving, in a mode of perceiving, a way of looking that seems very bare compared to our usual perception and ways of looking, but it's actually not bare. Nevertheless, it's a valid and helpful way of practicing.

So one possibility is bare attention—one avenue or camp, if you like.

The second broad possibility encompasses a whole range of practices that fabricate much less than bare attention fabricates. When we're in the mode of bare attention or simple mindfulness, we really can have the sense as practitioners: "Oh, I'm not fabricating so much right now. There is not so much being fabricated in terms of papañca and story and concepts." So there's a degree of less fabrication in the mode of bare attention.

But there are a whole range of practices in this second broad range of possibility that fabricate much, much less than bare attention. Much less. As the samādhi deepens, as the mettā deepens, or compassion practices—and certainly emptiness practices—we go way, way deeper in terms of fabricating less perception, so that the whole fabric of perception begins to deconstruct. Things start to become much less substantial—this is a spectrum here—much less substantial, and then they start not appearing, this or that element of perception, of sensation, just not appearing, all the way down to the total non-appearance of any perception, any sensation, any appearance or experience at all.

So there's a range of decreasing fabrication that one can—again, if one's practicing in the right way and thinking of practice the right way—develop that journey into less and less fabrication. There's a whole range of practices there. So that would be the second camp.

And then the third possibility is skillful fabrication. We can fabricate self and other, and the perception of self and other as this or that, the whole world around us and objects and all that, and fabricate in different ways and lots of different colors, if you like, to that fabrication and directions within that.

So there's bare attention, decreasing fabrication, and fabrication—three broad possibilities that span and break up or make up that range of ways of looking. Lots and lots of modes in there, except for bare attention, which is a more singular type of practice.

We cannot live in bare attention. You can try, but we cannot live in bare attention. We cannot live a life without fantasy—and I'm using that word in its beautiful sense on this retreat mostly. We cannot live without fantasy and without a kind of cosmology, if you like, a sense of what this cosmos is in which we seem to be existing. Fantasy and cosmology give structure, direction, and meaningfulness to self and the world, the cosmos.

So we can have periods when we're in the mode of bare attention—that's possible, that avenue—but I cannot live my life that way.

There are all kinds of very important aspects to that statement and implications of it, places where such an idea that we even could live that way comes from. For example, in the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries—this gradual change in human conception of the world that took place, centered in Europe—came the elevation and gradual dominance of the idea of being able to know reality in an objective way, removing the subject and the influence of the subject from the perception of reality and the world and materiality, or even other humans or society, and knowing them objectively if we take ourselves and our distortions out of the picture. With that came the elevation and dominance of measurement as the dominant paradigm and way of knowing.

Many of you will know, of course, this idea of objectivity and the absolute possibility of measurement grew and grew and got more and more entrenched, but then actually came back around on itself and began cracking its own structure with modern physics about 100 years ago—relativity, and particularly quantum mechanics. The whole idea of being able to be absolutely objective sort of cracked.

But anyway, with the scientific revolution there was—to borrow a phrase from Richard Tarnas—a sense of "ontological diminution" brought about in the wider consciousness, the collective psyche. What he really means is the sense that certain aspects of human experience became less real or were seen to be less real. There was ontological diminution of things like emotion or consciousness, aesthetics, the aesthetic aspect, the emotional aspect of human experience. These sort of became second-class or second-tier aspects of reality. They were seen as less real. The ethical dimension, the imaginative, the intentional dimension.

Now this is actually crucial, because these aspects—the emotional, the aesthetic, the ethical, the imaginative, the intentional—these are actually, if you like, the most human aspects of our experience. More recently, some psychologists think you can measure emotion by brain response or skin galvanic response or whatever it is. We can get people to fill out questionnaires and then rate their answers on a scale of 1 to 10, and therefore it's brought in again. But it's pretty weak that way in terms of the richness that's available to us.

So those aspects that in a way make us most human—though they are so central and so rich to our experience of being human—were actually slowly relativized and seen as less real than materiality and things that we could measure, things that were more so-called objective. And with that, what happened to the sense of meaningfulness in life and meaningfulness in the cosmos? It also got radically undermined with all that.

This cultural paradigm and dominant worldview that we've absorbed has profound implications for how we live and what we need as human beings. We require conceptual frameworks and fantasies that engage us and enchant us—frameworks that are soul-making. This soul-making is not optional; it's what the soul, the psyche, the human being fundamentally needs.

