Matter, Bodies, Worlds (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:14:59

Wrapped up in the typical modernist view of the world, of the cosmos, and serving as a basis of classical mechanistic science, are what we might call reductionist views of different kinds. I've touched on this before in different areas, in psychological theories and such, but right now what I want to emphasize is what I call bottom-up assumptions—assumptions that reality and the things of the world are created, if you like, from the bottom-up.

In other words, subatomic particles come together to make atoms, which come together to make molecules, which come together to make larger structures, which make the things, the perceivable things of our world. There's a bottom-up causality and also, more philosophically, a bottom-up notion of reality. In other words, the real things are these little billiard balls, subatomic particles, and then they build up. So it's a kind of reductionism to the smaller and the more elemental.

But one of the things I think is really important to realize in terms of maturity of insight is to recognize that to a certain extent, both in our personal experience and also in science and in the wider culture, the views and conceptions we have or with which we approach whatever it is—a scientific problem or experience, existence—actually in a way generate or give us, fabricate the experiences that it feels like we then discover, if we're not aware of it. This has very much to do with the whole idea of ways of looking and conceptions fabricating perception.

The same is also true about science. To a certain extent, materialistic, mechanistic science will find materialistic, mechanistic results. Through certain assumptions, what we seem to then discover objectively, independently, is just reflecting back our paradigm, our point of view, our assumptions. These reductionist views that I talked about, this bottom-up conception, are actually part of scientific materialism, which is part of secularism, the dominant view nowadays.

Why am I mentioning this? What I want to point out is that there's an alternative view, which is the more Neoplatonic view, or what used to be more popular historically in the West and also in the East—a kind of top-down metaphysics. In this top-down view, things, objects, whatever it is, have their origins higher, their roots higher in the divine. That then emanates down to create a lower stage, but the lower stage is somehow included in the upper stage. So it's a kind of top-down metaphysics, a top-down philosophy—the top being God or the divine, and then there are levels of world soul and all this. There are lots of versions of that, but there's a top-down metaphysics that we can compare and contrast with this bottom-up metaphysics that we have nowadays as the dominant view.

What I want to say is that I'm not interested in just replacing or substituting a top-down metaphysics for

the bottom-up metaphysics—not just wanting to switch the belief 180 degrees, substituting one for the other. Rather, I'm interested in what happens if, in practice, we suspend the habitual indoctrinated beliefs and assumptions that are basically reductionistic. Can I actually just suspend that in my view as a practice? Actually just not buy into that right now in terms of my experience?

Within that, what I want to say is that both these views may have a certain validity to them, top-down and bottom-up. Both of them might be views to experiment with—in practice. Practice, again, as experiment, as research, as flexibility of ways of looking. What happens when I view through a lens that is informed by the conception of a top-down metaphysics? We're not used to that in this culture. And what happens when I view things through this bottom-up metaphysics? We can do this as an exercise, and on retreat we will do this as an exercise.

Within that experimenting, there's a curiosity. How then, through this lens, informed by this conception, does my experience arise or differ when there's this lens or that lens? Perception, the fabrication of perception. What are the effects on the soulfulness or the soul-making? And what are the relative strengths and weaknesses, not just as intellectual arguments, but also in experience, of these two views—top-down, bottom-up metaphysics?

For example, recognizing that with the bottom-up metaphysics, as it's usually conceived in a modernist version, there is this kind of flattening that occurs. Scientific materialism holds that everything is just this mechanical, meaningless matter—that's all that really exists. Everything is just that, therefore it's flat. When that is the perception, it's very hard to feel or have a basis for meaningfulness. So we recognize what the effects of different conceptions are and ways of looking.

Actually, in the Pali Canon, and certainly in Mahayana Buddhism it's emphasized even more, in Vajrayana Buddhism even more than that—in the Pali Canon, in Buddha Dharma, and in Islam, and in Kabbalistic teachings in Judaism, and other traditions—there are actually many worlds. So there's not just one world, and that world is just like this. Actually, there are many worlds. Oftentimes, there's a hierarchy involved in a lot of these cosmological systems, cosmologies. But the idea is that there are many worlds, and what matter is in these worlds and what the bodies are is different from world to world.

Each world has its own kind of matter or appearance of matter, its own appearance of body. Each world operates according to different laws—different physical laws, different psychological and spiritual laws.

Chaim Vital was a Jewish Kabbalist, a student of Isaac Luria, who writes of an infinity of coexisting worlds. He also writes—and I may return to this—that every soul has a root in each world. In a way, all these coexisting worlds and levels of existence contain roots for every one of us, every being, every soul. Therefore, we each have infinite roots. Here again we see this interplay, this codependent arising, this co-involvement of self and world.

