The Gift and the Artifice of Self (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 45:15

So if we're talking about enchantment of self—and again, wrapped up with everything we're saying, all of this connects, every element of what we're talking about connects with every other element—the enchantment of self is integrally related to, integrally involves the sense of meaningfulness that we have in our life. Enchantment brings meaningfulness. Meaningfulness is an element of enchanting the self.

Einstein, actually, in some of his later writings, a book called *The World As I See It*, wrote: "What is the meaning of human life or organic life altogether?" He continues: "To answer this question at all implies a religion." So he's aware these are religious questions. "And then," he says, "is there any sense then, you may ask, in putting it? In other words, it's a matter of conception, belief, and not of so-called science. Is there any sense then, you may ask, in putting it? I answer: the man who regards his own life and that of his fellow creatures as meaningless is not only unfortunate, but almost disqualified for life."

Jung's view also emphasized so much the necessity of meaningfulness, of finding or creating meaningfulness. He actually saw psychoneurosis, psychological suffering, as ultimately the suffering of a soul which has not discovered its meaning. Whereas meaning, he continues, has an inherent curative power. So finding meaning in our lives has an inherent curative power. "Meaning," he writes, "makes a great many things endurable, perhaps everything." A sense of meaningfulness makes a great many things in our lives, in our existence, endurable—perhaps everything.

So the question of meaningfulness is so integral to our well-being, to how we live our lives, obviously, but it's also integral to a sense of an enchanted self, an enchanting life. As I think I mentioned in another talk earlier on this retreat, when we open the goals and the aims and the directions of our practice to include meaningfulness, to include soul-making and enchantment and beauty and the sense of sacredness—when these become the goals—then the aim becomes open-ended. The direction of travel, the avenues of the path of practice become open-ended.

There's an open-endedness of enchantment possibilities, an open-endedness of range, but it doesn't stop at a certain point. You can always somehow move further into all this. There's an unachievability in actualizing all of this fully, completely, ever fully arriving at an endpoint of all possibilities for seeing sacredness or beauty or deepening that, of fully living out one hundred percent our individuation.

There's a freedom that comes with all that, an expansion of freedom that comes with re-enchantment and imaginal work and cosmopoiesis. All kinds of freedom open up with that. And also duties. Images, cosmopoiesis, as I said elsewhere earlier on the retreat, seem to demand of us something—some kind of duty, some kind of embodiment, often though not always, some kind of action in life. A part of grounding,

if you like, in relation to images may well have to do with duty that comes with an image. And if we neglect that, we're actually ungrounded with the image and the image becomes ineffectual for us. The enchantment, the cosmopoetic experience becomes ineffectual for us because it's not being grounded through embodiment in both senses—both in the body sense, in the energy body, but also embodiment in terms of duty, action, implication for life.

This is subtle. Again, it's so delicate talking about all this stuff and walking around these areas. But again, Carl Jung wrote: "Any content that emerges from the unconscious into consciousness"—that's his system talking; again we talk about images or cosmopoetic experiences—"involves a spiritual or moral task which, if not accomplished, leads to misunderstandings, complications, suffering and illness. Without the corresponding spiritual work of assimilating and integrating the contents, the experience, the image"—the experience, however fascinating, however amazing or fascinating this image is or this cosmopoiesis or whatever, this enchantment, however fascinating—"loses its value and its meaning."

He was actually, in that instance, talking about drug experiences. People can have amazing images or cosmopoetic experiences on certain drugs, but if it's not somehow integrated through embodiment, through translation, through the duty that's there, the follow-up work—the duty may involve acting in the world and it may not involve acting in the world; I've talked about this in other talks, I'm not going to repeat it here, so I'm not implying that it always involves an action in the world—but some kind of duty in relation to this image, some kind of honoring of it, needs to be made manifest. And that's part of it. So there's a freedom and a duty. And this duty is part of the meaningfulness. Sometimes it's clear what that is, and sometimes it's a lot more vague.

A few months before he died in a plane crash, Dag Hammarskjöld wrote in his diary—he kept a diary published posthumously—just a few months before he suddenly died, he wrote: "I don't know who or what put the question. I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer yes to someone or something, and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that therefore my life in self-surrender had a goal."

So there was no event that he remembered, no specific person or image. Something was being asked of him to which he said yes, and that constellation created meaning for him. There was a duty in that—he was in a dutiful relationship of self-surrender, with goal and meaningfulness wrapped up together.

When deep meaningfulness runs through our lives, it brings the enchantment of the self, because the self is given this meaningfulness and trajectory. But part of that is that the meaningfulness feels as though—or we could say we entertain lightly the conception—that the meaningful is being asked of us by what is more than human. Can you hear that in what Hammarskjöld wrote?

