Theophany and Cosmopoiesis: Instructions

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I want to begin by summarizing very briefly some of what we've emphasized in imaginal practice, and then open a door from that foundation, building on it to elaborate some possibilities that emerge in a particular direction.

We've said and emphasized that when we sustain attention meditatively on an image—sensitive to the resonance and all the richness we've been discussing—we will notice effects with that image, from that image, on three primary dimensions: the emotional field and emotions; the energetic field and energy body; and the perception and sense of self, other, things, and world.

These three dimensions are not separate, but it's helpful to delineate them for clarity. As we've noted, when we focus on the energy body and tune to perhaps pleasant energy there—a sense of well-being, comfort, or ease—this can lead the energy body and consciousness into the whole range of states of samadhi by tuning to what is pleasant in the energy body.

Similarly, if in the emotions there's a pleasant emotion—happiness, peace, or joy—focusing on that pleasant emotion can also lead into deeper samadhi, and the whole being coalesces and harmonizes in that state of samadhi, an emotional-energetic state.

If what's happening emotionally and energetically is unpleasant and difficult, then focusing on either dimension—if we bring the right qualities into that focusing, into that attention—may calm the emotions and calm the energy body.

Regarding the third aspect of effects we notice—the sense of self and perception of self, other, and things—this may include an awareness of resonances, a mirroring or echoing of the image and imaginal figure in one's personal life. We've given many examples: wrathful deity, warrior, wonder, and so forth. These are usually not to be taken literally, but there's this echoing in personal life.

We've talked about daimons, and there is a sense of this echoing, this mirroring, the recognition of which brings soulfulness into the sense of my life and journey and the events in my life. It adds soulfulness, or rather, I come to resonate more fully with the soulfulness that's already there; I nourish the soulfulness. The sense of archetypal necessity and destiny, or telos, are all part of this in terms of one's personal life.

But within this third field of effects—the resonances of images on perception and sense of self, other, things, and world—we may also notice that there's a sense of holiness, sacredness, or even divinity in the image. What do we actually mean by those words: sacred, holy, divine? Perhaps we'll return to that question. For now, I'll let these words resonate without defining them too precisely. But this quality may

be part of what we sense and perceive in the image.

This sense of holiness or divinity in the image is something we can tune into and use in different ways. This is a massive subject, so I'm going to highlight just a few possibilities and directions.

One possibility is to allow that sense of holiness or divinity in the image to spread to the surroundings, thereby allowing what I call cosmopoiesis. I invented this word, though I'm not fond of its sound and haven't found a better alternative. Let me explain what this word points toward.

Cosmopoiesis: "cosmo" refers to cosmos—a word like "world" or "universe" but with more implication of the order or structure of the universe. We speak of cosmology in the West: what is the nature and origin of the universe? The "poesis" part refers to artistic creation—like making poetry, the poet creating poems. So cosmopoiesis suggests the cosmos as poem that we write as meditators, the meditator as artist creating a palpable vision, an experience of cosmos. Like an artist, we become able to create different cosmoses.

This points to the creative aspect of meditation, the malleability of perception that, with enough understanding and skill, helps us enter into or inhabit different cosmoses. It's like art, as I've explained at other times. This is indeed a huge subject, easily warranting a long retreat of its own.

Let's begin exploring this door. The sense of divinity or holiness in the image can spread to the surroundings, the environment, the world we're in around us as we practice. Through this spreading, we feel that we are inhabiting a different world. There's a creation of cosmos through perception, through the way of looking in the moment.

Sometimes this spreading happens by itself—the sense from the image, the divinity, the holiness, the sacredness simply spreads naturally. Sometimes it's already spread within the image itself, or the image is already mixed with perception. In other words, it's not separate.

It's not an image that's separate to the perception of the world in the moment.

So this is one possibility. Related to that, or if you like, a part of that, is just the—again, here's another word we've used already—the theophanic sense in the image, the image as theophany. Theophany: *theo* meaning divine or God, *theophany*. *Phanic* is a word that means something like showing through or shining through or appearance of. So it's an appearance of a face of the divine, or the divine shows through or shines through it.

And so sometimes we have a sense of an image. It could be a separate image, separate from the perception where I have my eyes shut and this imaginal figure comes, or it could be that the perception of the world is appearing to us as a theophany in different ways. So these two words are very related—cosmopoiesis or theophany—but it could be that an imaginal figure appears to us as a divine being.

Let's say there's that theophanic sense of the image. The image is a theophany. And so, for example, Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, or Tara, or Christ, or whatever. And then we can use that

image, that imaginal figure, with all the theophany that it's imbued with, and use it, as we've said, for cultivating different brahmaviharas—metta or compassion or joy or whatever.

But this figure may also not be a classical divine figure. It may be just some other human being or a teacher or a lover or a friend. Many possibilities, but they can become for us a theophany. This figure, this imaginal figure or this person that I know or know of becomes for us, through the imagination, through imaginal practice, a theophany. And then we can use this theophanic sense or the cosmopoiesis, the sense of cosmopoiesis, in different ways.

Now when we do that, when that is one of the effects that happens in the perception of the sense of self, other things, world, we never lose touch in practice with the feeling of the emotional field and the sensitivity to that or the energy body. So that's just reiterating something we've emphasized all through the retreat.

