A Sacred Universe: Insight, Theophany, Cosmopoiesis (Part 4)

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In speaking about concepts of the divine, of God, and how we might relate to that kind of concept, I think it's important to emphasize something about how we relate to talking and hearing about these concepts. In other words, how are we holding and conceiving of the whole relationship with concepts—with these concepts in particular?

My intention here is certainly not to build or outline some kind of rigid, complete, and final explanation of everything to do with the divine, some conceptual framework that's watertight and will last forever. Rather, I want to offer something in the way of conceptual structures, conceptual frameworks—logoi in the Greek—that can feed into, support, and open up our experience. Our meditative experience, our meditative exploration, and then meditative experience as exploration can, of course, feed back into the conceptual frameworks, offering something there as well.

So there's this mutual feeding, nourishing, supporting, shaping in ways that encourage, deepen, open, and enrich the soulfulness. I want to offer and build conceptual frameworks, to talk about possible conceptual frameworks and ways things might work conceptually that open up the whole field of exploration, inquiry, and experience—that do not close it down.

So it's important to acknowledge that in all this, maybe it doesn't fit together quite perfectly. It's a bit clunky at the edges. Maybe parts of a conceptual structure, or the whole thing or framework, is vague. That's especially possible and probable, in fact, here in this area when we're talking about the divine and God and those kinds of concepts and experiences, partly because of the nature of that material. The divine is almost by definition something that cannot be contained in concepts.

As a starting point, we're acknowledging the infinite nature of the divine. So whatever we say will not contain it. Whatever structure of concepts or ideation will not contain it, will not be enough. Paul Tillich, a very renowned theologian and philosopher of the 20th century, said, "Every understanding of spiritual things, Geistwissenschaft, every understanding of spiritual things is circular."

So there's a lot to acknowledge here if we're going to bring concepts in for the sake of opening and soulfulness, for the support of inquiry and investigation, for the adventure of meditation, of practice, the adventure of life really—in terms of opening the experience. If we're going to bring concepts in, we have to acknowledge something about circularity, about infinity, about the impossibility of containing and arriving at some neat, final conclusion, some complete structure that explains everything. And that is not

a problem. That's not a problem. It's just something to acknowledge because it helps the experience and because it opens the soulfulness.

So there's a different relationship here with all this. If some of it doesn't fit together perfectly, part of that is simply due to my energy levels and the present situation and time constraints from various angles. But also, another dimension of this is that I feel very much like all this is a work in progress for me. I mentioned earlier a different style of teaching rather than sometimes when it's appropriate to sit at the front and give you a complete package—this is it, it's finished, it's all very neat and clear. That has its place. But then there's other styles of teaching, this more what I was calling hermetic in another retreat, this more open-ended teaching. This is, in a way, a collaboration of exploration between so-called teacher and so-called student.

So this is work in progress for me. Ideas, concepts, feeding into experience; experience shaping concepts. And there's no problem in that. There's something beautiful for me in that, in the openness of it, in the creativity, the creation, the adventure, the discovery of all that.

So there's a kind of dance, if you like, between concepts and experience, between conceiving conceptual frameworks and the opening of experience and new experience. They're mutually feeding, shaping, nourishing, deepening, opening each other. And that dance evolves—evolves over time, even for one person.

There are personality differences here, hugely, in relation to all this, in relation to how okay people are with conceptual structures not being taken too seriously, how okay they are with conceptual structures being quite loose, with them evolving, how okay they are with even thinking at all or entertaining consciously conceptual structures. Conceptual structures are always entertained unconsciously. So there are personality differences, but even over time for one person, there's evolution, there's ebb and flow.

So there will be times for some people on this kind of adventure and this kind of exploration where it's really okay that there's very little conceptual framework holding the exploration at a certain time. Other times we need a structure. It really helps support and guide and direct exploration. And yet, as I've mentioned in several talks elsewhere, there is this concept in the Lurianic Kabbalah—what they call the breaking of the vessels, shirat hakelim—that structures will break, all kinds of structures in our life, as they are filled, if you like, from that perspective, from the light of God, but really as we grow, as the psyche grows, as things expand and get fertilized.

Structures—social structures, ideational structures, relationship structures—they will break, they will shatter, the shattering of the vessels. So in terms of conceptual structures, yes, we need structures at certain points. We establish them, we build them carefully, and then they break. And then we form, or new ones are formed, different ones, and they evolve. There's a whole evolution to this.

To me, there's a beauty in that dance between conceptual frameworks and experience and the dynamic of

that, the evolution of that.

We could say, "I don't want to dance. I don't want this dance between the conceptual and the experiential—this movement of evolving conceptual frameworks, this evolution of experience." Or perhaps we refuse to enter into that dance because we won't consciously entertain conceptual frameworks. We simply refuse. We don't want to dance.

Alternatively, what happens is we cling to one conceptual framework. Sometimes we don't even realize we're clinging—it operates unconsciously. Or consciously, we keep holding onto something static, trying to maintain it as a kind of rigid, literalized explanation of everything that remains fixed and unchanging.

I think it's crucial to understand something about the nature of perception and mind: there is always conceiving. Conceiving and perception, experience, shape and inform and structure each other. They influence each other inevitably. We cannot escape this.