We entertain the idea that the duties we have, what we are responsible to, what gives us meaningfulness and therefore enchantment—enchantment and therefore meaningfulness—is asked of us by something bigger than we are, bigger than the human. We're entertaining this idea at the very same time that we

need to see image as image and have equanimity in relationship to this sense of duty and embodiment and action. Complex, tricky.

I could have gone into it more on this retreat—this question of how images get translated into life or meet life, how we see life as image, how we navigate this relationship between the imaginal and life. It's an art, complex, requiring many skills as I said.

I can't remember who wrote it, but there's a Latin phrase: *Vocatus atque non vocatus, Deus aderit*—"Called or uncalled, the God will come." It expresses a certain view that the gods, the more than human, are present in our life whether we ask for it or not. That's already a certain view, but we need to entertain that view and that perception. Entertaining that creates the meaning.

Meaningfulness and this enchantment of the self through meaningfulness does not come without entertaining certain views and conceptions—admitting them, allowing them, holding them lightly.

In all this, again, there's this ambivalence, this both-and quality. We are both creating and discovering meaning. I create meaning and I discover my meaning, my meaningfulness, my duty. Some deep, mature insight involves really holding those two together and acknowledging them both.

This is particularly difficult around meaningfulness. People who do extensive work on emptiness sometimes go through a phase where they think, "Oh, it's all empty, therefore it's all meaningless. I see that I can create meaningfulness, but I'm only creating it." There's a kind of nihilism there—a stage that needs to be moved through.

The recognition that I create meaningfulness, that meaningfulness is created for me, will only lead to a puncturing of that meaningfulness and a certain nihilism if lurking in the background of my beliefs is the idea that there is some independent reality where things are actually meaningless, and therefore I have to create meaning. The assumption that really, independent of any creation, things are meaningless.

There's a very deep insight here into the emptiness of meaninglessness itself. Nihilism need not arise—it may be a stage some people go through, but the fact that I acknowledge and recognize that from a certain perspective I create meaning, even as I have a sense of discovering meaning and it being asked of me... I create that too. The psyche creates that. It takes mature insight to not view this in a nihilistic way, not to assume that the real truth is meaninglessness.

There's so much tied up in this re-enchantment of the self. I mentioned Chaim Vital, the Kabbalist, and his statement: "There is no soul which doesn't have endless roots." All souls have infinite roots in this infinite amount of coexisting worlds and levels of existence. Again, it's a metaphysical idea that we're taking more as a poetic idea, which is tremendously powerful.

Can I, in my practice—and this is what practice is—convert an idea like that, hold it poetically, let it have its power by moving it away from the purely intellectual to an actual way of looking? What would that be

like?

How can I practice seeing and feeling myself—seeing and feeling another—as having an infinite amount of roots in an infinite amount of coexisting worlds? Even if it's not infinite, just other worlds, other roots. I have multiple roots in multiple worlds.

When I look at the self, can I convert that idea, see it, feel it as a poetic idea? In my art—the art of my living, the art of my practice, the art of my existence, the poetry of my perception—can I convert that poetic idea into something powerful, into a way of looking at self, at other, at world?

Wrapped up in that too, because Chaim Vital continues in his teaching: in each of these worlds, the Torah—that's the Hebrew word for the Bible—the Torah is read in accordance with that world's subtlety and spirituality. So there's this teaching, very profound, radical teaching, that there are infinite interpretations of the sacred text. But more than that, this word "text" can be used more widely of any text, but also of nature—nature as so-called text. Infinite interpretations of nature, of self, of other, of existence, of cosmos.

All these ideas are wrapped up together. All these ideas are, if you like, vital, vitalizing in the re-enchantment of self and the possibilities of re-enchantment of self. And all these ideas actually make possible something—I think I mentioned these words—Latin words: amor fati, the love of one's fate, the love of one's destiny. I believe it was a phrase Nietzsche used.

But all these ideas make that possible. So the re-enchantment of self means that all these ideas can make possible the love of one's self, the love of one's fate, because it becomes something sacred. My life, the events of my life, the tragedies of my life, my suffering, my struggles, my perceptions, my openings, my vision, my work, my creativity, my difficulties—all the amor fati. And not just bearing it. This isn't a teaching of "accept what is."

Included in all this, at least in how I would like to present it, is this understanding: there is no "what is." "What is" is a kind of modern spiritual myth, in the worst sense of the word. It's empty. What is is empty. What is available to us are empty ways of looking—this flexibility of interpretation.

