Matter, Bodies, Worlds (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:02:06

I remember some years ago listening to a talk by a senior Western Buddhist nun in the Hinayana Theravada tradition. She was talking about insight, and she said, "You know, you might sit out in the garden and look at the little birds there flying around, sitting on a branch of a tree, singing even, and you might think, oh, how beautiful these little birds, how graceful, whatever, and feel touched by that. But actually, you're deluded. You're wrapped up in delusion because—look at them closely. Look how they move their heads, jerk their heads from side to side, always on the lookout for predators or for a worm to eat, always caught up basically, obsessed, programmed by the necessities of physical survival. And this is the basic harsh reality of their existence, which you are just not really seeing or choosing to ignore."

So the emphasis there is on this fact of dukkha and this disenchantment with the world and with beings in a way. There's imbued in that, or rather that is a description of a view. Can you hear how that's a view? It's a concept in that sense of view, but it's a view, it's a way of looking, it's an interpretation.

Can you also hear how wrapped up in that view and that interpretation, in this case of the birds, is something akin to some versions of modern existentialism, but also a kind of reductionism—a reductionism to explanations according to biological evolution or according to hardwiring of neurology in the bird's brains and nervous system that make them act this way. And wrapped up in that reductionism to physicalism, evolutionism, and neurology, implicit in what she was saying—actually I think it was more than implicit—is "this is reality. Get real. See this. See that this is actually the fact. Anything else you see is a superimposition, a delusion, an obscuration, a veil over that reality."

So explicitly or implicitly, there's a reality claim there. And that reality claim is extensive and thorough. In other words, this is all there is to know. This is the most important thing to know and understand. This is our explanation of what a bird is, why it behaves like it does, even why it sings. And this overextension has been a big part of what I've been calling scientism, as opposed to science.

Now compare that view, that sense, that perception and interpretation—that implicit interpretation, conceptual and perceptual—of the birds in the garden, and compare that view with the view of the birds as angelic beings, as theophanies, as faces, as expressions of the divine. Two views, two different worlds, actually, that are then felt, sensed, inhabited. In a sense, those two views are descriptions of, reflections of, and will give rise to different worlds that we sense ourselves in and perceive ourselves and feel ourselves in. And this is really crucial—of course, it's the main theme of the retreat, but it's crucial to everything.

Nowadays, in Dharma circles and in psychotherapy circles, there's so much emphasis—rightly so—on our psychological growth, our healing, our human flourishing, the flourishing of myself and self-expression.

But in a way, most of it, whether in psychotherapeutic circles or in some spiritual circles, is happening within, or I could even say against, a background of a meaningless, soulless, mechanistic universe. So here I am, pursuing diligently my growth and healing and flourishing psychologically, so-called spiritually, and it's all taking place in a bigger context, a literal background—because it's not something I pay attention to—of this soulless, mechanistic, meaningless universe that actually doesn't care a damn, doesn't give a damn about your process, my process, psychologically.

And that background, and the fact that I'm not really paying attention to it, has an effect. Actually, whether I pay attention to it or whether it remains, if you like, subliminal, it's having an effect on me, on my sense of existence, on my actual psychological, spiritual growth, healing, flourishing. It is not irrelevant. It is not without effect. Actually, I would say the effect is enormous.

So whatever we might mean by healing, or whatever we might accomplish in our flourishing, or my personal growth, my personal process, my healing, is actually quite severely limited. Whatever healing is possible is quite severely limited by the context of the world that I inhabit through my view, through my conception, through my assumption. The healing itself is limited. What we mean and what can be achieved in a healing, what a healing can encompass, what a healing can reach, what flourishing can reach, what growth can reach—it will be limited.

And in most psychological, psychotherapeutic, psychoanalytic circles—certainly not all, but many—and certainly the world of mindfulness and quite a lot of the insight meditation world, the whole discourse, the whole conversation, the whole teaching leaves out this side about what the world actually is. How do we perceive and feel the world? How do we conceive of it? It misses the relevance and the effect and what possibilities there are there. Or else it assumes something and then gets locked into it. But generally speaking, it's not given attention. We don't realize the effects that this has, or realize quite what we're assuming and how that ties in with notions of what's possible and who I am, what a human being is, what's possible.

