Mindfulness and Myth

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:19:14

In case it wasn't obvious, I want to clarify something about what we were discussing earlier regarding what I was calling a spectrum of priorities in one's conception, attitude, orientation, and intention for the path—the aim and goal of practice. On one hand, this spectrum encompasses whether beauty and sacredness and soul-making are genuinely at the forefront, or on the other hand, whether the priority is freedom, healing, and so forth for the self.

Just to make clear something I was assuming: where a person is on that spectrum at any time will vary depending on all kinds of conditions. It's not a static thing. Sometimes, even if generally speaking the priority is opening and deepening and widening the sense of sacredness, there will of course arise moments and times and situations in our life where what we really need is some relief from suffering—some insight or approach or cultivation that opens up a situation from the contraction we've put around it. So it's flexible, it moves, not just in long periods over time, but even within a day, probably quite a few times.

Let me say a little more about these themes—the why themes, why offer a retreat like this, and the context and bases. As I said, these are interwoven themes. I want to preface all this with what you might call an admission. Someone or other said something like: all philosophies that anyone would state are actually confessions. They're personal confessions, and I certainly recognize that if I'm offering a set of teachings or an orientation or a larger conceptual framework, implicit in that is revealing my own orientation, inclination, where I've arrived at, but also my predisposition.

In terms of the context of these teachings and the emphases we'll be supporting in practice over the week, partly this retreat, these teachings, these ideas, these practices, are a response to the situation around us—not just the global environmental situation, but also the situation of ideas in the wider culture, and in Dharma culture, spiritual cultures, and psychological cultures.

It's partly a response to dominant paradigms that often go unquestioned, which is partly why they become what happens to a dominant paradigm. A paradigm might arise first, for example, with the Western Enlightenment and the scientific revolution as a question. But over time, that paradigm itself—all those perspectives and views and philosophies—becomes entrenched, dogmatized, unquestioned, second nature. So it's partly a response to what's become encrusted and solidified in the wider culture and also in spiritual cultures—what has become prevalent and goes often unquestioned and is simply taken as truth.

Within that there are different aspects, and one is that I turn and see realism everywhere—different kinds of realism everywhere, whether in terms of religious realism or naive religious fundamentalism, or

secular realism, including the realism that is at the unavoidable basis of secular Buddhism, or the kind of realism that permeates most understanding of dependent origination in terms of process and real events, real aggregates, real moments happening in time—all the realisms that underpin and run through a lot of psychology nowadays, across the whole spectrum of psychology, whether cognitive behavioral or psychodynamic or whatever. It's rare for approaches, whether psychological or spiritual, to not be based on a kind of realism.

A lot of the work in psychology is wonderful, and there's a lot of work on ego psychology that's great, but there's a realism underlying that. It's quite different to have a non-realist basis—to have emptiness as something basic to the path, meaning an understanding of emptiness forming the basis of the path. And even more than that, to entertain this idea, this conception, that fantasy and image is primary. Included in fantasy and image are conceptual frameworks and ideas, and all of this is primary in constituting, fabricating, creating what we then experience and perceive and move in, rather than our experience being some kind of independently existing reality or the ideas we have being somehow real and true.

These non-realist ideas are really quite rare and radical in a world where realisms of different kinds are rampant. And even more, very often people might hear about a non-realist basis, but it's actually very hard to stay in it. So it's like, "Yes, that's right, great, okay, I get it." But so often then, whether we're talking in the realm of psychology or psychotherapy or dharma or other spiritualities, unwittingly there's a reintroduction of some kind of realism. Something or other gets reified, made real, assumed to be real, and often without even recognizing it. So even though there might be some enthusiasm for this idea of a non-realist, non-truth-claiming, truth-grasping basis for things, it's actually quite rare and difficult for a person to actually abide in that place deeply.

Picking up one area of all that, I find myself, along with others perhaps, responding to what someone coined the phrase "aggressive secularism." You see that in public figures like Richard Dawkins and others, but also within the Dharma there's a kind of aggressive secularism that comes from certain voices and positions within the Dharma. Because of the aggression there and the dominance of that force and the way it takes hold in people's consciousness and takes hold of people's consciousness, it seems to demand a response to balance it, to open things out.

That kind of aggressive secularism actually seems to me to be very much akin to—actually a form of—religious fundamentalism. Obviously, secularists and secular Buddhists conceive of themselves as completely opposite to religious fundamentalists, but there are ways in which sometimes these two positions are remarkably similar.

like camps, are really very similar.

So one is in relation to the word religious, and I've talked about this elsewhere, I'm not going to say too much about it now, but one of the things that's characteristic of, if you like, a religious outlook, a religious mindset and attitude, in contradistinction to, say, an artistic one or a scientific one, is that the authority is

sought and placed and assumed to be in the past.