Recently, I've found myself navigating frequent hospital visits, tests, and conversations with doctors about

results while facing the possibility of death in the not-too-distant future. These experiences have offered interesting reflections on what is and isn't soul-making within our modern medical system. While hospitals today offer extraordinary capabilities and possibilities for human healing, when viewed through the lens of soulfulness, they present a fascinating study in contrasts.

Soul and death share a special relationship—they go together. The sense of soul, life, and death is central to our human experience. Yet entering the modern Western medical system, wonderful as it is, one encounters primarily conversations about statistics, survival rates, biology, and matter. The human organism becomes treated essentially as a machine whose functioning we want to maintain and optimize, minimizing damage where possible.

This approach is valuable and important, but what happens to soul when this becomes the only conversation? What happens to soulfulness when these discussions about machine function, survival statistics, risk factors, and biological facts consume all the time and space? Walking through hospital corridors—again, these are wonderful environments designed for biological functionality—one notices how lacking they are in attention to soulfulness as a key element. There might be a small chapel tucked away somewhere, but otherwise, the design serves the biological machine.

If one were to raise this concern with hospital administrators, they might assume we're talking about addressing different beliefs people hold about what happens after death, since patients may die in the hospital or face mortality. But I'm not speaking about belief systems. I'm talking about perception, experience, and appearance here and now—of self, other, and world. Wrapped up in this is a sense of death, but not beliefs about what does or doesn't happen afterward. I'm speaking of perception, experience, and ways of looking that are soul-making in this very moment.

The challenge is complex, and I don't claim to have ready answers. Several centuries ago, when everyone shared Christian faith, or earlier when all were Catholic, there was common ground. Today, the range of what gives rise to soulfulness is enormous. What would need to be present in a hospital to offer soul-making possibilities varies tremendously from person to person. For some, it might be religious context; for others, simply precious time with family, where close human relationships become what is soulful.

This is merely an observation—I don't have a clear solution. But what strikes me is how, as a culture, we seem lost. We've misplaced any sense of direction for finding soulfulness again, for revivifying and re-engaging it, for rediscovering the threads that nourish soul-making. Culturally, we hardly know where to look. I wouldn't even know where to begin.

This loss of soulfulness impacts us in countless directions, and it can infiltrate our spiritual practice as well. Many of my friends and I, whose practice spans decades, recognize it's possible to attempt living in constant mindfulness, trying to dwell in bare attention. This approach receives enormous emphasis and gets presented as an ideal: "This is what I'm trying to do—live in bare attention."

When one truly loves mindfulness and practice and pursues this path wholeheartedly, certain aliveness does emerge. There will be radiance entering one's sense of things and some decrease in suffering. But I know from experience, and many have shared with me, that after genuinely attempting this approach, something troubling can arise. As someone told me recently, "I feel neutered"—this after years of practicing mindfulness with complete dedication. Another close friend described feeling like something in her soul was dying, even as other dimensions felt vibrantly alive.

A dimension, a very important dimension, the soul dimension, was being killed or neglected. All kinds of implications and problems, limitations can come out of that.

So I can try to live in bare attention, try to make my whole life a practice of mindfulness and bare attention, but the soul-making will actually come then around practice itself—around the whole notion of the path, the whole fantasy or idea of who the Buddha was and what he is or was. It will come around all that, around the tradition and around the self as the person walking the path or in the lineage of this tradition.

So I can try to be mindful as much of the time as possible, and yet still the soul-making will come in because it's what the soul does. And it will come in around practice. If my practice is just mindfulness and this kind of shaving off of soulfulness—because that's what bare attention does, just as when there's less fabrication, in those moments there will be less soul-making. It's only in the fabrication of those three broad possibilities that there's the possibility of soul-making, really.

But if we're practicing just mindfulness, then the soul-making comes around practice—around path, Buddha, tradition, self, etc.—as fantasy, as mythos. So even in the time of the Buddha, in the Pali Canon, out of their meditation, the monks and the nuns would have had this whole fantasy, mythos, conceptual framework of awakening as the end of rebirth, and so forth. And that was the trajectory, the journey, the Noble Path that they were on. This whole fantasy and mythos about the Buddha and the fortune of living in the time of the Buddha as this sort of once-in-an-aeon manifestation, in Theravada Buddhism.