This awareness isn't deliberately included, or when it is, there's usually quite a narrow view that assumes a certain version of reality—for example, certain secular modernist or existentialist versions of Dharma.

As I've pointed out before, the notion of self and the experience of world are always tied together—always. Self and world arise in codependence, influencing each other, shaping and fabricating each other, informing the perceptions of both. The healing of self, or the freeing or liberation of self to whatever degree, and the re-enchantment of self, happens in mutual dependence with the re-enchantment of the world. Re-enchanting self and re-enchanting world are actually aspects of one movement. We're separating them somewhat on this retreat, but as I've said, that's an artificial separation.

Even more than that—the healing of the self and the healing of the world go together. What does that mean, the healing of the world? What is the fullness of what is meant there? What does it mean to heal? What does it mean to free the world? The healing of the self and the healing of the world are inseparable.

When I heal the world, I heal myself. When I free the world, I free myself. What does this mean? What does it mean to free the world?

As usual, there's this mutual dependency. I'm leaving those questions open—I think I've touched on them elsewhere. But there's a fullness of mutual dependent origination here. Self and world go together. Causality goes both ways. When I re-enchant the world, I will inevitably re-enchant the self. I cannot not.

Sometimes we break it down into stages, and that's just a pedagogical tool—a way of presenting practice. Things can happen in stages, and sometimes they do evolve that way. For example, when we do a kind of deity yoga or work with an imaginal figure where there's eros and love, we might first notice this figure where the self is in relationship to an other. Then, as a sort of stage after that, we notice that the divinity of that image spills over in cosmopoiesis to the world, to the cosmos—a perception and divinizing, a making divine of the cosmos.

Similarly, when we do the mantra meditation, hearing all sounds as mantra, we may start with a sense of devotion to compassion—maybe compassion for ourselves, for others. It's to do with self and maybe other. But as one way of opening up that whole practice with the mantra, as we're exploring on this retreat, is that it opens up beyond what the self wants for the self, or for this other, and beyond even sound. There's this expansion into a fullness and a sort of all-pervasiveness of cosmopoiesis—self and world together.

There's a direction of evolution there, but things can happen the other way around too, and they can happen together. They often do happen together; it's just that we don't quite notice, because as I've said, we're often somewhat indoctrinated and trained to keep the attention on the self—the self's growth, the self's freeing, the self's healing.

Within this whole movement of re-enchantment and cosmopoiesis, whether it's re-enchantment of the self or re-enchantment of the world, or both together, I really want to stress again the crucial importance of this relative weighting between self and divine—the orientation. Am I orienting practice and healing and growth? Is it actually oriented within a conception of self-growth? Is that the priority? Is that the orientation? Is that the intention? Is that the conception?

Or is it more weighted towards the divine, with the self really as a vehicle for the divine? Practice, path, life, existence, self-expression, so-called flourishing, freeing—all of it, liberation, the whole thing—for God, for the sake of the divine, not for the sake of the self. That's a radically different view. Where am I generally in my life, and generally at any time, on this spectrum? For the self or for God?

I'm not just talking about words or slipping back into a self-view. I want to pick that up again and stress how much depends on this orientation or relative weighting between the self and the divine. This applies not just to the re-enchantment of the self, but also to the re-enchantment of objects in the world. Just as much as it applies to the re-enchantment of the self, it applies to the re-enchantment of objects in the world.

When there is some kind of enchantment with an object or thing in the world, and that enchantment actually has more to do with the self—more about the self, oriented towards or from the intentionality of the self rather than the divine—that's more my interest, my thrust. Oftentimes I don't even realize this is going on. But when it's that, when it's more actually about the self, this enchantment I have with this object or this whatever it is, piece of jewelry or whatever, then it's probably more akin to what we might call infatuation or superstition.

So things like this amulet or this mala, these lucky charms—we're in the realm of that kind of magical thinking. And their purpose, these lucky charms or this pendant I wear around my neck or whatever it is that people wear all over the world—the purpose of it is for the self. It's to give the self luck or to give the self protection. It's all for the self.

Versus, or in contrast to, seeing these objects, this thing in the world—whatever it is, a natural thing or an artifact—seeing these objects as theophanies, as faces of the divine. They're not for me in any way. Or again, there's a spectrum here. But sensing them as theophanies, feeling them as theophanies. Mostly when I use the word seeing, I really mean sensing. It's just a habit of language. There's quite a lot to say about that, but really hear the word sensing.

