A Sacred Universe: Insight, Theophany, Cosmopoiesis (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:35:20

So I want to explore what might be meant by words like God, gods, divine, etc. that I've been using throughout this retreat. I want to explore how we can relate to these words and ideas—how we might make such conceptions useful, fertile, enriching, and opening for us.

I'm very aware that for many people, hearing or encountering these words brings reactions—sometimes very strong reactions, including negative, constricting, blocking, and aversive responses. Some people simply get nervous around such language. These are loaded words for many, and we tend to bring considerable baggage to these concepts and ideas. Much of this comes from our personal and cultural history, perhaps our upbringing and early experiences. For some, this includes significant woundedness from certain religious contexts, education, or upbringing that involved unhelpful ideas.

I'm aware of all this, but perhaps even more importantly, I'm aware of how easy it is to bring assumptions, preconceptions, and quite simplistic, unhelpful notions to these words. When we hear them, we immediately think we know what is meant, barriers arise, and something constricts. People argue, and this is rampant in our culture right now—this so-called atheist versus religious debate. The whole discourse takes place on a literalized, simplistic level, with crude notions battering against each other. People might entertain the idea of an old man with a beard on a cloud, judging, as if that really exists, or debate the creator of the universe and such things.

So while I'm aware of all the history and the possibility of woundedness we might carry, it's really these assumptions, preconceptions, and notions that I want to open up and hopefully render useful and creative in these talks.

For some people, the word "divine" works better than "God." In Tibetan Tantra, they use the word *yidam* for the deity, the Tantric deity. They speak extensively about seeing appearances as divine, knowing appearances and sensing appearances as divine. This is standard Tibetan Tantric language. They discuss the primordial Buddha, primordial Buddhas, cosmic Buddhas—all of this.

So again, the question: How can we open up these words, these concepts and ideas, so they become what we might call *eidos*—what we look through? How can we relate to such ideas so they become useful and fertile? Is that even possible?

I want to try—emphasis on try—exploring, describing, and elaborating on some possible conceptions and

experiences of the divine, divinity, etc., that we might have in practice and in life. These relate mostly to what we've been discussing. There are many possibilities here, both for conceptual frameworks and for experiences.

This is something I really want to emphasize and probably return to later: the infinite range and plurality of possibilities for both experiences of the divine and conceptions of the divine. I'm obviously only going to discuss some of these, and some of the ones I'll explore can actually mix and infuse each other.

Obviously, being constrained for time, I'll need to be brief while trying to explain these ideas and ways of experiencing as clearly as possible. Some of what we're discussing now—the ideas and experiences—really depend on understanding, a deep understanding of emptiness. Some experiences will also depend on deep meditative experiences of emptiness in practice.

For those not yet familiar with that territory, this might be quite challenging, though it might not be. I wouldn't assume either way.

As an aside, I've been thinking quite a lot about what a good idea it might be to approach Dharma teaching and insight meditation instruction more in terms of a curriculum. This could make so much more possible. It's like: "Okay, now you've understood this, now you've developed these skills in practice. You're able to experience this, you're able to open that way, you're able to have this or that kind of mystical experience, or this or that sense of well-being or dissolution of *dukkha*. Now—now can we build on that? Now that you have that understanding, can we deepen it? Can we open a further door? We've opened these doors before—can we open other doors?"

Without a curriculum, what often happens is that teachings at the same basic level get repeated, and it becomes difficult to move forward without people feeling lost or uncomfortable, or judging themselves. The fault isn't so much in the person or the teacher or teaching method—it's in the lack of curriculum and the absence of an established foundation, both in understanding and meditative skill, that would allow further deepening and building. Without this, the whole range of teaching becomes quite constricted.

So hang in there if these concepts feel difficult. It may take several listenings, and some of this may become clearer as your understanding of emptiness and your practice with emptiness deepens.

By the way—and this is something I will emphasize again and again—when I talk about God, the divine, or gods, always, always, always that God, a god, the divine, etc. is empty. It has no inherent existence. I am not postulating anything having any kind of inherent or independent existence. Sometimes this is hard for people to understand, and they assume that using such words means one is postulating inherent existence. But I am not.

We could ask, why bother? Especially if some of this is going to be complicated, perhaps difficult to understand, and somewhat elaborate sounding. Why bother discussing these concepts and conceptual frameworks?

Well, for a couple of reasons at least. One concerns both soul and soulfulness. There are aspects of soul that love ideas, that love conceptual frameworks—it's part of the play of the soul. It feels almost like a necessity for understanding some aspect of the soul, for its life, vitality, and vivification.

Secondly, soul and soulfulness and soulmaking need a conceptual framework—conceptual frameworks that allow for soulfulness and soulmaking, that enrich and nourish it, that are actually wide enough to give it space to grow. The ideas, the conceptual frameworks, the logos we are entertaining need to have enough space so that soulfulness can grow. They also need to allow experiences—that's part of soulfulness. Conceptual frameworks need to be wide enough to allow a range of experiences.

This is so crucial. Too often people live and practice while harboring conceptual frameworks that are uninvestigated, unarticulated, unconscious—and this perpetuates a very narrow range of experience, both in life and in meditation. The conceptual framework can function, and we want it to function, like a fertile womb—a space that is actually fertile where things can grow and expand. Importantly, the conceptual framework itself can also grow, expand, and stretch.

Soulfulness and soulmaking need conceptual frameworks that support them. We could express this with Greek terms: psyche needs logos. Psyche needs logos or logoi that support it, enrich it, deepen it, allow it. If the logos—the conceptual framework—is too narrow, then the possibilities for soul and soulfulness and soulmaking are narrowed, constricted. It's no longer fertile. There isn't the possibility of deepening, enriching, widening, stretching the vistas of experience and of psyche.

For example, the assumption or idea that images appearing to one are simply the result of random neuronal firings in the brain—that kind of conceptual notion is probably not very fertile to soulfulness and soulmaking. There are many other ways of explaining things that seem so attractive as truths, especially in modernist culture, that actually kill, stifle, and constrict soulfulness and soulmaking.