But it's this certain openings in the third field of effects—the perception and the sense of self, other things in the world, and particularly the sense of holiness or divinity, and within that the theophanic sense of the image, the image as theophany, or this wider cosmopoiesis or both—that I want to explore a little bit and practice, and look at some practice possibilities there.

So again, setting that in a context of wider dharma understanding—and again, this is something we've touched on before—it's so important to, I think, have a dharma view, a view, a wider view of understanding dharma practice that supports opening rather than closes things down and keeps them boxed in.

So putting all this in a wider dharma context, we said there are, broadly speaking, three kind of avenues of practice that we can explore as practitioners, we have available to us and we can develop all of them.

And the first might be what often gets called bare attention practice, or a simple mindfulness—the sort of presence or mindfulness of presence to what is real. There's usually an assumption that what we're present to then is real. And there's the simple attention, for instance, to the sensual detail of the moment—this taste, this touch, and how it, quote, actually feels—or the presence to the moment, etc. And most people are, in the insight meditation tradition, very familiar with that bare attention or simple mindfulness. So that would be one mode, if you like, one gear of practicing, one way of looking.

And then there's a second kind of camp, if you like, or collection, which involves a lot of practices rather than one simple practice, that have in common that they undo fabrication, they unfabricate the perception, the appearances of self, other, world, to a much greater extent than simple bare attention or mindfulness practice, so-called.

So all the range of emptiness practices and samadhi practices and metta when it goes deeply, all these practices and all those avenues fabricate less perception, they fabricate less experience and appearance of self, other things, dukkha, etc. So that's a whole, as I said, avenue within which there's a range of practices,

the second camp of fabricating less, much less than regular perception, much less than simple mindfulness or bare attention.

Actually, most traditional Theravadan practices in the Dharma have that quality in common, that they fabricate less to different degrees, and in a way you can understand the thrust, the movement, of traditional Theravadan practices, for the most part, most of them actually are moving in the direction of the unfabricated.

So all these different practices, even mindfulness or the samadhi or the metta or looking at impermanence or whatever it is, seeing things as not-self, they have this characteristic to them that they unfabricate. They tend, as modes of looking, ways of looking, they fabricate less to different degrees and fabricate less and less until eventually one develops that skill to fabricate nothing at all. Nothing at all is being fabricated and there's the opening to the unfabricated as we talked about a little bit the other day.

So that's the second group of practice, the second range is this learning how to fabricate less, a little bit more and really radically less.

And then the third group of practices would include, what could we say, skillful fabrication. So one is actually deliberately engaged in fabrication, knowing that there is fabrication going on, but in the service of something. And it's skillful rather than unconscious or problematic.

That camp, this third camp of the practices of fabrication, very much using the imagination, imaginal practice or tantric practice, practices that fabricate the appearance, the perception of self, other, world in different ways.

So there's, first is bare attention or simple mindfulness. The second is practices that actually fabricate much less and tend towards a dissolution, a disappearing of appearances, a non-fabrication of appearances. They tend towards emptying out of self and of appearance. And the third group of practices actually fabricates skillfully in different ways, in different directions, if you like, and particularly we're interested in using the imagination, incorporating imaginative practice as being part of that, the skillful range of fabrication of the perceptions of self, other, and world.

Now, of those three camps, if you like, or directions, not everyone, but eventually I would say most people, if they're practicing a lot and diligently and widely and deeply and reflecting on all these things, and if they really get into all this stuff, most people will eventually, I think, come to a position or understanding where they actually see the second and the third of those directions as more important than the first.

So more important than this kind of elevation of the idea of presence or simple mindfulness or bare attention and the whole technology of stress reduction that's involved in that—important as it is and valuable and necessary as it is as an aspect, a platform, as part of our path, a stepping stone—most people will come to regard the movement, the whole direction and movement of learning to fabricate much less and opening to that dissolution and that emptying, that non-fabricating, the unfabricated, and also the

skillful fabricating, the beautiful fabricating, using the imagination, tantric practices and all that kind of thing, of the perception of self, other, world. Most people regard them as much more important and fruitful and richer directions in practice than the first ones—bare attention, simple mindfulness, or so-called presence.

Because especially with the last one, the skillful fabrication, it feeds the soul. It gives the soul, if we use that language again, what it wants. It's something that directly nourishes, deepens, opens, heightens, and sparks the soulfulness. Not that the others can't, but there's more range to that and more depth to the soulfulness in that third camp.

And very much it serves what we're talking about, this opening of the range of perception. We learn to fabricate skillfully through different ways of looking and see how the perceptions open and shift and change. This is really moving in that direction of serving this opening of the range of perception, which I've stressed several times on this retreat, in a way that may be one of the most important things and one of the most central ingredients of a different way of understanding what Dharma is and what practice is and the whole movement of the Dharma.

The second avenue, this unfabricating, is also in the service of eventually—not only of opening to this unfabricated and the mystical transcendent beauty of knowing that what is deathless, as I talked about in another talk the other day—not only that, but also through that, through deepening in that way and then emerging out of that depth of non-fabrication, then also understanding emptiness through that and giving us more license, more permission, also more skill and ability to shape perception, to enjoy the malleability of perception and to open up the range of perceptions.