But sensing them as theophanies, seeing them as theophanies—rather than tightening it around self and self-protection and lucky charms and all that—this thing becomes a gateway to opening through which beauty is opened in this wide sense. There's a widening, a deepening of beauty, of meaningfulness, of the sense of divinity, and of course the sacralizing of that object, which is implicit in seeing it as a theophany anyway.

With all that there's soul-making—the soul dynamic, if you like, of Eros, Psyche and Logos expanding, feeding each other, nourishing each other, inseminating each other, deepening, enriching, widening together, pushing each other further, penetrating deeper, opening more. All that is made possible by the theophany and much, much less so when it's really seen from the point of view of self-investment and self-conception. For me, rather than for God. As something for me, rather than as a face of God, or for God.

And notice also in that kind of superstitious or infatuated relationship with things and objects of the world, that a kind of immature enchantment in that infatuation or superstition involves also a reification often of their magical power. I really believe that this thing is going to give me luck or protect me from evil. There's also reification of evil then. There is not within that kind of immature enchantment the seeing of image as image. There's what we call an immature enchantment with certain things and certain objects in the world, and I'm not seeing image as image when that's going on. Not only is it about myself and for myself, I'm also not seeing image as image.

As I said, so much hinges in this work, and we don't often realize this, but so much hinges on this: where I am at any time, where I am more generally, in this relative weighting or leaning, so to speak, in the direction of or for the sake of self versus divine—in my conception, in my aspiration, in my intention, in

all of that.

Now this whole question about worlds that we, or the world that we inhabit and the nature of that world and the perception of that world, necessarily brings up the question integral to that whole meaning of world: the whole question of matter. And then again, the nature, the perception, the conception of matter. Because the world is, to us nowadays, a world of matter. And matter also implies body. So matter, world, body are completely integral to each other. The views, the conceptions, the sense, the perception of all that is tied together. This is absolutely crucial.

Matter. What is the relationship with, what is the view and what are the ways of looking, or way of looking, if it's singular, at matter? And when people use that word—matter or body or world—what do we mean? What is meant when a person says matter or world or body? What is the conception and the perception?

So again, with matter, most of the time when a person uses it, and obviously mostly they do, what's wrapped up in their use of that word matter is the normal modernist view, underneath which, if you poke them a little bit and say, "What do you mean by that, or what is it?" they would probably eventually, sooner or later, articulate a kind of high school version of classical mechanistic physics. It's made up of atoms, which are a bit like billiard balls, and they sort of ricochet around and they combine, none of which has any meaning or anything else going on, and they form different things which disintegrate after a while back to the atoms.

But matter might also mean a sort of quantum physics understanding, a more current understanding of matter, where matter is not—if you like, anything—it's not reducible to subatomic particles as things in the way that we usually conceive of things. As independent of the way they're being observed, as being located at any time in any place with certain other properties that we just take for granted as being part of properties of things. So subatomic particles in a quantum understanding are not things in the way that we think of things. There is a whole realm of difference there with what matter might mean once we actually start getting more current with our scientific view.

Or for another person, another time, say matter—the view, the conception of matter—if they've meditated in certain ways, and we've touched on this before, one of the lovely openings that can happen, mystical openings, and can become very much a regular, or not 100% steady, but quite accessible and prolonged in time, perception is that all is one, and different flavors of one. All is one, all actually is awareness in substance.

So matter is a kind of—or the way most people tend to perceive matter—in this view is actually, the reality in this other view is that it's actually awareness, or it's actually love, or it can be many kinds of oneness. But that's a different view of matter.

Or for someone else who's explored emptiness and dependent origination extensively and gone deeply

into the whole question of whether matter is real in the way that we think it is—there's a whole way that the perception and conception of matter and materiality, when one explores that view sustainably, deeply, thoroughly, opens up the sense of what is meant by matter.

Or again, there's a kind of Neo-Platonic view where, and this has different versions, matter is seen as an emanation of the divine in a kind of hierarchy. In some formulations, there's a transcendent divine and then a world soul, descending to a divine mind and then matter. But matter is perhaps imbued by the divine. It's a transformation of the divine.

