The Art of Perception

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:34:53

In the course of history, the predominant views or conceptions of the human imagination—the ways we regard and relate to the imaginal—have undergone tremendous shifts.

Historically, certainly three or four hundred years ago and extending back through time, many people held what was probably the dominant view that something like an imaginal realm possessed objective existence. There are still many people today who hold this view, though they represent a very small minority in relation to the dominant modern perspective. They maintain that the imaginal realm has objective existence—it is just as real, if you like, as this world of materiality that appears to most of us as the only world.

This imaginal realm, possessing objective existence and what some would say has more reality than this world of materiality, exists as a kind of matrix of meaning around our space and time dimensions. The world of space and time is enveloped by this imaginal realm, which generates or infuses meaning for us, direction for us, kinds of identity for us, images, and fantasies. In this way it influences us and influences history itself.

As I said, nowadays this is an extremely rare view. It's very tempting to think that now we're smart, so we don't believe such a silly view—we can see through that very easily as something that's obviously not true. But just a moment or two of honest reflection will reveal: am I really so smart to have this negative prejudice against the reality of the imaginal realm? Or is it just that I'm repeating, reiterating the modern view—a view in which I've been indoctrinated, which saturates my culture? I haven't figured this out for myself or proven it to myself or thought it through. I'm just a product of indoctrination, really. It's not that I'm so smart.

But there is this view, and there has been historically, in many different ways with different forms, articulations, and shades of emphasis—the objective existence of an imaginal realm, a realm of images that is accessible to human beings, and especially accessible when consciousness is purified or trained.

There's a theologian called Walter Wink who talks about this and wants to point out the modern prejudice we have and how rare that prejudice is in the course of human history. He takes something like the ascension of Christ or the resurrection of Christ and says that these were real events, facts, but they happened not in the realm of materiality—not an actual physical body going up to heaven or reappearing on earth—but in the imaginal realm, in the psychic realm.

Even more than that, these happenings in the imaginal realm changed God. So God, in this Christian

mythic view, as incarnating as Christ, as incarnate, reappearing in the resurrection, and also ascending into heaven to join the Father—this ascending adds something to God. It adds a new dimension, a new aspect, a whole change to God.

We're dealing now not with archetypes that are fixed in the original meaning, but archetypes that are actually plastic, malleable—which to me is a more attractive idea. And yet, within that, as I've spoken about before in other places, there's also a kind of eternality. This ascension, this resurrection, is always happening. It's always happening and always available—not just, and not even primarily, as a matter of belief. So often that's the emphasis in modern Christianity, especially after Protestantism: it's a matter of belief, of faith. But it's actually always happening, always available, always accessible to us in the imaginal realm as image, with all the potency of that.

So historically, and even a little bit today, there are these ideas of the reality of the imaginal realm. But through history, things changed dramatically and radically, starting some would say in the twelfth century and certainly later, made more emphatic starting from the seventeenth century with the rise of what we could call modernism—this view that is so normal, so unquestioned, so habitual and pervasive in our modern Western society.

For example, there was the elevation of the whole idea of reasoning—that what we know as human beings, knowledge, comes from reasoning. And knowledge actually means something different than it used to mean, because it used to mean something more like union with what is known. That actually constituted knowledge: a union of the human being's mind and heart and soul with what is known, as opposed to knowledge as a result of reasoning and empirical deduction.

Related to that very much was the whole change in relationship with study and reading. Again, before the modern era, the whole idea of *lectio divina*, divine reading—studying something or reading something was a matter of sympathy. The being, the soul, and the body (because people used to read out loud) were animated by the breath. *Anima* also means soul, as well as life. So reading was to come into sympathy with what we are reading. Sympathy means sympathetic resonance—the whole being is resonating with what we're reading.

The Christian mystic Hugh of St. Victor called this kind of reading "an ontologically remedial technique"—strange words that might make us wonder what he's talking about. But the whole conception was very different. The human soul and the human intelligence were not separate from the divine soul, the world soul, and the divine intelligence. So reading, Hugh of St. Victor says, brings light that comes from study and brings a human being to a glow, because the intelligence that's reading is not different from the divine intelligence at the center of the being.

We're going to return to these ideas, I hope, later on the retreat.

More generally speaking, historically there was a shift towards respecting and emphasizing the teachings

of Aristotle through a medieval teacher called Averroes, over the teachings of Plato and a medieval teacher called Avicenna. This moved away from the Neoplatonic teachings that were very pervasive in understanding the nature of God and how the divine permeated or informed all aspects of creation through a hierarchy of existence—a hierarchy of emanations from God.

This elevation of reasoning, this shift towards Aristotelianism away from the more mystical teachings of Plato—all of this is relevant to how we regard imaginal experiences. Reasoning becomes more trustworthy than imaginal experience. What constitutes knowledge is not something that comes through the imaginal. It's not a matter of sympathizing with a soul image. All of that, and all the implied concepts and metaphysics that might be either believed or entertained, is relevant to how we view imaginal experiences and how we hold them and how much we respect or value them.

So there is, historically, this view of the reality of the imaginal realm versus the more modern, dominant view that it's completely fictitious, rubbish, not real, does not constitute knowledge. And we now—especially the people who have shown up on this retreat—might flip-flop back and forth between those two positions. We might have doubt. We move in and out of entertaining certain conceptual frameworks. This is our experience.

Actually, it's not that cut and dry, certainly not historically. You get a figure like Plotinus, the father of Neoplatonism, who had a very sophisticated philosophy. I don't mean sophisticated in terms of complicated, but sophisticated in terms of insight that, to me, is similar to some interpretations of Buddhadharma, especially the teachings of emptiness as I would tend to frame them. There are similarities there.

Sometimes, and there's a flexibility in Plotinus's teachings, he would say only the transcendent, unfabricated is real. The imaginal realm, the world soul—all that is not real. At one extreme, there is only the real, the ultimately real, beyond anything you can say about it, beyond all experience. At other times, in this flexibility of his teaching and conception, there would be more the teaching that all appearances, all levels of being, dimensions of appearance and perception—all of that is divine, including the imaginal realm, including matter.