Let me begin by dividing up four possibilities—many of these overlap and can infuse each other and mix, but let's delineate at least four possibilities for experiences of the divine that are possible for us.

The first I've mentioned several times already on this retreat and elsewhere: it's possible for a person—much more possible for a meditator—to know, to realize, to experience, to open to... the language of how to put it breaks down, but to know, realize, experience, open to what is unfabricated—the unfabricated, where there is not the fabrication.

Usually through meditation, there is the cessation of the fabrication of any sense or perception of any object whatsoever—anything or object whatsoever, or any oneness or totality of objects. No fabrication of perception of object, no fabrication of perception of any kind of subject, even the most subtle subject of just a bare moment of consciousness or a vast awareness embracing all things. No fabrication of the perception of objects or subjects or time—not the past, not the future, not the present. All those most fundamental structures of experience—subject, object, time, space—all this not being fabricated.

What is left then, so to speak, is the unfabricated. It's not just a blank unconsciousness, like being in a coma. It's the unfabricated.

We've talked about other ways of putting this. We discussed Avicenna in the Islamic tradition, speaking of the darkness that reigns forever. We talked about the Jewish mystics' Ayin, which translates as nothing. We talked about the Neoplatonist One. All these are actually pointing to the same thing, articulating the same transcendent experience, transcendent opening, unfabricated transcendent reality—if you like—in different language, struggling to find words there.

It's there definitely in the Christian mysticism of Meister Eckhart and St. John of the Cross. Twentieth-century theologians and philosophers—for example, Franz Rosenzweig—speak of the God that is before all relation, whether to the world or to himself, the seed point of the actuality of God. He draws on the philosopher Schelling's notion of a dark ground. Different ways of talking about it.

In Buddhadharma, the Buddha describes it in different ways, uses different language. Perhaps the clearest is the unfabricated. And it's a way of conceiving the whole process that moves toward that—learning, as I said, through developing the art of meditation and learning how to fabricate less perception, less appearance, less experience.

Just gradually, gradually—starting at the probably for most people, starting at the levels of horrendous and painful solidification of self and other, an issue that happens in papañca—and just learning, oh, through letting go of clinging, identification, certain gross clinging to conceptions, that can fade away. It cannot be fabricated in a certain moment. And say, oh, that's interesting.

Let's take this and develop the skill, basically, of learning to let go of clinging, and I'm using that word in the broadest possible sense, to include identification and subtle concepts. Learning to let go of clinging more and more deeply, and at more and more deep and subtle levels. Not forever, but in a moment, as a practice of meditation, in different ways, and as I do that, I see the world of appearance of self, objects, and eventually time and space and all that gets fabricated less and less.

Developing that skill, developing that art in lots of different and beautiful ways, I go deeper in this journey of learning to fabricate less. And eventually there's—whatever we call this—realization, experience, opening to the unfabricated.

So this is realizable, experienceable, if we use those words. They're not even quite the right words. We can open to that, we can know that if we know how, if we develop the know-how to fabricate less in any moment. Not to live in a kind of unfabricated, which is impossible anyway, but learning as what meditation is, or part of what meditation is, as we talked about on other talks, learning to fabricate less.

Now this unfabricated, and again I mentioned this before, the Buddha said—it's so transcendent and transcendent of concepts also that the Buddha describes it in three ways. Often he just says, you can't say anything about it. It's so transcendent. Where all phenomena cease, all ways of speaking, all manner of

speaking ceases. He says, I think in the Suttanipāta.

Other times, and probably most often, he talks about it as so common in these mystical traditions that reach this level, talk about it in terms of negation. It's not this, it's not that. There is the absence of this, the absence of space, the absence of time, the absence of thing. And so it's sort of what corresponds to the via negativa in Christian mystical teaching. It's not this, not that, neti neti, if you know, from the Vedanta teachings.

And then the third way sometimes the Buddha talks about it is in a sort of positive affirmation as a kind of consciousness, different than our usual consciousness. Transcendent and without object and without support and not of time. Consciousness without attribute, without feature, as the Buddha describes.

Now why am I wanting to call that divine? Well, almost like I say, well, if that's not divine, I don't know what is—utterly transcendent, utterly beyond time, timeless, and therefore deathless. So that's a word the Buddha uses at times, deathless, the deathless.

And in many senses, there's this knowing that one has really a profound, profound and utterly transformative knowing of what is divine. People talk about in the theological traditions, the Godhead, God in himself herself. And this is possible for an insight meditator to know, as I said, just knowing how to go about it, go on that journey.

So there's the experience of that in a way that's utterly transcendent, that totally beyond any appearance whatsoever of any subject at all, any object, any time, et cetera. And then there's also the possibility, either before one has fully opened to that, but more often afterwards, of this unfabricated, this deathless, if you like, I say shining through appearances, shining through the appearances of this world in different ways. This sense of a timeless dimension to things, a sense of this transcendent, unfabricated, deathless, if you like, dimension, if you want to call it. The Buddha sometimes uses that word.

We could say shining through appearances and transforming the sense of this world, the sense of life and death and self and other and all of it. So, so precious. Utterly, utterly precious for a human being to know that and to taste that and to open to that.

So that's the second possibility. There's a sort of pure, transcendent, unfabricated, no appearances whatsoever, utterly beyond all experiences of subject, object, and time. And then there's the way that can actually—the authentic experience of that can kind of shine through the appearances of this world in different ways.

Thirdly, oftentimes what I hear from people, less so recently, but used to be quite a lot in other circles, is people use the language of the deathless quite a lot. Or someone might say, describing their meditation, I'm resting in the unconditioned. All I do is rest in the unfabricated, et cetera. That kind of language.

But really, what they're talking about is some other state. It's a state, an opening, a perception, a

meditative perception that is, if you like, a lot less fabricated as perceptions go than normal, everyday, conventional perception that most people have most of the time. But it's less fabricated than that, but it's not yet completely unfabricated. So it's not really the authentic unfabricated or deathless. And there's many, many possibilities. There's way too many to describe now, many possibilities.

