A Sacred Universe: Insight, Theophany, Cosmopoesis (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 54:18

In these final talks of our retreat, I want to draw together the threads we've been exploring in practice and discussion, while also elaborating and filling out some of the themes and ideas we've encountered. In this elaboration, I hope to take these concepts further and open doors for the mind—doors to new views and expanded possibilities for practice and experiential exploration.

When we open doors, we often find that passing through brings not only answers but also more questions, providing structure while simultaneously revealing new territories. Some of what I'll be discussing may seem to create more loose ends or to build certain structures while leaving ideas and possibilities incomplete. This may indeed be the case, which means there will need to be another retreat, another course—hopefully.

Over these next three talks, some ideas will be familiar while others less so. Please hang in there if some concepts sound difficult or hard to understand. In the third talk especially, I'll provide examples that should help clarify things, perhaps through repeated listening and concrete illustrations.

Remember how we began this retreat by examining the cultural and historical context in which all our discussions of imaginal practice are landing. We explored particularly the unquestioned assumptions, views, and sense of personhood—both our own and others'—that provide the backdrop for these teachings. These ideas meet views and assumptions we've absorbed from our culture, usually unquestioningly, until they become our reality, shaping how we view and sense everything: personhood, the world, the cosmos, and imagination itself.

Let me revisit and expand on what I call the modernist conception of personhood. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz, in his book *From the Native's Point of View*, offers this illuminating comparison between Western and indigenous conceptions:

"The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures."

We often take this view for granted, assuming it reflects reality rather than recognizing it as a momentary,

transitional phase in the history of a particular culture—a way certain human beings have viewed and sensed personhood during a specific period.

Alongside this intuitive cultural view, Dharma practitioners in the modern West encounter other perspectives that make strange marriages with our inherited assumptions. Popular among these is the view that the self is a process—that there is no self, only an unfolding of aggregates, psychophysical constituents moving through time like some computer readout or machine-like progression of physical processes, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and moments of consciousness. Everything else is dismissed as illusion; what's real is this atomized temporal process.

Another common view presents interconnectedness as ultimate truth—the lens through which we should understand selfhood. What typically happens for modern Dharma practitioners is an understandable attempt to cling to one of these philosophical views, perhaps having glimpsed it perceptually in practice, then trying to hold onto that glimpse. This creates a strange marriage between Geertz's bounded, integrated self and either the atomized process view or the interconnectedness perspective. These views either mesh together awkwardly or battle each other, with different ones dominating at different times, while we cling to particular views or experiences, trying to perpetuate certain insights.

It's worth noting that in the Buddha's teaching of anatta and the emptiness of self, all self-views without exception are regarded as empty, not ultimately true. The Buddha wasn't saying the self is an atomized process or a field of interconnection or any other particular view. Rather, no self-view whatsoever constitutes ultimate truth.

When we truly realize this and take it as an avenue of practice, a remarkable door opens: we become free to use, step into, and put on all kinds of self-views like garments and lenses, while maintaining the knowledge that whatever way we're viewing self and person is not real, not the truth. Because all views are equally untrue, we're liberated to employ any of them skillfully.

But the particular popular ones nowadays—I mean, I could list a whole bunch, but let's just say there's the atomized process or this view of interconnectedness. And interconnectedness may be something I'll come back to later. This is a kind of aside for now—I don't want to lose track of the main point.

But interconnectedness is an interesting teaching when we poke at it a little bit more. It's interesting what is meant and implied and not implied in the teachings of interconnectedness. So usually—I hope I'll return to this later in subsequent talks—we imply something of the physical processes or events that make up my body, and even my brain, my organism, and that of others are connected over space and time. This physical event here, this physical process here, is interconnected with others, or actually all physical processes over space and over time.

Or mental ideas, for example—I hear a teaching or I read a book or some idea in the culture or something like that—are also interconnected, connected over space and over time. So there is, if you like, the

teaching of interconnectedness is what I would call horizontal. Physical processes and events are connected with other physical processes and events. Mental events, if you like, are connected or influence other mental events.