For me, and I think it's the platform we're offering most on this retreat, there's something about understanding emptiness—and more than that, putting a radical emptiness, full, thorough, deep, comprehensive, at the basis of the path. Really letting that bear its fruit in what unfolds in terms of experience, meditation, practice, what appears, conceptions. What this does for me—the deeper one's realization of emptiness, the more it allows and legitimizes this play, this playfulness with ways of looking and conceptual frameworks, an ability to play with them, to entertain ideas, even metaphysical ideas, without holding them as believing in them as true or "this is reality."

For many people, this permission is gained through emptiness, some degree of realizing emptiness of everything. For some it's through philosophy. For some it's through philosophy of science, especially as

science has moved on in the last hundred years with quantum physics and relativity.

Niels Bohr, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist and one of the central father figures of quantum physics, held complementarity as very central to his philosophy. A statement is at the very same time both true and false. Or a statement that something is true means its opposite is also true. This became part of not only his life philosophy, but it emerged from deep questioning—mathematical questioning, but also philosophical questioning—that came out of that beautiful time at the beginning of the twentieth century. This idea in relationship to truth—that it's not quite as black and white or as neatly packageable or as single as the modernist view would have us believe.

Bohr also said regarding clarity that there's a complementarity between the clarity and the rightness of a statement. The complementarity is such that a statement which is too clear always contains something false. So the whole notion of truth, of knowledge, of what that is and what constitutes it has changed.

Through modern Western philosophy, this has all shifted. So whether it's through emptiness, whether it's through philosophy or modern science, or whether it's just through having an artistic sensibility, the poetic attitude that some people naturally have more than others—all of that allows us and opens up for us what I want to call the art of perception, the poetry of perception, and allows us to play with that.

All this is complex. In terms of conceptual frameworks, it's complex—reality, what is real, what is truth, how do we know anything, the epistemology, the ontology. I've talked about that in other talks, so I'm not going to go too much into that. But really to dwell on filling out what's involved in this art, in this poetry.

What I would like to emphasize more, again, is this seeing image as image—related to the emptiness understanding. We could also say seeing cosmopoiesis as cosmopoiesis, as poiesis—as art, poetry.

As making. As fabrication.

So central to our art, our poetry of perception, is seeing, recognizing, acknowledging, not forgetting: image is image.

Now, I'm certainly open to the idea—not only open, I feel very comfortable with the idea—of extrasensory perception and all that, in some instances when the mind's in certain conditions. But for this retreat, for these teachings, and for us mostly, most of the time, it will be much more helpful not to think in terms of ESP and ghosts and all that kind of stuff. Seeing image as image, seeing image as metaphor and cosmopoiesis as cosmopoiesis. We've filled out what that means, but we'll come back to it again. So important. So that's integral to our art.

Bonus of Ferrara, a fourteenth-century alchemist, had a phrase: *solutio*—that's a Latin word. Solutio is the root of alchemy. In other words, making solutions possible, turning what is solid, what is concretized, what is believed in a rigid way, in a fixed, solid, concretized way—making that solid into a solution, making it liquid. Seeing image as image, seeing cosmopoiesis as not fixed, not literal, not concretized in

the perception and in the conception. And that's the root of alchemy.

We'll see how we do with time on this retreat, but alchemy is another word for this poetry of perception, very much. We're in the business, or in the art, of transforming—actually, rather, transubstantiating, more accurately—our notions and our perceptions, our sense, our very sense of matter, of the world, of the self. Of course there's a transformation as well of the self in that, and also of divinity. And this idea, going back to Walter Wink's thing, of changing God—that God is not a fixed being, divinity is not a fixed being. There's something very deep in this. I've talked about it in other talks and maybe will come back to that. But this is what we mean: this art is an alchemy. It's a transubstantiation through perceptions, a poetry of perception transforming all that.

So as well as all that—integral to this art of cosmopoiesis, of re-enchantment—we can list five other factors. Good to bear in mind, to kind of check on. Most of them we've touched before, but I'll just list them now. So seeing images as images is one, and then five more.

One is this whole idea, integral to the art of cosmopoiesis: the playing with ways of looking. It's a part of re-enchanting the world—this playing with ways of looking, the flexibility, the range, the way we're holding that.

And implicit in that is a second aspect: when we're playing with ways of looking, we're also playing with—and again, the lightness of that word "play," the openness of it, the adventure of it, the interest, the research, and also the seriousness—we're playing with and entertaining conceptions, ideas, even large conceptual frameworks. That's implicit in playing with ways of looking. So to recognize that and recognize it's integral to re-enchantment, it's integral to cosmopoiesis as we are using those words.

But third, this is not a purely mental thing. It involves the body. This is why I put the emphasis on the energy body and that kind of awareness. This art of re-enchantment, this art and poetry of perception, needs to be in touch with—we need to keep it in touch with—our body, our cultivating, developing, refining our body awareness and body sensitivity, and also our embodiment.

So we're talking about embodiment not only in the sense of being in touch with the body and the resonances in the energy body—the openings, the contractions, the feeling of that as we're working imaginatively—but also embodiment as action. So what the image, the actions, how I am and how I speak... even right now, talking right now, there's a fantasy of that for me, and also for you, especially if you're enjoying this and if you love it. There are fantasies involved in the action of listening, or in the action of speaking, in the action that we do in the world. And this art of perception spills over not only into the way we see our actions, but also in what we actually do, what it issues in, in terms of our duties, our sense of duty, our sense of commitment, direction. We're going to come back to this.

And of course, as part of this third aspect of the five, it involves the senses. The senses are, if you like, the arenas of meeting of body and of world and of mind—if we even consider those three things separate. But

if we do, then the senses are really the arena, the fields, in which those three domains or aspects of existence meet: body, mind—mind, heart, *citta*, really, soul.