All of them are beautifully lovely. Again, some may involve the senses being completely closed in some kind of jhanic way, transcendent of the senses. And some of them—or even the very same states—have versions where the senses are more open. There's this experience, feeling, or perception of that dimension, that particular less fabricated dimension, shining through appearances. And as I said, there are many such dimensions.

Very common in our circles and related spiritual circles—not just Buddhist—would be the experience of one love, one kind of cosmic love or cosmic compassion pervading the universe, woven into the fabric of existence. When people do a metta retreat or practice metta and compassion over some weeks, this will eventually open organically, without my even suggesting it. In a way, I'm often waiting for that to happen—not as the be-all and end-all, but as one opening, one perception that is so beautiful, enriching, supportive, and helpful.

At that point, those people often start using theistic language. There's a flavor, a scent of divinity that permeates that love. That love pervading and surrounding, while holding everything, has the flavor, the taste of divinity—even if the person has never used such words before, never had that kind of experience, never had that upbringing.

Another one, probably even more common in insight meditation circles, is similar, but what pervades the universe or all appearances is awareness. This can come in many different flavors—I don't have time on this retreat to differentiate between them. But there's a kind of oneness of all things in one awareness. Sometimes people call it one mind, big mind, cosmic consciousness, or sixth jhana—different variations of the sixth jhana. There are many possibilities here. The divinity is in the awareness, this awareness that is universal—not just mine, not just in here in my body or brain looking out at the world, but everywhere. All things, if you like, are that awareness or express that awareness.

Or it can be just one physical substance or one energy. One person senses the oneness of all things in terms of matter, physicality, substance. Also very beautiful—a kind of holiness, a cosmic oneness that can be an experience of the divine.

All of these are beautiful. But none of what I've just described are quite the authentic unfabricated, because they still involve time, they still involve a sense of the present moment and a perception of space, and there's still a very subtle sense of subject and object. Still, there can be a sense, an experience, and also a conception of divinity.

There's also a whole range of levels of experience of divine oneness that come from recognizing that

everything shares in the nature of emptiness, in being empty. That understanding of emptiness can be at many different levels and bring with it different corresponding levels of a sense of oneness.

So there's the transcendent experience—if we can even use that word "experience"—of the divine beyond appearances. And then there are different ways we can experience the divine through or in the appearances of the world, the appearances of others. Different ways that sense of the divine can shine through.

These can be split into two camps. There's a universal way—the divine shines through universally, and usually impersonally. For example, when the unfabricated shines through, it's universal, shining through everything, and impersonal. It may be easier to see in some situations than others—often in nature—but one gets the sense we're talking about something universal and impersonal here. In many of those other states—one cosmic love or compassion pervading the universe, one awareness of which everything is the play, everything having the substance of awareness—these openings are also universal and impersonal.

But there's a fourth possibility, which we're leaning towards more in this retreat and emphasizing: the sense of divinity shining through a person or thing as a particular theophany, a particular face of divinity or of a particular divinity. It may be an imaginal figure, or a person or thing seen as image, seen through the lens experientially of mythos, of fantasy. But not universal—particular. And not impersonal, but personal, involving personhood.

This is what I would like to hopefully unpack a little, to explore what conceptual frameworks we might offer as support. Is it possible to open and provide conceptual frameworks for a notion of divinity that can include, allow, support, and nourish a wide variety of experiences of the divine—not just of a transcendent divine or of a universal impersonal divine, but of particular theophanies? Whether they're imaginal figures or the imaginal in and through persons and things.

So my life, my personhood, your life, your personhood, or someone else's, as seen as, experienced as, sensed as, and conceived of as the expression, the manifestation, or appearing as the manifestation of the divine—of particular, unique faces of divinity. Is that possible? This is really what I would like to explore.

Just to say, as we go into this, it seems important to me—interesting certainly, but also important—in trying to offer or explore various conceptual frameworks that might support and deepen and have a place for this idea of divinity, these experiences of divinity, to tie it together with an understanding of emptiness. As I said before, to put everything, the whole Dharma, on a basis of emptiness thoroughly.

So how, for instance, does the exploration of fabrication—seeing what's fabricated, seeing how perception is fabricated and the total way it's fabricated, exploring less fabrication until one opens to the unfabricated—how does that kind of teaching, that way into understanding emptiness, tie together with some of these other ideas and conceptions? How does it tie together with the imaginal? And how does that experience of divinity as the unfabricated tie in, or relate to, other experiences of divinity?

So some of that is tied together, and the relation is actually very simple. It's really just a conception of the dharma, as we've alluded to briefly, and in a lot of detail elsewhere. The conception of the dharma is this exploration of fabrication, and different perceptions, if you like, are experienced, perceived, appear, depending on how much fabrication there is.

So an experience of cosmic love, so to speak, is an experience of much less fabrication than your everyday experience where that's not present and things and others seem very separate and very solid. So there is, if you like, a spectrum of fabrication that we can explore, and different experiences of the divine take their place on that spectrum of fabrication. And so the relationship is actually relatively simple once you get into exploring that.

The cosmic consciousness is a relatively unfabricated experience compared to everyday experience. An experience of a lot of papañcha, a lot of hindrances, a lot of self-building and other-building and issue-building is an experience of more fabrication and almost certainly less sense of divinity there. So some of the relationship is quite simple, fits quite easily—I've mapped a lot of that out before.

But in relation to the imaginal and the idea of theophany, this imaginal figure or that person that I love as theophany, and the particularities and the personhood there, the relationship is not so simple. So in exploring some of this and elaborating on and opening it out a little bit, I'm going to draw on different conceptual frameworks. Some are ones that I worked out for myself, and others originate in other traditions.

Remember when you're listening to this that no conceptual framework can claim ultimate or complete validity or truth. It cannot claim to be the total truth or to be a true explanation of everything. Any conceptual framework—there'll be some place where it either falls down or contradicts itself or inevitably, with any conceptual system, relies on some kind of assumption that's ultimately unprovable.

