A Sacred Universe: Insight, Theophany, Cosmopoesis (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 46:17

So again, the whole question of assumptions and views about reality—what is real and what isn't real, ontology if you like is the fancy word for that—is very much part of the context of imaginal practice. The conceptual framework shapes how we'll hear some of these teachings and the confidence with which we'll be able to play and experiment.

I mentioned this much earlier, but it's worth saying again: people are very different with this in regard to imaginal practice. Some people don't seem to need much exploration of philosophy and questions of reality or opening up. They can just plunge into imaginal practice and play to their heart's content without needing any of that. Some people are even aversive to any philosophical discussion or exploration or opening up or questioning—they don't like the conceptuality of that.

Other people need a certain amount, which varies very much from person to person, to legitimize or give a basis or framework, a supporting framework for practice of the imaginal. Some people just need a little bit. A friend was telling me the other day that she just had a conversation with someone at a party, and this person just needed a little something that legitimized certain explorations with the imagination for them. Oftentimes that is the case. And other people need quite a lot.

There will be some people—many people probably—who are so entrenched or indoctrinated, if you like, with the dominant cultural modernist paradigms and views and assumptions that it really either takes an awful lot of time and pondering of the conceptual frameworks and philosophy underpinning the assumptions to liberate enough space and justification for imaginal practice and views, or it's actually impossible. So that's just interesting, especially as a teacher, to note.

I'll just share that for me, I'm actually really interested in these questions of ontology. Not that I think one can ever figure out the truth, but I'm still interested in conceptual frameworks and possible conceptual frameworks. In other words, conceptual frameworks can be things of beauty, and they are structures, avenues that open poetic possibilities and beautiful possibilities for the heart and the soul and experience. So I'm very interested in that, and if you like, a dimension or an aspect of the soul loves ideas and loves concepts.

It's just that I don't personally, for all the reasons I've said, believe that one will come to a conceptual system or framework that is *the* truth or *the* answer. And that frees up the whole investigation. You actually enter into it playing with it the way one might play with images or any other practice.

So there's a lot of range here too around the whole ways of relating to these questions of reality and ontology in regard to the imaginal, imaginal figures, imaginal worlds, et cetera, and all that. And oftentimes, as I said, some people—many people—will object. They're attracted perhaps, or not attracted, and something objects. And those objections, philosophically, if you like, are usually fairly predictable, understandably so, given the culture.

They say, "Well, that's fabrication. Aren't you fabricating that image or that perception of the world or that kind of perception of the cosmos or experience of the cosmos? And it's fabricated." Now, of course, the other unspoken side of that sentence, or that objection, is the assumption that there is something that is not fabricated. There's a perception that we can have of the world or of self or something that is real, objectively real and not fabricated.

The person voicing that objection has not understood, has not seen through practice, through deep insight into emptiness, the fabric, the extent of fabrication. All perception is fabricated. All experience, all appearance is fabricated. Without wanting to say—really without saying—that all fabrication is the same, so to fabricate an image is the same as fabricating a perception of this chair that I'm sitting on. Without saying that, there's something that the insight, the deep, thorough, total insight into the fabrication of perception, and then the emptiness of fabrication too—there's something that that level and that thoroughness of insight does that opens up and dissolves this objection: "Isn't that a fabrication?" about that image or that way of fantasying something in one's life or self or other or world, etc.

So that objection, "It's a fabrication, isn't that a fabrication?" almost always betrays an assumption of some kind of reality that we can experience—the thing or this or that object or self or experience, a perception that's not fabricated. Not enough exploration of emptiness there.

Or one might say, "Well, these images, imaginal figures, they're not real because they're not material. I cannot touch it or kick it or whatever it is." But again, a little more probing into this shows a lot of problems. One thing that occurs to me right now is that we've talked a lot about how images can affect the energy body. So there is, if you like, a kind of sensation in regards to images. The more you go into the matter of practice, the more you notice actually how strong this can be at times, and how vivid and how precise and particular some of this can be.

But perhaps even more significantly, we might just ask this person who's objecting this way, we might ask them in response: What is matter? What do you think matter is? This may be something we'll come back to, because if you take the route of modern physics, actually, you go deeper and deeper into this question. What is matter? Well, it's made of atoms.