So of course when we say body, we're involving senses, and we're talking about re-enchanting the cosmos and cosmopoiesis and all that. Of course our senses are involved.

So: playing with ways of looking, entertaining conceptions and ideas, the involvement of the body integrally, but also the involvement of the heart and heartfulness. And how absolutely essential that is to this work. Sometimes the heart functions as a kind of key. If it's closed, nothing can really happen imaginally. And conversely, the imaginal and the re-enchantment and the cosmopoietic ways can open the heart in different ways.

But heart and heartfulness are integral to this art.

And as we said right at the beginning, so is the imagination—or more accurately, the imaginal. So these five are all included, need to be included, they're integral, and they're part of what we experiment with in this art.

The art of perception means experimenting, playing with ways of looking, with ideas, with body awareness, with embodiment in action, with how we relate to the senses. It means playing with the heart, encouraging the heart and playing with the imagination, experimenting with all of that. And this art reaches out, covers and extends to and involves all areas of our being. There's nothing, in a way, that's necessarily outside of it—nothing at all.

Self, other, world; the mind and the whole way we feel and conceive and experience the citta, the mind-heart, the soul; space even, the perception, the conception of space, of time—all these areas of being, these domains or aspects or dimensions of our existence: space, time, self, other, world, heart, mind, knowing what it is to know. Communication, hearing—whether it's others or nature or whatever—music, gesture, communication in gesture, posture, movement, language and speech as part of communication, eating, seeing, smelling—all the senses.

All of these are, if you like, playing fields for our research—playing fields in which we create (we acknowledge that) and in which we also discover. This create-discover dualism or apparent dualism is something we'll return to as well.

Within this art, and within that playing that includes all of what I've just talked about, there might be generalities. Going back to earlier in the retreat, there are generalities of what's involved—all these factors I'm just enumerating now—but there's no specific formulaic perception. You don't have to... every piece of music or every painting or sculpture or whatever is going to be different, unless I'm deliberately trying to copy something, which is not what we're emphasizing so much on this retreat. We might start that way in terms of suggestions, but in terms of actual perceptions, there's no specific formulaic approach.

If we consider this art of re-enchantment—if we actually pull out one aspect of all I've just been talking about and consider it a bit more—disenchantment in the modernist sense comes from a number of factors and historical reasons. Just to single out two right now: one is the rigidity and singularity of conception and view. *This* way of understanding things, *this* way of framing things, *this* conception is the truth; everything else is not. That's actually very characteristic of modernism, unlike what we might call post-modernism.

So that's something pervasive in the culture that's contributed to disenchantment, and we're not free to play. Playing is delegitimized. Playing with ways of looking and ideas and conceptions and metaphysics is all delegitimized.

But what I want to emphasize right now is also the devaluation in relationship to human imagination—the devaluation of the imaginal and the devaluation of its epistemological value, meaning its validity as a way of knowing. That we can actually *know* through imagination, through the imaginal—which today, for most people, sounds completely bizarre and even bonkers. I'm not saying it's simple as an idea, but something happened to devalue the imagination and the imaginal.

Again, I really want to spell this out to make it clear, because I have just come to realize that what might feel very clear and obvious to me actually takes time for people to digest as a set of ideas and approaches.

When we use the word imaginal, implied in that word—or what constitutes the imaginal, or imaginal practice—is not just that it involves the use of the imagination. That doesn't necessarily qualify something as imaginal.

So I'd like to go through a list of seven aspects of the imaginal as we're using that word—the authentic imaginal. These are connected, but to me it's worth repeating them, even though you will have heard them before.

The first one—not in any order, and as I said, they overlap and connect, some of them imply each other—is that the imaginal needs to involve and imply soulfulness and soul-making. Even some use of the imagination in regard to something that has mythic themes doesn't necessarily qualify as imaginal.

I saw on TV the other day an advertisement for a computer game—I can't remember what it was called, the kind you get on your phone or whatever. It involved kings and dragons and rescuing princesses and wars and all that kind of stuff. Just because the themes are typically mythic themes doesn't qualify them as imaginal themes, unless they're soul-making. Now, they could be soul-making at times for certain people. Oftentimes, watching people who are involved in that kind of thing, it doesn't seem to be soul-making.

But also, usually when people are playing those kinds of games, there's not mindfulness involved—mindfulness in relationship to images. There might be a keen awareness, especially if it's happening in real time and you've got to react and all that, but not mindfulness in the sense we're talking about: sensitivity to the emotions that are constituted, elicited in relationship to the images; the soul

resonances, the soulfulness, what's happening in the energy body. All this is fundamental to what we might call imaginal practice and usually is not there in relation to that kind of game. It could be, but usually it's not.

So that's the first one: soulfulness and soul-making.

The second aspect—again, all related—is what we could call depth. I'm hesitant with that word a little bit, but let's call it depth, by which I mean two things. One is dimensionality. When it comes to images that are mixed with perceptions of materiality in the world—like the cosmopoiesis—the dimensionality, the depth means it's not just a kind of flatness, one-dimensionality of existence that the typical secular modernist view of scientific materialism would hold and assume about the nature of what is real. So there's a sense wrapped up in the imaginal of dimensionality that way.

But there's also a sense of depth as a kind of inexhaustibility, a mystery, an impossibility to fully understand the image. There's always more to this image than I can quite understand or capture or put into a box or convey.

When we encounter an image that we fully understand, or believe we fully understand—when we've placed it in a neat conceptual box, summarized it completely, explained it thoroughly in words that we can convey to another—something vital is lost. The very word "explain" reveals this flattening: to make plain, to reduce to a plane, P-L-A-N-E, removing the dimensionality, the inexhaustible depth, the essential beyondness.