And then also, perhaps a little more at one remove, different psychotherapeutic paradigms. What one means by body or how one relates to that, or the conceptuality underlying body and matter, is also quite different depending on the paradigm. There are psychologies that attempt to be very biological-based, talking about neural networks—very popular nowadays. What's underlying that? And others that relate to the body primarily acknowledging the fantasy through which body is seen, or body actually seen primarily as a field for that and not acknowledged as a fantasy, actually claimed as a reality. Body means different things in different psychotherapeutic theories. And again, that can become very dogmatic depending on the view. This is reality.

Or again, when a person talks about matter, what are you actually talking about? What do you mean when you use that word? Do you mean the experience, the perception, and wrapped up in that, the conception of solidity, of density? Is that what you mean when you talk about matter? Then there's the whole question of air and water and how solid and dense—and of course that's matter as well. But if you're talking about the experience or the perception or the conception of something like solidity, density, how aware are you? Are you holding that as a reality or as a phenomenon, which means appearance? Are you seeing there's an appearance, an experience, a phenomenality to solidity? It's a perception. It's a phenomenon, which means appearance, perception. Or are you just assuming there's a reality?

So these notions of matter—they're actually underneath. They influence radically as a basis our notions, our senses of the world. So as I said, it's wrapped up in that and also reality. And it's massively significant.

One thing to notice here as well is the word matter, M-A-T-T-E-R, and the word *mater*, M-A-T-E-R, which is a Latin word and means mother. They're actually related, I think, etymologically even. But there's something about this matter and mother, matter and *mater*, in terms of how we relate to that.

Very often the fantasies and images of matter—in other words, what we're conceiving of, but also our whole imaginal sense of matter, and of *mater*, meaning mother, meaning also origins, the birth of things, what gives birth, what are origins of things, or actually to do with motherhood—the fantasies and the images of all that, which nowadays, especially in a lot of psychotherapies, are very central to a lot of the thinking, a lot of the assumptions of those paradigms.

But it's interesting. So paradigms about trauma, about what's called perinatal psychology and influence

and what happens in embryonic stages, or just about motherhood and a person thinking about themselves as mother or potential mother. And just the whole area of developmental psychology that has to do with *m ater*, mother, origins, and also matter. All this is woven together, or all the origins in terms of the origins of Buddhism. And this kind of fantasy, historical fantasy, of getting back to the basic Pali Canon Buddha and exactly what he said and the origins—and the origins being better.

Notice with all of that, those kinds of ways of conceiving and really fantasizing and imaging matter and *m ater*, mother, origins, all that—it seems to me that those kind of fantasies and images which imbue all of that thinking about developmental psychology and all this kind of stuff, there is almost what we could say an almost intrinsic tendency to concretize, to not see image as image. These fantasies going on—and somehow because of the matter, in fantasies about matter, there's a tendency not to see image as image and to concretize it. It presents itself—it's a fantasy, but it presents itself, or there's an assumption that this is reality.

So whether we're talking about actual matter or whether we're talking about, as I said, fantasies of origin, whether it's historical fantasies or developmental fantasies or biological fantasies of origin and mothering and all that—why?

Because why is it concretized? Why do we not see image as image? This relates partly to the subject matter itself. The very nature of fantasies of matter tend to make themselves more solid, more concretized. It's an interesting psychological phenomenon—when we engage with images and fantasies about matter, there's something in their very nature that resists being seen as image.

So as we inquire into this area, as practitioners and human beings interested in existence, interested in our existence and our life and this world, can we recognize that there are operating for us—often at a subtle unconscious level and with huge effect—conceptions, perceptions, fantasies and images of matter? These have great effect on how we conceive, perceive, feel, imagine, fantasize about body, ours and others, about the world, about life, and the whole notion of being with life. Sometimes they give rise to more existentialist perspectives and philosophies. All of that is grounded in, based on, conceptions, perceptions, fantasies of matter.

If we talk about re-enchantment, the re-enchantment of the world and matter needs—almost by definition—to see matter not just according to the modernist view, not just this view of flatness. Matter is all there is. The meaningless movement of atoms is all there is. There is no other level of things, no other level of materiality, no other level of anything—it's all just matter. When that becomes the exclusive perception and is deemed the only reality, re-enchantment needs an opening up of all that. It's not just that.