And it still enters—the soul-making still enters in relation to practice and Dharma around practice if the practice is very narrow and the practice itself is not so soul-making. It will come around it. And that is not a problem. It's more just something to really recognize and observe and know this is happening. It's not a problem. It's not that we engage in soul-making when we can't handle reality, that we conjure fantasies and mythoi and images when we can't cope. It's not like that. It's simply how the psyche works, how the soul works—through image, through fantasy, through mythos. It creates souls. There's soul-making. There is the nourishing of soulfulness.

You can see this in all kinds of things. For example, food. In relationship to food, what are the fantasies that get woven into relationship with food? Really interesting. Cooking shows seem so popular these days on television. And sometimes I find even some meditators spending an evening reading cookbooks. It's not because they have to cook the next day. They're just interested in these cookbooks and fantastic pictures

and such sensuality in the pictures. What's the fantasy? This is not a criticism, but what kind of fantasies get wrapped up in food?

Sometimes it's the fantasy of nature, connection with nature. Sometimes it's richness or the good life. And that's wrapped up in the fantasy that's keeping us—if one is into this, I'm not, but if one is into watching cooking shows—that's maybe one of the fantasies.

You will find plenty of hardcore Buddhist practitioners—and I've been in this camp myself—of just regarding food as fuel. Then that becomes a fantasy. It looks like it's not a fantasy. It looks like it's shaved off: I let go of all fantasy and papañca around food. It's just fuel. But wrapped up with seeing food as just fuel is a renunciate fantasy, and people can fall in love with renunciation and the path of renunciation—the simplicity of it, the surrender of it, the stripping bare of it. And again, that may be tied in with the whole conceptual framework of the Four Noble Truths as transcending clinging, or letting go of clinging.

So this fantasy and conceptual framework gets wrapped up in the idea or the viewing of food as fuel. Or the whole thing that's brought to food might be about mindfulness—and you get this a lot in retreat centers. And then the fantasy, the mindfulness fantasy in relation to food, is about tasting the moment, perhaps, or tasting life, literally tasting life. But also its broader meaning of tasting. Or it might be—and for so many people, their sense of mindfulness and presence, their fantasy that's woven into mindfulness, their practice of mindfulness and presence—has to do with nature: nature and their love of nature and what nature is and interconnectedness, and all that is all wrapped up in there as well.

Or again, if mindfulness is the main thing in relation to food—mindfulness of taste, mindfulness of greed—it's plugged into a more renunciate fantasy and a more renunciate framework that has to do with transcending clinging, transcending this world and attachment to materiality, attachment to sense pleasure, perhaps even attachment to manifestation, not being reborn again.

Or there could be a food fantasy—this would probably be a lot more conscious and deliberate in a lot of cases—as food as the nectar of the gods. Or a slightly darker image: the blood or the body of the gods. And we can actually practice that as an image, as a fantasy in relation to food.

But it will come in. One way or another, in relation to something like food, there's going to often—when it's alive for us, when we're interested and there's connection there—the fantasy comes in.

A fantasy comes in. Which one is it? So this fantasy, the mythoi, images—the psyche and the soul need that. They need soul-making, and they do it through image, mythos, fantasies.

Wrapped up in all this, and we've touched on this before, is the whole question about reality. Is this a delusion? Is it going away from reality and not being connected with reality? All that philosophical objection that comes up for people. But understanding emptiness can be really helpful here—deep understanding of emptiness.

This journey into really practicing ways that decrease fabrication in the moment, so there's a dissolution, a loss of substantiality, and then a dissolution of all appearances. That whole spectrum, journeying on that spectrum and then coming up and realizing what that more and less fabrication is dependent on, how things get fabricated. You understand all these appearances are empty.

I'm not trying to live in a state of non-fabrication—I could not anyway—or a state of less fabrication. But going up and down that spectrum of fabrication, understanding it, I understand the emptiness of all appearances. And that frees fabrication. It frees me to fabricate. It gives license and permission and beauty to the play and the playing with fabrication, to soul-making.

So it frees up fabrication, including the imagination. Because very often someone would say, "Soul-making, fantasy—that's fabrication," with the sense that it's just not true, it's not real, it's a lie, it's fabrication. But once I understand emptiness deeply enough through practice, I really understand all experiences are fabricated, all appearances are fabricated—there are none that are not. And that frees up this whole investigation into soul and image and imaginations and fantasy.