When we flatten an image in this way, either exhausting what was never truly inexhaustible to begin with, or believing we've captured its fullness through explanation and categorization, the image inevitably loses its spontaneous arising. It becomes lifeless, stripped of vitality, and simply stops appearing for us. Either it has completed whatever limited work it was meant to do, or more accurately—and this touches the heart of dependent arising—because the image depends entirely on our relationship with it, on our conception of it, on the very image we hold of the image itself, our flattening destroys its nourishment.

Having truncated its inexhaustibility and limited its depth, we deprive the image of a fundamental dimension of vitality. Without this nourishment of mystery, of being somehow larger than our complete comprehension, the image dies for us.

This principle of inexhaustibility applies equally to ideas and concepts, particularly those intertwined with images—something worthy of deeper exploration in future retreats. When an idea or conceptual framework or metaphysic remains somehow bigger than our capacity to fully grasp it, when we cannot polish it off and contain it completely, when mystery persists at its edges, that idea becomes extraordinarily fertile. This connects directly to what I've explored elsewhere regarding the soul dynamic: the mutual expansion, insemination, nourishment, enrichment, and deepening of psyche, image, logos, and eros in their dance together.

*The third aspect** of the imaginal is the otherness and autonomy of the image. Here we encounter a sense or conception of the image as having roots that extend beyond our personal human history—at least as typically understood from a humanist perspective. This question of how personal history relates to the genesis of images is delicate and deserves careful consideration.

But what we're exploring is neither a reductionist explanation rooted solely in neurophysiology and brain networks, nor one limited to personal biographical material. Instead, we grant images a quality of otherness, of autonomy. We play with, entertain the possibility of their independent existence. Connected to this otherness is a sense of their divinity—that their roots, their origins, touch something divine. Whether we're engaging an image of the world in its cosmic vastness, an image of another person, of self, or purely intrapsychic imagery, there exists this dimension of divinity.

What "divinity" means here can remain beautifully vague, and that vagueness is not only acceptable but appropriate.

*The fifth aspect** is meaningfulness—the way imaginal images bring and convey deep meaningfulness to us. This overlaps naturally with soul-making, but meaningfulness differs from meaning in its inexhaustible richness. Rather than "it means X" or "it means Y," we encounter something fuller, more spacious.

This meaningfulness operates personally, impacting our lives, commitments, and direction. This doesn't necessarily translate into specific plans—traveling to particular places for predetermined periods. Meaningfulness and the sense of commitment and direction it brings can be far more open, non-specific, unplanned. Yet it touches what is most deeply important to us as human beings, carrying within it the aliveness and vitality of what truly matters.

*The sixth aspect** returns us to a central theme: image as image. Seeing image as image constitutes part of what makes something imaginal in our understanding. This includes recognizing that the conceptions and conceptual frameworks we entertain—whether explicitly articulated or merely implicit—related to the images we perceive and engage, we hold lightly. We don't grasp them as ultimate truths or believe in them as fixed realities.

*The seventh aspect** emerges from the confluence of all the preceding six: the imaginal reveals itself as a realm of beauty and sacredness. I use both words in their widest possible sense. The beauty may not be immediately apparent—in fact, it often isn't at first.

It might feel completely opposite. "This is a horrific image, it's disturbing, it's ugly." But something usually happens in this way of working with such images that we come to see their beauty, or they transform, or we come to expand our sense of beauty just as our senses of sacredness are expanded. So there's no prescription here, no narrow meaning of what beauty and sacredness mean, but the imaginal characteristic is beauty and sacredness.

When we talk about the kind of enchantment that we're emphasizing on this retreat—what we call tentatively mature, imaginatively based enchantment—it will involve all of this too, because it involves the imaginal. This is integral to this art of perception.

Within all this, going into what it means if we're really going to view this and engage in this as an art, first of all it involves a recognition that our lives and the perceptions of our lives already involve fantasy and image. They're already imbued and full of that, especially where we love, especially where there's meaningfulness for us. To not recognize that, I would say, is psychologically naive.

I want to read you a quote from Friedrich Nietzsche—really, it's his encouragement to engage in this art, in this kind of art. He says: "Ultimately man finds in things nothing but what he himself has imported into them." There's a strong statement of dependent arising, of fabrication understanding right there—so much ahead of his time, such a radical, deep, insightful thinker.

"Ultimately, man finds in things nothing but what he himself has imported into them. The finding is called science. The importing we call art, religion, love, pride."

So part of this art of perception is the idea that we're importing. We're realizing that. And it's also part of what we might call the spiritual, religion. It's also there when we love.

But then he goes on to say, and this is even more interesting, even more radical: "Even if this should be a piece of childishness, even if this importing should be a piece of childishness, one should carry on with both and be well disposed towards both." Both the finding and the importing, but also the importing that's coming from childishness—projection from childhood, we could say—and also other kinds of importing.

Continuing: "Some should find, others—we others—should import something."

This is interesting to me, his encouragement to engage in the importing, to engage in this kind of bringing something deliberately to perception, to play with it, to engage in the art of it, even when it is, in his words, childishness or based on pride. For example, when it involves what we call projections based on one's childhood experience and hurts and wounds.

This is strange. This is completely the opposite of what a lot of modern psychology would say. Even when it's based on childishness and pride, engage in the importing. Why? Partly because of the necessity—in a way, the fundamental necessity—of recognizing the more general and important principle of importing, that importing is going on. And that recognition might be possible even through childish projections and pride.

It's not restricted to that. It's not that those are the only times where we're importing. And it's not as if sometimes we import, and there's the possibility of not importing, of a bare attention, of this so-called being with things as they are—the phrase of the Buddha that's basically misinterpreted, I think—of receiving purely the facts of reality.

So recognize the fact of importing, and actually he's encouraging it. Quite a radical teaching.

Again, in the ideas that are underpinning and allowing and opening up this art for us, the art of perception, there's this recognition of the infinite possibilities of interpretation. I was listening to something by Glenn Mullen, another Buddhist teacher, and he was saying how his teacher had told him that many Buddhist teachers—classical Buddhist teachers like Nagarjuna and Asanga and Atisha—deliberately wrote in a style that would be open to multiple interpretations.