As a clarifying footnote, particularly for those familiar with trends in modern physics over the last fifty

years, I want to distinguish this idea of many worlds—infinite worlds that Chaim Vital and many others across spiritual traditions have written and spoken about over the centuries—from a theory still popular in modern physics called the many worlds interpretation or multiple universes theory.

According to this physics theory, there are uncountable, innumerable parallel, separate universes just like our own. Some are microscopically close to this universe we inhabit, some are slightly more different, and some quite divergent. In many of these universes, I am giving this same talk with something very slightly, microscopically different in the delivery. You are listening, but perhaps with something infinitesimally different in your listening or in the mental processes occurring as you listen.

Some universes will be more dissimilar, quite divergent. In some, you may have listened to a certain point, then grown fed up and decided to switch on the television, now happily watching The Simpsons. In many of these universes, I never made it to give this talk for whatever reason—perhaps I died long ago. Or you never made it to listen for whatever reason.

But right now, parallel to this universe we find ourselves in, are countless other universes differing either infinitesimally or quite widely from this one. This many worlds interpretation in modern physics differs from what Chaim Vital and others describe.

The spiritual, mystical cosmopoiesis of Chaim Vital and other traditions—Islamic, Christian, and many others—differs in two ways. First, it involves a kind of verticality. There's a dimensionality, a hierarchy implicit in these cosmic arrangements. These worlds are often presented as hierarchically structured.

I personally feel comfortable with this word "hierarchy," but teaching in our culture, I want to be cautious because it often brings assumptions, baggage, and dualisms. But in Chaim Vital's Kabbalistic tradition and others, there is this verticality, this cosmic hierarchy of worlds.

Second, these other worlds that Vital and others allude to are not separate from each other or from this here, this world and moment—at least as I conceive it. This dimensionality, this verticality, is not the same as separate universes trundling along and unfolding in parallel on divergent paths.

Worth dwelling on in this extended footnote: I wonder if this modern physics idea actually qualifies as a theory or is more conjecture within the scientific paradigm. As far as I understand, it's impossible to devise an experiment to discover if it's true. Because you can never find out if it's true, I'm not sure this constitutes what could be called a theory.

This conjecture differs anyway, with no notion of verticality and no separateness of worlds—two major differences. Historically, this idea arose in modern physics as an attempt to avoid or explain results discovered in subatomic physics experiments that seemed to show—according to the plain, obvious, rather radical but simplest reading—the dependence of the observed on the observation.

What is observed, the nature of what is observed, depends on the observation, on the way of looking. I

look one way, I see a wave. The scientist looks another way, sees a particle. The kind of observation determines what is observed.

In quantum theory, prior to observation, we can only speak of what's called a probability function or waveform. There isn't a distinct thing with distinct properties. An electron or proton exists more as a probability wave—probability of being here or there or way over there, of having this or that velocity, occurring at this or that time with so much energy. None of this is discrete, defined, or determined, but exists as a kind of smudge or wave of probabilities.

The very thingness of the thing and its most basic properties—what it is (wave or particle), when it occurs, where it is—depend on the way of looking. This isn't due to disturbance or inaccuracy from observational apparatus. This is fundamental indeterminacy at a very basic level in the universe. There is no objective reality to things independent of observation, way of looking, and approach of observation.

But that conclusion—that somehow the way of looking, perception, or consciousness on one hand, and the world, matter, etc., are interdependent; that matter, its appearance, behavior, and properties depend on the way of looking, the approach, the conception, the consciousness, the perception; this interdependence of world and observation, of matter and way of looking—

that is so outside of the very ideas that form the basis of the scientific revolution centuries ago.

For instance, the ideal and the possibility of observation free of bias—that's a fundamental scientific ideal, that we can observe things objectively, free of bias, and that we can discover an objective independent existence of things, which we can discover if we are able to observe free of bias, which we can.

And there's the whole separation—the independence of mind and matter, stemming from and championed by Descartes, who divided existence into res cogitans and res extensa. Res cogitans means the mind, the cognitive thing, the cognitive function. And res extensa—matter extended in space.

So these ideas—the possibility and ideal of observation free of bias, the objective independent existence of things which can be discovered in that way, and the separation and duality of mind and matter—are fundamental ideas that underpinned classical science and allowed its progress. Wonderful, amazing progress.

But somewhere along the line, they became, for many if not most, dogmas—beliefs about the nature of reality. And with that, there is a fear for many still that without these kinds of assumptions, there can be no science. Without the idea of an objective, independent existence of things that can be discovered and the distinction between mind and matter, there can be no science. Without them, the whole edifice of science will crumble.