So loving my fate actually becomes, again, an art. It's openness to multiple perspectives. What is can be seen from so many different ways and is colored and shaped and fabricated by so much that there is no independent "what is." So we're not talking about accepting what is; we're talking about loving what is. Loving our fate, loving our life, loving the self. Amor fati.

So my self is not different from what befalls the self, including the sufferings, including the challenges, including the difficulties, including the pain, including my life and death and whenever they come. This knowledge that it's empty, this love of that—love of it, knowing that it's empty, knowing that it's art in how I see it. And again, recognizing that within that we're sensitive to the dimensions of myself, of my existence, of my fate, and the divinity of all that.

So yes, it's given, and yes, we create all of it through our perspectives, through the art of perception. So this loving it—again, to emphasize a distinction we're making in this retreat—it's not "I love it and it's all perfect because all is one." All is equally the same substance of God or oneness of awareness or love or whatever it is. That's included as a level within this understanding that I'm talking about when I use the phrase amor fati. It's included, but we want to add within that the inclusion of, as I said, the personal, the particular as necessary. All of it is relevant for my soul, the persona, for my personhood, and also necessary for God, for the divine.

Nietzsche had this question of eternal recurrence. If you had to live every moment of your life again, over and over and over, your whole life in all its details, without anything changing, over and over for all eternity—so that means all the periods, all the moments of pain, of suffering, of struggle, confusion, even stagnation, and the durations of all those periods, and the timings, the order in which they come, not changing any of that. The joys as well, not just the pains, but all of it. And not smoothing the experience and the life out to being nice.

How would you feel about that? It's only in this amor fati that you can recognize the sacredness of it. What would make such an idea tolerable? And the test of your art of life is your response to that question.

So again, so much about what we're talking about in this re-enchantment of self, the re-enchantment of existence and cosmos, is creative, is art. We're really emphasizing that. I've said so many times.

In many traditions from ancient times unto the present, there's this idea of the possibility of becoming divine. The human being has the possibility to become divine. Acknowledging that that's rare, that kind of development, but we can, if you like, become God or a god or divine. You get this in Plato and Plotinus and then the Upanishads and Buddhist Tantra, in Jung as well.

Many others express this teaching as well. In Orthodox Christianity, it's called theosis. Let me read you something from theologian Jonathan Jacobs, writing about this possibility in Eastern Orthodox teachings. According to the Eastern Church, theosis "transforms the entire human person, including her sense perceptual capacities." This aligns beautifully with what I've been exploring—transformation occurring in perception itself. "Hence the deified, the ones made divine, are those who see things as they truly are."

There are some differences in understanding, but let's elaborate on what he's saying. Before this becoming divine, our sense faculties don't reveal things to us as they truly are—this is part of what's called our fallen human nature in the Christian tradition. He makes an analogy with autism that's worth considering. It's not that our perceptions are completely untrustworthy. Our current epistemic situation—our current condition of knowing through perception—is not unlike that of an autistic person. Autistic persons can perceive much in the world and indeed often have more finely tuned abilities to perceive some things. But they don't have the same abilities others have when it comes to perceiving persons. They may be able to see facial expressions and describe them accurately in detail, but they cannot see them for what they truly are—expressions of emotion, for instance.

Similarly, our "fallen" sense capacities need not be unreliable in general to be defective in what they deliver. We can see things in the world accurately; we just cannot see them for what they truly are. In this case, we cannot see the theophanies—selves and things and events as faces of God. We are, like an autistic person unable to see certain aspects of a person or thing, unable to see them as theophanies, or at least less able to do so.

In Buddhism, there's the teaching of authentic seeing—one definition of ultimate wisdom in some Buddhist teachings. Authentic seeing is the way a Buddha sees experiences as divine and beings as deities, as Buddhas. That's actually authentic seeing. Anything less than that is inauthentic seeing.

Panayiotis Nellas, writing about the Greek Orthodox tradition, explores this idea of being made in the image of God. What this really means is that we have the possibility to tend toward the archetypal image—related to what I mentioned about the angel at our head—and we have the possibility of serving as effective instruments of the Christ. This is a gift given to us by the divine, but also a gift of our being, a gift of ourselves. It's also, if you like, a destiny, or at least a goal, or at least a potential of our being.

He speaks of a pledge—I'm not entirely sure what he means. Perhaps we pledge ourselves to this, or perhaps the divine makes a pledge to us through creating us in the divine image. But this pledge becomes a marriage—a marriage of the human to the divine image. He writes: "In the archetype, it's in the archetype that one finds one's true ontological meaning." We return to the image and the archetype giving us direction, pulling us, offering us duty and meaning. This is the meaning of our being—our ontological meaning through the archetype, through the image.