The idea of non-conceptual experience has become very popular, but it's a myth in the worst sense—an illusion. We must understand that at the subtlest levels of perception, consciousness, experience, and mind, conceiving and perceiving are completely woven into each other. They inform, shape, and structure each other at all levels, from the subtlest to the grossest. It's important to recognize this fundamental truth.

As a person goes deeper into imaginal practice and more fully explores experiences of theophany and cosmopoiesis, one sense that can emerge—both as felt experience and as conceptual framework, the two going together as aspects of the same gestalt—is the sense of multiplicity of dimensions in the nature of any object.

A person, a thing, an imaginal figure—when we see imaginally, there's a sense we can develop through practice: whatever I'm looking at, this object, this person, this thing, this world, has multiple dimensions to it. Its nature is to have multiple dimensions.

I want to tentatively offer the label "the vertical spectrum of the imaginal." I'll explain later why that labeling is so tentative—I'm not particularly gifted at coining phrases and labels. But this vertical spectrum of the imaginal refers to this sense of the multiple dimensions that comprise an object or pertain to an object.

I'm saying something more specific here than simply noting it's possible to perceive selves, things, others, and world in different ways—which is certainly part of the teaching about fabrication and emptiness of perception.

This morning, there was an enormous hullabaloo outside the window—a racket of shouting, screaming, yelling, whooping, and arguing. I'm fairly certain it was a school hiking group stopping briefly outside. Right there, we can hear it through the lens of a certain social perspective about "kids today" and so

forth—hearing it as a racket expressing inconsideration. Obviously wrapped up with that is some aversion, some reactivity.

We can also hear it in the mode of bare attention, where it's simply sound. And it's possible to hear it, as the Tantra teachings suggest, as mantra—as holy speech, as the sound of divinity. In meditation, we can hear it differently: not as racket, not even just as sound, but as expression of the divine, the sound of the divine, the music of the divine, the speech of the divine—holy speech.

What does that mean? It's vague. Do we need to elaborate? I'll return to this. I could say this is simply an example of the flexibility and malleability of perception—that it's possible to perceive things in different ways. But I want to say something more in relation to this vertical spectrum of the imaginal.

I look at my friend, someone I've known for a long time and love very much. I can see her as flesh and blood, aware of the physical processes that make up her body and the mental or biological processes in the brain. I can see her through her personal historical background—her upbringing, her woundedness, her trajectories of growth, where she gets stuck, her particular strengths, her characteristics. I can see her in the ordinary sense of self, this modernist sense of self we discussed in the other talk.

Yet as I'm looking at her, meditating imaginally on her presence before me or in my mind's eye, I can also see her, I also sense that she is, or that she expresses, the feminine aspect of God.

She is a face, she is a theophany. At a certain level of perception, level of imaginal perception, she appears to me as one of the feminine aspects of the divine. She appears to me as angel, as dakini or deva if you prefer the Buddhist words. There's a theophany there, and it's quite—it might be really quite particular or a little bit vague. It might even be that at the same time I am aware of the ordinary, modernist way of seeing her—of course I'm aware of that—and I'm aware of this other level. I may be aware of other levels too. I may also be aware of a kind of more universal expression of the divine coming through, but this particular one of the feminine aspect of the divine is very particular to her. It's in and through her personhood, her particularity, and it's expressing an aspect of the divine that has to do with the personhood of the divine or a personhood of the divine.

It might even be that I'm aware of several of these more personal and particular expressions, manifestations, or different levels at the same time as I look at her, as I meditate imaginatively on her, eyes open or eyes closed, looking at her. There can be a sense that there's a spectrum here. It's as if one could tune the attention to different levels. Maybe one stands out and calls for the attention, calls the attention to tune into it. Maybe there's a multiplicity and then one can deliberately tune the attention that way.

This sense can emerge for practitioners—it's both a sense, a perceptual sense, and a conception, so they're woven into each other. This conception may emerge quite loosely, and then, as I said, influence and support the perception, and so the soulfulness and the soul-making. Perception, experience, appearance

will be influenced, supported, and will influence and support the conception. It's mutual. In all of that, there's a deepening and opening and enriching and nourishing of the soulfulness and the soul-making.

So this, what I'm wanting tentatively to call the vertical spectrum of the imaginal, is hard to define. A spectrum, if you like, of theophanies, a spectrum of faces of the divine. I really want to emphasize it's a spectrum of perception. Placing perception and the whole way of construing Dharma and imaginal practice and all that—perception is central. Whether it's non-imaginal or imaginal, placing perception and the fabrication of perception as almost the core concept, the central concept, the hinge concept, the basis concept on which everything is structured, built, rests.

So really emphasizing, if I talk about this vertical spectrum of the imaginal, we're really talking about a spectrum of perceptions, not separate from the citta, from the mind, the heart, the conceiving. But it's a sense, a spectrum of what we might call faces of the divine, and it comprises in this spectrum all kinds of manifestations or expressions of a sense of utter sacredness all the way down to non-sacredness.

More specifically, we could say that this sense of this vertical dimension of the imaginal is the sense and the conceiving that selves, things, and world have in and through their particularity—that's very important, in and through their particularity—the selves, things, and world have their roots in, they originate in, they mirror or reflect or they possess or are comprised of dimensions other than just the commonly agreed upon dimension of materiality or self as we tend to view it, conceive it, sense it in the paradigm of modernist culture.