So how to save science and save those beliefs? Different postulations, different conjectures. Rather than the idea of the way of looking of the observer determining whether we see a particle or a wave, whether

it's here or there, there is the conjecture that both the particle and the wave exist—or in one universe it's a particle, in another universe it's a wave, in one it's over here and in another it's over there, or in a third place, or very far out in another place. Anything that is even remotely probable, according to this smudge of probability in the mathematical waveform, anything that is even remotely possible—each possibility will exist in one of these parallel, separate universes in the modern physics idea of the many worlds interpretation.

It's only one idea, by the way, among others. And as I said, you can't really prove it, and it's certainly not popular with everyone. I'm not sure whether it's the observation that actually causes the universe to fork or split—perhaps in some versions—or just that these universes already exist, and in each one we have a particular version of reality, a particular outcome of what might be seen in our universe as a probability prior to observation.

So there are these multiple universes in this many worlds interpretation of modern physics—innumerable universes running in parallel, separate, without any interaction between these universes. But all of them, each of these innumerable universes, has objective, independent existence. And each thing, whether it's a large thing or the smallest subatomic particle, has objective, independent existence.

As I said, that idea is not popular with all modern physicists at all, and some would regard it as a kind of baroque idea, really. There's one physicist whose name I can't remember who said this is very heavy baggage, this idea of multiple universes, multiple parallel, separate universes—very heavy baggage for not entertaining the idea of the interdependence of the way of looking or consciousness on things. Refusing to entertain the idea that seems so dangerous to the fundaments of scientific paradigm. When we refuse to entertain that conclusion from the quantum experiments, then we have to carry this very heavy baggage of this many worlds interpretation of modern physics.

You might say in Dharma language, the cost of not entertaining or not opening to a view of the emptiness of an objective independent reality is this kind of very heavy baggage of this idea. And again, it seems to me it's a conjecture, so therefore I'm not even sure if it comes in the realm of science. But there are other possibilities, one of which is more entertaining—something more akin to the idea of emptiness in Dharma teachings.

So it's not necessary, this idea that is still kicking around fifty, sixty years after it was first proposed in 1957 in the modern physics world.

But again, just to make clear, Chaim Vital and others in different spiritual traditions through the centuries are talking about something very different here than this modern physics notion. There's verticality, dimensionality, possibly hierarchy, and there is not the separation of these worlds from each other or from this one here.

And if you just let these ideas, fantasies really, images—these two, the one more spiritual cosmopoiesis,

and the other the more flat conjecture that abounds with some modern physicists—if you go back and forth between them and let them resonate, echo, reverberate, and have their effects in the soul, I would say one notices quite different effects on the soul of entertaining each of these ideas about the cosmos.

One, because of the dimensionality and the verticality and the non-separateness, seems to me to be an idea that is soul-making—an image, a fantasy, a cosmopoiesis of soul-making. The other, because of its flatness, its separateness of these multiple parallel universes, does not give rise to the same soul-making. Or any soul-making. Science fiction and that kind of thing, or strange existential notions or feelings. But not so much soul-making.

Anyway, that was in some senses a footnote, but worth making the distinction.

So many of the main religious traditions of the world, spiritual traditions and practices, have this idea in the cosmology, in the cosmopoiesis, of many worlds. And also many levels of body—you get this in Tantrism, whether it's Buddhist or Hindu, in Sufism, and so forth. Levels of the body. So yes, there's this physical body, and then there's the ethereal body, or the body of light, or the subtle body, or whatever. And these different levels of the body conform to the different worlds that we were just talking about. So each level of body or each kind of body has its own world or its own earth that it inhabits.

This metaphysical framework sometimes runs implicitly through many of these cosmological ideas. But what I want to emphasize—what we want to emphasize on this retreat—is that these concepts, such as the pure land in Buddhism, Buddha realms, or the world as mandala, are not referring to something separate or distant. That is here now.

We're not talking about something removed in space or time. We're talking about perception, about experience. It's possible to experience and see this right now—the room you are sitting in, this space around me, and myself—can all be experienced as a Buddha realm. These levels are not separate; they're here now.

The entire foundation I want to establish is what we could call phenomenological and experiential—it's rooted in practice. We're not engaging in what's often derogatorily dismissed as "speculative metaphysics"—fancy cosmological ideas that bear no relationship to what can actually be experienced.

Sometimes, phenomenologically, in our direct experience, we encounter what feels like a hierarchy. It doesn't have to feel this way, but it can seem as though there are levels of perception available to us as human beings. Pure lands, Buddha realms—whatever language you prefer—these different worlds can be experienced. And so can different bodies—different wholes, different senses of embodiment.