At the same level of being, the same dimension of being, there's a horizontal interconnectedness. Though we, of course, admit that the physical state of things affects the mental, and the mental affects the physical, essentially it's a teaching that does not draw attention to or admit or emphasize an interconnectedness between dimensions of being, or invite the idea that there are other dimensions of being apart from the physical. So it's a horizontal teaching rather than vertical. That's an aside for now. I'm just throwing that out as a seed.

The main point here is, again, what is the context of these ideas that we're talking about? This is the modernist context of the modernist person, as Gertz described, or mixed strangely—a strange marriage with a sort of clinging to certain dharma views and holding onto them as philosophies: the atomized process or interconnectedness. And also the context of what is the modernist view or assumption or sense of reality of what the cosmos is.

And that cosmos being essentially physical matter—atoms moving, bumping into each other in kind of meaningless movement and interaction of matter over vast stretches of space and time, which over vast stretches of time now give rise to consciousness in some way that scientists haven't figured out yet. And so there is a kind of level, two different levels—consciousness and matter—but that consciousness is an emergent property of the physical, of matter. And so that's the modernist view of the cosmos.

Not everyone believes that, and we may battle that in some ways. But what that then means in terms of the context of my personhood, of our personhood, the context of my life and the trajectory of my life and what gives meaning to my person and my life, the context of my dharma practice, my view of dharma, my spiritual practice—all of that takes place, if you like, within a context of what we could call a philosophy of materialism, that matter is the primary reality.

A better word is physicalism—and don't confuse materialism as in the chasing of expensive cars and iPhones and all that kind of stuff with this philosophy of materialism. The physical matter is the primary and the only reality, and everything else emerges out of that, and if it's not material, it's illusory. Or if it doesn't have its roots in matter, it's illusory.

So what this means is that the context of everything that I do—my person, my life, my practice, all that, and whatever meaning I chase—is within this essentially physical universe. Everything's taking place within physicalism.

And it's so easy not to realize that these views and assumptions about personhood or what a person is and what the cosmos is are perspectives. They are perspectives. What I would call ways of looking. They are not complete truths. Absolutely not. They originated, some of them at least, as kind of working guidelines

for the scientific revolution. And somehow they became absorbed into the culture and the mindset of the culture as if they were proven and complete truths. Very interesting—not proven and not complete truths.

And similarly with those dharma views of the process or interconnectedness or whatever, vast awareness, whatever it is. So these are perspectives, and this is really, really important to emphasize this and to realize this. Absolutely crucial—everything hinges on this: realizing what is a perspective and what is not a truth, a complete truth.

And then the question with perspectives or ways of looking, what I call ways of looking, is: what does this perspective, what does this way of looking bring? What does it open and what does it close? What does it unfold? What are the effects of looking through this way of looking, this perspective, this lens? And what are the effects of looking through another way of looking, another perspective? This is the golden question, if you like, for me—the golden dharma question.

So what do these perspectives bring and what do others bring? Rather than "this is the truth." And in the context of the teachings of this retreat, what does soul need? What kind of perspectives, what kind of views, what kind of conceptual frameworks does soul and soulfulness need? Because that is a deeply important question.

question for the being, for our being.

So there are these contexts that we live and move in, and where we try to arrange and follow the pathway of our life and practice—contexts of views, assumptions about personhood, cosmos, and imagination.

Then we have something like the notion of self-expression: to express myself. How important this has become in modern culture for us! It's something that, as I alluded to earlier, wasn't really an issue at all in other cultures or in the Buddha's time. Self-expression is alive for us; it's something important. We might not speak in those terms, or we might feel very inhibited when it comes to that and want to shove it away as a concept because it's so painful for us, not even realizing that we're doing so.

But in the context of some of these views of personhood or cosmos—for instance, if I'm clinging to a view that the atomized process is really the reality—then self-expression becomes a ridiculous notion. Any emphasis on it is simply absurd. Who cares? It's just an atomized process; it might as well be a machine.

Or in the context of this modernist cosmos, an essentially meaningless universe, self-expression becomes—again, maybe not ridiculous, but there's a disjunction there. Self-expression is often where a sense of meaningfulness comes into our life, where we generate meaningfulness. But it's divorced from the larger context, or there's a disjunction, because all this is taking place within this vast universe of essentially meaningless matter. And somewhere we've been told that this is reality.