So the sense—and let me say that again—this vertical dimension as a concept is the sense and the concept that selves, things, and world have in and through their particularities, through their personhood, if you like, they have their roots in, they originate in, they mirror or reflect, they possess or are comprised of dimensions other than just the commonly agreed upon dimension of materiality, or of, for instance, self as modern culture construes and views it.

Just to make one thing clear, it's not a spectrum of solidity versus ethereality, what we were talking about some days ago. It's not a spectrum of the octave or register, so to speak, of the image, like very refined and light compared to more bassy and solid. That's not what we're talking about here. It's really that the imaginal sense is imbued with a sense of the sacred through the sense of comprising or expressing more than the modernist sense of ego, of self, of person, or just matter.

This "more," comprising more, expressing more, the multiplicity, the spectrum there of manifestations, of faces, of theophanies, if you like—this "more" is not horizontal only. So for example, we talked about the interconnectedness of physical objects, interconnectedness at a physical level. I can look at my friend and see her interconnected to us—we're breathing the same air if we're in the same room, we're built of the same stuff that emerged from the same supernova explosion, formed the earth and built of earth and air and fire and water if you use the Buddhist elements.

This interconnectedness at a physical level is also a kind of "more," because usually I see her contained just there. Her body stops at the edges of her skin. When I look through the lens of this interconnectedness at a physical level, there's more, but it's a "more" horizontal spreading, if you like, at the level of physicality.

Or the causes—if I think in terms of the causes and conditions, when we usually talk in those terms, the causes and conditions that give rise to this self, or this object, or this world or environment. Usually, again, that interconnectedness or that inclusion of the web, the net of causes and conditions, is also a "more." It's expanding the view from a tight, bounded object "more," but it's expanding it horizontally. It's talking about interconnectedness and feeding in and expanding the limits of this person or object or thing that I'm looking at, but it's all horizontal. It's all on the same level. What's feeding in there and what's being acknowledged as being "more" is on the same level. It's horizontal.

What I really want to emphasize is something that's not horizontal, something of, as I said, other dimensions, other levels, if you like, of being or existence, but again, really perception. Everything hinges on perception, that that is there, available in the perception.

So vertical spectrum of the imaginal—in a way, it's a sense, it's a perception. We get that sense. But as I said, it is by its nature a conceptual framework. It's a logos. So the sense of it, the perception of this, includes the logos, the conception of it. This is something I want to stress.

I do not have to believe this as something real, and you do not have to believe this as something real. There is no credo here you must sign up to. I'm going to return to this point, because it's so important.

That's one crucial aspect. And it might be that the whole conception of this vertical spectrum is relatively vague. For me, actually, I certainly don't believe it as some kind of literal, concretized, fixed reality that I'm assuming has inherent existence. It remains quite vague for me, but it can still be extremely powerful. I really want to emphasize this and return to it. It can still function so beautifully and potently in terms of soul-making, nourishing and opening soulfulness. You don't have to subscribe to any belief, and it might be relatively vague. It might not be. We'll return to those points because they're very crucial to emphasize.

So it is, to an extent, a sense, a perception. It is also a conceptual framework, a logos. But what's important then is that the conceptual framework, the logos, needs to be loose enough or big enough. My conceptual framework needs to be big enough to allow that kind of perception of this vertical spectrum, of this multiplicity, of these other levels shining through. It needs to be big enough to allow theophany and cosmic oasis.

If I view an image only in typical self-referential terms—there are many ways I could do that, but for instance, viewing this image as arising only because this happened to me when I was a child, or something like that—it's not to say it's not arising in part because of that, or that one couldn't view personal human history as part of the vertical spectrum. But if I only view it self-referentially in those terms, then that

view is a shrunken and narrowed, constricted conceptual framework, logos, and it will prevent the sense of theophany. Do you understand?

Mostly this is unconscious. We hold onto views, conceptual frameworks that are quite narrow unconsciously, and there's not enough room to allow experience to open in different ways, as I've said many times now. That kind of viewing an image only self-referentially will prevent the sense of theophany, of vertical space, almost by definition, because theophany, by definition, is seeing an expression, a mirroring, an originating in the archetypal or the divine. I'm seeing this thing, this person, or myself, or this image as originating and expressing and mirroring the archetypal or the divine—an archetypal or the divine. In other words, by definition, it's not just self-referential, because if theophany evolves, other levels of the vertical spectrum come through, other levels are evident in an image.

Now, what also happens through this, as a person practices imaginal practice—we've touched on this already, but let me say it again—is that there is a tendency for the theophanic sense, for the image sense to spread. It becomes a sensibility. So this loose conceptual framework that's operating, the seeing of other levels, and the tuning to that becomes a sensibility and a mode of being. It becomes how we see. And then it spreads in different ways.

One of the ways it spreads is to embrace more objects rather than just the imaginal figure or this personal thing that I'm looking at. Now that might be purely internally—an imaginal world might open up. Or it might be that this world, the world of agreed upon conventional physical reality that we see, comes alive in a kind of cosmopoiesis, that it becomes a different kind of cosmos while still seeing perhaps the same things—the trees over there, my friend here, the sky, the grass, whatever it is, the river, the city. But the theophanic sense, the image sense that was perhaps focused on one figure, whether purely internally, purely imaginal, or through an object in the world like my friend, spreads to create a kind of world, a cosmic oasis.