The Buddha speaks of this in the Pali Canon. I'm not certain if it appears in the long version of the Satipatthana Sutta, but it's found in the Samaññaphala Sutta, "The Fruits of the Homeless Life." The Buddha describes the skilled meditator creating a mind-made body—a kind of etheric body. There's an awareness of this body that can, if the meditator chooses, separate in location and journey forth, having

all kinds of adventures with a complete sensorium of experience, separate from the physical body's location.

Some of you listening will recognize this as a familiar experience in various forms. It can arise in many different ways. I remember someone on retreat who was simply sitting in the lounge having tea when a blue light body unsheathed itself—that's the very word the Buddha used—from her physical body. She remained quietly in the library, calmly watching this blue light body walk to the other side of the room.

With practice—and I don't want to overemphasize this as necessarily important—such experiences can arise very spontaneously. There was no sense that this was some kind of schizoid break or mental breakdown. She simply observed this experience with calm interest. It was nothing alarming—actually a very peaceful, beautiful experience. With certain meditative states, this becomes readily available and quite enjoyable, opening a whole other dimension of embodiment.

Phenomenologically speaking, it's a phenomenological fact—a fact of our experience, of what appears to us in perception—that there are levels, if you wish to think hierarchically, or a multiplicity of perceptions and experiences available to us. This is simply factual.

We can argue about metaphysics and dismiss things as "mere metaphysics," but as human beings, we face the undeniable fact that a range or multiplicity—or if you're comfortable with the term, levels—of perception and experience are genuinely available to us. We can train in opening to these different levels, extending our range, inhabiting all of this, perceiving more clearly, feeling more fully.

This becomes part of our training in the flexibility of ways of looking. Why emphasize this? Because when we understand meditation in this light, part of the training involves opening up to and recognizing this phenomenological fact. This I cannot argue with.

Someone might be listening and thinking, "Well, that's not my experience." I'm sorry, but I would simply say: you need to practice a little more before making such claims or extending that assertion that "it's not real." Practice more. Open up your experience through practice.

Of course, that person probably needs instruction in practicing in certain ways to open up both their practice and their view of practice. This is what I emphasized earlier—it's not just about meditating more. I need to meditate in certain ways. I need to frame and conceive of meditation in terms of fabrication, ways of looking, and dependent arising.

And I must do this without presuming—as often happens when people discuss fabrication—that "yeah, that kind of thing is fabricated when I'm really caught in papañca, when I'm really believing this crazy self-hating thought. I realize that's fabrication, but other stuff is real."

What happens when I don't make that assumption? What if I remain open in my exploration of fabrication? Who knows what's fabricated? Let's find out. Let's discover this by experimenting, by viewing

meditation in a certain way, by exploring and developing ways of looking, and then see what reveals itself as fabricated in terms of experience.

Someone might hear all this about phenomenological fact, experiential fact, the availability to experience of different worlds and different levels, and actually experience that. This is probably much rarer. They might experience even the dependent arising—when I look this way, I see that. This is the perception. They experience all these levels of perception.

And still, even after experiencing this over and over again in lots of different ways—this dependent arising, this dependency on the ways of looking and how perception is fabricated—let's say theoretically that they still hold to, cling to this idea that reality is one-dimensional in this modernist way. Then what?

Then I would say we need to expose and question the epistemological assumptions of that person clinging to that position. What's happening, and what are they assuming about what constitutes valid knowledge? What are they assuming about what knowledge can be trusted? They're not trusting their own experience. This is a person who's hypothetically been through all this and seen this in meditation. Then what are you trusting as valid knowledge and why?

You can see these philosophical questions can sound so abstract, but they're absolutely at the basis of all that we're talking about. Reaching these walls and actually starting to question these assumptions is inevitable for someone who questions their existence deeply, who wants to look deeply into their existence. These questions are inevitable if we want to really open up or even question whether there is a basis for re-enchantment, for cosmophasis.

So what are the assumptions epistemologically about knowing? In this hypothetical case, I'm not trusting my own experience. What then am I trusting and why? Am I just trusting the view that happens to be most popular in the cultures that I move in at the time that I happen to be alive, the common view? A little reflection will show that most people hold that view without having thought about the whole thing much at all or explored it either intellectually or experientially.

Or am I trusting so-called science, but actually what I mean by that is really quite an outmoded version of science and the scientific approach? Or am I just trusting my inclinations, because I have a certain predisposition to a certain view? Why should I trust my predispositions? Why do I assume that they're right?

Or is it fear? Am I actually afraid of opening up the worldview, perhaps because I feel safe in the little container that I've constructed for myself without realizing it? Perhaps I'm afraid of the implications of a widening of the view.