So this again, everything hinging around perception and with that needing a wider view of the Dharma or a different view of the Dharma than may be common or familiar to many people. But needing a wider view of the Dharma, a conceptual framework of the Dharma that can actually hold all that, accommodate it, wherein all this makes sense. And it's a slightly different conception of what the direction and the aspiration of the whole of Dharma practice is.

When we make that delineation between these three avenues, it immediately, as far as practice is concerned, brings up the question: well, what is it that takes a practitioner in any moment in one direction or another? And as a practitioner, how can I steer and navigate and move between these different modes, these different avenues or directions?

Most people, as I said, will be already quite familiar with that practice of bare attention or simple mindfulness or presence or whatever we want to call it. But it's worth knowing too, in trying to understand better this whole question of navigation and steering and moving between these practices, it's worth knowing too also that clinging—even unconsciously—to a concept of actuality, that when I'm mindful or when I'm practicing bare attention this is the actuality of things, this is things as they are, to misappropriate a phrase of the Buddha, actually subtly or rather implicitly clinging to that concept that

when I'm mindful I'm with the actuality of things, that will actually lock this avenue of bare attention, so-called, in place. It will keep it in place as a perception, as a way of looking.

Because I believe this is reality. And in a way, just that subtle belief practicing bare attention—it doesn't even need to be a conscious thought—locks the perception in place and the way of looking in place and then the appearance in place. So it actually cannot evolve too much or change or develop too much.

I'm throwing this out as an aside, but it will be worth, if you want to explore this kind of thing: what's the difference if I'm practicing just simple mindfulness, so-called, and I have a subtle view that I'm being with what is real—say materiality or this or that—and just shifting that view, same practice, but just shifting the view to seeing this is appearance. This is an appearance and that's what I'm giving mindfulness to. There's a difference between appearance and appearance assumed to be reality or physical reality or materiality.

These are subtle views woven into the mindfulness, subtle conceptual views, usually unconscious, woven into the mindfulness. We can make them conscious and then play with practicing with this subtle view, and with this subtle view, and see what happens, how they change the experience, because it will.

But if I have, as I said, if I'm clinging unconsciously, usually, to a concept of this is the actuality that I'm being mindful of, that will prevent the experience deepening and opening, and will limit it in a way, and will also limit the understanding of deeper emptiness.

But most people are familiar already with that simple mode of bare attention or mindfulness, whatever we call it. The second avenue or group of practices, the ones that tend to fabricate much less and with that whole range of less and less fabrication—emptiness practices, samadhi practices, mettā practices, compassion practices, those kind of things—it's really just a matter of learning those practices and developing one's skill with them. It's just a matter of finding the right ways to practice and developing them and then sustaining them as ways of looking.

So I need to learn this particular emptiness practice, let's say, regarding things as anattā, as not-self, all phenomena that arise. I slowly, gradually learn, develop the skill to regard them as anattā, as an example, as not-self. And then I sustain that way of looking, moment to moment, as a deliberate practice. A lot of skill, a lot of subtlety involved in developing that as a practice—a tremendously powerful and beautiful practice. But doing that and sustaining that way of looking will, as an example, will tend to fabricate less and less self and perception of things and world and phenomena.

So steering that way is a matter of just having, understanding what one's doing in those particular practices, developing them and just sustaining them as a way of looking.

In the third camp, the avenue that actually engages and sustains this skillful fabrication of self, other, world and the perception of self, other, world, we need to recognize when that is present for us, when there is, if you like, to use a Buddhist word, a skillful perception of self, other, world—a different

perception that's actually there. Recognize when it's there and tune to it.

So this is recognizing, for example, holiness or divinity, recognizing the theophany, recognizing that there's a cosmopoiesis there. So recognizing that quality, recognizing that perception and tuning to that and actually sustaining a focus on that, on that perception, on that way of looking. So whatever it is that one's doing, whatever it is that the mind and the heart are doing to look that way, that needs to be recognized and sustained gently.

But often what actually happens in this avenue is that something sparks, or triggers a different way of looking—a way of looking of seeing the world through the imagination and then seeing self, other, world, seeing, perceiving them as theophany or with this wider cosmopoetic sense imbuing the perception. Something sparks that and something in us, a sense to that mode of being, that way of looking by picking up that spark and tuning into that perception.

So one could definitely engage, say, a tantric practice deliberately to see one's food as divine nectar, as I mentioned at one point, deliberately trying to taste it that way and see it that way and smell it that way. I'm very clear what I'm trying to do, and I'm sustaining that as a gentle way of looking as much as I can.

Or it might happen more spontaneously. Something sparks in the mind or triggers—perhaps a poetic idea, a line of poetry, a fragment of music, an image, or someone we remember or think of or see who is alive for us as an image in the sense that I'm using the word. Any of these can function as a spark, a trigger, and become a kind of portal to this different perception, this more holy or divine perception and sense of self, other, world. There's something that's sparking this cosmopoiesis, sparking a theophanic sense. The possibilities here are truly endless.