And what we have there is the image of self and other and world co-created together. Actually, there's another factor there—eros. That's a whole other subject. But there's a co-creation in this spreading of self, other, world. The imaginal sense of all are co-created together, mutually dependent, mutually feeding.

The important point here is that there's often a spreading. This was talked about in the instructions the other day. There's a spreading of the sense of theophany, and there can be a cosmopoiesis.

Now someone might say—it's a fair enough thing to say—well isn't that just coloring the perception? You have this sense and then it's just spreading to color the perception of the world. And yes, it is a coloring of perception, but again, it's important to realize, to have enough depth of insight to realize that all perception, all perception is colored all the time, is fabricated. No perception is independent of the way of looking.

So how does this work? If we go into this a bit more, this idea of the vertical spectrum of the imaginal and

this spreading—I've talked about this kind of mechanism before, though it's not quite the right word, but the way that it works. I felt like I didn't quite explain it very well previously, so I'm going to try again.

When there is eros in relation to an imaginal figure—that imaginal figure might be purely in the imagination with no reference to the world of physical objects, or it could be the way I'm seeing my friend through or as image, as we talked about—when there is eros with an imaginal figure, that eros, almost by definition, wants more. It's this desire for more, and particularly it wants more contact. It wants more to be in contact with, and it wants to fertilize. We could say that's what eros is, that's a definition of eros we could start from.

When that's there with an imaginal figure, there's this love, this desire for contact, for more contact, more to contact. But because of that desire, it impregnates and gives more life to the image, not just in terms of vividness and touching the heart, but also it expands the image, expands and enriches and deepens the fantasy, the mythos that's operating. So much so that it stretches it. And one way it stretches it is by creating other levels, creating eventually this sense of theophany—the sense that certain levels are divine, that the divine is speaking through, shining through in the particular.

Eros doesn't lose sight of the particular. It's often in spiritual approaches that eros wants to just dissolve in the beloved or achieve union or melt or whatever. Actually, in doing that, there is the dissolution of the eros too. So eros needs a particular, a particular person. It needs to see this and love it in and through its particularities and its personhood, and fill that out, make it more multidimensional, more complex. It's not just a movement towards this universal dissolution, union, whatever. That's valid too, but that actually dissolves the eros, and it actually also dissolves the psyche, the soulfulness there.

There's something—we'll come back to this more—this parallelism of two movements, the universal and the personal. Two tracks, very connected. We'll return to this.

But as I said, eros, in wanting more and wanting to contact more, wanting more contact, more to contact, it wants to fertilize and it opens up the levels in the particularity and through the particularity of this thing, this person, this world. It opens up a sense of theophany, of God shining through in different forms and different levels through that particularity and in that personhood. That perception of theophany and that multiple dimensionality implies or needs an increase of the conceptual framework, a stretching of the logos.

So as eros does this and opens up the soulfulness, the psyche, it also stretches the logos. That movement itself, the whole gestalt of that movement, the whole dynamic involves a stretching of the logos to incorporate that. So it stretches vertically, if we use that word tentatively, and it also spreads to the world, to the surroundings in cosmopoiesis—that spreading in cosmopoiesis to feel like we're inhabiting a different world, or we have a sense of the existence of other dimensions of being to this world.

This spreading is also part of eros opening psyche, eros opening the soulfulness, opening the image and

the imaginal sense, fertilizing it, inseminating the image of the beloved. It's spreading to the world and also spreading vertically. This spreading to the world, this cosmopoiesis, is also part of eros desiring more connections, part of it creating or discovering—both creating and discovering—more of the beloved. This is what eros wants: I want to go deeper into you. I want to penetrate deeper, discover more of you, move inside you, know you, know the worlds that open up through you. This is what eros wants.

So this widening in terms of spilling over to include the world and the cosmos is part of the thrust, the movement of eros. All of it is the movement of eros wanting more, and the more implies, includes other dimensions—and this is where I want to emphasize it—other dimensions to the object, other dimensions, other levels of beauty and other levels of being in or through this object, person, this world, or nature.

What I'm calling a vertical spectrum of the imaginal, a vertical dimension of perception, is opened up, as well as the wider one that begins to include the surroundings, which you will have noticed in meditation already sometimes.

This vertical dimension, this vertical perception and conception—this sense, to loosely define it, that selves, things, and world have in and through their particularities, through their personhood, have their roots in, originate in, mirror, reflect, possess or are comprised of dimensions other than just the commonly agreed upon dimension of materiality or self as understood and viewed and sensed in modernist culture—this sense and conception of the vertical dimension is a manifestation or a way in which soul-making happens. It is psyche opening. That sense itself and that conception reflects and feeds an opening, an increase, a deepening, an enriching, a nourishing of soulfulness.

If we do not cling either concretely or literally to the whole idea of it, in some kind of new age way, or just cling too tightly to the whole thing. The part that we said in an earlier talk, part of the way I would like to define soul-making is to include this very light holding of concepts—not literal, not concretized, loose, not believed in, not regarded as being other than perception or something separate from the mind, not regarded as an ultimate truth in a sort of final sense.

But this sense of this vertical dimension, the perception of it, which includes the conception of it, you could say is ensouling the world. It's a way of seeing and conceiving that very potently opens the sense of soul in the world and the world being ensouled.