But at any rate, either it's a question of developing the meditation, thinking about the meditation, framing it, conceiving of what on earth meditation is, and opening up that frame in a way that allows this whole thing—allows space and air and actual movement in terms of these openings of perception and these

questions—or it's a question of questioning my assumptions about knowledge and what's called epistemology, how I can know anything and what is valid knowledge.

What I really want to emphasize here, over and above all this, is the phenomenology. All these ideas and cosmologies—many worlds or flat world or whatever it is—can we bring it back to practice and experimenting? The whole thing is a phenomenological exploration. It's an exploration of our experience, of our perception of what appears to us and how. In other words, bring it back to practice.

For example, with regard to the body, I can experience and look at the body in a way that sees it as a field of sensation. In terms of insight meditation, that's the most normal way. I can see and experience it, approach it through a way of looking that reveals the energy body. That becomes the appearance, as we've been emphasizing on this retreat. I can see, experience, feel, and perceive the body as imaginal, imbued with image, or the imaginal body as theophany as well. The body as theophany—my body, your body—as theophany, as face of God, the face of the divine.

And I can approach and have a way of looking at the body that has different kinds of conception of organic matter—through molecular or genetic or evolutionary or all kinds of conceptions of what organic matter is. And there are others too that are not quite so reductionist.

But phenomenology, as a philosophical enterprise, always includes conceptions. Some philosophers don't quite realize this. They believe in the possibility of just having a view without any conceptuality involved, a sort of pre-conceptual view of things. It's quite common in spiritual traditions—just being, don't think—as if we can have this naked view, naked phenomenology, naked experience of things.

Always, I say—and I've gone on about this in other talks and retreats—always appearance, phenomena, perception, experience involves conceptions. Perception involves conception.

Most of the time, very subtle, not even fully conscious.

And in terms of, if we just stay with that range, or that example of some of the range of ways we can practice with ways of looking at our body and sensing our body, maybe there's a hierarchy there for you in those. And you can organize them into some kind of hierarchy, or you feel there's a hierarchy. But not necessarily. There doesn't need to be. And again, there's a flexibility of conception that I would favor. Just reading recently about Plotinus and Neoplatonism, how there was, in his way of teaching too, this flexibility of conceptualization. So sometimes he talked about matter as if it was a kind of illusion far from God, the furthest emanation of the divine energy. And other times it's actually no matter, it's equally divine. Everything is equally divine. They're just different transformations of divinity, if you like, of the substance of divinity. So complex and, for me, amenable to flexibility of conception.

There's a... Most of you know what pantheism means. It means God is... everything is God equally. God is, if you like, nothing else but what exists. So matter is God, and that's kind of it. Actually, it's probably different versions. But then there's something called panentheism, which includes the idea that there's, if

you like, again, a level of God, a level of perception which transcends appearance. So there's, yes, all matter is divine. All matter is imbued with divinity. Everything in the world is imbued with divinity. And there's also a dimension, if you like, to the divine that's the unfabricated, the transcendent, that's beyond matter, actually beyond all appearance, all object and thingness.

But in relation to mindfulness of the body and what we were just touching on, when people often think about mindfulness of the body as the first foundation of mindfulness, as I said, they tend to think, in our world, of physical sensations. And wrapped up with that is usually either the rhetoric or the implicit assumptions that when I'm with my physical sensations, I'm with the immediate reality. Immediate meaning there's nothing getting in the way, no concepts, nothing. This is just the immediate reality of things.

And one's not seeing that way, that mode of approaching things as a way of looking. It's taken as the immediate reality and not as a way of looking. You understand? And if I assume that, and if I see that kind of mindfulness of the body as immediate reality and not as just another way of looking, then the whole talk of the energy body is just like, well, that's just something you're imagining or dreaming or believing. It's a fabrication. Whereas the other one is not a fabrication. The sensations are not a fabrication.

Actually, they're both modes of approaching practice. They're both ways of looking. Both of these are ways of looking. They're both modes of mindfulness of the body. And a deeper exploration of emptiness and fabrication of perception also sees the fabrication of sensation through clinging, through conception.

About the energy body in relation to these different kinds of body. We're talking about the energy body. We've been emphasizing it because, going back to the opening morning, because it provides us with a manifold, a multiplicity of resources for lots of different kinds of practices in lots of different ways. I'm not going to repeat that. That's why we've been emphasizing it.

But also, it provides us with one strand, one possibility, among others, of a way in which the body and the sense of the body can be re-enchanted. The energy body provides one strand, among others, of ways that there can be a re-enchantment of the body. Meaning, it's not essentially, truly, the nature of the body is not just matter, just molecules and genes and all that, but there's depth, dimensionality. There is this availability to perception of a subtle body, a body of light, a body of energy.