So anything to do with self-expression is dwarfed by that. But also, anything to do with our meaningfulness or sense of meaningfulness does not derive in any objective way from the universe. It has

no place in the universe. It's alien in the universe—dwarfed and alien, facing a void of meaninglessness. I tend to think it's self-generated, therefore kind of illusory, because this self, despite the interconnectedness at the level of physicality and perhaps ideas, is essentially a strange, alien, minuscule entity in a vast universe of essential meaninglessness. And that is the real reality, the objective reality.

So these views do something quite potent to notions of self-expression or meaningfulness.

In relation to how we think about and view self-expression or personhood, these contexts—philosophical contexts, often unexplored, often unquestioned, often half-conscious—constrain how we think about and view personhood and self-expression.

So that, for example, what we've been talking about as one possibility of seeing a person—my person or another person—as a theophany, as an image or vision or portal expression or face of the divine, as a being, an angel expressing the divine, through which the divine shows itself in a certain form, diaphanous to, translucent to the divine, to what wants to come through.

We talked about this: that the desire is not so much in me—what wants to come through me. It's something I'm not separate from, this divine that wants to come through, this angel that wants to come through, and what it wants. But it's also more than me somehow, other than me—both.

And this divine, this divinity or angel that wants to come through, is in a particular form, particular to a particular personhood. So it's a different concept. I'll elaborate on this later. It's a different conception of the divine than simply that the divine is shining through everything because it shines through everything universally because all is one. Or it shines through everything that has awareness, or whatever, because awareness is what's divine, and therefore anything that has awareness.

This is a different vision or sense of the person and personhood.

Because of the cultural context, the philosophical context—and often we don't really think of any of this as philosophy—there is a constraining, a constricting of the range of possible ways of seeing and sensing the person. And I'm interested in widening that with a range of possible ways of seeing, of viewing, of sensing personhood—mine and others. What is it, for instance, to see and to sense the other vividly in a beautiful and rich and deep way—the other as self as a portal for soul, for something much bigger, for soul worlds, for the divine?

Now, as I've said before, very much fundamental to these contexts of views and assumptions in which we move and conceive, and in which the teachings land, is the whole question of reality and what is real. We've touched on this; there are different aspects.

But in relation to, for example, imagination—this view of physicalism, that the physical is the only thing that's real—among other aspects which I've talked about before and will come back to, this means that we tend to view, or the culture tends to view, imagination as unreal. We say "imaginary" with a kind of

derogatory sense to it for the most part. We've touched on this. I'm reviewing.

And that was one of the main reasons why Henri Corbin coined the term "imaginal" rather than "imaginary"—to escape or set aside the derogatory views and assumptions that imagination has in the culture. I'm talking about a different way of approaching the imagination, a different way of relating to the imaginary which becomes something valuable and has a certain reality to it.

So for people like Henri Corbin, for William Blake, for Walter Wink—a Christian theologian with a quite sophisticated philosophical background and understanding—for Buddhist Tantra, and I'm thinking particularly of the very beautiful worked-out systems of Tantra that you get in some of the streams in Tibet, I'm thinking particularly of Longchenpa and Mipham in the Nyingma tradition. For these people, the imaginal is actually more real than matter.

So there's a turning upside down of the usual cultural view that we now inhabit. Now, the question of what matter is is something I'm going to touch on a little bit later.

But the view is that the imaginal actually has, in a way, more reality than matter. Someone I don't know too much about—Swedenborg, a mystic and visionary in the Christian tradition from a couple of centuries ago—exemplified this perspective. A writer named Slešlam Miloš, writing about Swedenborg and the way he held the reality of the imaginal, observes:

"Swedenborg's detailed descriptions from his imaginal practice of beautiful gardens, their trees and their flowers in heaven, of slums, dirt, and ruins in hell do not mean that he believed they existed other than in imagination." So he understood this imaginal world—what he called heaven and hell within a Christian theological and conceptual framework—as existing in imagination. But Miloš continues: "But imagination is the most real existence."