That's not quite that simple. It's not that all appearances are fabricated in the same way or have the same kind of conventional reality, but it can go a long way to freeing up the permission and the avenues to explore, fabricating in different ways, including the whole range with image.

Now I'd like to add to our meaning of soul-making, or maybe say it's characteristic of it. This realization, knowing that this is image, this is fantasy. So there's an awareness, knowing image as image. I want to say that's part—I don't think it's what everyone includes in their definition of soul-making, but let's include it in ours. There's a recognition that this is image, this is fantasy, and knowing image as image.

And even more than that, there's a flexibility around conceptual frameworks and views. We're not landing on one and reifying it, saying, "This is the truth, this way of seeing things, this way of seeing images, this way of seeing life, this is real." So included in what I want to call soul-making is this flexibility and skill and being able to move between different views. That's a really helpful, desired attribute, capacity, skill.

Now that flexibility in regard to conceptual frameworks might come through emptiness practice itself as it goes deeper and deeper. It might come through imaginal practice too, interestingly, or both—emptiness and imaginal practice. It might also come for some people through more modern philosophical investigations: postmodernism, poststructuralism, and that sort of thing. But it can come in different ways or a combination. And some people are already just able to do that. They're very loose and flexible in how they hold conceptual frameworks, very able to move in and out of different ones, even if they seem contradictory.

And it might be—I often wonder—it might be that some people may never be able to do that. They will never, for whatever reasons, be able to have that flexibility of conceptual frameworks. And their whole

way of looking is just regarding things as concrete: it either is or it isn't, it's either this or it's that. It may be that some people just don't have, will never be able to stretch and open that way. Just as it says in the Mahayana tradition, some people will never be able to understand emptiness deeply, and so one should be careful who one teaches it to. It may be the same around all this. I'm not sure.

But if we take this as part of what we mean here for our purposes—this flexibility and ability to move between different conceptual frameworks and to entertain them without locking down on this or that as true or the only truth or reality—if we include that, then part of what we're entertaining in terms of soulfulness, in terms of what is soul-making, part of the conceptual frameworks that we're entertaining that give rise to and support and nourish soulfulness, is the idea, the eidos that we're entertaining of the necessity of this image that is meaningful to me, that's resonant for me. That sense of the necessity of this image, entertaining the idea of the necessity of this image—that's part of soulfulness, it's part of the soulfulness there.

And again, to repeat what we've already said: I can sense that necessity, but I'm also acknowledging that it's given to the image through my way of looking, through my way of conceiving. So certainly I have that experience of it being sensed as necessary, but I know also that it's given. And necessity doesn't imply, "Oh, this image is necessary, therefore it's the only image or the only fantasy for me."

It doesn't imply a kind of singularity.

So with respect to the self and soul-making, there is really also the idea, the eidos, of opening up a sense of a multiplicity of fantasies, of mythoi, of imaginal figures and characters. That multiplicity is very much an aspect of soul-making and soulfulness and soul. And also the idea, the eidos, of a certain autonomy that these imaginal figures, these archetypes, these gods have—that's also very much a part, an aspect, a necessary ingredient of soul-making.

So we are not regarding them as factors or essential qualities of the self or the psyche or whatever. An imaginal figure is a person, in some sense, equal to the self. It's not a constituent of the self. It's not a part of the self to be somehow integrated into this chief executive self that will then make decisions and balance everything and navigate successfully through life in a balanced way or whatever.

And awakening then is not so much a process of, say, collecting the whole set of these constituent sort of figures or qualities or whatever and having them together, the full set, in a balanced way without any conflict between different characters, figures or aspects or qualities. We can open up the sense of awakening to even include the possibility that sometimes these figures make impossible and unreasonable demands of us and our lives. I'm going to come back to that whole question.

But that's a very different image of awakening, not as necessarily balanced in the way that we might think, not as completely lacking in contradiction or conflict, not as devoid of unreasonable and impossible demands on the self, coming from, let's say, the depths of the soul, the wider psyche, these imaginal

figures.

So all this means that perhaps there are multiple styles, if you like, of awakening, or directions of awakening. I've talked about this in other talks, so I won't say too much. But the views open, the view opens in relation to all that, perhaps.