So, again, you see this in secular Buddhism with the sort of emphasis on the Pali canon teachings and a sort of claim of historical, you know, objective historical accuracy there. But in a way there's something religious about that backwards placing, or that placing of authority in the past, that assumption of authority in the past, as opposed to an opening out into the future that's characteristic of art and science in different ways.

But secondly, with regards to the word fundamentalism, there's a kind of fundament, a basis, a ground, again, in realism, in a notion of truth. And in secular outlooks or approaches, that truth that goes unquestioned forms a fundament and a fundamentalism—an unquestioned, unquestionable assumption or basis for everything. All the rest of the teachings are based on this assumption of truth. That's a kind of existentialist truth. This is our existential predicament. This is what it is. This is undeniable fact of the facts of our existence.

And wrapped up in that is usually what's called philosophical physicalism or materialism, the assumption that, as we've talked about before, matter is primary, matter is the only reality, things, consciousness, etc., human beings, apparent selves, emerge out of matter—out of the complex organization of matter over time and evolution. But essentially what's real is the physical as conceived according to classical mechanical science and Newtonian science, etc. These existential and physicalist truths form a fundamentalism. These are unquestioned. They are the bedrock of this.

And together with this backwards authority, this religious attitude, there is a kind of religious fundamentalism. And in some instances, it mirrors, replicates the kind of militant religious fundamentalism that we see around the world today. Because we actually hear this, or witness, a kind of wish to expel or stamp out views that don't fall into that mold—opposite views, opposite sensibilities. And to me, that's questionable. That's really not okay. What's going on there? That's very characteristic of notions of heresy and all kinds of abuse that we've seen in history taking place under the auspices and the aegis of religion, now taking place under the auspices of secularism.

So I would much prefer a plurality, a real range of attitudes and approaches and sensibilities, because there's a range in where human beings are, what they need. And there's a range in souls and what resonates and what is soul-making for different souls. And so for me, it's very important to keep that range and that plurality and resist any idea of stamping out this or that teaching or expelling it.

And I hate to have to share this with you, but if you know, if you're behind the scenes with the politics of retreat centers and that kind of thing, not just here, but around the world, there's probably more of this that goes on than you guys might be happy to hear about. So, you know, can there be, rather than that, a plurality and openness, recognizing the diversity and the diverse needs of souls and perspectives and sensibilities there?

So I also talked about realisms in psychology and psychotherapies and the assumptions there. I think we will, both Catherine and I, return to that whole area repeatedly as the retreat goes on because it asks of us all, I think, today, quite a lot of sensitivity and we want to present a kind of balanced view of all that. So we'll return to that, this whole question of realism in psychology later.

Again, part of this idea of these teachings or this thrust of teachings, this direction, this opening of these teachings is as a response, partly as a response to what we could call disenchantment. So the emphasis on re-enchantment is, if you like, in response to disenchantment.

Disenchantment itself is a word that means different things to different people. It's defined in different ways and there are different kinds of disenchantment. But one kind of disenchantment, I would argue, actually runs through the Pali Canon, because the Pali Canon actually presents a transcendent thrust in its teaching. The movement there is not to be reborn in this world, that's their final goal. There's a kind of, of course, turn away from sensuality with that, turn away from this world as anything that's really that deeply attractive or sacred.

Nowadays, a reading of the Pali Canon is really not very popular because the whole area of the transcendent, also because of secular takes, is out of bounds. So we're left with nothing but this world. So there is a kind of movement to somehow twist, if you like, the message of the Pali Canon into some kind of life affirming or world affirming or sensuality affirming teaching, which actually it's pretty hard to do if you're really openly reading the Pali Canon. It's hard to justify that kind of reading. But that's become, if you like, the prevalent reading in a lot of circles.

So there is a kind of strange tension between disenchantment of a certain kind and enchantment that runs through the Dharma. But even more than that, in the wider culture, which obviously knows nothing about the Pali Canon or is not really exposed to the Pali canon, there's a kind of disenchantment of modernism. Disenchantment was actually a phrase that was first used, I think, by Max Weber, the sociologist, a hundred years ago even, perhaps.

And what does that mean? What's the disenchantment? Partly it's this flatness—the assumption of a one-dimensional cosmos, purely matter, purely meaningless matter, random atoms ricocheting off each other, coming into combination through their physical forces and happening to build stuff for a time that can be quite complex and quite amazing, but then that just dissolves. Nothing but this flatness, this one-dimensionality.

There's a disenchanting that took place as that became the dominant way of not just conceiving but perceiving the world over some centuries after the Western Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution, replacing the more sanctifying views of the cosmos that existed in the Middle Ages and other parts of the world. But there's also a kind of disenchantment that comes with secular humanism regarding what the

human being is and what the human being isn't—we'll return to this later—and with scientific materialism.