We can talk about spiritual re-enchantment, where that perception of matter opens up and includes other views. There's a recognition that there's a multiplicity of views—yes, I can see matter as matter, but I can also see all matter as sharing in the substance, the essence of this oneness of awareness, or oneness of

cosmic love. There are many different kinds of spiritual re-enchantment.

There's also the possibility of what we've been calling, somewhat clumsily, this mature imaginal-based enchantment. This implies the multiplicity or the availability to perception of more than one dimension. It implies this matter, this object, or the world as a whole, as theophany, in and through the particulars. This is different from the more general, universal, impersonal spiritual re-enchantment. It's in and through the particulars that the theophany of this thing or that thing or this object manifests.

Just like the self, just like desire, just like will, just like our emotions and even our suffering and our difficulties and our difficult histories, just like our images, just like ideas—matter also, just like all of those aspects or dimensions of our existence, in the re-enchantment of it according to the mature, imaginal kind of enchantment that we're talking about, is also seen as divine, as theophany, as having divine roots. But this is in and through matter, in and through the object. When we speak of levels or having divine roots, this is not separate or something only separate or only transcendent to the appearance. It's not something else that I can't see, something outside of experience, something beyond form and matter.

All this is necessary in this kind of enchantment that we're emphasizing on this retreat. But it's interesting—it's difficult with language to come up with words that both make a coherent system and describe well the subtleties of what we're talking about here and what's available. Sometimes I'm aware that the language I'm using will rub certain people the wrong way, or they'll take it to mean something that I'm not quite implying.

More generally, I think it's a really interesting exercise to actually inquire into your experiences of enchantment. When you feel an enchantment with things, when you feel that sacredness or beauty, inquire into what actually is involved for you in that experience, perceptually and conceptually.

We can have experiences of everything being equally enchanted, but oftentimes it's interesting—some things seem to be more enchanted or enchantable than others. For example, plastic artifacts made without seeming care for aesthetics, just functional or convenient, versus a flower. It's easier to have that sense of sacredness and enchantment with the flower for most people. Or in nature or wilderness, as opposed to on a busy city street or a run-down city street. Not always, but generally.

With spiritual enchantment, it's more possible to have everything equally enchanted. But sometimes—and this is just a suggestion which I think is very interesting and can be subtle and difficult to actually discern—when there's a sense of divinity, what conceptions are wrapped up in that perception of divinity for you at that time? It's hard to articulate, hard to actually discern.

It's probably obvious at this point that wrapped up in this whole question of the world that I inhabit is the question of matter, and all of that has very much to do with typical scientific thinking that has imbued our culture. So wrapped up in this whole practice of cosmopoiesis and re-enchantment is the questioning of science, or rather, the relationship with science.

I want to quote from Nietzsche, who writes about science as a prejudice. He's really talking about this faith in scientism, this overextension, this exclusivity, this claim of scientism that everything can be reduced or explained in terms of a certain kind of reduction of scientific thinking. There's a sort of delightful ranting and vitriol in the way he writes sometimes, so you might react to that, but you can also just enjoy it. It's kind of theatrical.

So Nietzsche presents this theatrical critique, one of the many selves he consciously inhabits, offering a delightful vitriol against the faith with which so many materialistic natural scientists rest content nowadays. He questions their unexamined belief in a world that supposedly has its equivalent and measure in human thought and human valuations—a "world of truth" that can be mastered completely and forever with the aid of our "square little reason."

"What?" he asks. "Do we really want to permit existence to be degraded for us like this, reduced to a mere exercise for a calculator and an indoor diversion for mathematicians?" Above all, he insists, "one should not wish to divest existence of its rich ambiguity." Again, there's this call to the multiplicity of perception, the multiplicity of possible interpretations, this rich ambiguity that deserves reverence for everything that lies beyond our horizon.

Rather than circumscribing things in this neat little view—thinking we have reality mapped out with just a few more discoveries to make—Nietzsche asks what lies beyond that horizon. Is there something in us that wants to push through and beyond, to expand that horizon with reverence?

He challenges the claim of justifying an interpretation of the world that permits only "counting, calculating, weighing, seeing, and touching, and nothing more," calling it "a crudity and naivety, assuming that it is not a mental illness and idiocy." Would it not be rather probable, he suggests, that precisely the most superficial and external aspect of existence—what is most apparent, its skin and sensualization—would be grasped first and might even be the only thing that allowed itself to be grasped?