Well, what are atoms? They're made of protons and electrons and neutrons. Well, what's an electron? As you go deeper and deeper into it, it becomes actually very hard to say what matter is and whether matter exists or doesn't exist in the way that we tend to think of what it means to exist—to be something independently in a certain place at a certain time and everything I said before.

When we go into an electron, many of us will say, what's an electron? Well, it's an equation, really. And that equation is an equation of probability of manifesting in certain ways depending on how one is looking at it. What is matter? I say the real is material. I respond, what is matter? What do you mean by matter? And those equations exist in other dimensions than three dimensions—they exist in thirteen dimensions or something more. Actually, they exist in a number of dimensions depending on how many electrons we're talking about.

Or philosophically, if one takes what's called a phenomenological view—as an attempt to approach philosophy through just what we experience—we say, well, I experience resistance, or coolness, or heat, or hardness, or softness, and that's what I'm calling matter. But that's actually a different thing. Then we're back to the realm of perception and fabrication of perception.

So this idea that only the real is what's material is very understandable, but probe a little deeper. What do we mean by material? What is material? What is matter? We can approach that in different ways—physics, philosophy, dharma practice. It dissolves, if you like, hardened notions, ossified notions of what matter is when we explore, when we question deeply through one of those avenues.

Then a person might say, well, what's real is what's shared. So if I get one hundred people in a room and let's say at least ninety-seven of them agree on what is there, what they experience, what they see—everyone sees the table or whatever it is—then we can say the table is real. So reality is given by what is shared, and the other two or three people are just a bit bonkers or weird or whatever.

Again, so saturated and habituated are we to that kind of assumption that we don't often really question it. There are a few things to say here. One is just to point out that many images are shared, of course. Culturally, for example, one just needs to think of the image of Jesus or the Buddha in Buddhist cultures or our culture nowadays. So many images are shared. And of course there are many secular images—it doesn't have to be spiritual or religious—many secular fantasies of existence, of the world, of society, of self, other, as we touched on briefly.

There's also—to allude to this, though it's not the subject of this retreat and we really have to wait for another retreat—but it's very interesting... That's an understatement, but a whole direction opens up when two or more people engage in imaginal practice together. As a kind of relational meditation in the field together, including lots of aspects and dimensions of their experience, meditating together, talking with each other, experiencing, communicating together in the realm of the imaginal, there are ways that images are shared in that way. And actually in all kinds of ways through that. That's really a whole other retreat.

But in a way, more importantly to this objection—the real is what's shared—is just posing a counter question: can something have a kind of reality? Because a lot of the problem here is in that word reality. Can it have a kind of reality, or a kind of validity, if you like, when it is not shared? Can something not be shared and have a kind of reality, a kind of validity? Why not?

This is very important. When Corbin and Walter Wink and William Blake say the imaginal is more real—whatever words they used to say that—more real than the physical, when they say that, they're not implying that if you do imaginal practice right, if ten people do imaginal practice right, they'll all experience the same thing. There's a kind of non-individual shared reality that exists in the object. It's objective, independent of the individual. I don't think that that's being implied at all. Or if it is, I'd like to question that.

And when someone—I don't know who used the term—speaks of the discipline of the imagination or disciplined imagination, again in contrast to the imaginary or just what we call being lost in papañca or just daydreaming and that sort of thing, again it's not that if one practices with the imaginal, different people will see the same image and experience the same thing.

I think, or I would like to hope that the phrase "disciplined imagination"—wherever it was coined, whether by Hillman or Corbin or another—truly refers to what we explored earlier in this retreat: the delicacy and nuance of mindfulness that one brings to imaginal practice. It speaks to the sensitivity to resonances, the tuning of attention and energy, the careful noticing and encouraging of what nourishes, deepens, opens, ignites, and broadens the sense of soulfulness. All of this constitutes the disciplined imagination. It does not mean that such practice will result in experiences or images that are somehow universal or non-individual.

This distinction is crucial. Robert Avens, quoting Henri Corbin, writes about theophanic vision—meaning a vision where something else shines through the image, figure, or imaginal seeing. Perhaps it's another person, oneself, or the world itself, but there's a sense that something divine is showing through, coming through that particular face of the divine. We might call it seeing this or that as angel, if you will.