There's a response to the disenchantment that is pervasive now. It's become so much the norm that most people wouldn't even recognize that they're living in a disenchanted universe because they have no recollection of an enchanted universe. But it's important to say that we're not anti-science here. I have a deep interest in science, especially physics and modern physics as much as I can understand it. There's a difference between being anti-science and what needs to get challenged, which is scientism—this creeping outward, overstepping of the boundaries of what science, or what people believe that science, can legitimately explain and take within its purview.

What started in the scientific revolution as really a mode of approaching, a way of thinking, a way of approaching experimental data and a sort of scientific method, slowly over time became an unquestioned truth that there is nothing more than what can be explained by scientific materialism. These became actual realities and truths that will eventually be able to encompass and explain the whole of existence, the whole of our experience. So it's this scientism that actually is part of a kind of disenchantment, although again we can call it a kind of cultural enchantment, of which scientism is one example.

The context of this retreat is partly in response to this creep of scientism. And in Dharma culture—though it's not really only Dharma culture, but wider than that in the culture of psychological growth and healing modalities, the medical model—mindfulness is often presented with what I would call an underlying metaphysics of disenchantment, an underlying metaphysics of non-enchantment in the way that we're using it. Either because it's presented more and more rarely these days in the sort of classical Pali canon thrust of disenchantment toward transcendence, or there's a kind of limited enchantment in the more popular versions of the way insight meditation or mindfulness is taught.

For example, what gets enchanted is the whole idea of the moment and living in the now, or nature to a certain extent. Within those enchantments, why they are limited is because they are often actually assuming a flat cosmos. There's also the assumption of realism wrapped up in that. So the moment is real, this experience is real, these atomic units of perception or consciousness or factors of mind are real, time is real. Also, the kind of physicalism that's the one-dimensionality of the view of nature. It's all based on a kind of flat cosmos assumed to be real, from a realist conceptual framework.

Part of the response and part of the contrast I want to draw out is what happens when we take emptiness as a radical basis for our path—an understanding of emptiness as a radical basis. This is so crucial and so seemingly hard for people to really grasp: what it really implies to do that, what's really involved in that, and why it's such a radically different basis and approach to the Dharma. Radical actually means, from the word *radix*, which means root. So the whole root, the whole basis is really different.

The idea of the possibility of placing ways of looking—the notion of different ways of looking and the different possible ways of looking, all the different possible ways of looking and the notion of the

exploration of the fabrication of perception—these two interrelated notions, putting them really central, really integral to the whole unfolding of the path right from the beginning. And what is it then to have a non-realist assumption? We're not dealing with any concept that we have, any perception that we have, anything that we think we arrive at as real or truth.

Practice then becomes, in all that or with all that as a basis, the exercise of flexibly entertaining different ways of looking—a whole range of skillful ways of looking, which includes conceptual framing. So a conceptual framework or an idea is part of a way of looking, and some of these are very, very subtle, and some of them are broader, grander, more built up. But this whole flexibly entertaining and trying out different ways of looking is to see their effects on freedom, their effects on the heart, on the perception, on the sense of beauty, on sense of meaning, on soul-making. All of this we can experiment and play with because there is this flexibility. Because things are empty, we are free. All there is is ways of looking and we are free to engage different ways of looking.

So this whole idea of ways of looking, the fabrication of perception, forms both the starting working basis of a path and also the end. The deeper and deeper we go, you see, all we're left with is ways of looking. Ways of looking are empty too. But there's something that legitimizes it right from the beginning. And this, as I said, is radical and a big deal.

So all dharma concepts—whatever it is, aggregates or not-self or impermanence or whatever—none of them are truths or realities. There's no dharma concept that really is a truth in that sense or reality. But all of them, all dharma concepts, big ones and little ones, are ways of looking or concepts embedded in ways of looking that become available to us with skill and practice. We then engage them, but they're not truths.

So this is, as I said, a big deal. It's a radical re-grounding of what the path is and what it's based on and what it involves. And it has all kinds of massive implications in the way it opens up possibilities for practice and for understanding.

One of the reasons perhaps why it's difficult for many people nowadays in dharma circles and wider mindfulness circles to really recognize the significance, the radicality, or what a big deal this is—placing emptiness, placing ideas of ways of looking and fabrication in their fullness at the basis of the path, letting a path form around those conceptions—one of the reasons that's so difficult is because there's so much emphasis and rhetoric and assumption on a reality that can be arrived at through mindfulness, through bare attention, that permeates perhaps a lot, if not most, insight meditation teachings and approaches, and also, of course, mindfulness teachings and approaches.

And together with that, what makes it difficult is that the ideas of fabricating, of what is fabricated and seeing through the fabrication of certain ideas or states or thoughts, seeing them as fabrications—that idea is already there, as is the idea that comes up from time to time that we can look at things in different ways. There are different ways of looking at an experience or whatever it is that's happening.