But what's characteristic to any cosmopoiesis, or practice of cosmopoiesis, is that it includes the surroundings. I'm not just dwelling, focusing on just this imaginal figure divorced from the surroundings around me. Whether deliberately or spontaneously, the surroundings get included—where I'm practicing, if I'm outside or in the meditation hall, whatever the sights, the sounds, the appearance of the world around me as I'm practicing. This may mean the eyes are open, but they can also be closed, and one is still including a sense of the surroundings, an awareness of the surroundings.

The cosmopoiesis can be fed or triggered or born from an emptiness practice. States of samadhi naturally bring with them what I call after-effects on perception—they naturally bring cosmopoiesis. Emptiness practice, metta, compassion, or samadhi naturally alter the perception of the world, and through that we can actually understand more about emptiness and fabrication of perception. Kinds of cosmopoiesis can come through all kinds of practices, all kinds of states. The possibilities are infinite—the range is infinite.

So it could come from emptiness practices or samadhi or metta or compassion. It could come from some poetic image or idea that we are practicing with and resonating with. As I said, we notice the sense of holiness or divinity within that image, with that image, and we tune to that and let that spread. It becomes

a kind of tantric practice where one can, for instance, see one's surroundings, sense one's surroundings, feel them as a Buddha realm, or sense them as theophany.

I'll share an example by reading you an email that a student sent me, because it highlights some of the possibilities here and some of the possible directions. She was talking about emptiness practices that she was exploring with some friends as a group, working through different emptiness practices together. Then she says, "I have been working with the imaginal quite a bit since we last spoke at Gaia House. The naughty child image has not returned, nor the indulgent aunt. But the sexual image is morphing and changing and feeding me more and more as I experiment with receiving it more fully."

This is actually the same person you may remember from early on in the retreat when I mentioned her experience of feeling like someone was kissing her as she walked through the corridor, which opened up samadhi when she began exploring it in practice. Sometimes the images that have their roots in or obvious correlation with our biographical history and childhood—like the naughty child or the indulgent aunt—are really important for us. But it's often the other images that seem to have less obvious biographical correlation or roots in our personal history that actually may last longer and be more fertile, seem to go deeper. It's almost like they come from a different dimension.

She continues: "The eros is less hard now but still very powerful. I've observed that it seems to come when the samadhi is deepening. Occasionally it comes when I call it, like it is rescuing me when I feel overwhelmed by heaviness or pressure in the body." This is very much what we've talked about—using images in relationship for the sake of samadhi, helping to shape and develop what's happening in the energy body.

"It usually begins with that sensation of being kissed, and it took quite a while for me to allow myself to be kissed and to enjoy it, which feels unbelievably nourishing. Each time this image comes, or occasionally when I bring it up myself, I learn more. One part of the image involves the being that is kissing me, joining me in meditation, fusing or melting into my body. I can feel changes in the body's texture and there is a sense of succumbing to one with greater experience."

This joining, being joined in the meditation, fusing with or melting into the body of some imaginal other—whether the teacher or some divine personage—and that affecting the whole sense of the experience, is so common.

But it's really her next paragraph that I want to draw attention to for our purposes today. She continues: "During my meditation last night, I was imagining everything was made up of silence and holiness. Another favorite practice at the moment."

Let me say something about this. There are practices I would put in the group of emptiness practices, where one listens to silence—listens to the silence in the mind, the silence between thoughts, the silence that pervades thoughts and pervades the body sensations, the silence that is around sounds. Even as one

deepens this practice, there's the silence that seems to pervade sounds as well as thoughts. Attuning, listening to silence—this is a whole practice in itself, a very beautiful practice that deepens and deepens. That silence becomes deeper and richer and more mystically pregnant with a sense of holiness.

Very, very beautiful practice in itself.

And she puts, "I was imagining everything was made up of silence." What will happen if you do that practice of listening to silence and you develop it? One will actually have the perception of everything being made up of silence and holiness. It will come very organically, naturally out of that practice deepening. She's using the word "imagining." So one can have a little taste of that and kind of trigger it through the imagination, which may be what she's referring to.

Then she continues, "I was really feeling the spaciousness of looking in this way and everything was very soft. And then the sexual image came and also feeling behind the eyes of tears at several points. The emotion in the tears was of being moved and of touching something sacred." There's not tears of sadness or grief—something like that. It's of being moved. There's a difference. Touching something sacred. "This fusing of the sexual with the sacred is new. Usually I work with them both, but separately."

So that was her report. And it sounds like, from that email—I didn't get the chance to talk with her after this, unfortunately—but it sounds like there's the possibility from this place of the sexual and the sacred fusing in her experience. There's the possibility very much like a threshold for that to evolve so that this erotic image that she's been working with so skillfully and developing can actually expand to a wider sense of, a wider perception of sacredness in the world, and maybe also eros in the world.

This is a whole huge subject. And that would be different than just the perception of silence as holiness that she was alluding to before and I described. Here it's through an image, and particularly an erotic image, and that opening up, actually widening into a cosmopoiesis, where it starts to imbue the whole perception of the world as sacred, in a very particular way. This is such a huge subject, that one in itself, but that would be one possibility.