And that dimensionality, that more subtle body, if you like, or the energy body is connected to and integrated with the cosmos, but not only in the sort of modern materialist ways of conceiving as, of course I'm integrated into the cosmos because I exchange atoms with it through eating and going to the toilet and through breathing in and out, I'm connected with the cosmos that way. That's fine and that's great and that's important. But the ways that the subtle body or the energy body might be perceived to be connected with and integrated into the cosmos are different than that. And there's dimensions and depths of that. I'm not going to go into that. It's to be explored in practice, to be discovered in practice.

So all of this, this question of matter...

Bodies, worlds, and all of it—we could say we're in the business of alchemy. All this has very much to do with what we could call a way of conceiving what alchemy is. I hope I don't need to say that alchemy is not a sort of pre-chemistry. It was not a pre-chemistry where people were trying to convert lead to gold so that they could get rich. That's a certain view of alchemy, but I'm not talking about that at all. I doubt that for most serious alchemists that was at all what was involved.

Alchemy, as I've touched on before, is rather, if you like, a transubstantiation of matter, of world, of body. But this transubstantiation, this transformation of the substance of things, is something that happens in and through perception. So when we talk about alchemy, we're talking about the realm of perception, of our sense of things.

And this transubstantiation is available to us in all of the six senses. So yes, through sight, yes, through sound, yes, through touch—through the footfall and the touch of the foot on the floor or on the ground, on the earth, as we walk, or in the walking meditation or whatever. There can be an alchemy available that's arrived at through any of the six senses, and then again it might spread to the other senses.

So, for example, in touch, what's characteristic of this transubstantiation is that the one touched and the one touching are felt to be transubstantiated together. Again, we're back to the self-world thing. Because subject and object are never separate as they appear to be. The nature of the fabrication of perception is that subject and object get fabricated together. There's a mutual dependency, mutual co-dependency of their arising.

Someone—I can't remember where it's from—defined alchemy or summed it up as the spiritualization of matter and the materialization of spirit. The spiritualization of matter and the materialization of spirit. And they said that's what alchemy is.

But when we talk about this transubstantiation, this making divine, if you like, this alchemy of matter, or this realization of the divinity of the substance of matter, of world, of body—it has different images and metaphors for that in alchemy, which I don't need to go into—but this transubstantiation, and this is really, really important now, this transubstantiation doesn't necessarily involve or mean or imply a making ethereal in the perception, making less solid or making translucent or luminous or any of that in the perception.

In other words, there can be this transubstantiation and yes, of course, one option is that I'm looking and the world seems to me luminous, ethereal, less solid. That's actually very common. But it's only one option.

Because also there's the possibility that the very density and, if you like, what people used to call the darkness of matter or the sleep of matter—that is spiritualized. The materialization of spirit right there in that density, in that non-translucence, in that solidity. That solidity itself is not transformed, is not changed to something more ethereal. The solidity, the density, the darkness, whatever you want to call it,

is itself infused with a sense of divinity without the object—whether it's body or matter or world or this object or that—without that becoming lighter and brighter.

So there's this transubstantiation in the very sense of density and solidity. It's rendered—that very density and solidity is rendered divine.

Again, going back to what we're trying to do here in the broader picture, we're opening and extending the sense of sacredness. So sacredness doesn't always look like white light or translucence or ethereality or whatever. We're opening and extending the sense of sacredness to everything eventually, in all forms and all perceptions.

And as we emphasized before, all this, this transubstantiation, this alchemy of perception, we're regarding it as art. It's an art.

So, for example, when we talk about seeing the world, seeing the surroundings, seeing the environment now as a deva realm or a buddha realm, as the palace of a buddha or a holy mandala, sacred mandala, and practicing that, or either that arising spontaneously through practice—yes, there's a way of approaching that, and a very valid and lovely one, where, for example, in the mandala, each location has an exact symbology and the detail of all that is important to the way of practicing. That's great and that's fine.

On this retreat we're emphasizing the art of it—a much looser approach, much more poetic, if you like, or potentially more creative, more open. So it's less formulaic. Not necessarily less precise, but less formulaic. And it may be precise or it may be vague.

But involved in that, in that art of feeling the world as deva realm, as the palace of a buddha, as the mandala, whatever language you want to use, what's involved in that art is the sense of all of it being sacred. It's, again, more than the typical modernist view of matter. Something is transubstantiated in and through the perception.

But that includes, if we're talking now about mandalas and all that, it includes a sense of the geometry, a sense of the space and the actual configuration of the space is not something that's kind of dissolved or transcended. I'm not just talking about being in a field of white light, kind of homogeneous, everything dissolves in that. Objects are not faded. I mean, that's a valid meditative experience and direction, of course.

But in this kind of perception of the world around me as mandala, it's not that the objects are faded or I'm replacing one perception of an object with a very different one. But things have their space. The space is set up in the same way.