Corbin wrote that "the theophanic vision is essentially an event of the soul, taking place in the soul and for the soul." Notice here that Corbin's language and conception tends toward using "soul" as a kind of entity. We touched on this in our discussion about soul-making. This usage is perfectly fine—that's his style of language. For myself, I tend toward the language of soul-making, moving away from entities, though entities work as long as we understand they don't possess inherent existence.

Corbin continues: "As such, its reality is individuated for and with each soul. What the soul really sees, it is in each case alone in seeing." In other words, the reality of soul is not consensual, not shared, not socially agreed upon—it's individual. He adds: "The field of its vision, its horizon is in every case defined by the capacity, the dimension of its own being."

I want to share another brief passage, but must preface it by noting that Corbin's system, conceptual framework, and vocabulary differ significantly from ours. He draws from monotheistic traditions—particularly Islamic mysticism within the broader Abrahamic context—and Platonic philosophy. It's quite a different system with different vocabulary and conceptual framework, though beautiful and elaborate. Rather than attempting to outline all of this now, I'm taking the liberty of

translating it somewhat for our purposes here, adapting his vocabulary and concepts to ones we've discussed more thoroughly.

Avens writes: "Soul-making creates imaginal figures, but their reality is neither hallucinatory nor illusory. They are neither objectively nor subjectively real, but belong to the intermediary and mediating realm of the mundus imaginalis"—Latin for the world of imagination, the imaginal world. "They are God, or gods, seen in such a form as an individual person is able to grasp." These imaginal figures created by the soul are perceptions that constitute reality for the soul, despite—or precisely because of—their individual nature.

Note in both passages what I want to emphasize: these visions are individual but dependent on the soul. We've emphasized this repeatedly throughout our exploration—they depend on the soul, or the citta, the mind-heart, the way of looking, the mind-state, the inclination, the assumption, all of that in the present moment. Dependent on all of this, the image arises. We never part from this understanding of dependent arising.

Swedenborg wrote that in heaven—we might say in this imaginal world, this mundus imaginalis—"the form of your world is what you are." William Blake offered a beautiful phrase: "As a man is, so he sees." I'd like to add three words to that ending, because one might easily think, "Well, I don't see angels, I don't see beauty, therefore I'm not spiritual or pure enough." But I would amend Blake's words: "As a man is, so he sees at that moment."

At this moment, when the citta is colored in this particular way, when this conception operates subtly or more consciously, as a person is, so they see. Again, we understand this as fabricated, as dependent arising, as empty—like all perception, it arises dependently.

"As a man is, so he sees"—we can take this as a statement about being in the world and seeing the world. I see the world, the self, others in ways dependent on how I am in that moment. Dependent on the state of mind, the inclination, the conception, the way of looking, I see that way, I sense that way, I perceive that way.

That's a fundamental Dharma concept.

But it applies too to the realm of the imaginal. So we have to acknowledge that with conventional reality, with material things, fabrication and dependent arising are part of the perception of everything. Everything—all perception—is dependent arising that way. But we're emphasizing it as well in terms of the reality of the imaginal world.

So again, it's not an objective reality. It's not independent of the individual consciousness, the mind and heart that are seeing that way. And yes, there are differences between what appears purely to the imagination versus something that's perceived as material and shared with others in conventional perception. Sometimes conventional perception is imbued with mythos and fantasy, and sometimes much

less so when we're practicing bare attention, as we discussed before.

There are differences in the kinds of fabrication that are operating there, and as I said, I'm not sure how to fit all that together into a grand, overarching conceptual framework. So acknowledging those differences, but there's something fundamental to all reality, which is: as a man is, so he sees. As the consciousness is, as the mind is, so we see at any moment. All perception—dependent arising, fabricated, empty.

And as I mentioned briefly before, it's this exploration and understanding of fabrication—part of which is the exploration of unfabricating, of learning to fabricate less and less perception through different practices, and eventually, hopefully, to open to the unfabricated where one is not fabricating any perception at all. The exploration and the deep insight, reflecting on that and understanding that, opens possibilities and doors in terms of experience, in terms of the range of perception, in terms of understanding, and what's possible in terms of conceptual frames. It's massive.

So putting that as the basis and central axis for what the whole of the Dharma is liberates a lot of possibilities for imaginal work for many people.