So we could say that psyche, soul through Eros's fertilization, through the sort of thrust of Eros there or the opening of Eros, it sees this way. Or rather, it wants to see this way. There's something in the soul that we could say wants to see this way when there's soul-making and the increase, the nourishment of soulfulness. Psyche will tend, the soul will tend through Eros's fertilization, as I've described, tried to describe. It will move towards seeing more this way.

We could say maybe the soul needs, soul needs this kind of multiple or multiple-leveled, multi-dimensional seeing and knowing and conceiving. William Blake wrote—I'm not sure which

poem—"God save us from single vision." It's a prayer: God help us, God save us from single vision. So there's something in us that as the soulfulness, the soul-making increases, it needs this sense of this multiple, multi-leveled nature of things, of perceptions. And that seeing that way actually reflects an opening of soul, opening of the psyche.

This whole movement dynamic of eros, psyche, and logos that I'm trying to describe—feeding and growing and fertilizing each other, creating space, opening, creating wombs for that fertilization, deepening and widening.

So I said earlier that the word vertical, or the whole vertical spectrum of the imaginal—it doesn't exactly roll off the tongue, it doesn't sound that poetic to me, but I can't think of anything right now. But the word vertical is a little problematic for a couple of reasons. One is that it tends to, or it may, imply a kind of hierarchy. There's up and down, and up is usually better than down in the way we tend to think.

Now, this idea of a vertical spectrum has a long history, or rather, ideas of vertical spectrum has a long history, especially in Western philosophy and spirituality. So there's some parallels with neoplatonist ideas of the great chain of being and that sort of thing, where actually the verticality does imply a hierarchy. One end is good and one... A synonym for the top end of the vertical spectrum in Neoplatonism is "the good," and the other end is not so good. It's less holy, it's furthest from God, and also less real.

So this good is also something called "the one," as I said in Neoplatonism, and there's a kind of ontological hierarchy implied, I think, as far as I can tell. So that that's real, that ultimate, unfabricated, is real, and everything else, sort of progressively, has less existence, less reality, so that matter, in some versions of Neoplatonism, if I'm understanding correctly, is actually regarded as illusory, or even, as I said, unholy.

And in a way, some approaches to Buddha Dharma might be similar. Even in the language, this is unfabricated. The other is fabrication. These other perceptions are more and more fabricated. They're fabrications. So there's a kind of reality imputed to the unfabricated and less reality to other perceptions. That may be an important stage, as I've outlined briefly here and in other places. A very important stage is a kind of way of thinking about things and conceiving of things as one deepens in meditation. It may be actually extremely important as something that unfolds. But to stop there is a problem because it creates a dualism.

So one thing about this vertical spectrum of the imaginal is actually not, I would say—let's not confound it with the spectrum of fabrication of perception. So as I said, in the teaching of the spectrum of fabrication of perception, there is the spectrum from unfabricated to fabricated, a little fabricated, more and more fabricated. And implied in that, and importantly implied in that, is the implication of what's real and what's illusory or empty, unreal.

But wrapped up in that is a dualism. And in a way I feel we need to be rescued at some point from that dualism. As I explained earlier and elsewhere in much more detail, we can actually see at some point in

exploring this whole teaching of the spectrum of fabrication that fabrication too is empty. It's like a teaching that's a raft, the whole teaching about fabrication, and at a certain point we realize, oh, that's not a real thing. We recognize the emptiness of fabrication at a certain point, and that reveals, it collapses the duality, it reveals the holiness, if you like, of everything, rather than one transcendent, unfabricated, is holy, and the rest of the world, the fabricated, is less holy. Everything appears holy, everything appears magical. There's the collapse of the duality, any duality between unfabricated and fabricated.

We might also point out, actually, that in Buddha Dharma, when we use the word illusory eventually is another way of saying the same thing. Where usually that word illusory that people say this or that is illusory, it's in comparison in the back of their minds with something that is not illusory. But actually, what is it to recognize that if everything is, so to speak, illusory, actually saying everything is magical and holy? There's nothing that it's illusory in contradistinction to anything that's not illusory. All of it is opened up as magical and holy.

So... Maybe the word vertical could be replaced with the word multiple.

I'm not sure. Maybe the word "spectrum" also gives me pause, because spectrum implies a kind of ordering. Perhaps there is, in terms of experience, a kind of ordering here. So again, in terms of perception or the sense we have of divinity might be stronger at one end of this vertical spectrum in the imaginal than at the other end—progressively different. So that might be a way of conceiving it, though that's different from saying it is so, or this is the ultimate truth.

We might reflect just a little bit more on what the relationship is between the spectrum of fabrication of perception and this vertical spectrum of the imaginal. This is, I think, tricky—not to confound them. I don't think that would work. It's tempting to, but I don't think that would work.

We could say, perhaps—this is really a half-opening of an idea I'm putting out—perhaps they're in some way parallel, or two threads that perhaps intertwine along a spectrum, along a direction. The spectrum of fabrication of perception has at one end the unfabricated, and we could say that as an aspect of the divine, the transcendent, unfabricated, objectless, beyond time, beyond any appearances, beyond any sense of consciousness in the usual sense. So there's that aspect of God, the transcendent aspect of the Godhead, if you like.