The geometry of the space is set up as we perceive it usually. But the matter and the space itself is given this or felt to have this dimensionality, verticality. So that's part of the art of this inhabiting a mandala,

this cosmopoiesis.

Or again, when we do the exercise of hearing all sounds as mantra, to quote a tantric instruction. Again, we can do it in a sort of very precise way with some set of very precisely defined symbology wrapped up with the syllables of the mantra. Or we can do it in a much looser way, a much more personally creative way. So on this retreat, that's more what we're favoring in this art of alchemy.

So just a couple more things. I mentioned time before. Wrapped up in this whole notion of cosmopoiesis, this whole notion of worlds and what the world is or how we perceive the world or different worlds, is the whole notion of time. Through practice, either through going deeply into emptiness practices—that's one avenue—or another avenue through going deeply into this art of cosmopoiesis and the imaginal, there are two avenues there. Both of them will eventually, and in the case of the cosmopoiesis, probably sooner rather than later, though it's variable, open up our conceptions and our perceptions of time.

Going the direction of deep insight meditation practice via emptiness and this exploration of unfabricating, of fabricating, the fabrication and unfabrication of perception dependent on the way of looking—that way, eventually one will have experiences of timelessness. And they can happen in all kinds of different ways. I'm not going to dwell on it here, but just to say that. And eventually there's the possibility of not fabricating. There is the cessation of the fabrication of perception. No perception, no thing, no self, no other, no object, no space. No time, no event. This is, if you like, a realm or sphere, ayatana as the Buddha called it, completely transcendent to all conventional experiences beyond time. There's no continuity of time there. There's nothing like it.

So that's possible, this completely transcendent experience beyond time of timelessness, beyond any perception. There's also possible through this deep emptiness practice perceptions of that kind of level or that kind of timelessness but in and through the perceptions we have of things happening in this world in time. So kind of the timelessness sort of shines through and we have this again, a multi-dimensionality available to consciousness. Yes, of course this thing is happening in time, and at the very beginning, in the very same perception, if you like, there's a sense of the timelessness of this moment, of this perception, of this thing, of all of that.

So this is what's available to us through deepening in what I would call insight meditation as the way of exploring fabrication and unfabricating will issue in this. And it can happen spontaneously in meditation. Some of that can happen spontaneously. So that's one avenue.

And the second avenue is what we're emphasizing more in this retreat, the avenue of the imaginal and the cosmopoiesis. I've talked about this in other talks, other retreats, about how there can be a sense of the timelessness of an image because the image is kind of iconic and there's a sense of eternity, of the eternality of what one perceives, whether that is the world that one perceives in cosmopoiesis or this particular image or this dimension of a being or a relationship. There's a sense of it happening, if you like, in a different time.

Corbin has the phrase hierophanic time, meaning the appearance of the sacred, literally—two Greek words, hieros sacred, phainein appearance, face. So he talks about the imaginal realm, events in hierophanic time. This image that touches me so deeply, that seems so soul-making, it has a sense that it's happening in another time and eternally.

Alex Wayman, who writes—he's a Buddhist writer, not sure if he's still alive, but wrote a lot about Tantra and translated some Tantras—talks about fruitional time or great time in contrast to, I think he uses basic time for the usual sense of time, linear, unfolding, and time passing, impermanence and all that. In contrast to what he calls fruitional time or great time. And this is the sense of time or the time of the imaginal realm, the time of the sambhogakaya. Again, to mention that word from Vajrayana Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism—the world of the imaginal having its own kind of time, which is, if you like, an eternal time, a timeless time, an iconic presentation of the events and the images that take place in the sambhogakaya, in the imaginal realm.

I think why Alex Wayman calls it fruitional is because, if you like, that is, on the one hand, a fruit of awakening. In other words, this is part of the perception of an awakened one, a Buddha or a bodhisattva who's had certain levels of insight, of realization into emptiness. It opens up both the sense of timelessness in the first sense that I was using, but also this sense of the eternity and the sense of timelessness that imbues images and events in the imaginal realm, in the sambhogakaya. It opens up the sambhogakaya, in fact, which is characterized by a sense of eternality, of timelessness, to the images, appearances, events there.

But it will also happen as a fruit just of practicing imaginatively, eventually. We recognize, sometimes it needs to be pointed out to us, but we recognize that the images, the perceptions have a kind of timelessness to them.

And so this, at multiple levels, our sense of time becomes available to us and accessible to us—regularly accessible and easily available as perceptions. Different kinds of timelessness simply become part of how we see the world, not only when we're in a state of transcendence, but actually in and through the very appearance of things.