But underneath all that, underneath those relatively limited teachings of fabrication and the acknowledgment of the possibility of different ways of looking, there's this idea that mindfulness or bare attention will reveal what is unfabricated—the experience in the moment revealed barely, nakedly, as it is.

The word unfabricated is often not used, but if it's used occasionally, it means something like this experience just as it is, or this bare actuality of the breeze on the cheek, or the thought as the thought, or whatever. So in that understanding, the whole teaching of fabrication of perception is grossly limited. And there's a limit on the exploration of just how much we can let go of fabrication and move to unfabricate perception more and more.

So underneath all these teachings about mindfulness, bare attention—typically the way insight meditation is taught—is some kind of assumption of a reality that we can meet, find out, that is life as it actually is, experience as it actually is. But there's not this understanding that there is no reality independent of the way of looking.

So yes, sure, we can look at things differently at different times to a certain extent. But underneath that, there's a reality. There's a way things really are, which we can look at a little bit differently. But the whole teaching of ways of looking has a very limited depth, because underneath the teaching or occasional mentioning of different ways of looking at things, there's an idea that there is an actual independent reality.

So what I would like to say is, contrary to that, all we have are ways of looking. They're empty too. There's no reality independent of the way of looking. There's no objective, inherently existent reality. And the scope for unfabricating perception, for moving up and down on the spectrum of fabricating and unfabricating, is complete. It goes into total cessation of any experience of subject, object, space, time, thing—all of that.

So there is not this assumption, this being held onto of reality or bare attention being able to expose, to reveal, to meet reality. Typically people hear these teachings about ways of looking and fabrication, and it just doesn't have the impact. It's like, "Yeah, so what?" It just goes in one ear and out the other or over the head, because being with reality or bare attention is held onto as really the main thing. So teachings about ways of looking or mentioning the flexibility of that is just heard as a sort of, "Yeah, okay, big deal"—a small occasional supplement.

As I said, what I would really want to give is a different ground to the dharma, a ground of groundlessness, a basis in emptiness, in this fullness of understanding and the comprehensiveness and thoroughness of the understanding of the ideas of ways of looking and fabrication. So there is nothing hiding in there about this bare actuality of the moment or meeting things as they are.

So quite apart from the fact that emptiness is sometimes scary to people, the prevalence and the ways

these ideas have sedimented in dharma culture and in the consciousness of practitioners means that they're there and they're operating. And what is heard that might actually be deeper or wider or different than that actually tends not to get heard because it just bumps into those sedimented ideas. And as I said before, it's not easy to stay in that notion of non-realism.

What's quite popular these days is replacing the word "truth" in the Four Noble Truths with the word "tasks." And that's good in a way. It's kind of obvious that they're tasks. But still, what happens there is that at one level in recent years, people get very nervous with the word "truth."

And so they don't like it. They feel a bit oppressed by it. So there's a kind of small, superficial liberation in jettisoning that word "truth," and it feels good. But really, as I said before, what's happening? Okay, so one's not using the word truth, but still underpinning that, even if I've replaced it with another word... The shift is really nominal—literally, it's just in terms of a word that has shifted—because underpinning all that is a belief in so-called existential truths, the so-called truth of our existential situation, and usually a kind of unspoken, unarticulated philosophy—well, rather unthought about, unquestioned philosophy of physicalism involved in that. So the shift is purely superficial there, often.

So how do we even... you know, for some people, what enables this shift of basis to really having emptiness and deep understanding of emptiness and dependent origination as a basis of the path? I mean, curiously, the more one understands emptiness, the more it even makes sense to have emptiness as a basis. So much so that it's almost like one can't really take seriously an approach that claims some kind of realism or truth, explicitly or implicitly. So I'm just saying personally I can't really take anything seriously that doesn't—that is based on some kind of realism that's usually hidden there.

So for some people that approach, curiously, of putting emptiness at the fundament of path will actually come once they understand emptiness more deeply. For others it might come through certain more modern philosophers, and really probably starting with Nietzsche—a very, you know, amazingly insightful, radical thinker—and since then lots of other philosophers in the Western tradition who open up this whole question of truth, kind of deconstruct the assumptions of truth and reality that we've had. So it might be that that helps with people.

It might be for some, I mean, it actually comes through a deep understanding of modern physics. Or for others, it's just that they already are possessed of, or have available to them, if you like, what we might call a more artistic or poetic sensibility. And their personality is already, in contrast to some personalities that tend to see things and think of things in quite concrete, literal terms, some people are already, I would say, blessed with this kind of ability to not fixate consciously, or in a way that articulates, or in a more unconscious way, on reality. And so there's this kind of liberation that comes through an artistic sensibility.

So any of those—whether it's understanding emptiness deeply, or modern science, or modern Western philosophy or some aspects of modern Western philosophy, or this more poetic sensibility—these can

liberate and make available for us a shift in the very basis and direction of what the path is. So it's not about truth or based on notions of truth, explicit or hidden, implicit, but it's really more an art. And from whatever direction one is liberated in that way, then we see, we feel that we are free to create. The whole thing becomes art, and I will come back and talk about that.