And just to offer a few more possibilities, give you a sense of the range of what's possible here, or the beginnings of what's possible at least. So some people practice mantra meditation, the repeating inwardly of certain holy syllables or mantras or phrases. And so here, perhaps practicing at first, hearing the mantra internally as a theophany. So the mantra itself, hearing it internally, but hearing it as, if you like, divine speech or the cosmic primordial sound or whatever.

So implicit in hearing it as a theophany inside, internally, so to speak—implicit in that is there's usually a conceptual framework of what is sacred, but it's usually vague. This is something I will return to later. So implicit in the practice, hearing internally as theophany is a vague conceptual framework of the sacredness of it. Practicing hearing the mantra that way internally with this sense of sacredness of theophany and then letting it spread—and again it might spread naturally but letting it spread so it feels

like it's not just coming from within but it's pervading the world, pervading the air, pervading the cosmos, pervading nature. And then one has a kind of cosmopoiesis where the mantra is, again, imbuing the whole world, the whole cosmos.

Sometimes, amazingly, and we've touched on this before, even something that happens in meditation that is a distraction can end up sort of taking a turn. In a way, we can notice something in a distracted thought, for example, that it has a theophanic sense within it. We notice that, oh, I thought I was distracted, but actually it's got another quality to it. When I notice it, I pay attention to it in a different way. So even within distractions, sometimes we can notice a gold, a treasure there. In this case, particularly what I want to emphasize is the theophanic sense, the expression of divinity, if you like, in the very distracted thought or idea or whatever. And that's something then we can notice, tune to, and allow and open to.

So an example of this—it's maybe for some people a strange example, but because I was a jazz musician for some years and I used to play jazz electric guitar—so we're working so much at that in the past, sometimes I mean happened a lot in the past when I was actually a musician, that one often has, it's as if a part of the mind is just improvising music all the time and improvising these melodies and jazz lines, if you like. And because one knows the guitar, one's actually seeing, if you like, the image of the guitar and where the fingers would go, and it all just is happening kind of spontaneously by itself in the mind. And sometimes it's very creative, sometimes it's just a sort of thing that's going on.

And so I was meditating, and I noticed that that was going on. And I couldn't—it felt a little sticky as a distraction. It's like, oh, I let go of it, but it still was there. I let go of it, it still was there. And then I was noticing, oh, I can actually hear those musical lines being improvised. I can actually hear it right now in a certain way, or play with hearing it a certain way, as if that music that the mind was creating, the mind was hearing inside—you can hear it as mirroring or as an analogue of the endlessly creative musical cosmos.

So there's a whole kind of world of idea, quite vague, wrapped up in that way of hearing. The vague idea of somehow the essence of the cosmos is somehow or at some level a kind of music. And the vague idea that the different human musical laws, those different systems and different cultures, those laws of music somehow mirror the cosmic or divine laws. This is all very vague and subtle ideation.

So I know there are those ideas out there in the world. In the meditation it felt really not like a rigid or a clunky idea.

There was something very subtle about this hearing and this loose, vague ideation that was also very subtle. It was quite fluid and not some clunky metaphysical system.

What I'm talking about here is the shift in the hearing of what was initially a distraction in the meditation opened a really subtle meditative sense. Part of what was involved with that was a kind of relaxing of the mind's clinging or aversion to or narrow focus on the music that was in the mind. And the attention

suffusing a little wider, including the energy body, as we said, and—I keep stressing—including this sense and attuning to the sense of the wider cosmic theophany that was with this hearing of this music in this subtle way. And also the attention was with the very subtle and vague idea of this music of the cosmos and the way that human music echoes or mirrors or expresses the divine and the cosmos.

I may come back to this image later, because in different ways it might illustrate something. But that would be, maybe for some people, a quite strange example of a way that actually can pick up on something, even in a distraction, and tune to the sense of the theophany there, and the implicit cosmopoiesis that can sometimes open up with that. Actually what was distraction becomes a very beautiful, subtle meditation that one then sustains the attention on, and very, very fruitful in that respect, very beautiful.

It's possible that a person whom we see imaginally can become for us a theophany, a face of the divine. They become, if you like, an angel. Corbin talks about the angelic function of beings. So this is very possible, especially when there's eros. I don't just mean sexual attraction—I include that, but I mean more. Especially when there's eros in the relating to and way of seeing that person, and especially where there's imaginal practice and imagination imbuing that perception, and the logos, the conceptual framework supports it—very possible for a person that we love to become for us a theophany, an angel, to fulfill a kind of angelic function for our soul, for the psyche. And then there's a seeing of divinity in that person.

But this is a different kind of sensing of divinity. It's a different mode than, say, seeing all beings as one or partaking of the oneness of things, whether that oneness is the mystical silence or oneness of cosmic love or the oneness of awareness or whatever it is. Different kinds of oneness share in that they erase or dissolve the particularity of the personhood, the unique personhood. That kind of sense of a divine oneness that includes all beings—that's absolutely wonderful and it will come out of standard metta practice if you do it long enough in certain ways, it will come out of different ways of practicing with awareness and with silence as we've talked about.

But right now I'm after something different: a way of sensing divinity, sensing another person as theophany, as angel, but in a way that includes or retains their personhood, their particularities and their uniqueness. Even though each person might appear to us as not just one kind of theophany, but multiple. So one person, when the imaginal practice is really rich in regard to a person that we love, and when there's eros there, and when there's the conceptual framework opening and supporting it—one person can be different angels to us. They appear as different theophanies. And all of them retain their personhood, their particular uniqueness. It's not this dissolution into oneness.