Yes, of course there's time, of course there's the perception of time, and one deals with that and relates to that. But in the very same appearance is this dimension of timelessness, or dimensions—different kinds of times. So this is all wrapped up in this whole notion, this whole possibility of experiencing worlds and imaginal realms.

Going back to the theologian I mentioned, Walter Wink said the ascension of Christ, or the resurrection of Christ—these are happening in another realm, in the imaginal realm, and that's always available and always accessible, as I pointed out. Why? Because there's a kind of eternality there. It's always happening.

Sometimes a sense of timelessness, either through an exploration of certain expressions or certain ways of

approaching insight meditation, will bring an experience of a timeless realm—something separate, as I said, and dualistic with this world, the world of appearances. That can happen. In a way, what needs to happen then is a deeper understanding of emptiness. Or there can be this kind of separation and dualism between the imaginal realm and this realm, this world.

So that might happen experientially, but eventually, sooner or later, these worlds—this multiplicity of worlds that's available to us in cosmopoiesis—and these multiple dimensions in our perception of time, time and timelessness, they are here now, available in the appearance of this world, this moment, all this existence. Not separate, not dualistic, not only transcendent.

Back to the panentheism. Yes, there is the capacity for transcendence beyond all experience, beyond matter, form and all that. And there's the possibility of the perception, the experience, here, now, in and through—and in and through also all the particulars, not just dissolving things. So that non-duality, non-separation of these worlds, of these levels of perception, these realities, dimensions, and non-separation of time and the timeless—all of that can be here, now, available, not separate, not dualistic.

The last thing regarding the way our practice evolves, or the way we evolve towards that realization of non-duality of all this, or the availability, or the inclusion of all these different levels and dimensions and worlds and levels of time—the way we move towards that more integrated experience of this as integrated into this very appearance now, or inherent in, available in, present in, present to perception, to experience, in and through this very appearance, not as separate—the evolution to that availability in practice, in our sense of existence, to that non-separation, to that non-duality, the evolution of that—it might be that duality or separating out of what is sacred from what is profane is actually, for some people, a necessary stage.

It's interesting—everyone would like to jump to a view of "everything is sacred." And of course, I would say that's a more mature view. It is a more mature view. And that's what we're interested in, that spreading, as I said, of the sacred, of the sense of the sacred, the senses of the sacred. So that's great. Everything is sacred as an idea.

But oftentimes, if that as an idea is just words, or it's not deeply based and a fruit of deep and consistent exploration and practice—it's just an idea, and sometimes it's even a secular kind of idea—what happens is that actually everything sacred experientially really drifts or slips or becomes nowhere. Nothing is sacred.

So sometimes many of us, or some, are actually helped by deliberately circumscribing: this is sacred, or this place is sacred. So this temple—there are the precincts of the temple, and within those borders, it's sacred space. We create sacred space somehow or other, perhaps through ritual, perhaps something or other. We conjure, we enchant this space and it becomes sacred. And we're in it and there's an out of it. There's a duality there.

Or people making a pilgrimage. The classical way of thinking about pilgrimage is that place that I'm making a pilgrimage to is sacred. And that's why I'm making the pilgrimage there. It's special. It's different. In a way, it's other.

So what I want to say is: we have to be practical with all this. I'm really interested in practice, in development, in the evolution of perception, of experience, of what's available and what makes a difference in our existence, in our life. And sometimes for us, or for some of us, for many of us perhaps, separating out the sacred deliberately, caringly, and giving that more sanctity or approaching it with more sanctity is actually a stage on the way to perceiving everything as sacred.

So I just want to acknowledge that and actually leave room for that. Because always, when we talk about practice, whether it's these kinds of practices or other kinds of practices or simple mindfulness, always the question that should be imbuing practice and in the background or at the foreground of practice at all times is: what is helpful here? What is helpful? And if I'm interested, deeply interested in moving towards a vastly deepened and enriched and opened up sense of existence, that really one has expanded the sense of the sacred, the senses of the sacred, then I need to be practical about that.

What actually helps me move towards that? I don't care about dogma or nice-sounding formulas. What I'm interested in is actually making a difference in life, in existence, and indirectly in culture.

So not dogma, not dogmatism, but pragmatism. What is actually helpful here? And what are the temporary stages, the provisional stages that move me towards deeper and deeper insight?

Often certain kinds of duality need to be respected and seen and entered into as stages of perception—stages of realization and insight—because they're on their way to non-duality. People want to jump to the non-dual perspective, and while not always, oftentimes it ends up having not much power at all, not much transformative power. It sounds good and there's a kind of attraction to it, but the question remains.

Always, always, always—whatever the practice, whatever the direction—what's helpful here? What is helpful?

Thank you for listening.

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