But the kind of realisms are so prevalent, sometimes they're hard to notice. They're actually, as I said, hidden a little bit. So much in the languaging of mindfulness or dharma... One person was talking about mindfulness as, I think, being with life as it presents itself, meeting life as it presents itself. And that kind of phrase, or that kind of summary of what mindfulness is, can sound very attractive. It also sounds completely innocuous and completely obvious to people who've been practicing mindfulness a little bit.

But what I want to say is, is it really? Is that really, A, what the Buddha meant, and B, more importantly, to my mind, is it really that innocuous? Or is there, again, a whole slew of assumptions—ontological assumptions, epistemological assumptions, all kinds of stuff—wrapped up in such an innocuous sounding phrase, such a simple and attractive sounding phrase?

Again, I've talked about a lot of this before, but what does "life" mean? Such a buzzword these days, life. What do you mean when you say life? What's wrapped up in that? It's, again, a word that can easily have included in it all kinds of things that are taken for granted about what's real. Again, our existential situation or the reality of matter, or the flatness, whatever. So "life as it presents itself"—yes, okay, what do you mean by life? What exactly do you mean by life? All kinds of things. I'm not going to labor that now.

But even the phrase "as it presents itself"—"as it presents itself" seems to suggest a kind of independence there, a non-recognition that what is presented in perception or to perception or as perception doesn't so much present itself independently. Perception is not a kind of passive receiving of some kind of representation of reality, or a reconstruction of some passive reconstruction, or sort of passive but faithful reconstruction of some kind of reality. We have to see that what arises as perception, what is presented, if you like, or feels as if it's presented to the mind, is not independent, is a dependent arising, dependent on the ways of looking.

And not understanding that, not including that as either an insight or a mode of working, means actually that we're missing what I would say is the main point of classical dharma, which exactly is understanding that—how perception is fabricated, as I said, dependent on the way of looking. Understanding the deep teaching of dependent arising and emptiness. "This is hard to understand, hard to see. I'm not even sure if I want to teach this," he said. This is the thrust, the main point of what I would call classical dharma.

meaning Dharma doesn't include the imaginal, and so forth.

So phrases like "life as it presents itself" tend to obscure the dependent arising—the arising of perceptions, appearances, and experiences dependent on the way of looking.

Here again, this importance to me, this real importance, this necessity of questioning what is wrapped up in the views operating in this or that position or statement. It's what I call, what I think the word means, critique, as I said in the opening talk. For instance, wrapped up in a phrase like "being present" or "meeting life as it presents itself."

Is there a kind of assumption of modernist physicalism—these random atoms or what matter really is—versus just the notion of appearance, which is a much more phenomenological notion that leaves much more open, much less assumed? We're dealing with appearance. We're not necessarily dealing with what we might think matter is according to a modernist, physicalist view. There's a huge difference in those assumptions, in what opens up by those assumptions, in what's allowed by those assumptions either way.

Sometimes, unfortunately quite often, people write to me or they say something about emptiness and they're relatively enthusiastic about it, and then they say something about how congruent that is with understandings of how the brain works. So this possibility, this understanding of fabrication of perception and the possibility of different ways of looking is reduced to a ground—and the ground is the brain, the ground is the neurophysiology and the different neuronal mechanisms and processes happening in the brain.

But again, we're back at physicalism. Emptiness does not stop, does not have a ground or propose a ground in the brain or in any kind of physicalist ground. So to somehow try and convert the teachings of emptiness and fabrication of perception into an equivalent that posits things in terms of explanations according to brain neurochemistry and neurophysiology and mechanisms is not, as far as I would say, a deep understanding of emptiness. It's leaving out a whole range of territory there.

But this physicalism, this tendency to do that kind of thing is endemic in our culture. We're saturated in it. The way we think and assume and perceive is saturated in that conception, that assumption. It's what sometimes modern philosophers call a sediment—it's sedimented in our view. So much so that we don't... it's become something that's just kind of solidified and hard to see, hard to question, hard to have a different assumption, hard to even see that it's operating sometimes.

As I said, different possibilities of understanding emptiness, more deeply probing, more deeply questioning with the emptiness practices, or modern physics and what quantum physics has to say about the reality of so-called atoms and electrons and those constituents, or modern Western philosophy questioning the whole ideas of physicalism—whether it's in continental philosophy or Anglo-American traditions, from both sides of the Western philosophical tradition—that the whole notion of materialism and physicalism is really being, has been for quite a while, deconstructed, pulled apart.

So I would say, and I think this is extremely important: the brain and the mind and the processes of the mind are all empty. All of them are empty. The matter that makes up the brain and the neurons and the atoms and the subatomic particles—all empty. So emptiness really means a groundlessness. We are not

positing or assuming a ground in notions of matter, atomic particles, subatomic particles, as something real.