Yes, it's imagination, but the way Swedenborg viewed that kind of imaginative experience gave it a completely different ontological validity. It's the most real existence. For Swedenborg and for William Blake, this other world, this world of the imaginative, is more real than any physical place. There's quite a different view operating here.

When we come to all this and try to understand how these things fit together—we think we understand matter and the experience of conventional reality: this is a table, that's a chair, and so forth, and then there's the imaginal, psychic phenomena and all that—how does it all fit together? What kind of conceptual framework will present to us or outline the truth of what is real here? What is the reality of all this and the reality status of all this?

The easy and unexplored option is simply to follow without too much questioning what's given to us culturally. But when we start exploring, start questioning and probing these things through practice, through experimentation, through dialogue and philosophy in our experience, we realize it's not that simple.

As I said, I don't pretend to have the answer, and I don't think anyone's really worked it out, as far as I can tell. What you get nowadays is people approaching this in three broad ways.

One is this sort of going along with the assumptions of modernist culture and dismissing the imaginal as just imaginary and a waste of time. Reality becomes—even if people dismiss using words like truth and reality—actually a default assumption about what's real operating in their philosophy.

More sophisticated, some philosophers and people nowadays would admit that contrary to the modernist assumption—which is that there is a view or a way of looking that reveals reality, whether it's scientific materialism or, translated to the modern dharma world, mindfulness or bare attention reveals reality—contrary to this singularity of view that's often explicit or hidden in someone's philosophy or approach or dharma teaching, there's a more sophisticated philosophical approach that's quite popular.

This is the postmodern realization, acknowledging that any individual perspective will be incapable of capturing the truth of things or the reality of the way things are. Therefore, there's the necessity of multiple perspectives, just by virtue of a difference in the level at which reality exists.

One analogy I got from Sanford Drob, a philosopher who writes particularly about post-modernism and the influence of Hegel and other ideas, but also on Jewish Kabbalah in the contemporary context. He has this analogy of the way maps of the globe work to try to represent in two dimensions something that actually exists in three dimensions.

There's something called the Mercator projection. When you're making a map of the world in two dimensions, it will necessarily be distorted. There are also political ramifications of this, but it makes certain countries look much bigger than they are, and other countries or continents look much smaller than they are. Then there are other systems—I think one's called Gall-Peters—other systems of translating the three-dimensional to the two-dimensional map, which make different countries look bigger and smaller. Suddenly you see that Africa is enormous, or India is really quite large, while countries like certain European nations are actually tiny.

But there's the acknowledgment that neither is really an accurate definition or description or translation of reality necessarily. The reality being in three dimensions, we necessarily acknowledge that there are some distortions when we try to translate that, represent that three-dimensional reality in two dimensions.

That's a physical analogy of our existential and philosophical situation. The assumption there, implied in all that, is that there is some kind of objective reality to the way things are, to the universe, to things. It is there, but it's certainly not obvious, and it's not really translatable or expressible to human consciousness, to the human mind. But the assumption is it does exist objectively, sort of independent of the human mind. It's just that it's not articulatable at our level.

This kind of thinking has parallels. Some of you may have heard of a physicist named David Bohm, who

had some dialogues with Krishnamurti. He was not so keen on some of the implications of quantum physics, which seemed to be implying to many people this sort of non-objective status of reality, of things, of atoms—that an electron or whatever it is, a particle, does not exist in any way independent of our observing of it.

It doesn't exist as a thing in a place at a certain time with a certain energy, with a certain speed or mass. All of that is very much contingent, very much dependent on the way of looking, in a way that has profound parallels with emptiness teachings.

Some people, including Einstein, were deeply uncomfortable with the implications of these discoveries made in the early part of the twentieth century and what they seemed to suggest. David Bohm wrote a book called *Wholeness and the Implicit Order*, attempting to work out a system of physics which, similar to what Job was saying about the masses, gives an objective reality at a certain level while recognizing that what we then perceive has all these strange features that quantum mechanics describes—but that this isn't actually the reality. In other words, there is this objective independent reality, but it simply cannot be translated or made visible to us, so it gives rise to these strange effects when translated to our level of experience, perception and understanding.