As one fabricates a little bit more, coming down from that top end of the vertical spectrum, there is more universal and impersonal shining through of the sense of the divine through the world of objects and things. For example, universal love, cosmic love, the one awareness, the one mind, the big mind. These are points on a spectrum of fabrication coming down that reflect a certain amount of divinity. Then, fabricating more and more down the spectrum, it becomes just the normal, non-sacred perception of self and other and world.

At one end of the spectrum, it's completely transcendent—there's more oneness and less solidity toward

that end. As you move down, there's more solidity, more separation, and less sense of sacredness, moving toward more normal perception.

On the other side, or the other thread that's entwined or parallel to that track of the spectrum of fabrication, is what we might call this vertical spectrum of the imaginal. We could say this has its one vertical end in the aspect of God that is more akin to what we were describing with Buddha nature—that incorporates both the ultimate gnosis of the Buddha, the Buddha nature, the wisdom awareness, and its objects. So it incorporates both objective and subjective aspects of the divine.

Within that, or coming out of that, is a spectrum of the imaginal and a spectrum of particular theophanies. So my friend as a particular aspect of the feminine aspect of God, a particular face of that, or other ones that are available there—again, down a spectrum. At the other end, converging with the sort of normal, non-sacred perception of self and world.

In a way, these two spectra have their bottom end converging in normal, non-sacred perception of self, other, world. Their top end converges in the divine, but different aspects. One aspect is the transcendent, unfabricated. One aspect is the non-transcendent, more ultimate of a Vajrayana conception, for example. That's maybe a start—I don't know. I'm just playing with some ideas there.

These two threads would be in a way parallel, or not be the same, but have aspects in common. One crucial thing to realize is they're both spectrums of perception. They're both perceptions. They're not separate from mind. Crucial. They are both empty. That's the second thing they have in common, related to the first—they are both empty. We're not talking about things that have any ultimate reality. Third, what they have in common is they converge in normal perception at one end, and at the other end they converge in the divine, but at different aspects of the divine—one as utterly transcendent, one as inclusive of appearances.

Right, I'm playing with ideas here that are, as you can hear, half-formed. But in terms of practice possibility, this is actually interesting, because implicit in all this is that we can play with moving up and down each of these spectra. For example, we can play deliberately seeing things as theophany—deliberately hearing those loud, raucous voices outside as mantra, or just tuning into that theophany when it appears. So we can play with the perception of theophany, moving up and down the vertical spectrum of the imaginal, or just responding to what emerges from that spectrum to us as perception.

And then we can also play with the spectrum of fabrication and unfabrication, as I've talked about extensively elsewhere. We can play with moving towards the unfabricated, then play with not letting it fade so much, mixing that with theophany. If perception fades too much, imaginal practice becomes impossible because imaginal practice involves form and particularities. All that fades when you get too near the unfabricated. But there's a play here, either separately or combined—all kinds of possibilities.

I don't pretend this is something that doesn't take probably quite a while to develop. All those possibilities require tremendous skill and art, but they're there for us. There's such breadth and depth and richness—probably infinitude—of possibility for the ways experience can open, for dimensions of experience.

Now, when we conceive of an image-sense having its root in the divine, or having its root in a god or an archetype—using this particular language—we're saying this image-sense is mirroring, reflecting, originating in the divine or in a face of the divinity or an archetype. And this image-sense, in the largest sense, is asking me to honor that. Through the image, this root in the divine or the root archetype is being honored, replicated, expressed, manifested—whether through the image or through the image into my life.

It's through this that one of the ways a sense of sacredness comes—through this sense of another dimension, another level. It's a particular kind, or rather a particular directional range of sacredness: what I'm calling the vertical spectrum of the imaginal. It's not the only one, as we've talked about and made very clear, I hope. But particularly—and what I really want to emphasize—it's from there that a sense of meaningfulness for us is born or supported.

In relation to this having its root or origins in, or mirroring or expressing another level—the divine or archetypal—this has a great deal to do with meaningfulness. I'm going to return to this, but just to say I don't know if that's obvious to you. I'll come back to that.

When we talk about a root in a face of God, or a root in an archetype or a daemon, that root we're talking about—if we use that language—is not a static root. It's something I would like to conceive as much more dynamic. By dynamic, I don't just mean impermanent or changing. I mean particularly dynamic because of everything I said earlier about the way this works in terms of eros and fertilization, deepening and enriching the image. The image, the root, is not static. It's not reflecting something static. It's actually transformed, evolved, stretched, opened, made larger, deepened, made more multilevel through eros and fertilization.

Corbin talks about the angel out ahead—this figure, this angelic imaginal figure that I never quite reach, that always steps ahead, keeps moving ahead. I might catch up a little bit, but he or she moves out further. So the relationship is never one of union. It's one of direction and movement and connection, infusion—but not union. There's a dynamism here that has to do with the eros, the psyche, the logos, as I talked about.

And again, to emphasize so much: when we talk about root in the divine or this archetype or that daemon or this aspect of the divine, we're talking about something that's empty—absolutely empty, empty of inherent existence.