Listen to this. In relation to this whole avenue and basis of understanding fabrication—understanding fabrication through learning to unfabricate, then realizing that this thing, either that perception or sense of self or whatever, was fabricated. When I looked in this way, therefore I realized it's a fabrication, going deeper and deeper into that until one reaches the unfabricated.

In a very different tradition, Avicenna was a renowned Islamic philosopher, mystic, also a doctor, a very important pioneer of medical understanding, and just a general polymath, genius person who lived in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. In relation to this exploration of unfabricating and learning about fabrication, in relation to that and the imaginal, listen:

"She who confronts the darkness that reigns forever"—this darkness that reigns forever has nothing to do with moral darkness or evil or anything like that. The darkness that reigns forever is, in Dharma language, the unfabricated, the unconditioned, what the Buddha sometimes referred to as the deathless or the *asaṅk hatadhamma*, the unfabricated. This transcending of any perception, darkness because there is no perceiving there, that reigns forever because it's beyond time.

"She who confronts this unfabricated, the darkness that reigns forever, and does not hesitate to plunge into it for fear of difficulties, will come to a vast space, boundless and filled with light. The first thing she sees is a living spring whose waters spread like a river over this interworld, the *mundus imaginalis*, the imaginal. Whoever bathes in that spring becomes so light that she can walk upon water, can climb the highest peak without weariness."

Corbin writes about this passage from Avicenna: "Once the soul has emerged from darkness, once it has risen from the abyss of unconsciousness"—again, by the abyss of unconsciousness, he means exactly what the Buddha would call cessation of consciousness, cessation of perception and feeling, if you know the

Dharma lingo from dependent origination. So this opening to the unfabricated, this non-fabricating of perception.

"Once the soul has emerged from that darkness, from that abyss of unconsciousness"—and he writes—"this changing the appearance of things, walking on water, climbing Mount Qaf," which is a mythic mountain in that Islamic spiritual tradition, "all these are psychic events whose scene and action are set in neither the sensible nor the intelligible worlds"—that's kind of jargon for some Platonic philosophy; we don't need to go into that, but let's just say the world of the material senses or of abstract ideas—"not set there, but in the intermediate world of the imaginal, the *ʿālam al-mithāl* in Arabic, as it is called, or the world of symbol." We translate: the world of image and typification, he writes. "This is the place of all spiritual recitals."

Now, there's a lot of jargon here. By "spiritual recital," he means spiritual, or so to speak, imaginal encounters with imaginal figures, etc. And this world, he continues, "is intermediary between the intelligible and the sensible. It is the world in which spirits are corporealized, given body—spirits are given body—and bodies spiritualized."

Okay, so there's a lot of stuff in there, as I said, about his system that's different in vocabulary. I don't want to go into that. The real point is the interesting parallel between what Avicenna describes and the *siddhis*, the supernormal powers described by the Buddha in the Pali Canon and other Buddhist traditions: that someone who is able either to enter very deep samādhi, very deep jhānas, or more commonly, very deep experiences of emptiness, or the unfabricated—this darkness that reigns forever that's plunged into—then for them the world of perception becomes malleable.

And I don't know the answer to how much—I've heard Tibetan teachers, actually been sitting in the room where they talk about people walking through walls, etc.—or is it just imaginal? An imaginal world opens up with great malleability there and great possibility for walking on water and the rest of it.

So I just want to make that parallel really. The central thing is this exploration of fabrication through learning to fabricate less and less, which exposes the fabricated nature of all perception, emptiness of all perception.

And going deeper into that opens up the malleability of perception and the world of the imaginal. We also see, again, the parallels between that phrase from alchemy which we've mentioned several times: "do not proceed until all has become liquid." In Avicenna's teaching there is this spring, the immersion in the spring, in the liquid, and through that everything becomes light—as in not heavy, not solid—the malleability of perception there.

So I'm pointing out some parallels across what on the face of it seem like very different traditions, the Buddhist and the Islamic mysticism. But this is for many people a real key to the imaginal—not for everyone, but for many people it's a real key to opening up the possibilities of magical practice.

Most emptiness practices are practices of unfabricating. I've said this quite a few times now: learning to fabricate less, and in doing so, in engaging emptiness practices, the sense of the solidity or fixedness or givenness of things is lightened as things become liquid, perception becomes malleable. Now, it also does that, as I'm repeating now from the beginning of the retreat, as samadhi deepens. There's a sense, too, of the body and the world of perception becoming less solid, more malleable, also through metta practice.