And then also, we're entertaining the idea—an idea entertained that's really helpful and really opens up the sense of soul-making and soulfulness—that the human being is in the psyche or in the soul, rather than the other way around. The soul or the psyche is something in the human being. So that's quite radical. Esse in anima, Jung wrote in Latin—esse in anima, to be in the soul. The human is in the psyche, the soul. The soul is something much bigger, if you like, than the human and the human's life. We are in that rather than that is in us. And all of this has implications in relation to the images and working with images and the imaginal figures that come.

So when we see these imaginal figures and the plurality of them, the multiplicity of them, we can see, yes, not self. They are not self. This is not self, this image. But it's a different sense. It's beyond just viewing them as anattā, as not self, in a sort of more classical Buddhist sense, as a way of letting go. I see that's not self, that's not self, this is not self, that's not self. It's a way of deep letting go, this anattā practice, anattā view, way of looking—a way of letting go.

In this way of seeing this image and that image, and that all the multiple images are not self, it's a way of letting go of clinging, but it's empowering and vivifying, giving life to those imaginal figures as well, through all these other ways of fantasizing with the images and the conceptual frameworks around.

And again, in regards to the whole question of necessity: Who wants to come through? Which image wants to come? Which imaginal figure wants to come through? Who is it that acts or feels or sees this way? This is also a question, a dimension, a question that comes out of seeing the necessity of these images.

When we personify, when we let things take form as persons or imaginal figures, there is a disidentification with that to a certain extent. But the who—who wants to come through, who sees this way, who feels this way, who acts this way—that's a different kind of who than you get in, say, the Advaita tradition when they say, "Who is asking this question? Who is wanting to be enlightened?" There, the thrust of that turning the question back to the asker is that there is no answer, or nobody really is wanting that, or oneness is wanting that, or whatever. Here is very much more not this dissolution into universality, no one, or oneness, or whatever it is, but actually letting form as an imaginal figure, a person with all that depth and complexity and richness, knowing also it's empty. So the who goes in a different direction.

And with all this, with this seeing "this is not self," but we're empowering, we're not then claiming this image as a part of the self, as I said, or claiming this image to be in service of the self. Now, we could relate

that way. We can regard imaginal figures and try to see them as somehow serving us, helping me with this, helping me with that, making me become more whole, more balanced, more this, more that, more successful, grow on my path, etc. It's possible. But to me, a more interesting way is not regarding them that way.

In terms of regarding them that way, there's a short passage in the Iliad, in Homer's Iliad, where it says the muses met Thamyrus the Thracian—he was a musician. And he boasted that he would win in a singing match with the muses themselves. This angered them. The muses were divinity's daughters of Zeus. This angered them.

This boast—that he was a better musician than them and would win such a contest—angered the muses deeply. They struck him blind. But here is the passage that particularly strikes me: they robbed him of the divine gift of song and caused him to forget his harping. They robbed him of the divine gift of song.

There is a profound view embodied in this passage. The gifts of the soul do not belong to the self. Or in dharmic terms, they don't belong to anyone—here they are regarded as divine gifts. They come from the daimon, they come from the divine, from the archetype, if you like. They are not in service to us. We may be in service to them.

This represents a complete reversal, a 180-degree spin on how we may be tempted to view these things. We want and need soul-making—the psyche needs that. You could say the soul needs soul-making.

James Hillman wrote somewhere, reflecting on psychotherapy and the years of therapeutic work that preceded him, that perhaps what people were coming for was not just to be loved or cured, but to be told into a soul story. Not just to be loved or cured, but to be told into a soul story.

This soul story is another term for what I'm calling fantasy or mythos. A soul story is not so much my story—my human story arising from my personal life—but rather a story that we are in. We are lived by the story.

What does this mean? We are lived by the story. Again, this is a 180-degree flip in how we view our lives. We are lived by a story. This doesn't necessarily mean a classically mythic story—Greek or Buddhist or otherwise—but rather this mythic storying of life. What would it mean for us to view our lives this way?

And not in a clunky, rigid manner. Everything becomes liquid—to use that archetypal metaphor again. We're entertaining a mythic storying of life, but without rigidity, without viewing it in a clunky way, seeing it all as liquid. It becomes poetic, subtle. We know image as image.

James Hillman says, "To be in mythos is to be inescapably linked to divine powers, archetypes, and moreover to be in mimesis with them"—to mimic them, that is. To be in mythos is to be inescapably linked to divine powers and moreover to be in mimesis with them.