And why would you do that? Well, to encourage the creativity of the seeker, of the student. To encourage their exploration.

If you know a text like the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, the Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way by Nagarjuna—an absolutely seminal, central text to all Mahayana Buddhism—consider how over the centuries, and still nowadays, contemporary Western teachers interpret not just certain passages from the book, but the whole project or the whole thrust of what Nagarjuna even means by emptiness. Such a range to the interpretations.

In Buddhist Tantra as well, there are certain Tantric texts, original Tantras, that have many commentaries written on them, and some of the commentators give four levels of meaning to every word, or every sentence. For example, the Tantric Chandrakīrti in his commentary on the Guhyasamāja enumerates all of them.

There's four levels of meaning in this text. Interesting also in Kabbalistic teachings, there's also four levels of meaning to every verse or word in the Bible. It's called pardes—an acronym for the four levels. Pardes also means, as Rachel said, paradise or garden. So the entering into this openness, this multiplicity of meaning and going into the meanings and making them lived and alive and soulful is entering the garden. But in both the Tantric commentaries and the Kabbalistic commentaries, all the meanings are valid. It's not one over the other. They're all valid.

The Bible, both the Old and New Testament, are much easier to read in these kinds of ways than, say, the Pali Canon, because the Bible is, to me, clearly written in a kind of mythical language. It's amenable to, it's open to that multiplicity of interpretation because it's imaginal. Again, it was only with the rise of Protestantism and the kind of literalism and the wanting to reduce the Bible to one singular meaning—everything just means one thing and you're either right or wrong and it's all very literal. But the Pali Canon is a little trickier. It's very hard to take most of it in any kind of mythical way. Some, yes. But this multiplicity of interpretation, you also see it with Western philosophers. The diversions of opinion on what Kant really meant by something, or Hegel, or Nietzsche, or Heidegger, or Derrida—it's pretty clear that some of them are writing in an ambiguous style that's open to plurality, and they're even acknowledging that, for instance Derrida.

But for us, what all this means is this infinite possibility of interpretation. It legitimizes and grounds and

opens up for us this poetic artistic attitude—not just in regard to texts and Buddhist texts or whatever texts, but also to existence. This poetic attitude to existence we're talking about—alchemy—is really what that involves. Poetry and art, the poetry and art of perception.

It's actually William Blake, who was both an artist and a poet, who somewhere wrote, "A double vision is always with me." Meaning, yes, of course, I can see the things that we all agree on now in our post-scientific revolution, Western Enlightenment agreement on things. Of course I can see that. That's one of my visions. But I have another vision, a double vision, a second vision that is always with me, and that's the imaginal vision. Because multiple vision is possible. It's interesting—it's an artist and a poet, someone not a mystic, but someone who had that sensibility, that kind of attitude, and broadened it to existence.

So yes, going right back to the beginning of the talk, there's the imaginal realm conceived of as something real, or at the other extreme, conceived of as completely non-real, completely invalid, completely a waste of time. My tendency and encouragement is more to view the imagination, the imaginal realm, not so much as something that's real, but more as a mode of attention, a mode of awareness, a mode of being. This includes conceptual frameworks and ways of looking, playing with that, modes of conceiving, modes or ways of looking. And that opens up the imaginal realm. The imaginal realm is really a mode of being, a mode of attention, a mode of awareness, ways of looking and conceiving.

William Blake wrote something even more interesting, radical, if you like, or strange-sounding to modernist ears. He said, "Imagination is the savior. Imagination is the savior, or imagination is the Christ." What does that mean? What's he on about? Imagination is the savior. Imagination is the Christ. And even within that, what does he mean when he says Christ? Saving us from what? Imagination is saving us from what?

From the flatland. From single vision, what he calls Newton's sleep. From an absence of soul-making. And also from what Friedrich Nietzsche almost kept drawing attention to—the dead end of modernist nihilism. So it's through this art and through the imaginal that the dead end of modernist nihilism can be transcended, gone through and then gone beyond. The meaninglessness that pervades existence, the valuelessness that pervades existence, as Nietzsche pointed out. It needs an art to go beyond that and not get stuck in a modernist nihilism.

And there's more to this. Imagination is the savior, is the Christ.

So if we think about the ways that we can conceive of or view or relate to perception, perceptions. One is a very normal and, for us, obvious way that perceptions are received. They're received from the reality of the world. They reflect or represent that reality. This is a normal assumption, a normal mode of conceiving of perception as we move through the world. Maybe it's necessary at times. Of course, we relate to perception that way. It's part of how we move in the world. So perception as something received.

But secondly, it's possible to relate to perception—this is more subtle—perception as something gift or

grace from the divine, from God. This is also received, but it has a whole other dimensionality to it. My perception, even the simplest perception, is a gift or a grace from the divine.

But because we investigate in meditation this flexibility of perception and we investigate the dependent arising of perception, the fabrication, dependent arising of perception, we can also come to see through all that, through playing with all that in practice, that perception can also be regarded in a third way as opportunity. Perception as opportunity.

Through perceiving this way, through this cosmopoiesis, through this image, through this fantasy of myself and other and what's happening, there is opportunity as related to the word door, porta—opportunity. Porta is door in Latin—opportunity. We can, through the image, all kinds of possibilities open for us. Open for consciousness, for the heart, for the being, for the life, for meaningfulness, for soul, all of that. So perception as opportunity, as door.

And didn't Jesus say, "I am the way"? So imagination, imaginal perception as doors, as opportunities. I am the way because I am a way, if you like. Opportunity.

And related to that, fourth way of conceiving or viewing perception is—what about this? Perception as redemptive work. Perception as redemptive work. And again, tying it back to Christ. Christ is the redeemer, right? If you know the lingo from Christianity. Perception as redemptive work.