But then that particular theophany can spread to the world as well. That's actually a huge subject and interesting—again, something that one could easily spend a long retreat on or write a book on. I'll just mention it now as a possibility.

Some of the possibilities can actually be very, very simple. A retreatant a while ago shared that he was

enjoying reading a little poetry on his retreat and was reading a Hafiz poem. I can't remember the exact line from the poem that triggered it, but it was something about Hafiz saying all things are gifts from the divine or gifts of the divine or the beloved, using the word beloved as a synonym for the divine. Note also again that when there's the word beloved, there's the inclusion of the erotic component in regard to the divine. Calling the divine the beloved introduces, allows, supports the eros in relation to the sense of the divine.

This poem says all things are gifts from the beloved, the divine. And that line touched his heart and opened his heart. It became, if you like, a poetic eidos, a poetic idea which became a poetic way of looking. That's what we're in the business of here—we're in the business of cultivating these different ways of looking.

So the heart was touched, was opened, and the idea there—all things are gifts from the Beloved, from the Divine—entered and transformed the way of looking, so that things were actually perceived that way. It wasn't just a cute line of poetry; actually it became a meditation, became a perception. He was seeing and sensing things that way. And then we were talking about gently encouraging a sustaining of that way of looking, so the heart connected and perhaps just dropping in like a whisper now and then the memory of that line of poetry, and letting it transform the way of looking and sustaining that way of looking, just very gently, very lightly, without clinging too tightly to it.

Doing that, joy came—in this case, joy came, rapture came, physical bliss, definitely a sense of beauty and depth in the sense of the things of the world. There was cosmopoiesis happening. He was at that point experiencing, inhabiting a different cosmos than the regular one that he felt he inhabited. So that would be a very simple way of triggering, if you like, or encouraging this kind of cosmopoetic perception.

Or it might be that organically one is practicing meditation and some kind of poetic idea that has a cosmopoiesis implicit in it just arises spontaneously in one's mind. I remember some months ago doing standing meditation outside in the early morning sun beneath the beautiful trees we have here at Gaia House, and really opening to the sense of the surroundings and everything. And this phrase came to me: I am prayer.

What does that mean? "I am prayer." It came out of the sensibility in the moment, and it also fed a sense of self in the moment. I am prayer. So it's a very—what am I? I am prayer. What does that mean? I don't know. It's a poetic idea. I mean, it has all kinds of resonances. I could probably say a lot about it.

That phrase definitely didn't mean "I am prayer" as in supplication, as in asking God for this or that favor and sorting this or that out in my life. Prayer as something much deeper, much wider and mysterious in the range of its meanings. Prayer as praise, rather than supplication or asking for wishes to be fulfilled—my wishes to be fulfilled. Even wider than praise.

I cannot get to the bottom of what that means—prayer—and certainly not to the bottom of what it means

to entertain the idea, the poetic idea, "I am prayer." And letting that be there in the consciousness and letting it have its effect, the effects of this poetic idea on the perception, on the way of looking and the beauty and the depth that that opens up, opened up.

And that opened up a sense actually of the cosmos and the earth, the very earth and the trees and the ground and the sunlight as prayer. Not just "I am prayer," but all this is prayer somehow. What does it mean? I don't know. I don't have to figure out what it means. I have to open to that cosmopoiesis.

Another possibility would be to practice, say, with breath meditation and practice feeling or conceiving or imagining the breath as the breath of God or a god or a goddess. So what is this breath that comes in and out—either in the anatomical way of air or the whole energy breath that we were talking about earlier, at the beginning of the retreat? What would it be to play with conceiving of that, imagining it, feeling it as the breath of God or the breath of the goddess?

Or perhaps, what is it to breathe with the beloved? To breathe with the beloved. So breathing together. And who is that beloved? It's an imaginal figure. It may be a lover in one's human life. It may be some other figure that there is this deep love for. It may be the divine in some face, some form. And again, if there's eros there, it's really okay. It might be a very erotic motion, in some sense, and way of relating to breathe with the beloved in the imagination.

Maybe with that there's a real sense of blessedness that comes. Probably because it involves the breath and that kind of opening, it's probable that that kind of imaginal work—feeling, conceiving of the breath that way—probably will invite the possibility of being breathed by the beloved, or breathing with, a kind of opening, abandoning, all of which are, if you like, aspects of the energy body, but also aspects of the whole being, the emotionality, the whole psyche, the whole consciousness.

So we can gently introduce some imaginal idea or concept or just the image there and play with, kind of navigate, ride it. What does it feel like it wants to open and do in the energy body, in the emotion, but also in the perception?

Another example: one might hear, for instance, the birdsong or the wind or some other element of sound in the natural world or around us. Hear that as mantra. So that is the mantra. And what does mantra mean? Well, it could be divine speech. It could be sacred vocalization. It might have some other meaning.

So there's no real formula for any of this. It's very improvised. What kind of way of conceiving—very loosely, usually very vague or quite vague—way of hearing birdsong and wind gives it or imbues it with that sense of holiness? So we're just gently supporting, inclining the attention and also the way of looking, the way of relating, the way of conceiving, so that it opens up this cosmopoiesis.