In that dynamism is also the whole idea I described briefly at several points from the Jewish mystical

book, the Zohar: that we create God as much as God creates us. A radical idea in theological circles. Or in the Lurianic Kabbalah, this repeated dynamic of the shattering, the breaking of the vessels, of the structures. Here the vessel is not only conceptual frame—it's also an image itself. As I said, it gets stretched or broken, then structured differently again. And that breaking of the vessels also applies to God, or a god, or in a more monotheistic sense, divinity. Our notion and perception of God also breaks, shatters, gets structured differently, grows.

This dynamic itself—the repeated shattering of the vessels, building again, growing, stretching, shattering—that too is part of God. We're actually conceiving that as part of God rather than as some kind of fixed entity in some separate realm.

Again, some of you will recognize this really echoing a kind of post-structuralist or postmodern understanding: rather than assuming fixed, independently existing structures, actually incorporating very much, at a very basic level, this idea of not just fluidity, but a whole dynamic there, and non-independence of these structures, of whatever root an image is reflecting or expressing, or the divine root. We're not talking about fixed, independently existent structures.

And again, to point out the shortcomings and inadequacies of most postmodern philosophers: there isn't, with all that, any practice—any practice of meditation, and specifically meditation as the practice of a flexibility of perception, a practice of different ways of looking. It's not there. So everything stays at the level of language, word games, text. It's presupposed that that's the fundamental thing. It cannot go more subtly. And all it can do is deconstruct rather than actually move fluidly and creatively between perceptions, experiences, and therefore worlds that are recognized not to be ultimately true or fixed or independent.

So this sense or conception—sense slash conception—of things, selves, others, world, image having their roots in, echoing, mirroring other levels, divine levels, aspects—that brings a certain kind of sacredness. There are, as I said, all kinds of possible kinds of sacredness, but there's a whole subset of kinds of sacredness that come out of that kind of sense and conception. That's really what we're emphasizing here.

And that root, as I said, can be conceived in different ways. One way, if you want kind of Buddhist ways—some people will, some people won't—one way is possibly marrying it with the kind of notion of the ultimate in certain tantric teachings, the notion of Buddha nature, the gnosis or wisdom awareness of a Buddha, which also includes the objects that appear to it.

So the root is in both the subjective aspects and the objective aspects of the divinity. The roots of these images are there in, if you like, the mind of God, the divine, the ultimate mind, but also they are creations of that mind, of the appearances to that mind. So that's one way, perhaps, of moving the conception, if you like that.

Now I mentioned earlier that the ways of conceiving of divinity and also of images and that connection

there bear a great deal on our sense of meaningfulness. So I want to flesh that out. It may be obvious to some of you already through practice or just from what I've said already, but it may not be. So I want to spell it out a little bit.

Earlier on the retreat, we pointed out a number of times that meaningfulness or sense of meaningfulness pertains to images or is characteristic of images in the sense that I'm using the word image, fantasy, mythos, and that sense of meaningfulness is part of what we were calling soul-making, soulfulness, and the nourishing of soulfulness.

So when we conceive of images in the ways that I've been leaning towards on this retreat—asking, granting a certain amount of autonomy to images, or admitting that they have a certain amount of autonomy, conceiving of them as having a certain amount of autonomy, as being in a way bigger than the human, knowing still that they are dependent arising, not separate from my mind, my perception, fabrication, etc. But when we grant them that greater being, if you like, a certain kind of autonomy, a certain kind of reality, and a sort of origin, or a mirroring of another level, a higher, more divine level, if you like, or levels of the divine, and then we turn that around in our relationship to images and ask, what is it that this imaginal figure wants? What do you want?

If you remember, we emphasize this so much, that this kind of way of conceiving of images and their divinity, if you like, their roots in divinity. This fills out, deepens, brings alive a sense of meaningfulness for us in particular ways that the soul needs more powerfully and more particularly than other ways of conceiving. It nourishes that sense of meaningfulness. It gives us a sense, for instance, of calling in life, of destiny, some road calling me, some pull towards something that I can't quite understand. I'm being pulled by something bigger than me. It puts the soul events of my life, gives them a meaningfulness, a movement that's imbued in meaningfulness that has a lot to do with personhood. My personhood and my life, your personhood, your life, expressing, manifesting on the track of a certain kind of deep and divine meaningfulness. Its origins are not completely in the me, so to speak.

So the soul needs this. Recognize again the circularity of some of these statements and arguments as Paul Tillich pointed out. Never mind. So what? It's part of the territory. And this is a whole big subject about meaningfulness. Meaningfulness is a whole big subject and sometimes people want to assert the fundamental, ultimately true meaninglessness of everything, as if that is true. They might shy away from words like truth and try not to use them, but underneath or woven into what's being said is that ultimately we live in a meaningless universe, and any meaning that we might generate is therefore essentially kidding oneself, not having the courage to face meaninglessness, the existential meaningless and the limits of our existential situation.

There actually—and I've pointed this out other times—there is a fantasy right there, the existentialist fantasy. The meaningfulness that comes into that fantasy is exactly in that, in the sort of casting oneself as being brave enough to face that reality of meaningless, to cope with it, to articulate it, to uncover it.

Actually, as a soul story, a fantasy, there's a kind of dead end there for soulfulness. There's a limit. But limits are part of the attraction of that fantasy, the bravery of limits. It's all resting on an assumption of truth, even if that is not recognized or realized or admitted. There's a fantasy in there about what's true. And then the self and the world are cast in line with that fantasy.