So rather than searching or trying to concoct some kind of complete or final system, metaphysical system or whatever, rather than that—and that's something I would actually be very much aware of if someone is claiming that or putting that forward, a system of ultimately true explanations, finally true explanations. Rather than that, and rather than seeking a conceptual framework that then is provable, I'm interested in the idea of conceptual frameworks as doorways, portals. The conceptual frameworks themselves are scaffoldings or structures that support our inquiry, our investigation, the fertilization and opening of our experience, of our practice, of our meditation. They nourish and support psyche and the meditative adventure and all of that.

So in what follows, I'm going to try to tie together a few different conceptual frameworks, but it's up to you. There's no obligation here to take any package, and certainly I'm not presenting some polished, complete product at all. You'll quickly realize that. You may gravitate towards one of these frameworks. You may tie them together in the way that I do, or I'm trying to at least, or in your own way. Or you may have some other conceptual framework that you draw on to support the validity of and fertilize imaginal

practice, the sense of the divine through imaginal practice.

Let's start with what we've already talked about—this notion of fabrication of perception and the learning, the possibility to learn the skill, the art in meditation of unfabricating to different degrees, of fabricating less perception. And eventually to open to, realize, experience, so to say, the unfabricated, what is unfabricated, this transcendent dimension, if you like, beyond any subject, any object, any sense of time, including the present moment.

So how does this unfabricating work? Earlier I said it's dependent on clinging, but we could also say it's dependent on delusion. In other words, to the degree that there is delusion operating in the mind at any moment, to that degree will there be the fabrication of perception. Perception is built up, solidified, made more separate, made more intense, to the degree of delusion.

Now delusion goes with clinging and craving, as the Buddha pointed out, but delusion really is, if you like, the most important supporting condition for the fabrication of perception and appearance. That's why it's first in the twelve links of dependent arising that the Buddha outlines.

So when we look with delusion, when there's delusion in the citta, in the mind, in the heart, it fabricates more perception. Now, the state of papañcha is full of delusion, isn't it? And that's why there's more fabrication there—more fabrication of self, more fabrication of issue, more fabrication of other, story. That whole structure is the fabrication of perception.

As there's less delusion, less belief in an inherently existing self, less delusion, less belief in any of the subtle concepts that operate in the citta usually—including belief in time and space and awareness of something, there are all kinds of possibilities—and there's less clinging, so the structure of appearances, the fabrication of appearances, begins to fade. They begin to be fabricated less and less to the degree that the delusion is not there. Or we could say to the degree that insight is there, there's less delusion. Insight and delusion are inversely proportional. So less insight, more delusion, more appearances. More insight, less delusion—in other words, less appearances.

Until eventually we see that in any moment that delusion is really drained from the citta, at that moment there will be this complete unfabricating of perception, of appearance, of experience. And one opens to, if you like, the unfabricated. And we see the world of the fabricated is built on delusion, we could say. The house builder that the Buddha talks about is built on delusion. So on his awakening he said, "Ah, I've understood, and there's not the delusion anymore, house builder—you've been seen."

And so in that sense, the unfabricated takes ontological precedence over the fabricated.

It seems more real because the fabricated appears as the result of delusion. There's also a felt sense, and very much a perception, that holiness resides much more fully in the unfabricated than in the fabricated.

So actually, through this very deep experience we're discussing, a duality is created between the

unfabricated and the fabricated. One seems holy, so to speak, while the other appears merely as a product—or primarily the product—of delusion. Fabricated through delusion, dependent on delusion, as the Buddha might say.

But the journey—the meditative journey into emptiness, the understanding and insight in these terms—doesn't stop there, hopefully. We begin to actually question, to see deeper into the whole notion of fabrication, into the structure of the teaching of fabrication itself. We actually see that because time is empty, because what is fabricated is empty, fabrication itself is empty too.

And this is one way of dissolving the whole duality, collapsing the entire duality between the unfabricated and the fabricated. Then there is not this sense that the unfabricated is holy and the fabricated is not holy. Everything can be seen as holy and divine—both so-called unfabricated and so-called fabricated. The duality dissolves. It takes the understanding and the meditative seeing and the being in the world to a whole other level.

In that seeing, everything is equally holy, equally divine. There's actually a possibility of seeing it all as universally divine, or of picking up this sense of divinity through the personhood and the particular that we were discussing.

So when, for instance, one employs a meditative way of looking for a time in practice, or one sees in practice—deliberately practices a way of looking that delicately, skillfully holds the understanding: this awareness right now, this moment of awareness, this mind right now, is not self. Not me, not mine, as the Buddha says. One holds that in awareness.

And one sees also that this awareness, this mind, in the same moment—it's not self, and it's also not separate from the appearances that are its objects. The subject and object, the mind and the objects of appearance, are not separate.

And one also, in the same moment, holds lightly, skillfully, in the view, in the way of looking, that this awareness, this mind, is empty in itself—perhaps, for instance, because it's beyond time in the sense that time is empty. Anything that exists must exist in time, and time is empty, therefore this awareness is empty.

When, through practice—a very, very deep practice I'm speaking of—one holds these insights very lightly, delicately, like an art, and looks and meditates on the present moment: this awareness, not self; this awareness, not separate from appearances; this awareness is, in a sense, beyond time, is empty, and the time that it exists in is empty.

Then that awareness at that time, because it has a lot of insight in it and very little delusion, is really cutting, dissolving delusion at a very fundamental level. Seeing that objects are empty—and we can include that objects are empty and the subject is empty. Then there will be an unfabricating to quite a deep degree.

And the awareness, if we still talk in terms of awareness, moves towards something completely—or to a large degree—towards this consciousness without attribute that the Buddha sometimes uses as a phrase to describe the unfabricated. It unfabricates. There's an unfabricated awareness or consciousness there, very different from our usual consciousness, and not the kind of vast awareness that I mentioned at other times.

But one possibility of holding all that insight, for a meditator who has really practiced and developed gradually this art of unfabricating, is that it unfabricates and opens, if you like, to this unfabricated awareness.