Wrapped up in all this, or just another way of saying all this, is really about questioning. Really about questioning. And for me, that's so key, so much the lifeblood of practice, or one of the things that gives zest and vitality and thrust and openness to practice. Without a kind of radical questioning, our practice is actually quite narrow and quite circumscribed in the range that it can open to.

So very often, someone might hear about a retreat like this or these kinds of teachings. And of course, very often—and as I said, you'll even get it here—an enchantment is contrasted with the real. So it's not real. "Off with the fairies" or something like that. And what a person really wants is "my life, the reality of my life—I want meditation and mindfulness for my everyday life."

That idea of mindfulness and meditation for everyday life can be very attractive. And one wonders what's actually the attraction? Part of it goes back to this coping that people, understandably, are suffering and want to find ways to cope with what most often bothers them, which seems to be things at the level at which we're perceiving them. These are real, they're a problem—how do I deal with that?

But one wonders too whether the idea of mindfulness or meditation for everyday life... somehow encapsulated in the title and the thrust of the teachings, there's a belief in and actually a reaffirmation and a support for habitual perceptions and conceptions of what reality is. And this is much safer, if you like, because questioning deeply notions and perceptions of reality and habitual assumptions is basically upsetting. It's not necessarily peacemaking at first.

Challenging deeply such ingrained assumptions—such assumptions and perceptions and conceptions that everyone seems to agree on about what's real, what's called ontological assumptions, and what we can know, epistemological assumptions, cosmological assumptions about what the world is—this is not easy. So if you like, it's more attractive to hear teachings that seem to reaffirm what we already know, what we already take to be real.

And so there's this, both in Dharma culture and other spiritual cultures—if we even use the word spiritual, which of course some of them don't; it's more about personal growth or however it's phrased—and in the wider culture as well. That word "secular," one of its root meanings is "of this age."

Like, "of this age" is what secular means from the Latin. But to me, what "of this age" should mean is the questioning of what is now outmoded. That's what it means to be of this age—to be moving forward, not just receiving what's actually an old inheritance.

So the assumptions of classical mechanical science, whether one is drawing on them in one's exposition of secularism or teaching, or whether it's just through the neurophysiology, which seems very modern because it's current research, but it's still based on classical mechanical science—and the assumption that we can have objective, independent understanding of anything that's so much at the basis of the classical

scientific method which started with the scientific revolution and the Western Enlightenment.

But actually, what is it to really question these old inheritances of ours—these philosophical, usually unspoken, or just tacitly assumed, tacitly born assumptions that we have, perceptions, conceptions? The questioning of them is what is current, not just the adoption of ideas that are actually hundreds of years old and have been surpassed in science, in philosophy, in dharma, in all kinds of things.

So the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer voiced this recognition that the way we see, our perspectives, are partly the result of history, and we have to recognize that. We're not getting some objective take on anything, whether it's a text or our existential situation. Our views are products of history. We interpret—again, whether it's a text, the Pali Canon text or other Buddhist texts or other religious texts or our life—the hermeneutics of that, the interpretation of that is from a certain historical situation as a result of, conditioned by, and by all that, and also has a certain horizon that's historically conditioned and conditioned by all kinds of other factors.

But the possibilities for interpretation, the hermeneutic possibilities, these evolve. So it's also not just a result of history, but it's part of history, and the whole thing can be dynamic. Interpretation is not—we don't arrive at a truth of either "this is what the Buddha said, this is what he meant, and this is the truth, and anyone who doesn't agree with me is just simply wrong, just simply deluded, or whatever," or "I can extract this, or excise this, let's say, so-called Vedantic overlay, or whatever, or this corruption of the text, and arrive at the pristine actual truth, independent of anything else." This is not a very mature understanding of what actually goes on in looking at old texts or in looking at our existence, ourselves and our lives.

The interpretation, hermeneutics, becomes actually inexhaustible—so creative, open. These are some of the ideas that this philosopher Gadamer expounded and expanded upon, but many others in post-modern philosophy as well. And again, these kinds of questionings and seeing through the assumptions of classical mechanical science, of the assumption of being able to have objective, independent understanding and perception of anything—these also can be approached by emptiness, as we said.

Dharma understanding, if I go deeply enough, if I approach it in the right way—if I have to set up my whole investigation into emptiness in the right way, otherwise that too will just reach a wall, and I can't go any further.

So what is it—again I know I'm harping on about this, but what is it to really, really, not just normally, but really understand not to have notions of truth or reality, either explicitly or implicitly, girding our sense of existence, but also the path? What is it really to have to jettison that? And really, if you like, to have a ground of groundlessness, to have a non-realism as not just the basis, but permeating through the whole of the Dharma?