So re-enchantment as redemptive work from the disenchantment that's so pervasive through the cosmopoiesis. We are redeeming something. We're healing something, but it's through perception. But also the emphasis on work. This is something that we can actively engage in, actively practice, actively play with, like art is work. We talk about works of art.

So Tantra can be viewed as redemptive work, redeeming the whole perception of self, other world, matter, all of that. And actually one way, for those of you who are a little bit familiar with Tantric teachings—and again I hope at some point in the future to talk more about this on another retreat—we can regard the imaginal realm as what's called the sambhogakaya. It's one of the Buddha bodies, the trikaya, the three bodies of the Buddha.

So there's the aspects, if you like, of Buddha nature, or dimensions of Buddha nature, and Buddha nature in the sense of a kind of divinity really, all-pervasive, ultimate mind that is not separate from the world, from matter, et cetera. So this realm of the imaginal, the imaginal realm is the sambhogakaya. It's one of the bodies, if you like. And again, notice the language, one of the bodies of the Buddha nature, of the divinity. And again, the Christ. So tying all this together, there's similarities there. Imagination is the Christ. Sambhogakaya is the realm of the imaginal, the realm of divine appearances, the appearances of tantric deities and mandalas and Buddha realms, et cetera. All that's sambhogakaya. And it's an aspect of Buddha nature as ultimate reality, as the divinity, divine consciousness, if you like, and that way that pervades the whole world.

More, still, about this art and the art of perception. Some of you will be artists or musicians or write poetry seriously, et cetera. And don't you recognize that when we make a piece of art or music or compose music or a poem, how in making it, it makes you, it shapes you. The work itself feeds back and influences and shapes, especially if one takes one's time and edits and revises and spends time with the work in the subtle shaping of it. We shape it, it shapes us.

Similar with the imaginal and the art of perception. We're acknowledging that we shape it—there's an art there—but it shapes us too. And what I mentioned earlier, there's a recognition that we both are creating. We create this work of art, but somehow we also discover it.

Again, sometimes you have this sense—I think as Michelangelo said—it's like I'm just chipping away at the marble to reveal the sculpture that's already underneath. That's how he thought of it. Sometimes there's a sense of like, I'm getting to something, I'm revealing, I'm uncovering something. We're discovering the piece of art that we're creating. And we recognize this both/and.

And perception and imaginal perception, we can view them the same. Tom Cheetham, I read a little passage by him where he says this word "invention"—so it's another word for creation, right, invention—comes from the Latin *invenire*, which literally means to come upon, in other words, to discover. So the original meaning of invention was discovery. It's only in the late sixteenth century with the rise of the whole modern sense and experience of self and subjectivity that the whole notion of, or the whole meaning of the word "invent" came to mean to make something up. It was flipped 180 degrees, what it actually means.

But as I said, all this—this create/discover, this shaping and being shaped—we recognize that in relation to images. We recognize also this slip historically, the movement away from discovering images in the imaginal realm as if they had some kind of objective reality towards they're just made up. It's just rubbish, isn't it? And with that, correspondingly, the devaluing of the imaginal as ways of knowing, devaluing of the imaginal epistemologically.

So art, this notion of art and our encouragement then through these practices—now it's like meditation, really what I would like, and I hope you can get this feeling on this retreat—is that it extends to life. This whole notion of art extends to life, to the ways we feel and see ourself, others, the whole of existence. So art as—you know, the usual way we think about art—then the art of meditation, and the art of playing with perception and meditation, then it actually just becomes life. The thing you have to sit in a certain posture and it's all very formal, you have to go on retreat for X amount of time, just becomes life. This is how we live in the art of perception or recognizing life existence as the art of perception.

There's another little quote from Nietzsche. He writes, "We should learn from artists while being wiser than they are in other matters. For with them, this subtle power"—the power of making things, of making beauty, of arranging things, of interpretation, of recognizing the work of art as both created and discovered, all that that's involved for artists—"for with them, this subtle power usually comes to an end

where art ends and life begins. But we want to be the poets of our life, first of all, in the smallest, most everyday matters."

So these little moments, little shifts, small everyday matters. The imaginal comes and touches us on the arm. Something opens in the perception just for a moment or two. These are important moments. We can go with them, open them, nourish them, explore them, capitalize on them. And the encouragement to really do that deliberately so that this art of perception extends to the whole of our existence.

And if we regard and relate to the senses that we have and the views, the perceptions that we have of the self, of the other, of the cosmos—if we regard and relate to these as works of art, listen to the words there, works of art—then to me that implies that we can never reduce or fully comprehend self, other, world. Again we're back to this inexhaustibility. As works of art, they have an inexhaustibility. The very sense of them is something that has a beyondness to it. Can never fully reduce them or to some explanation fully comprehend them.

So part of the problem with scientism is that it tries to explain everything from a certain framework and point of view and assumption and reality base, from materialism and reductionism. But this simply will not do. It simply doesn't match or meet or extend really to what needs—to the beauty of things and the soul of things and the meaningfulness of things.

So to always explain things in terms of neurology or biology or evolutionary, you know, biological evolutionism or from the reductionisms of materiality—you know, analyzing a great painting in terms of the molecular structure of the paint and the canvas, it might be interesting to a certain extent. It might explain something. But the art—where's the art? It will explain nothing about the actual art, about meaning. It will explain nothing about the meaning or the meaningfulness that that painting has for us and how it moves us and what moves us in it and what's most important to us.

So the most important thing about this painting is what it does for the soul, so to speak. And a materialist explanation can do nothing to explain that. It almost does not go anywhere at all towards explaining that.

And I would also add to this that great art, if we can use such a word without sounding pompous, great art is never going to be fully understood. There's always something that's beyond even what the artist can sometimes get their heads around or intended. It's only kind of whatever the opposite of great art is—poor art—that can be kind of summed up and explained and fully understood. There's this inexhaustibility. To me good art repays...

what we bring to it in terms of our attention, it will repay us, it will nourish us, it will delight us and open to us and reveal more and more of itself. We will discover more and more dimensions to the degree and dependent on the energy and the quality of the attention we bring to it—the openness and the fullness of our receptivity, our sensitivity, the aliveness of the energy and attention that we bring to it. To that degree it keeps repaying us.