Another possibility, though, and even more artful, is that one can actually play with and modulate the degree of the fading and unfabricating of experience. It's as if you're taking your foot just lightly off the pedal, so that you're holding all this understanding of emptiness very, very lightly in the mind. It's not a great deal of thinking, but that insight is there. It's imbuing the awareness. And yet you're not letting it completely fade because you're not leaning on the insight too heavily. So it's a very light touch.

And so appearances are around, but they're imbued with the whole sense—subject, object, awareness, appearances—imbued with the deep understanding of the emptiness of all of it. Radical, deep, total emptiness.

And it's possible then to play, because appearances are still around, with tantric practice, which essentially is a mimicking of a Buddha's—I'm going to use the word gnosis, just as a translation of the Tibetan word yeshe—particularly so that we don't get confused with words like insight or awareness or wisdom. Using all these words, sometimes the vocabulary gets so confused, with people using different words or not realizing there's a difference. But the practice of tantra is this mimicking of a Buddha's gnosis, a Buddha's ultimate—let's call it wisdom awareness, as another translation of the word gnosis. And that's one way of understanding what tantra is.

In this sense, the word ultimate actually means ultimate because it's what a Buddha has, like a fully awakened being. So we've touched on this before, that in the Vajrayana, in the tantric teachings, the word ultimate is used in different ways. Sometimes it's used to refer to emptiness; sometimes ultimate means what a Buddha enjoys or what is characteristic of a Buddha. And again, there's all kinds of confusion and slipperiness with vocabulary.

So sometimes in tantric teachings, in Vajrayana teachings—now I'm going to draw particularly on someone like Mipham from the Nyingma tradition; he died in 1912, I think. A brilliant, brilliant teacher and scholar from the Tibetan tradition, from the Nyingma Tibetan tradition. He would use the same words like emptiness or suchness or ultimate in different ways at different times. But in their deepest meaning, when he used them in their deepest meaning, they all kind of refer to the same thing. And another word is Buddha nature. It's this ultimate gnosis of a Buddha. It's a Buddha's perspective.

So this Buddha nature, this ultimate, actually in his way of presenting what Buddha nature means, includes both the subjective and the objective aspects of this Buddha mind, this Buddha gnosis, this ultimate Buddha consciousness. Both the subjective—and that subjective is this yeshe, this gnosis, this awareness that is empty and that knows emptiness.

Sometimes people use the word—this is an aside now—sometimes people use the word pure awareness, but awareness always has some degree of insight or delusion in it. And it always has, it's always mixed with other inclinations, some degree of clinging, and so on, some degree of conceiving.

But this idea of the yeshas, the gnosis, the Buddha gnosis, is an empty awareness. It has no inherent existence. But it's a gnosis, it's an awareness that knows the emptiness of everything, including itself—space, time, all objects, all subjects, everything. That's what yeshas is from the subjective aspect.

And the subjective aspect of the Buddha nature perceives the objective aspect of the Buddha nature, which is a world of divine appearances. Not just universally, like all imbued with divinity in a kind of universal way, but also particulars—particular deities, particular manifestations, and particular deities manifesting through particular objects or places or beings in the conventional sense.

So all of that together—the subjective aspect, the yeshas, the wisdom awareness, the empty awareness that knows the emptiness of all things, and the objective aspect, the perceptions of the divinity and the particular divinity of divine appearances—all that is Buddha nature in, say, Mipham's framework. And all of it is the ultimate.

Now, not to confuse things, but there is a parallel here between some of what we've just been talking about and also the teachings of Isaac Luria, who was, I think, a sixteenth-century Kabbalist living in Safed in Palestine. And he elaborated a kind of mythic metaphor, if you like, for the aspects of the divine, for the nature of the divine.

And in that aspect—this is not to be taken literally, certainly, and also not to be taken temporally—but in that sense, then, the Godhead, the innermost transcendent aspect of God, the light of God, if you like, the wisdom, the yeshas, the gnosis, if we translate between systems, or this unfabricated awareness, exists, so to speak. And then within that light of God's wisdom, there's a withdrawing from a certain, if you like, region. Again, this is mythic. It's not literal. It's not even temporal. There's a certain withdrawing of God's own light from a portion of that light, so to speak. And that withdrawing creates a space in which the creation of the world happens.

So you can actually see—I don't know if you can hear in that—that withdrawing is called tzimtzum in Hebrew. And actually here in that, something akin to the teachings of fabrication and unfabrication, if we translate creation as the dependent origination of appearances, then you could hear it or read it as: there is this unfabricated awareness when there's insight and wisdom there to a total degree. If I, so to speak, withdraw some of that insight, or, as I said, don't lean on it so much, or if I allow it to be not so complete,

then appearances can be fabricated. It allows fabrication.

There are real parallels I find interesting between that and the teaching of the dependent origination of appearances, once one has understood that teaching at a deep enough level and can hear in a different way these other—which to us sound very strange—theistic systems, often depending on your background.

And then the question would be: why would God withdraw some of the light of that insight? And there are different answers there in this mythic system. Partly because God's nature is infinite. And being infinite, God includes not just the transcendent aspect that's beyond appearances, beyond form, beyond manifestation, but also includes the whole realm of manifestation—indeed all manifestation—because God is infinite in nature, ain sof, without end in the Hebrew. That's one example.

Another part of the answer, which in a way is also very beautiful, is because of God's desire. You may have heard this: God desired to know himself, to know herself through appearance, through manifestation. And so there's this desire to not remain completely transcendent, unfabricated, without form, without manifestation, without all of that. And again, not to stretch it too much, but we can see the desire there and the relation between how clinging and craving work to fabricate appearance in the Wheel of Dependent Origination.

But Isaac Luria goes even further, because all this—that kind of mythic metaphor, structure, conceptual structure of the nature of God, all that, this idea of God withdrawing from a portion of his divine light, withdrawing, creating a region of less light—that whole idea is from the perspective of the human only. From God's perspective, there is no withdrawing of light. There is no tzimtzum.

So again, if you can feel into this a little bit and actually see, oh, that's similar to this, or has parallels with this further stage of the teaching about fabrication—actually understanding both fabrication and unfabrication are empty, that there is no duality there. So the teaching of fabrication and unfabricating is all, from a certain perspective at another level—it's all samata, it's all equality. It's all empty. There is no duality there. So it's a teaching from a certain level of perspective, whereas this is all from the perspective of the human only. It's not God's perspective. It's not an ultimate truth.