A lot of dharma practices will share this liquefying aspect, this making less solid of the world of perception, this unfabricating aspect. It's what they do. Imaginal practice also has this effect. So someone might not have done any emptiness practice or any of those other dharma practices and actually just engage in imaginal practice that renders the sense of the self and the world less solid, more malleable. And so actually gives rise to an understanding of emptiness and an experience of emptiness, of this fabricated nature of perception through imaginal practice.

Then both through deep emptiness practice or through metta practice or through imaginal practice, very commonly there arises organically a sense of perceiving the world as divine or perceiving other, or this or that, as angel, as theophany. A sense of cosmopoiesis opens organically by itself as one practices imaginal practice or emptiness practice deeper and deeper.

I wrote about this in the book that I wrote—as the emptiness practice gets really, really deep and starts even spinning back on itself, so to speak, to question even the reality of the notion of fabrication, saying even fabrication is empty, we can start organically, naturally—many people—to start perceiving the world as Buddha realm, if you like, to use certain language from Tibetan tantra. The world opens to cosmopoiesis. The divine world can be perceived. Or we can deliberately incline the perception that way through all these practices.

All these practices, in fact, are mutually contingent. So imaginal practice and emptiness practice and samatha and metta—they all feed each other. Emptiness practices will lead to samatha, to metta, and to the opening of the imaginal and the perception of a divine world. The deliberate perception of divine world will bring metta effortlessly and samadhi and will help us see emptiness and open the imaginal for us.

All of it—metta practice. That's why we did many years ago at Gaia House this retreat. I think we did it three years in a row, a long retreat: "Loving-kindness and Compassion as a Path to Awakening," meaning very specifically that as one deepens into metta and compassion, one can actually start directing that metta and compassion towards phenomena and beginning to see then how phenomena fade and how thus they are fabricated, and actually using the metta and the compassion practice to understand the deep emptiness of perception, the fabricated nature of perception.

But when we practice metta, it will give rise to samadhi. It will give rise to metta, obviously. It will give rise to samadhi. It will give rise to understanding of emptiness. The world, for people who do long metta retreats, begins to be perceived more and more at times—in and out—as divine in all kinds of different

ways. Cosmopoiesis is functioning there just through dedicated metta practice over time.

So all these practices are actually, if you like, mutually feeding, mutually—yeah, they feed each other, they nourish each other, they open each other and deepen each other.

All this talk of the imaginal and the malleability of the perception of self, other, world—it's all, as I've mentioned briefly and as many of you will realize, very much related to the teachings of Tantra, Buddhist Tantra, which essentially is a whole realm of teachings based on the understanding of emptiness, absolutely having as a basis the understanding of emptiness. Then based on that understanding of the emptiness of all things, practicing the perception, seeing, the sensing of everything as divine—self, other, world as divine—and incorporating into that, including into that, the practice, the use of the imaginal. So obviously there's a lot of connection here.

The word Tantra is quite interesting. It's worth—I just want to open something up a little bit here. That word Tantra is a Sanskrit word, and the suffix, the last part, tra—tantra—when you have that as a suffix in Sanskrit, it indicates the root, the first part of the word, the tan. It indicates the root as the means of the action, or the instrument of the action that the root means.

For another example, the root in Sanskrit, pat, P-A-T, is "to fly." That's what it means, to fly. So when you put tra on the end, you get patra—the means of flying, the means of flying—which becomes wing. So patra is wing in Sanskrit.

So when we come to tantra, it means the tra of tan, the means of tan, of "to tan." So what does the word tan mean in Sanskrit? It means a whole bunch of things. Listen—I'm not going to spell all this out. Listen carefully. You might have to re-listen here. Listen carefully and ponder.

Ponder these different meanings of the word tan. So the tantra as the means of all this, in relation to everything that we've talked about on this retreat—about archetypes and soul-making and the imaginal and everything we've covered. I'm not going to spell it all out; I'm just going to go through a list. But see if you can hear each one related to or in the field of or brought alive by everything that we've discussed.

So tantra as a practice, imaginal practice, this seeing of, this perceiving of all things as divine through the imaginal, through the malleability of perception. Tan means—tantra means—the means of, the practice of. Tan means to extend, to spread, to weave, to accomplish. So what's being accomplished? Who or for the sake of what is something being accomplished?