There's a fertility to really great pieces of art. They can be appreciated in different ways, approached from different angles. If you're doing something like Hamlet, how many different ways are there of interpreting that play? Or a Beethoven symphony—you can approach it this way, that way. There's this inexhaustible richness.

All this connects to the art of perception—what we perceive as self, other, world. There's this same inexhaustibility if we really regard them as works of art. But we recognize too, filling out the parallelism, the dependent arising of the art aspect itself. The beauty, the meaning and meaningfulness, the emotions that a work of art elicits for us—we recognize this dependent arising both in the realm of conventional art and in the realm of this art of perception.

So in conventional art, the beauty, the meaning, the meaningfulness, the emotions—all of that arises dependently from the confluence, the aliveness of the interaction between artist, art piece, audience, spectator, context. The information we have, others' views about this piece influence what happens for us. Others' views about art in general or about life in general, existential views—even the artist's own views affect how we view their art. Of course they do. Or generally other authorities, people whose views we give authority to, or just the authority of the dominant culture because it's pervasive and popular. All this mixes together in a dependent arising, and the things that are important to us in the art are recognized to be dependently arisen from all that.

All this too we recognize—it's the same for the imaginal, for cosmopoiesis, for enchantment. So many parallels with art.

And again, we can go even one step further. Sometimes there's a person working with the imaginal or these ideas of cosmopoiesis who thinks, "This is nuts. This is completely crazy." Or there's that doubt about reality and unsureness that we've touched on—very normal, very understandable, maybe an important part of this process nowadays.

But again, putting it into parallel with the artistic process or our relationship with art, you probably don't consider art that you love to be nuts. It's art. It's not nuts. It's not about reality in that literal sense, so doubt doesn't enter in that way.

Even more than that, we can be deeply moved by some piece of art, whatever medium it's in, and moved not just emotionally and not just in ways that we can understand or reductively explain—"Oh, it's a piece about impermanence, it's a poem about my childhood," or whatever. The ways that art moves us go beyond what we can understand about how it's moving us or what's being moved. There's an unfathomability, a complexity, a mystery in the very resonances for the soul, the emotions, the body, the perceptions. That unfathomability in the resonance is deeply important.

It's moving to us, has its effects, all of which function without any idea that this is reality. Because we know it's art, or it's a movie, or it's a novel, or whatever. Without any notion that this is reality, yet still it

does something powerful to the soul. Same thing with images, same thing with seeing an image as an image, with cosmopoiesis. It's not hampered by qualms about reality.

And it doesn't need to be realist art or even related to anything recognizable. This art, this painting or music, doesn't have to have any relation to anything recognizable in my life or in anyone's life. An abstract painting—why is it that Rothko is so moving, so deeply moving to so many people and in so many different ways? Or Howard Hodgkin. Or music that has no words to it. I can't say it's about anything you could put into words. It's not translatable. It's not reducible.

Even more than this, in terms of this relationship with reality—when we relate to something as art, it liberates it from this kind of tight, literalistic relationship with reality. And so it can do its soul work for us. It can do its transformative work. It can open up something without this hampering by all these qualms regarding realism.

I think it was Oscar Wilde—I can't remember exactly, but I recognize this for myself. He said something like how much it broke his heart, as much as any person or any event involving an actual person in his life, what happened to someone in a novel by Balzac. And I recognize this too with certain characters in novels or certain historical figures that mean a lot to me—people I've never met and who are dead now and whom I'll never meet, but somehow I care for them, I love them. As Oscar Wilde said, I care for them and love them as much as real people. Think how strange that is.

Loving a character in a novel or a fictional character that's a product of art—loving and caring for them as much as we do for the so-called real people in our lives—would strike someone locked into certain mindfulness or insight meditation dogmas as rather mad. They might quickly want to interpret it: "Oh yes, it's because they represent a facet of your heart, like your compassion or whatever."

But even with the real people in our lives—the flesh and blood friends, relatives, family, loved ones, lovers—perhaps what we love about them is their divine dimensions. This is what moves us. This is what we care about. It's not taking away anything from the human; it's actually expanding what is involved in what the human being is, or how we see human beings—both as subject and object. When I love someone, it's because I am sensitive to, and resonating with, and moved by the divine dimensions of their being. That could involve the whole of their being, but it's a way of seeing.

Often people want to think that beliefs, and also the creation of beauty in one's life and aesthetics, are for the purpose of consolation. Because of our existential situation—maybe not being able to face up to that—people believe certain things, so the idea goes. Sometimes even the creation of beauty is to soften the brute horrors of existence, the facts of our existence.

But if we question that, and if we translate the idea of believing to this idea of the flexibility of a range of conceivings—of views, of ways of looking that we're entertaining and holding lightly and not as true—and if we're also holding this idea of the otherness and the autonomy of images, of an image that means its

beauty is not just created but also discovered because there's this otherness, this autonomy...

These two ideas together: belief becomes flexible range of conceptions and ways of looking, and otherness grants that we discover beauty and not just create it for our own purposes. Then the whole idea of belief and beauty being for the purpose of consolation in our life—of reassurance—that crumbles a little bit. It opens up in a different direction.

Belief and beauty are—or if you like, conceptions entertained and beauty created and discovered—aspects of the creative act of perceiving and perception. And that means they're aspects of being, because our being is perception. That also includes, as I said, the beauty of embodied action, in creativity, in kindness, in ethics.

But beauty—creation of beauty, discovery of beauty—and also this playing with, you could say playing with beliefs, or playing with conceptions and views, ways of looking, they become fields of play, fields of opportunity: soul-making. That becomes the point rather than consolation—soul-making.