Now when I practice and get a sense, if I develop the art of my practice, of my meditative practice and my skill with emptiness and playing with fabrication and appearance and unfabricating, when I do that and develop that, then I can ask at a certain point, at any point perhaps: whose mind is this? Whose awareness is this? Whose wisdom is this? Because I can see it is not self. It's not my awareness. There's a real developed perception possible.

This awareness is not self. It's a really important practice to cultivate. But at the same time, it's not separate from appearances. And if I'm practicing in a certain way, it's not separate from the divine appearances that I sense. And I sense too, whose mind, I ask you, whose mind is this? Because it's not self, it's not separate from appearances or divine appearances, it's beyond time, it's empty. Whose mind is that?

I cannot, I'll get the sense in asking that as a meditative question that both conceptually and experientially, we could say, I see my mind, this mind, so-called my mind, is not separate from this Buddha nature. It is not separate from the cosmic Buddha or the ultimate, as Mipham described it, is not separate from this ultimate mind or God, the mind, the awareness of God or the divine. So not just conceptually, but experientially, I can open up that sense.

And why is that important? First of all, it's a very beautiful, very freeing experience of the divine, but it gives a sense of my being, my citta, participating in the divine at the deepest level. And this is actually a hinge point, this idea of participation in the divine is a hinge point in terms of trying to create or offer conceptual frameworks that support a sense of divinity. Divinity comes in there are many, many possible flavours of participation.

The other day my friend took me to a beautiful stretch of the river, of the river Dart. I'd never been there before. And there was a bend in the river and there was no one there. We were there alone. It was a cold day, beautiful day, beautiful autumn day. And there was a steep cliffside on the other side of the river and trees, wooded and really, really gorgeous. And the colours of autumn and the leaves falling on the water.

And I was sitting there, opening to the whole scene and taking it in and the beauty of it. And into my mind suddenly came a line or a fragment even from Thomas Merton. "Day unto day uttereth speech" was what I remembered. I can't even remember if that's the right thing or if it's half a sentence or what the context was. I think it's the beginning of a passage of writing. Day unto day uttereth speech, whether he's quoting someone else or what, I don't know. I wasn't even sure if I was remembering it right, but day unto day uttereth speech. I had no idea what it meant, or what he meant by it, or what the original thing meant, but it was something that ignited something in me, in my heart and mind and soul and in the perception as I was looking at the river and the autumn scene and the beauty there.

And I didn't quite know what it meant. But that poetic phrase came into the perception and shaped and opened the perception in a certain way. It's actually quite difficult to describe.

So here I am sitting by the river, a beautiful spot and everything that's there. As always, there's many ways of looking. It's only a lack of meditative skill or, as I said, conceptual frameworks that are too constraining, whether we realize it or not, that actually limit our ways of looking.

So very possible in that situation to see that scene only sensually, in the sense of, wow, pretty colors of autumn, yellow and red and gold, and how they reflect in the water. And one is just really, if you like, responding or tuning in at the level of purely sensual pleasure, if such a thing exists, or pretty colours there, is one way of looking.

Or, of course, it being autumn, one could be filled with a sense of impermanence and reflect on impermanence, the leaves falling onto the river and swept gently along by the current and that could be what one is sort of tuning into and what colours and shapes the perception.

Or a different variation of the whole process of nature moving, the river flowing, the decay, the growth and then the decay and the whole cycle that the process one could tune into that, that would be a way of seeing, a way of looking, supported by the conceptual framework of process, et cetera.

But what was there for me was somehow triggered by this day unto day utterance speech, this fragment of writings, poetic, these poetic words whose meaning I couldn't really say. There was really a beautiful and very difficult to describe sense of participation, a kind of cosmology, or cosmopoiesis, actually, if we use the word, was there, was opened for me.

In other words, the whole cosmos, including myself, and the whole scene there, and the whole of nature, was seen in a particular way, was felt in a particular way that involved participation and particularly the echoes of that, of those words, somehow as if the trees were speaking, or the cosmos was speaking, maybe that's a better way of putting it, the cosmos was speaking, but obviously using the word speaking poetically. So there was this poetic sense of speech, the cosmos as divine speech, and of my being participating in that.

I could describe more, but it's actually not that important. Part of what I want to draw attention to is, one may say, a person might say, I sensed or I felt I sense, I feel, I am participating in something larger than us. In other words, the kinds of sense of participation we can have in terms of the way we sense the cosmos are varied.

So many people might say, I sense, feel, and I'm participating in something larger than us. But what was characteristic about this sense was that it did not only refer to the fact that I was aware of or thinking of a vast web or a vast net of physical objects or more dynamically physical events or processes in which I participate, my body breathing back and forth, the autumn air, etc., my even slight sweat coming from my body or how...

into the air, or how this body arose out of the earth and the elements—that kind of level is a horizontal level of participation there.

So that kind of participation, which sometimes people sense or want to emphasize, is what I would call participation at a horizontal level, at the level of physicality. But here, the sense of participation also involved other levels—other than the physical, physical material in the ways that we usually construe physicality and materiality in modernist culture. I don't know—spiritual, soulful, mental, divine really, and divine in both a transcendent and an immanent aspect.

So part of what was mixed in there was the sense of the unfabricated shining through, but it was only part of it. There was a kind of vague cosmopoiesis. I'll come back to this word "vague" because it's actually important to realize that a lot of the experiences we have that are tied into conceptual frameworks are quite vague, and that does not matter. I'll return to that.

But there was a kind of—if you like—vague, poetic sense of the cosmos, very much involving this

multi-leveled participation, a participation at levels that were beyond the physical, that involved my mind, my awareness, the roots of that, and the sense of the root of that in the unfabricated, if you like, and so forth.