What's interesting about quantum mechanics and its philosophical implications is that most physicists simply ignore the philosophical questions it raises. Very few actually pursue them, and of those who do, some, like David Bohm, are drawn to the project of finding an objective reality. Of course they are—that's what drew them to physics in the first place: the idea that there is a reality one can discover and capture in certain formulations, equations, or conceptions. The whole beauty, romance, and attraction of physics for physicists is to discover what that objective reality is. That's the entire scientific project.

So much of the quantum revolution can be philosophically challenging to the very foundations of the scientific revolution and the assumptions that became embedded after it. But this represents one more sophisticated philosophical approach: assuming there is an objective reality that's simply not capturable or translatable—like the necessary distortions when translating from three dimensions to two.

Now compare this second possibility—assuming there's an objective reality that's difficult or impossible to fully comprehend—with a non-realist, non-reificationist conceptual framework. What do I mean by that?

We humans have a tendency, a deep-seated tendency—and I would say this is what the Buddha is pointing to very fundamentally in his teachings—we have a strong inclination and attachment to assume an objective reality to things: selves, objects, world, time. What would it be to approach this question of reality with a non-realist conceptual framework as the basis for our whole way of approaching things, including the Dharma? We don't reify anything as ultimately real or "this is the way things really are"—any conceptual framework.

What would it be, or is it possible, to put the Dharma thoroughly on a non-reifying basis of emptiness?

This, to me, is so important. It opens so many doors. I can't emphasize it enough—how fundamental and fundamentally different that would be. Can we do that? Can we realize the Dharma, shape and conceive of the Dharma, absolutely, thoroughly, completely on a non-reifying basis of emptiness?

That means emptiness, this understanding of a non-realist perspective, actually becomes the total fundamental of everything in the Dharma. The whole Dharma is on that basis. I think that's actually quite rare in the Dharma world.

Everyone who's been around the Dharma for a while would agree with the word "emptiness"—yes, of course, śūnyatā, emptiness. But the meaning is very, very different. There's a whole range of what people actually mean when they use the word empty or emptiness. What I mean, and what I would like to place as the basis, the foundation for the whole understanding and practice of Dharma, is not the sense that emptiness means things or selves are just a process in time of smaller units—moments, aggregates, or whatever. And not just the teaching of interconnectedness or certain other teachings. I'm talking about something much more radical than any of that. Much deeper and much more total.

Because in that process view, for example, the elements of the process are still given a certain reality. I'm talking about something utterly total. Everything, without question, is empty. Even the deepest, most ingrained concepts of space, time, awareness—all of that is empty, thoroughly.

What often happens in the Dharma is people say, "Yes, yes, of course, emptiness. Of course things are empty, of course this or that is empty." But then it's almost like it becomes something that's easily forgotten about in practice. It's like, "Yes, yes, of course," and then one engages practices or views that ignore or don't incorporate the understanding of emptiness. So the whole idea of bare attention, or when we bring into practice the question, "Is this moment enough?"

All of that rhetoric, all of those teachings—while helpful at a certain level—actually reinforce this reification, this making real of something. They serve as possibilities, particularly for beginners, because they seem basic. One can think, "I can get my head around that. Being present in this moment sounds so simple, so attractive in its simplicity, so basic. That's good. It seems as if I'm meeting reality on an undistorted level."

But that apparent basicness very quickly becomes a basis—a foundation for the whole of the Dharma, the entire worldview, everything else. The unquestioned assumption of the reality of this moment, the unquestioned assumptions about bare attention meeting some basic experience—these take root. They create, they fabricate experience in line with that assumption. So it seems that way and perpetuates an experience of this or that, of this moment or this bare attention, as reality.

Then I'm left thinking I just need to align with reality or this moment. I need to be with what is. I need to accept reality, open to what is, love what is—however we put it. Lovely, beautiful, very helpful, but only to a certain level. Quite limited.

The basis there is a realist one, not a non-realist one. The foundation of that kind of dharma is not in emptiness, even though a person might say, "Yes, yes, of course everything's empty." Or they might agree with emptiness but mean something different by it. They think, "That's real. Other things are empty. This moment, this bare attention, this process is real. I can be with that." That becomes the basis—the realist basis rather than a non-realist one.