This seemingly obvious empirical experience, upon which positivism bases its claim that we can only understand through empirical experience and resulting science, might be the most superficial layer. A "scientific interpretation of the world," as commonly understood, might therefore be "one of the most stupid of all possible interpretations of the world, meaning that it would be one of the poorest in meaning."

He continues with a thought "intended for the ears and consciences of our mechanists, who nowadays like to pass as philosophers and insist that mechanics is the doctrine of the first and last laws on which all existence must be based." An essentially mechanistic world would be an essentially meaningless world. He offers a brilliant analogy: "Assuming that one estimated the value of a piece of music according to how much of it could be counted, calculated and expressed in formulas, how absurd would such a 'scientific' estimation of music be? What would one have comprehended, understood, grasped of it? Nothing, really nothing of what is music in it."

This relationship we have—whether we realize it or not, whether we think about it or not—with classical scientific, mechanistic ideas and scientism is actually crucial to our sense of existence, our life, what our practice is, what the path can be, this whole notion of the possibilities of re-enchantment. Philosophy of science becomes important, curiously, because it's not at all abstract. So much of our assumptions, so much of our perception, our sense of existence and the world, so much of our Weltanschauung—our worldview—is informed by, influenced by, indoctrinated by certain actually outmoded scientific assumptions that we don't realize we hold.

This philosophy of science is really important nowadays because it's not abstract at all. What has this got to do with the Dharma? It has everything to do with it nowadays—everything to do with our sense of existence and liberation and possibility.

About a hundred years ago, philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno wrote *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*—referring to Western Enlightenment, post-scientific revolution thought. They too critique the assumptions of science that have come to pervade our culture, pointing out that this classical scientific approach and its mechanistic assumptions cannot accommodate everything about existence.

It cannot explain everything about existence by trying to reduce and approach the whole of our existence as if its reality is best and most truly explained at the ground level by this kind of classical scientific, mechanistic approach. This is actually one-sided and prevents—or rather, it provides only an incomplete, diminished understanding of nature—and an understanding of nature as an object to be controlled and manipulated.

This was something that Theodor Adorno stressed quite a lot, and you see here the beginnings of a critique about our relationship with the environment. Nature, through this view, becomes an object to be controlled and manipulated. As they write: "Men pay for the increase in their power with alienation from that over which they exercise their power." So yes, science and technology have enormous power over nature through this classical scientific mechanistic paradigm, but we pay for it with alienation from nature.

As the scientific revolution gained steam and its ideas became more pervasive over a couple hundred years, as they became the dominant view in our Western culture, that ostensibly rational movement intrinsic to the Western Enlightenment—the seemingly rational movement to try and eliminate all forms of prejudice and dogmas—remained, paradoxically, limited. That's the whole principle of the classical scientific approach: let's get to some kind of objective, unbiased reality through the scientific method. We have faith in that. We believe in that.

Yet even as this positivist reasoning gained dominance in the culture, it still remains, as Horkheimer and Adorno write, "engulfed in mythology." You haven't actually gotten rid of mythology. You think you have, you believe you have, but you haven't. By positivism, I mean a sort of dogmatic assertion—there's a dogma involved in this philosophy. It asserts, as dogma, that nature must always be understood in terms of

quantitative categories. Again, it's tied up with that whole notion of measurement I mentioned on the opening evening: if something can be measured, then that's a sign that it's real. Measurement and reality go together.

But the process, they point out, "is always decided from the start." Mathematical procedure, including the procedure of measuring everything and construing what is measured as real, "becomes, so to speak, the ritual of thinking." So tied up in our whole assumption, the way we think about things, is this mythology and ritual that we don't even realize.

There have been many critiques in modern Western philosophy from different directions and starting positions, beginning to see that we cannot simply adopt the classical mechanistic Newtonian view or assumptions of the scientific revolution. They just do not hold for many different reasons. What I'm emphasizing here is how much this underpins our sense of things in modern culture.

So again, what liberates that? What opens it up? It might be an approach through Western philosophy. It might be that some of us simply have a more poetic attitude to existence, to things, to life and selves. It might be through deep exploration of the teachings of emptiness and the practice of emptiness, seeing dependent arising. It might be through deeper understanding of quantum physics—actually through science itself—that starts to subvert the very principles or assumptions on which science was initially based.