Now, I know many people, or some people would say—just as a philosophical point—I know many people say, "Well, you can't prove that that's there, these other levels." And that's absolutely right, and I alluded to this before. We're talking here about realms of experience or dimensions of experience, and conceptual frames. They're not in the realm of verifiability as it is scientifically defined. So we're not actually in the business of proving, and nor are we in the realm of what's provable, verifiable according to the paradigms as defined by science. But so what? So what?

We're talking about experience, perception—deep, life-changing, important, these kinds of things that matter to us deeply. And so what if it's not in the realm of the provable or the scientifically verifiable?

I wonder sometimes whether that kind of perception—I know I only described it vaguely—but I wonder whether that kind of perception, that sense of participation at other levels, the sense of a kind of vague cosmopoiesis or cosmopoetics that involves that kind of thing that I described—whether that's... I wonder whether it's not available to most people. I wonder if it's gone out of fashion in some ways, meaning that it's not really supported as a perception for people these days because people don't read so much about that sort of thing or don't talk about it or hear about it.

And because of that, it's not supported as an actual experience that can open. Or I wonder whether people do actually experience that, but are kind of clumsy in trying to communicate it or express it, or limited because they don't have the conceptual frameworks or the vocabulary, or a little lazy or shy.

So I wonder, actually, about all this stuff—in the imaginal and the cosmopoiesis, this stuff—whether it's more prevalent than one might assume, or whether there's reasons why it's not prevalent. Because it's actually not supported because of not being talked about, not being shared, not being given conceptual structures that support it.

So what I was describing by the river, in a way, as I said, mixes—mixes a sense of the unfabricated shining through and also a kind of cosmopoiesis or theophany, the divine speaking through nature that was more than what we usually mean when we sort of think of poetic metaphors. It wasn't that I heard any words, it wasn't that literal, but it was something that was palpable, that made a very deep impression, more than just a way of speaking about something. But this was a mixture of the unfabricated shining through and a kind of cosmopoetic theophany there.

As I said, there are—we could say—three possibilities of the divine appearing through appearance, of the unfabricated shining through in the authentic unfabricated. There's the sort of universal awareness or universal love, other kinds of more common senses of the divine in a universal and impersonal way shining through. And then there's a third possibility or range of possibilities that involve the imaginal and

theophany and cosmopoetics—meaning, the divine coming through particularly, in particular ways, particular appearances through the particularities of a person, their personhood, and so forth. And the particular face of the divine in that way.

And again, just as a philosophical point, a person may say, "Well, yes, okay, you had such an experience or this or many of the other experiences that I describe that people have had or I share with you. And it's supposed to say, well, but it may be that it turns out not to be true or it's not true." This is, again, such an idea. I wonder whether it falls into kind of a tight and narrow and not fully opened up conception of truth—that either it is or it isn't true. It's a way of regarding truth and reality that's very understandable given how we've been taught to conceive and think of things.

But maybe it doesn't have to be in that tight camp of either is true or is not true. As I said several times in this retreat, the whole notion of reality and truth needs opening out, kind of filling out the range. We need to be a little more sophisticated with what we're talking about.

And here, in these kinds of experiences, as I said, we're concerned with perception—meaning experience—and also meaningfulness. And it's important to realize that this is what matters to us as human beings. Perception and experience of course matter. Our experience matters to us. And meaningfulness matters to us as human beings. And they matter to us deeply, deeply.

So it's not so much, "Can I prove this or that?" but experience matters. The range and the kinds of experience and the depth of experience and our sense and taste of meaningfulness and the depth of meaningfulness. We need to realize this is what matters to us.

And these are constructed—perception, experience, appearance. These are constructed and fabricated, inevitably so, and subjectivity, my subjectivity is involved. So right there, there's an opening up of the whole sort of tight way of regarding truth, because we're dealing with perception and meaningfulness there, and we're acknowledging that they're constructed, inevitably they involve the subject. We're not simply talking about something that's independently, objectively real. Meaningfulness—meaning and meaninglessness can never be purely objective, can never be. Actually, neither can perception, and so forth.

So perception and certainly meaningfulness are participatory, constructed and fabricated through the way of looking, through the conception.

This insight is shared by postmodern understandings. Many people have written about this. I feel sometimes that postmodern writers, or writers about postmodern traditions—if you can even call it tradition, or that direction, that thrust—are in a way limited through not having meditative experience. The participation they're talking about, the construction of perspective they're pointing out, is usually to do with texts and words and quite gross levels of perceptions.

Even people like Heidegger and others—all these people really lacked a depth of meditation that would

have enabled them to enter deeply into the subtleties of what's involved in participating in experience and constructing and fabricating all the subtle conceptuality that's involved. They're way more subtle than language or words or thought, as they so often pointed to.

When one has that degree of understanding and learns actually to move between multiple perspectives, realizing none are true, it's quite different from just an intellectual, philosophical understanding of, say, post-structuralism or post-modernism that just deconstructs this or that perspective or understanding or piece of writing or philosophy and pulls it down or points out how it's constructed at a certain level.

Oftentimes what happens then is it just veers towards a kind of nihilism, as if recognizing that all perspectives are not true—constructed—but there isn't then enough meditative skill, because one hasn't developed that meditation, to actually then realize: oh, these are all constructed, actually constructed on a much more subtle and deep level, all these perspectives. I can actually realize that and then enter into multiple perspectives.

Rather than just deconstructing and being left with a kind of cold, barren nihilism or an intellectual game that leads nowhere, I can actually enter into different perspectives. We talked about so much on this retreat and play with that meditatively—moving between different perspectives, different ways of looking, opening up different senses of the cosmos, different soul worlds, different ways of seeing, engaging cosmopoiesis. All of it without clinging to it as real, as ultimately real, as true in that kind of tight way.

But it gives me real, practical, lived fluidity and this increased range in which I can experience beauty of the different perspectives. Doors open, worlds open. Rather than the kind of nihilism and barrenness that might come out of a purely intellectual post-modernism, I'm really interested in opening up the realm of experience, perception that's possible for us as human beings.