So just to finish: all of this—recognizing the fact of fantasy and image in our lives, in our perceptions, and also the understanding of emptiness—these things, these two recognitions, allow this art of perception. They open it up, they form its ground, they legitimize it.

It's very different from realist, concretizing views. The dominant view of secular modernity, the existentialist views that permeate a lot of our culture, a lot of philosophy, a lot of psychology, and more and more a lot of Dharma and secular Buddhism, really are formed on, take off from, have their basis in realist assumptions—oftentimes without completely being honest about it.

So for example, the now popular replacement of the word "truths" in the Four Noble Truths by "tasks"—as I said before, it seems like an important move, but still underpinning all that is a whole assumption about what is true and what is real materially and existentially, and what's not true and not real. And that's all functioning with all kinds of limiting effects, without being acknowledged as a perspective of reality.

It's questioning myths and assumptions that opens all this up. Questioning, questioning, questioning.

Again, I'll share a passage from Nietzsche, where he says: "What is familiar is what we are used to. What is familiar is what we are used to, and what we are used to is most difficult to know. That is, to see as a problem. That is, to see as strange and distant, outside us."

In other words, these ideas that imbue our culture—as I said before, we're indoctrinated by them. We just assume that they're true and we don't even realize that they're operating. It's very hard to realize what is actually operating for us as views. Some of them we never even articulate explicitly, or everyone agrees on them. We never question them. But this questioning—questioning the assumptions and the myths that run through our views and our sense of reality—this questioning is a massive part of what opens things up.

For instance, Charles Taylor, a contemporary philosopher—he's very old now, but wrote this massive tome called *A Secular Age* on secularism. He talks right at the beginning about what he calls "subtraction stories." It's the idea that our current view of things—the view of modernity or secularity—is really what we've done: shaken off or exposed as unreal all the superstitions. We've subtracted all the superstitions and all the nonsense and all the misapprehensions.

and rubbish that people before us used to believe. Now we are the ones—if not the generation, then the period in history following the scientific revolution and the Western Enlightenment—who see things nakedly and truly as they are, because we've subtracted all that other rubbish.

You see this as well in fantasies of secular Buddhism: subtracting all the spiritual, mystical, metaphysical gobbledygook and being left with the real thing. One of the things Charles Taylor points out over the length of more than one of his books is how this modernist, secularist view is just as constructed as any other view in history. It results from new inventions, new technologies, from certain shifts in self-view and other ideas from the history of ideas—all of that is constructed and conditioned. It's not a naked, objective, existential reality that we're dealing with.

The myth of subtraction stories, he points out—he says he's devoted to exposing the falsity of those kinds of stories, so popular, so easy to swallow, so seemingly convincing.

The philosopher Michel Foucault says something similar in quite strong language. Sometimes he talked about his work as a kind of archaeology—in other words, digging down into the historical roots of any particular philosophy or position or social structure or idea or convention. In that archaeology, he says, we will ask them—these ideas or philosophies, and in this case we're talking about questioning the assumptions and the myths that we just take for granted, that seem so much a part of what is real, what is generally unquestioned.

We will ask them, he says, where they come from. Some people say, "Well, it comes from the Pali Canon." But that too, as I've pointed out elsewhere, is a historical fantasy. There's a fantasy of the Buddha, there's a fantasy of origins, there's a fantasy wrapped up in that claim, the belief and assumptions that shape certain interpretations of texts or certain historical claims as being absolute, naked things—as it was intended to be.

But Foucault says we will ask them where they come from, toward what historical destination they are moving without being aware of it. In other words, these assumptions that we have, these views that we have—there's a lot of unawareness in them, to echo Nietzsche. Then he continues: what naivety blinds them to the condition that makes them possible? Again, echoing Charles Taylor: How did this thing even come about? Is it really a naked reality, or is it also conditioned, constructed through history?

And lastly, Foucault says, what metaphysical enclosure encloses their rudimentary positivism? In other words, this idea is so popular, so seemingly convincing and appealing—that we can really be just

empirically with things as they are and strip away all this so-called metaphysics and gobbledygook. But actually there's metaphysics involved in that. I've talked about this in other talks. And as Foucault says, it's an enclosure. It limits and encloses what seems to be a radicalism—a rudimentary, basic positivism: "These are the facts. We're stripping everything down to facts." Are you really doing that? Or is there metaphysics and enclosure and all kinds of unquestioned assumptions wrapped up in that?

Fundamental questioning is so important for me, so important for a practitioner, so important for our culture nowadays, so important to liberate this art.

There's another quote I'd like to read from Northrop Frye. Essentially, what he's calling criticism—this kind of questioning, what I call critique at the beginning of the retreat—what criticism or critique can do, according to Northrop Frye, is awaken students to successive levels of awareness of the mythology that lies behind the ideology in which their society indoctrinates them. An awareness of the mythology that lies behind the ideology in which their society indoctrinates them.

It grants students—this questioning grants students—an emancipatory distance, a liberating distance from their own society, and gives them a vision of a higher human state. Ultimately this transforms their experience, he goes on, so that the poetic model becomes a model to live by in what he terms a charismatic mode. It's a Greek word, but he's really talking about this mode, this art of perception—being in the mode of being of the imaginal, the art of perception, the cosmopoiesis.

Myths become myths to live by, what he calls myths to live by, and metaphors become metaphors to live in, which not only work for us but constantly expand our horizons. And that relates to the soul-making and the expansion of eros-psyche-logos that I've talked about elsewhere. What he calls entering the world, through all this, of kerygma or transformative power—the soul-making, this re-enchantment.

But it's the questioning—questioning and the insight, whether it's philosophical insight, meditative insight into dependent arising and emptiness, psychological insight, recognizing how fantasy and image imbue our lives and our perceptions. All of that is the questioning and the insights that will liberate the possibility and the range of this art of perception. Liberate also the depths to which it can be soul-making for us, nourishing and re-enchanting.

So it liberates it. Questioning and insight liberate it. They also ground it. So important.

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