A non-realist basis is much more radical. Hard to see, hard to understand, as the Buddha said—discernible only by the wise.

So what about, instead of a philosophy that assumes objective reality, instead of spiritual teachings that basically have a foundation in reificationism of some kind or another—what about a basis for the Dharma in exploration? The exploration through practice and through reflection, but mostly through practice—an exploration and understanding of the fabrication of perception.

What about that as a basis, as a summary of what the Dharma really is, how it works, how it all fits together? An exploration through practice, an understanding, a deepening insight into the fabrication of perception, of appearance, experience—using those three words interchangeably. And then eventually, as that deepens, the understanding that fabrication too, as an understanding, as a concept, is also emptied.

What about that as a nutshell explanation of what the Dharma is and as a basis for it? That gives a very different sense of everything—of what the universe is, the world, what experience is—and also a very different sense of what the Dharma is.

Some people might hear this and say, "Well, questioning reality in that way sounds abstract and intellectual." That's unfortunate because it really is not abstract. That might be a reaction, but we're talking about practice here—something very possible, very engaged, direct and palpable in its effects.

Or a person might hear this teaching about fabrication and say, not quite understanding, "Oh, so you just fabricate something, you make up something so that you feel better." But in that kind of response—which sounds like a question but is really a statement or judgment—it's betraying a reificationism. "You're making up something else. There is a reality; you're making up something different." It betrays what the Buddha would call delusional reificationism.

So rather than this reifying basis and understanding about "what is" or "this moment," what about a discovery, an opening through practice and insight that this moment is co-created with me, with the sense of self—even the most subtle sense of self, just the barest sense of consciousness or vast awareness? This moment is co-created with any sense of self, co-created with the way of looking, with the state and inclination and assumptions and conceptions of the citta. It's mutually dependent, mutually contingent and not separate from that.

All of it—the way of looking, the self, the subject and object—are mutually dependent and not separate. And then this moment becomes something thoroughly empty, along with the self, along with the way of

looking and consciousness and all of it. Thoroughly empty, magical.

When we assume that this so-called bare experience we might have through mindfulness practice is real—when I assume that even tacitly, even without realizing I'm assuming it, unconsciously—it constrains. That assumption constrains the ways of looking that are possible for me, the kinds of views, the kinds of lenses through which I can look at experience. There's a constriction of possibilities, of range, through the assumption of reality.

Because the ways of looking are constrained that way, then the experience, the range of experience, of perception, of what actually appears in terms of experiences of self, of other, experiences of the world, of time, of space, of things like desire and eros, of cosmos—

All of that gets constricted—the range of perception, of experience I can have of all of that.

And as one gets deeper into the teachings of emptiness and realizes, actually, it's a constriction too in the conceptual frameworks. Because I'm assuming what's real. Tied up in that is a whole conceptual framework. Again, I might not even realize it. I might not even be able to articulate it. I might not even have thought about it ever. I might be unconscious. But there's a conceptual framework operating.

That assumption of reality constrains not only my experience—my ways of looking therefore my experience—but also my conceptual frameworks that I can entertain, move between. It constrains my hermeneutics, if you like—it's a fancy word for me, meaning my ways of interpreting experience, interpreting cosmos and the world that I'm in. Reading, if you like, this field of experience.

And all of that constrains the freedoms that are possible for me and constrains the creativity of existence. Constrains, too, the sense of beauty that's possible and the sense of the range of beauty. Remember we were talking about this before—the range of beauty that's possible for me as a human being. What kinds of beauty can the soul open to and know and taste and wonder at?

So deep, radical, total emptiness—that realization, that level of insight—actually allows so much more. As that insight deepens, it allows so much more. It allows, for example, cosmopoiesis, this word that I used the other day, this opening of the possibilities of seeing, of sensing, of really inhabiting a different cosmos, feeling oneself in, perceiving a magical cosmos, a divine cosmos, a cosmos like this or that, the range of, if you like, poetic possibility—cosmopoiesis, the idea of creating different cosmological poems, poems of the cosmos.

It opens possibilities through insight, through deep, radical, total insight into emptiness.

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