But also, rather than that kind of result of nihilism, I'm interested in keeping meaningfulness alive, in keeping the possibilities for meaningfulness alive, keeping them as viable options for us at times. I'm interested in conceptual structures and practices that support a deep and rich and enriching sense of meaningfulness in our lives. Not to cling to a sense of meaningfulness out of some kind of fear of our real existential situation. Not to cling to it at all. It's an option. At times there are different kinds of sense of meaningfulness. We can have a sense of that deep meaningfulness to our lives. And at times it's not there and it's not needed.

When, for instance, there's the perception of the unfabricated shining through everything, that's beyond meaningfulness. And it's an experience of the divine, but in a way it dissolves any sense of or need for meaningfulness at that time. And yet there are other dimensions of the being, the soul, the psyche that need meaningfulness, of which meaningfulness is actually an integral part.

So I'm interested in that—not to cling to it all the time, cling to a certain idea or cling to a certain

experience of meaningfulness, but to have it as a viable option, something we move in and out of in rich and wide and deep ways, alive ways, so that this is open.

Of course we can deconstruct meaningfulness—we can do it in many ways—but not only do that. And if I talk about meaningfulness, I'm going to come back to this in relation to all this question of the divine. But meaningfulness, we can realize, has no inherent existence. It's not independent of the subject, of my mind, of the concept. Of course not.

But again, we fall so easily into this polarized or dualistic thinking. Either it's real in some kind of purely objective way, in the way I understand objects as being different, separate from the subject, from me and my consciousness. Either it's real in that way—the meaningfulness of my life, or this aspect of meaningfulness—or I am just making it up, and therefore it's unreal in the way that I narrowly conceive of real. You can see all this is so easy for us to assume. Either the cosmos or life or my life is meaningful in a real way, which somehow means independently objective way, or I'm making it up. It's either one or the other.

But can I see? Actually, no. It has no inherent existence. It's not independent of the consciousness, and yet it still has validity because I'm not falling into that separation of subject and object, subject and world, cosmos—that whole conceptual framework, ideology, lack of understanding.

So I'm really interested in this dimension of meaningfulness, or these experiences of meaningfulness in our lives. And that comes—I'll revisit this later—but that comes through the personal divine rather than the universal divine or the impersonal divine. So it's through the experience of images as we have been talking about them, with this sense of being rooted in archetypes and daimons and other levels that want something from me in my life. This meaningfulness is through those kind of experiences of the divine—they're in images and in seeing my life or my person or another person's life, another person's personhood as reflecting or rooted in or mirroring, originated in archetypes, daimons, some other level that's retaining of the personal and the particular.

So I'm going to revisit that, but all that's implied—part of what's implied there is then how to tie this understanding of emptiness and the unfabricated with this sense of the more personal divine, because that's where the experience of meaningfulness is possible.

So we still have to tie them together, or rather we're interested in tying them together. For someone like Henri Corbin, he was working, if you like, from really a kind of Platonic or neo-Platonic sort of conceptual structural philosophy, or variations on that. I'm not going to go into details of that and describe that—we don't have time. But he was working in that kind of framework.

In that kind of framework, there is, or that kind of theology, if you like, this ultimate reality which is very akin, as we said, to the unfabricated, the neo-Platonic one. In Latin, sometimes they call it the *deitas absconditas*, the hidden god. It's inaccessible to the senses or to any manifestation in form or image—a

hidden god or godhead beyond, if you like, human accessibility.

When there is that as a sort of theological construct, then the human being needs angels to span the sort of chasm, the abyss, between the godhead and the human. They are, if you like, images of God, as we talked about, theophanies. For Corbin, he actually held that it was impossible to have an experience of this *deus absconditus*, and he held any such experience to be a sort of self-delusion, if I read him right. But then again, he almost certainly was never given the kind of or taught the kind of meditative tools and arts that I've been describing in terms of unfabricating that would actually help him to move towards that and have that kind of experience.

But in that system there's a kind of transcendent God and then one needs the images to be the theophanies, to have the experience of God, because I cannot have an experience of this inaccessible, transcendent God in that kind of thinking. So in that system, the angels are—I mean, it's quite an elaborate system—but they are tied together, but there's a kind of, they span this chasm, if you like, the imaginal figures.

But he also, I'll stay with Corbin for a minute, he also, for him, would hold the human imagination as, and would regard it as distinct from the divine imagination, but actually kind of continuous with it. In other words, we're back to what I was describing earlier, this realization that we can have, this perspective that we can have in a very palpable way. Yes, it's a concept, but it's also a kind of experience, if you like, that comes out of that concept and out of the meditative play and meditative seeing, that my mind, my awareness, that includes my imagination, is not separate from God's imagination, God's mind.

And especially when we tend towards gnosis, when there's a lot of emptiness and the malleability in the seeing, when there's very little clinging, when there's a lot of insight around, we're playing in that kind of tantric way, then we really sense then, or can sense, that the imagination is not separate from God's imagination, so to speak. God's imagination is manifesting through my imagination. My imagination is a manifestation of God's imagination.

So, and even for Corbin, there's a kind of theological structure there. As I said, I'm actually quoting someone called Thomas Cheetham who writes a lot about Corbin. He said, "The human imagination for Corbin is distinct from but continuous with the divine imagination." You can see how that parallels very much what I was talking about earlier. Whose mind is this? Being that it's not-self, it's not separate from divine appearances, it's beyond time and it's empty. I can sense, I can conceive it as not separate, this mind, this awareness, this imagination is not separate from God, God's mind, from the ultimate mind, from the Buddha nature, etc.

And then this experience that we—I would say is inevitable for someone practicing, doing imaginal practice after a while and practicing deeply with imaginations—you have a sense of, yes, creating an image, but also discovering an image. So creating maybe a soul world or a cosmopoetic cosmos, a sense of the cosmos or this image or whatever that comes, but also discovering it. So yes, it's my mind creating it. I

can have that sense of it and I can acknowledge that. We've touched on this a little bit before. But I also have the sense of somehow it has some kind of autonomous existence. You could say, because it's in the mind of God, it's in the divine mind, it's part of the Buddha nature, the potential of the Buddha nature.

Let's stop there and pick up a little further later on.

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