So we can, again, just spelling this out with the different conceptions of divinity or cosmology. Again, to say, if I have a completely one-dimensional view of the cosmos—so this is in contradistinction, in contrast to the sense of a vertical dimension of many dimensions—if I have just a one-dimensional view of the cosmos, as we said, for example: Really, all there is that's real is matter. This teaching, this philosophy of physicalism, what's called physicalism or materialism in philosophical circles. And all there is that's real is matter, and everything emerges out of the interactions of matter. Matter is meaningless. The interactions of matter are meaningless. Consciousness and the complexity of our life, etc., and all what looks like tragedy and joy, etc., is just kind of basically based on or emergent from meaningless interactions of matter according to the laws of physics.

But that view, that kind of one-dimensional view of the cosmos, you can see how that erases the possibility of any deep sense of meaningfulness, certainly to the cosmos, but also then by extension, by implication or context, to our personhood and our lives and the images. It's all essentially just the meaningless movement of matter. And that's the only real reality. So as I said, the images that come might be just random neuronal firings.

Then there are some other views and perceptions of divinity. We talked about, for instance, a universal conception of divinity that's quite popular, a universal perception of divinity that's fairly easily accessible for most meditators - the kind of mystical perception of "all is one," and in different ways, maybe all is this vast cosmic universal love or compassion, or all is awareness, and so on.

Interestingly, here's a conception of divinity, but also that conception of divinity also kind of erases or leaves no room for a more personal meaningfulness. In its universality, it has no room for a more personal meaningfulness. That's not so obvious, but by personal meaningfulness, I really mean any meaningfulness connected with the particularities of the person - one's personhood, one's life trajectory, the soul events of one's life, or as I said, a sense of a calling or a sense of destiny in one's life.

Even to take another view of a mystical view or a view of divinity - a simple view of the emptiness of all things, or as we outlined, the view that understands everything is fabricated. If we just stop there, that also erases meaningfulness. And as we pointed out, without enough depth, if the view does just stop there, those kinds of conceptions - "everything is fabricated, there is the unfabricated" - that view may actually disparage the world, the cosmos, as fabricated, and then orient towards this transcendent unfabricated, erasing the world of phenomena, of perception, of manifestation.

And that fits into the classical Pali canon trajectory of ending rebirth. All this is fabricated. One does not want to be reborn into this world of fabrication. One wants to escape, dissolve, end rebirth and dissolve

into the unfabricated. So there's a disparaging of the world of fabrication. That does something quite profound to a sense of meaningfulness.

So either in the universal views of "all is one," or "all is love," "all is awareness," or cosmic consciousness, or the view of the unfabricated being divine and the fabricated being the undivine - in all of those cases, meaningfulness only would lie in the movement towards ending rebirth, or unbinding in the unfabricated, or realizing universal love, or realizing oneness, or whatever. Meaningfulness can only then lie in those. If that's the only conception of the divine, that's the only conception of the cosmology there, then meaningfulness just lies in moving towards, trying to move towards perceiving that continuously - continuously perceiving oneness or cosmic love or whatever it is - and perhaps helping others get there.

So meaningfulness comes, yes, to help others get there. But the particularities of beings, of manifestation, of action, of expression, of love, as well as the particularities of personality, of character, they have no particular meaningfulness other than sharing in this universal oneness. Well, they're one like everything else is one, or this universal reality. Basically, it's the same as saying they have no particular meaningfulness. Meaningfulness does not reside in the particularities; it resides in the universality.

So when we think about different conceptions and practice options that we can explore, it's only in this kind of conception and viewing and practicing the view - as we're talking about viewing ourselves, our lives, viewing others and things, and the world as mirroring, echoing, rooted in some particular aspect or archetype of divinity. It's only in doing that, in other words, in perceiving selves, others, things, acts, speech, and all of that as particular theophanies, that we support meaningfulness in this particularly deep way that's connected with our personhood and the particularities of things.

It supports meaningfulness in the most soulful way, the most fully soulful way. It's a dimension of the possibility of meaningfulness. That kind of conception will support meaningfulness the most, will fertilize and root a sense of meaningfulness in deep soil, because the conception gives it that, and the view gives it that.

We've talked a lot now about conceptual frameworks regarding the divine. There's a lot there. I'm conscious of that. I'm conscious that it's complex, some of what was said, a lot of what was said, difficult to digest, difficult to understand, perhaps. So very conscious of that. And really, again, the encouragement to take it lightly, take these concepts lightly, take your relationship with these concepts and with playing with them lightly around the concepts of the divine and how that works in with images.

The Kotzke Rebbe, a Jewish mystic from the late 18th century who died in the mid-19th century - I think he's basically the rabbi from Kock, which I think is in modern Poland - he said, "Pfui!" - which I'm assuming is a Yiddish exclamation - "Pfui! I'm not interested in a god any Tom, Dick, or Harry can understand."

So take this lightly. It's okay, in a way, to be - there's something actually beautiful in grasping towards

understanding, this movement of shattering conceptions, groping a little bit, putting things together, letting them grow, building them. That's part of the dance.

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So take this lightly. It's okay, in a way, to be—there's something actually beautiful in grasping towards understanding this movement of shattering conceptions, groping a little bit, putting things together, letting them grow, building them. That was part of the dance.

Thank you for listening.

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