Or what would it be to hear the birdsong, hear the wind as love, as metta, as the compassion of the bodhisattvas, compassion of the cosmic Buddha, the compassion of the cosmic Christ?

Or here, the birdsong, the wind, or whatever it is, as the devas, the angelic beings, praising, singing joy. And these angelic beings, they're imaginal figures. I may not see them. Their being and what they actually are, what they constitute, that may remain quite vague to me—no problem. The specificity that's important there is the shift in perception, the hearing in a certain way. It may not be the actual imaginal figure that gets clear—this angelic being or deva or whatever. You understand?

So either spontaneously these things arise, these shifts, but it's possible that the self, ourselves, or the human beings around us, or the animals, or the birds, or the surroundings—the trees, the grass, the land, the light, the nature—actually even with practice, or when it goes very deep, even the plastic artifacts that may be around us, man-made artifacts, plastic things that may seem to conventional perception very unholy, even those things, this sense of theophany, they can become theophany too, or part of a wider cosmopoiesis.

But it's possible that all this—self, humans, nature, surroundings or specific trees, for instance, specific animals or whatever—can be perceived, seen, sensed as, if you like, angelic. And again, keeping that word quite open, not really filling out what it means. Maybe later we'll do that, fill it out a bit more. But maybe just to say now, it means that they are not just one-dimensional material. There's a verticality being introduced into the other dimensions, if you like, into the cosmology.

So, it's interesting... One could, I suppose, with a lot of practice, actually do a little exercise and practice sustaining different ways of looking at, say, self and other. So just in terms of human beings, what is it to see someone, one's own self or another, as a biological machine—and their consciousness, my consciousness, as just what they call an epiphenomenon, something that arises just out of the right combination of matter over time, consciousness emerges? That's quite a popular view these days, if you like. Sometimes it's a consciously articulated view, sometimes it's a subliminal view. Now, that itself could be seen as amazing. There's a wonder in that, just that possible in that view. Or it could be more, if you like, a bit nihilistic.

Compare that, or add to that—sometimes Joanna Macy talks about deep time, this sense of this biological machine evolving over all this time and eons, not eons, but billions of years, in fact, the evolution of life on Earth and how we share roots. Our biology shares roots. And in a way, what we are now is connected through all that time, with everything that we have evolved through. And for some, there's a kind of holiness, there's a kind of holiness in that way of looking, introducing that idea of deep time.

Or what would it be to look at the self or the other and see in terms of the classical Buddhist elements, either the four elements—earth, air, fire, water—or six elements, those four plus adding space and consciousness? And as I said near the beginning of the retreat, this, as a way of looking, actually is not one way of looking because in itself it can be directed, as all of these, it can be directed with different flavorings.

So one can look at oneself or another in those terms. It's purely a kind of deconstructive way of looking.

It's taking apart, seeing there isn't much self there, and a way of letting go of clinging to a person or to their body or lust or whatever. Or one may look at, in terms of these four or six elements, and see the interconnectedness of this person, this self, or that person with nature and with each other. These elements flow porously between person, self, and world.

Or again, same concept but given a different spin. One actually sees through a lens that feels the holiness of the elements. There are quite different ways of looking within that.

Or with the aggregates, the five aggregates that Buddhism sets up as ways of looking—body, vedanā, perception, mental formations and consciousness. Again, that can be taken in, or rather using that as a conceptual framework—it's not one way of looking, actually several different ways of looking depending on how one's flavoring it. Again, it can be directed or work as a kind of deconstructing of the self or the person so that we don't cling so much to the self or to other selves.

It can also be seen in terms of seeing again the interconnectedness of these aggregates. The aggregates that I have here are not really that different from the aggregates that you have there. Consciousness is consciousness. Body is body. Moments of vedanā, moments of vedanā—what's the difference? So as a way of breaking down the sense of separation, giving more of a sense of interconnectedness, that takes that conceptual framing of the elements and it creates a different way of looking than just a kind of deconstructive tool.

Or again, if you've done a lot of emptiness practices, what is it to see in terms of the aggregates, but know that those aggregates themselves are empty? They are fabrications. Or even further, to see them as divine. They are empty divine phenomena, if you like. The aggregates are empty and divine.

So these are all different ways of looking within a conceptual framework that allows actually within it slightly different conceptual frameworks that form ways of looking. But apart from that very last one, where there's a sort of awareness that aggregates themselves are empty or divine, or perhaps their elements as holy, this idea that we're talking about today of actually seeing self or seeing other as angel, as theophany, as an emanation of the divine—and everything that's implied there about perhaps a vertical dimension that we've mentioned, or the different levels of being—that would be different than seeing more in terms of interconnectedness or just the pure materiality of things. It's different.

But there are, with any way of looking, a kind of cosmopoiesis that's going on here. And involved in that way of looking, in any way of looking of these that I've delineated, is a conception, usually unconscious, of what matter is and what the cosmos is. I don't know if anyone would actually do that as an exercise. You could play with it, and there's no reason why not. But I'm really trying to point out there are different ways of conceiving, and some of them allow more of a sense of holiness and divinity, and that's different than purely interconnectedness—which is a more horizontal connection between things.