It means to perform as well—like to perform a ceremony, for instance. It also means to compose, for instance, like a literary work or a work of art, to assist. Going back to that—when we're talking about daemons and what wants to come through—who or what is being assisted?

It means also to resound, which we could also say to re-sound. So something that has an existence at another level is being re-sounded through my perception, my seeing it, my experiencing it as image here.

To resound, to re-sound, to roar, to emboss. To emboss means to engrave a pattern of something in or on something else. Again, there's a pattern of something which is coming to me as image, and I might see another as image, as angel. Again, I'm not going to spell all these out.

It also means to prepare a way for, to prepare a path for, an opening for. Again, for what? For me? For gods? For archetypes? For the daemon? For what wants to come through? Tan also means to direct towards. It also means to manifest. Can you hear the resonances of everything that we've been talking about in some of these translations of what tantra might mean? To display. Again, to sacrifice is another meaning. And sacrifice is from the Latin—sacra facere—to make holy. Can you hear the resonance of all this?

In Tibetan usage and the late Indian Buddhism, Mahayana, one usage of the word mantra was actually synonymous with the word tantra. So you talk about the path of tantra, and one might just say the path of mantra. They use them completely interchangeably. And so, same deal—mantra in Sanskrit: tra is the means or the instrument, the practice of man.

And man as a root in Sanskrit, mantra. Again, listen, allowing everything we've talked about to resonate, to echo in these root meanings, the meanings of the root of what tantra, mantra can mean. To believe—man can mean to believe, to imagine, to suppose, to conjecture. And there's that idea of the flexibility of conceptual frameworks, to regard anyone or anything as. So this idea of the fantasies, the mythoi that pervade our perception and our being in the world.

It can mean—man can mean—to think oneself or be thought to be, to appear as, to be of an opinion, to be of a certain opinion. Again, this flexibility of conceptual frames, of views, of perspectives. But also the views, the perspectives, the ideas of different archetypes. We talked about this at a certain point—that each archetype has its own ideational inclination or structures or perspectives.

Man can also be to set the heart and mind on something. It can also mean, very beautifully, to honor or esteem. So again, to enter into a view that honors or esteems—and through what? It can also mean simply to perceive, and that has everything to do with what we're talking about. It can mean to offer or present. So what is being presented in this world to the world of perception? What is being offered through my life or through the life of another as I see it or through the perception of this thing or the world? World as offering.

There's all kinds of... Those root words translated—I'm not just playing a language game here—are pregnant with so much beauty and so much richness of meaning and possibility to explore.

So some of you will know, when we talk about tantra or the path of tantra, the path of mantra, that includes Dzogchen. So some of you will be a little bit or very familiar with Dzogchen teachings. And sometimes it's interesting—Dzogchen is quite popular now in the West. But it is a tantric path. So it's actually, in the context, Dzogchen is tantra, but this doesn't get emphasized that much because there's so

much emphasis on nature of mind and instructions and teachings about nature of mind. But Dzogchen is within a context. Teachings on the nature of mind are only a part of Dzogchen.

And that's within a context of this perception or seeing of appearances as divine—that's the context for those narrower teachings about nature of mind, the cutting through instructions and all that. These exist within a much bigger context that has to do with what tantra essentially is: this practice of perceiving all things as divine, of seeing all appearances as divine.

That's the context, and that's the context of the teaching of nature of mind. The purpose of the teachings of nature of mind—because they bring a very deep freedom, of course—but also because they liberate, as I said, tying back to what we were exploring much earlier, they liberate ways of looking, perceptions of that divinity of all things. And again, divinity here is not just a universal divinity—because everything shares in the nature of mind or everything is awareness or whatever, so everything is divine in the same way.

It's quite personal, if you like. There is personhood in this, in that divinity. The universe expresses, if you like, the different persons of divinity.

Now, I'm aware that I'm using this word quite a lot—divine and God and this or that—and I know it makes many people very nervous. Other people just put up walls to it, and all kinds of reactions can arise. So I want to explore that a little bit in the next talk. What do we mean anyway? How can we conceive of this word that to some is very comfortable and to others is very alien and very off-putting?

So I want to explore that in the next talk.

Thank you for listening.

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