And with all this, as I said, in regard to the contemporary context of all this, of our teachings, of our

culture—again, the importance of questioning, and what are the questions of our time? So it's easy to just receive old answers and act as if they're new, or assume that they're new. But actually, what are the questions of our time? What is it time to question? It's a big deal, as I said.

And again, related to all this—we're talking partly about why. Why offer such a retreat? Why is it important? I speak for myself, but I think I know from Catherine also that she has found this as well—since I've been talking about the imaginal, for instance, I've lost count of how many people have reported back to me that because of hearing these teachings, something was legitimized, that they were somehow given permission through hearing these teachings to play and to explore and to pick up concepts like divinity, God, angel, without rarifying them, that they were granted somehow permission.

And certain—to play, to explore—and certain concepts were, and perspectives were legitimized. The whole use of the imagination, words like soul, etc. So I rejoice. It really touches me when I hear that. I'm very glad that that kind of opening has happened.

And I have a question again in relation to that. Where did the pressure come from, the authority, the imprisonment come from in the first place? That it was not legitimate, that there wasn't that permission. Where did that authority and imprisonment come from? Who imprisoned you? How? Where do we give authority? Where do we give up our authority? To whom? How does that even happen? That somehow I can't entertain certain ideas which might be extremely fruitful, extremely nourishing and fertile for the soul and opening in all kinds of ways. Somehow something has gone on with authority or authority figures or something or other and I'm not allowed. They're out of bounds. They're taboo. What's gone on there? How has that gone on and why has it gone on?

So this, to me, is a real question. So partly I'm offering this retreat to give permission, to legitimize, to open up whole vistas and areas—vast territories for exploration, for play, for the fertility of the soul, for inclusion of aspects and dimensions of being that have somehow gotten amputated. Rendered out of bounds. No entry. Do not enter. Do not even think about using this.

There's a big desire in me to open up those territories because I see how important they are, how necessary they are. And there's a question in that.

So just a few brief things to finish—I said I would share some thoughts about relating to the retreat, relating to these ideas and teachings. How do we hear and how do we frame and hold these ideas and these teachings?

If I just share for myself, I notice that I feel quite sensitive and sometimes a bit reactive—I get a bit nervous when I hear certain ideas expressed in New Age language, where there seems to be too much realism, too much reification. It rubs me the wrong way. I can't take it seriously. Whether it's a more New Age idea or a more secular idea, something really reacts to that in me. I get a bit nervous when I'm listening. That's just me sharing what doesn't work for me when I'm listening.

So if someone is talking that way, or I'm reading something in that vein, I have to work a little bit on how I'm listening so that I can actually take in what might be useful without getting tripped up by what makes me uneasy.

One thing here—and I've talked about this before, but it's so important that it's worth repeating—we have this emphasis on deep understanding of emptiness and dependent arising on one hand. All perception, all experience is empty. There's no ultimate truth in any of what I perceive, no ultimate truth in any conceptual framework. A real strong emphasis and basis in that.

And if you like, on the other hand, what appears to be in opposition to that is this willingness to entertain certain conceptual frameworks or what we might call metaphysics—sometimes quite Platonic in the sense of these hierarchies of existence or things that are given reality. So there seems to be a kind of opposition there.

In a way, this kind of work—imaginal work and re-enchanting in meditation—can seem like walking a razor's edge between these two extremes. There's what seems to be realist spiritual metaphysics on one hand, and radical emptiness and understanding of dependent origination on the other hand. So it can seem like one is walking a tightrope or razor's edge between those two.

But my experience is that the deeper I go into understanding emptiness, what looks like this tightrope balance—this narrow razor's edge, this precarious balancing where I have to keep in the middle to avoid falling off on either side—actually becomes something quite different. What seems like a very difficult, narrow place of walking or standing actually, with practice, isn't narrow at all. It's quite the opposite. It actually becomes a very wide and fertile field, allowing, legitimizing, inviting a kind of infinitude of exploration.

So practice becomes, in this holding together of the understandings of the emptiness of all things—radical, absolute emptiness of all things, complete, thorough emptiness—the holding of that with the willingness to enter into and entertain various conceptual frameworks, even metaphysical ones. With practice, the balance doesn't feel precarious at all or contrived, which from the outside, or maybe at first, it might seem to be.

Going back to this question—how will you hear these teachings? How will you frame and hold these ideas? As I said, I shared what makes me nervous sometimes. The encouragement is to take care, to find a relationship with these ideas, with the practices, with the teachings that works for you.

A second thing related to that has to do with listening in general, or reading. I know I've said this before, but again, it's so important. It seems to me that as human beings, we listen or read teachings almost from inside certain boxes, from certain conceptual structures that we've built up, that we understand or assume to be true or real. We listen to something new or read something new from the perspective of what we already know.

And sometimes in that, what happens is we just cut out and cut off and almost, in some instances, literally do not hear what is new, what doesn't fit into the boxes of our conceptual structures. This is maybe just part of the way the human mind works.