Some people hear the word "divine" and wonder what on earth it means. It can make us nervous

depending on our background and inclinations. But there's an idea from Neoplatonism—from thinkers like Proclus—called epistrophē, a Greek word meaning reversion, reverting to the archetype, the primal form. This connects to what we discussed earlier about archetypes.

Our life, or rather the way we see our life, involves seeing it in relationship to these archetypes, these gods. This concept also appears in Corbin's writings on the mysticism of Ibn Arabi, where it's called ta'wīl in Arabic. Epistrophē, ta'wīl—this echoing, this seeing in relation to, this mirroring of God or the image, and the life mirroring the God, the archetype, or a manifestation, an appearance of God, angel, archetype, daimon.

Is it possible to open up and give life to these ancient ideas—centuries old—but approach them now with a much more sophisticated understanding of what life is, what the word "real" might mean? Can we approach them with a more open and sophisticated understanding rather than either a naive one or what has become the modernist notion of reality?

Can the Buddhist teaching of emptiness help us here? I think it can. What would it be to entertain words like "divine" or "God," knowing that they are empty, fully empty?

God is fully empty. So hopefully we're going to come back more to this. But in working with the images, we can actually sense something other, something beyond, if you like. Sometimes that's in the sense of timelessness of an image, the eternality, the non-temporality of an image. We actually sense that, again, like a poetic image.

And that sense of timelessness, of something beyond, of otherness, that helps the image gather potency, be powerful, be deep for us, gives it a sense of significance, gives it a sense of something more than the human. So we can sense all that without needing to contract around a kind of naive belief in the reality of some concrete God figure or something like that, or a concrete view of an angel or something like that.

Maybe God is not separate from my life and the way I view my life, the way I view my duty, my journey, my acts. There are all kinds of possibilities here, but we need to open out and be a little more sophisticated with our notions of reality, our philosophical notions of reality.

When we talk about story, we're talking about fiction. A story is a fiction, generally speaking. And this is crucial in relation to all this, because a fiction, a story, is actually a shapeable thing. My story, the story of my life, is not a fixed, concrete thing, once and for all written down. It's shapeable. The past is shapeable. We can shape different stories, if you like, out of the same material of our lives, and different soul-making. We can make different soul-making stories.

A story is a fiction. A story is also not, therefore, something posited as real. It's not a rational explanation. I overheard someone the other day making a joke about—what was it that they were saying? Of course, saying it's God's will would be equally of equal explanatory power. They were making a joke because they didn't really mean that. They were dismissing the whole idea of God's will. But the idea of God's will at its

best is not a rational explanation. This happened because it's God's will—oh that, thank you, that answers my questions. No. It opens up a different dimension of relationship with the event that's happening, with the journey that one's on, with this thing that one's looking at.

The story there, the fantasy, the image is not functioning—it's not even intended to function—as a rational explanation. It's intended to open the soul-making in relationship with. Big difference, subtle difference, but big.

Story, in this sense, fantasy, gives life. It is soul-making. Actually, again, James Hillman points out that story is the only mode of accounting or telling about that does not posit itself as real, true, factual, revealed—that is, literal.

In all this, in the soul-making, or rather with soul-making through images, myth or fantasy—whether it's an image that appears to us or whether it's seeing our life as image, myth, fantasy—something is healing here. Something is healed in this way of looking, these ways of looking. Something is loosened. Aspects are loosened. There's a letting go, a loosening of self-fixation.

In a way, we no longer see ourselves when we see in terms of soul-making as so isolated, because we're connected through this epistrophe that is echoing and mirroring and rootedness in the angelic or the divine, if you like. There is this reintroduction and reconnection with what I was calling the vertical dimension that hopefully I can say a bit more about as the retreat goes on. Therefore, we're not isolated and two-dimensional, one-dimensional.

In all of this, when we use words like soul-making and think more about that, or regard things in that way, conceive of things in that way, soul-making, that takes the focus and the question away from, "Is this true or real?" The question becomes, "What is soul-making? How do I recognize that?" Well, it feels a certain way, opens up a certain way in the psyche, in the consciousness. It takes the question away from this oftentimes too narrow, too unsophisticated philosophical regard of truth and reality, and takes the question into what is soul-making, what nourishes, deepens, enriches, vivifies, gives depth to, gives range to soulfulness.

So it's a different way of relating. It's a reorienting both to image and fantasy and to existence, self, world, other, etc.

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