That's an interesting development, because still most scientists, often including quantum scientists, simply ignore the philosophical implications or questions that arise. They know they're there, but they ignore them, or it makes no impact in their lives.

But as I said, why am I emphasizing this? Because it has implications for our sense of the world we live in, and that has all kinds of implications for self, path, practice, existence, possibility—all kinds of things. Even such fundamentals of existence as time and space—and perhaps in other retreats I could give whole talks about time and space—are part of our way of thinking about world. World involves time, our sense of time, assumptions about time, and assumptions about space. They're fundamental to when we say or feel or sense "world."

But what is the relationship with all that? What is the perception and the conception? Even our notions and sense of space come to be questioned through modern science itself. The usual understanding—again, it's a modernist, cultural modernist understanding of space as the most obvious thing—is that space is simply a kind of empty, neutral, meaningless vacuum that's then filled with stuff at certain locations. That's, funnily enough, actually quite a modernist view: that it exists objectively, and that's the reality of things.

We don't realize it. It's so intrinsic, so woven into our very sense of existence and what the world is. But that's actually a culturally conditioned, culturally constructed, modernist view, and it was not always the

view everywhere and for all time that humanity had, that human beings had.

And with the rise of both relativity and quantum physics, we start to see that space is not actually independent of matter and energy. Again, the usual view is there is space and matter is the lumps of matter here or there, moving around in space as something separate from matter. Space is just a context, if you like.

But with Einstein's general theory of relativity from 1916, actually space and time, in fact, are not independent of the matter in it. The matter is not separate from it and actually shapes space and time, as does energy. And then in quantum physics, there are also notions that actually, at a quantum level, space is nothing like what we conceive of it as. It's more like what they call quantum bubbles or quantum foam. Actually, there's all kinds of theories.

So things that are so obvious, like space, like things being separate in space—there's this end of something and that end of something, or there's this corner of space and that corner of space of a room or whatever it is. There's a beginning of something and an end of something. But these seemingly so obvious notions of separation and continuity don't actually hold. They're not, so to speak, fundamental realities as the quantum world gets probed.

Most people these days have heard of the idea of wormholes. They're popular in science fiction movies and novels. So you go through a wormhole in the universe and suddenly end up on a different side of the universe or a different time—wormholes in space-time. What a strange idea.

But even more than that, stranger to our usual notion of space, much stranger, much more challenging to our habitual notion of space, is the whole idea of non-locality. It came out of something called Bell's theorem and then was proven through experiments. Whatever future theories of reality come out of science, this idea that actually two particles can become what they call entangled and actually influence each other instantaneously, even if they're at different ends of the universe—the whole idea that this place is different from that place, and what happens here takes time to get to what's over there, the whole notion of whether they're really different places—it's a radical challenge to our whole notions of space and time.

And John Archibald Wheeler has had a theory of what's called geons. So actually what subatomic particles are is not so much a lump of something, a billiard ball of something, or a point of something moving in space, but actually a particle is a hole—H-O-L-E—in spacetime. So this is a theory that hasn't been proved yet, but it's a way of conceiving. So that matter and space both are not at all how we assume them to be. All of this is getting challenged through science.

Actually, wrapped up in this is a whole other level—what the status of scientific theories is as well. That's a whole other question, but I won't go into that now.

So the typical view, the typical conception of matter, world, space, time, body—it's fine. It's completely

fine. It has its validity. Clearly, it's functional. What I absolutely want to object to and raise my voice against is the insistence that it is true and that it is the only reality. This is reality. Anything else is make-believe or delusion or whatever.

Of course it's fine as a view, and it's fine for someone to spend most of their time in that view. Of course it is. This insistence that it is true, it's the only truth, and explicitly or implicitly founding a total philosophy or a kind of dharma or a path that's somehow limited to that and limiting in that way, and founding that on its supposed truth—whether it's an explicit or an implicit claim—this I do have a problem with. Something not conscious, not thought through, not aware, maybe dishonest, or maybe just lacking in insight.

To get back to what Blake said: "Save me from single vision." That's the single vision. And then it's asserted dogmatically in something that's called aggressive secularism or whatever. This we must raise our voices against, open up through questioning and through insolence that can happen in all kinds of ways.

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