It's difficult sometimes because there are periods—maybe long periods in practice—where those boxes need to get consolidated, need to get built up. We need to hear just little bits that patch this and that and make the structure more firm. But there's a downside to all that, because sometimes we simply do not hear what is new, what doesn't fit in the box, what's different, what stretches and opens and sometimes breaks—even shatters—the box.

So is it possible, as we go through these teachings, or other teachings that you come across, or books that you read, to actually listen for the new, to read on the lookout for what actually doesn't fit in your box? This is difficult.

This is difficult. But just putting that recognition out there—the acknowledgment of the difficulty—while offering a gentle encouragement to listen in a different way than what is often habitual for us. Listening for what is new, for what doesn't fit into my box of what I already know. Again, it's more challenging. It's sometimes not so comfortable.

The second aspect of listening and reading concerns hearing the relevance of what's being said in any moment, the point that's being made. I mention this because of a couple of experiences I've had while teaching. Some years ago, I gave a talk where a large portion explored quantum physics and its relationship to emptiness, to understanding reality and perception, and what that meant for freedom. Afterwards, one listener somehow conveyed that he thought I had simply gone off about quantum physics because I was personally interested in it—that I had gotten lost in a tangent having nothing to do with anything, certainly not the Dharma. I was actually surprised because I had perhaps assumed too easily why it was relevant or what the connections were.

Another instance occurred while teaching emptiness on a long course. Going through and explaining these concepts about emptiness, I realized that for three or four people, it remained completely abstract because they couldn't see any connection between realizing the emptiness of things and a reduction in suffering or freedom from suffering. For some people, the whole thing seemed like abstract philosophy. "What does this have to do with suffering?" I realized I had to go back and actually connect things that, to me and to some others, seemed completely obvious. The relevance, the connection of ideas with freedom from suffering, needed to be made explicit.

So I suggest: what does it mean to listen for relevance? If something isn't clear, ask. Ask, "Why did you make that point? What exactly was the purpose?" Or "What was the point of that practice?" Do ask, because when we hear things and don't understand their relevance, their power to transform or open up possibilities is almost completely diminished. It dissolves right there.

Related to this, we can speak of what we might call listening and reading structurally. How often I hear from people that they listened to a Dharma talk from this teacher or that, and they say, "I took one thing"—then they share perhaps half a phrase from what the teacher said in an hour. It might be "turn towards what's difficult" or something similar. Which is wonderful—they received that and it was important—but it's almost like a myopic or over-microscopic focus on some small detail.

We need to listen for details, to read for details, of course we do. But sometimes what happens is that in doing so, we're not listening or reading for the big picture, for how things fit together. Usually when we're not really listening or reading to see how it all coheres—how the big picture forms, the larger conceptual structure—then what we find in our practice and in our lives, the way the Dharma develops for us, is actually limited. There's a kind of constraint on the movement that's possible and the opening that's possible.

I know this isn't always easy given the way different people's minds work, but just as a general encouragement—not just for this retreat, but more broadly in one's life—is it possible to gently cultivate what I'm calling a more structural kind of listening or reading? So that one really understands the relevance and how things fit together in the bigger picture.

These are just general points about relating to the teachings. We'll talk more about relating to the different practices probably tomorrow, but these apply more generally to the teachings themselves.

One last thing: teachings have to unfold in linear time and in chunks. We can't sit here and download it all in one second. And even if we could download it all at once, it would obviously be very long and everyone, including ourselves, would fall asleep or become exhausted. So teachings must be presented inevitably in chunks, in time.

But on this retreat in particular—and this applies to other retreats as well—sometimes those chunks are not really separate. We're going to explore, for instance, what it means to re-enchant the self and other, to re-enchant the world, to re-enchant time, in all these different areas of re-enchantment or re-enchanting the seeing, the hearing, the tasting, the touching of the six senses. But actually, all these areas of re-enchantment are not separate at all.

They're, if you like, mutually dependent. The enchantment is mutually dependent. They're, if you like, enchanted together. The self, the world, the senses, the perception, the ideation—all of it is actually enchanted together. But we have to split things up to talk about them.

So sometimes you'll be four or five days into a retreat and you'll get a piece of something and think, "Oh, I wish you'd said that at the beginning." Or a piece at the beginning doesn't make sense until later, doesn't quite fit until later. Just a recognition of that—it's a limitation of our existence in a way, of the way things arise for us and need to be separated.

Related to that, there's not really on this retreat so much of a linear movement where we start with this

and, dependent on that, we will go to something more advanced. It's not really set up that way, unlike other retreats, with the exception—as we'll talk about tomorrow—of the energy body as that forming a working basis for our practice.

A lot of material to bear in mind and hopefully to open things up and make things fruitful and helpful for all of us.

Thank you for listening.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.