But basically, what we're doing, again, in practicing something like this, or opening to this cosmopoiesis, is

we're playing with eidos. We're playing with the imagination and ideas, loosely, to create ways of looking. We're playing with ways of looking.

It's worth mentioning, as part of that, one will notice that the perception of the world through this, or of another, through these different lenses, or when one's playing with this kind of theophanic sense or cosmopoiesis, the perception will appear at different registers. We've talked about this before. So it might be, for instance, very ethereal. The whole world might seem very insubstantial and kind of luminous, or it might just look like it ordinarily looks—more solid. So just mentioning that is something to notice. And one can sometimes feel, oh yeah, it wants to be at this register. The perception wants to be at this register. So just allow it to be at that register.

When we talk about a more angelic or theophanic perception, it's not necessarily the case that that sees everything and perceives a more ethereal substance or perceives that higher register. It's not necessarily the case. But we're playing with ways of looking. We're playing with eidos.

And the sacredness here—we recognize this is not independent of the mind and the heart. The sacredness that we perceive and that we feel so deeply sometimes is not independent of the mind and the heart. The citta, the mind-heart, the conceptual framework, the way of looking, gives sacredness to the perception. It gives sacredness to appearances. It gives sacredness to things. It sacralizes things.

Now, if we say that, and if one hasn't perhaps explored emptiness enough, one immediately thinks, "Oh, so what that really implies is that they're not sacred, really." One tends to think that way, but no, it does not imply that. Because we are not buying into the sort of usual Cartesian split of mind and matter, subject and object. There's a different understanding underpinning all this. We understand that nothing, no thing has independent existence, has an existence independent of the way of looking. And that gives a different status to the perception of holiness. The holiness is not separate from the citta. But that doesn't mean that it's not real.

So there are parallels here with, when we're talking about the primordial wisdom awareness, the Buddha nature, and that awareness itself, that primordial wisdom awareness itself being something that's holy and empty, and also not separate from the divinity that it sees, the objects that it sees. So here too, the objects of awareness and the awareness and the sense of sacredness—none are separate. Objects, awareness, sacredness—not separate, and all of them are empty. And it's the understanding of emptiness that's part of what allows the sacredness and the validity of the sacredness.

So in practice, with this theophanic sense, or the sense of theophany in an image, or an image as theophany, or the theophany in the perception of the world, just to point out a few things regarding practice. A lot of this is actually intuitive, but it's good to spell it out as well in case we get a bit lost and just to be a bit clearer.

So in a way, what it rests on is an openness at least to that experience being a possibility for us and also an

openness to the whole thing conceptually. To some degree of openness and receptivity to these kinds of experiences and these kinds of ideas may be necessary. And then, so that's one.

Second is the recognition of that theophanic sense in an image or in the perception of another or of the world. We need to recognize it when it's there.

And then that's second, and the third, we need to tune to it. So it's actually something like—this has to do, as I said, with what is the specificity that's important to any image. Remember when we talked about imaginal practice and instructions there. So we're tuning to the theophanic sense because that's something quite specific, has a certain flavor, a certain tone, a certain character or expression. It's a certain kind of—remember we talked about tuning being one of the aspects of attention. It's tuning to the theophanic sense, the theophany.

And that tuning to allows that sense, allows the theophany—the sense of the theophany, the flavor of it—to filter out, to stabilize. It also amplifies it within the larger perception, within the wider perception. It may still be quite subtle, but the tuning to it makes it stronger and stabilizes it.

And then in a way, fourth, we're assenting to this theophany, this theophanic sense. That doesn't necessarily mean I literally believe it concretely. I don't literally believe that birdsong is sacred text. I don't literally believe that my lover is God or whatever it is, in a very literal sense, in a literal, concrete sense of what God might be. But there's an assenting to something. There's an assenting to the view, the experience, and the idea within it.

And then focusing on that, and opening to this sense of theophany, focusing on the theophanic sense and the image, and opening to it and its resonances. Often, sometimes, letting it spread. Letting it spread to become a cosmopoiesis. Letting it spread to the sense of the world, the perception of one's surroundings and the cosmos. So one feels, one senses oneself in a different cosmos, if you like. Or rather, this cosmos transubstantiated.

And again, a literal believing of that is not necessary. We're not really talking about belief here. It's difficult for some people to understand that.

So an openness to the whole notion and the possibility of experience, a recognizing of the theophany, a tuning to it, an assenting to it, focusing on it, opening to it and its resonances, and then letting it spread, letting it spread. And when there's distraction, if there is distraction—which there usually will be—we can perhaps lightly remember the original image and again open to the theophany there and just do the same thing, do the same steps.

Maybe the original image disappears, and there's just the wider sense of theophany, the wider sense of cosmopoiesis, if it's coming originally from a sort of separate image. Or maybe the original image stays, and that stays at the same time that there's this wider cosmopoiesis, this wider theophanic sense.

Let's stop here for now, as I'm just really wanting to give examples of and point in the direction of what we're talking about here and give an idea of some of the possibilities. There's actually so many. Give an idea of some of the possibilities and we'll talk more about this whole area and direction later.

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