For most of us entrenched or saturated with modernism, these are strange ideas. Even if they're beautiful, we can almost hear them as quite dangerous. If you know certain psychological concepts about inflation and ungroundedness, there's the possibility of lack of discernment in all this. But as I've said, skills, capacities, wisdoms, and cultivations need to accompany all these ideas about becoming divine and manifesting the divine to make them less dangerous. Through practice, we actually realize—we make real—the beauty of these ideas.

So there's this thread through many historical strands of becoming God, becoming divine. And then there's also the strand I've mentioned several times about both becoming God and, in that process and through our activities, creating God as well—creating the divine.

You see this in different versions. We talked about Walter Wink's understanding of ascension and resurrection—shaping, creating, influencing, changing God. You see it in Hegel's philosophy as well, where the human being and the consciousness of the human being, and the evolution of that through time, creates at least a level of God.

In postmodern understandings—though it's still very rare within postmodernist theories as a whole to even talk about the divine in more than a dismissive manner—there are glimpses of this recognition.

And there's also the strand I've mentioned several times about both becoming God, but in that and through our activities, creating God as well, creating the divine.

So you get this in different versions. We talked about Walter Wink talking about the ascension and the resurrection—shaping, creating, influencing, changing God. You see it in Hegel's philosophy as well, that the human being and the consciousness of the human being and the evolution of that through time creates at least a level of God. Postmodern understandings, more postmodern understandings—though it's still very rare within postmodernist theories as a whole for this even to talk about the divine in more than a dismissive manner.

This idea that we both become and create is quite a common idea in a lot of Jewish Kabbalistic strands of teaching. So that our prayer and our voicing in prayer, and the breath that comes through us, and our intentionality in prayer, as much as our psycho-spiritual work, as much as our actions in life, in embodiment—all of this shapes and creates and influences and maintains God, the divine, the divine archetype.

So yes, our actions in the world and our mental states and our work draw down what's called the divine influx. We draw that down into the world. We create it in the world. But also in the so-called supernal realms, in the higher realms, all of this maintains, shapes, influences, creates the divine or brings aspects of the divine together in erotic union. So it affects the intra-divine nature. These are radical ideas that most people who think about religion would never think would exist.

The whole idea in the Jewish tradition of mitzvot, of commandments—as many commandments as Buddhist monks follow, actually more than Buddhist monks, but both traditions have so many things, rules to follow, commandments to fulfill, ways of acting, ways of not acting. But there are ways of seeing that those very actions, those very seeming constrictions on one's behavior—do this, don't do that, do this little thing, this thing I don't even understand the reason for—there are ways of seeing that that enchant existence.

Seeing those little actions, the blessing involved. And with that, those actions become the action of the divine intelligence. Again, this might be in our kindness, in our acts of compassion, in our serving, in our creativity, or maybe more prescribed in certain monastic orders or in the laws of Judaism and Islam. But they become the actions of the divine intelligence through the human, because the divine intelligence is innate there in the human. Entertaining that idea.

So through our actions we express the divine, we manifest the divine, and we create and shape the divine. What's called in Jewish tradition the Shekhinah, the feminine manifestation on earth of the divine—it's that which, through our actions, through our prayer, through our cosmopoiesis, through our images, through our psycho-spiritual work, all of that, is brought into erotic union with other aspects of the divine.

And there's this idea in Hebrew called *tzorech gevoha*, the need on high—in other words, God's need. A

certain level of God is beyond all this, is completely unaffected, transcendent, unfabricated, beyond anything that we can do or conceive, beyond anything we conceive. That level of God is unaffected, the *ain sof*, the infinite. But there are other levels of God or aspects of God that have a need, a necessity—as I said, a necessity for you, for your personhood, for the particularities of your personhood.

So become God, but also become and create God. This is quite a sophisticated notion to be able to entertain and hold and have as one of the ideas that one entertains, one of the conceptual frameworks and the richness that can bring, the possibilities. Quite a sophisticated concept to hold, to entertain, to hold lightly, to look through, to act through, to live through.

Nietzsche said God is dead, but it's so narrowly understood what he meant by that. Certainly he was referring to a certain popular, dominant view in Western Europe at that time, at the end of the nineteenth century, of what God is, based on popular Christian view, and he's saying that view is dead. But really what he meant more fully was God as any truth, any supposedly independent, inherently existing thing. Very radical thinker, and that idea—this notion or belief that we have of independent truth—he said that's dead. When he said God is dead, that's what he meant was dead, of which a certain popularized version of Christianity's version of God is just one instance. He was pointing to something much more radical, much more challenging for people to even understand, and much more far-reaching in its consequences.

But is there a way, just as he said with the concept of soul, there may well be with the concept of divinity? Don't throw that out. Expand what it means. Acknowledge the art there that we create and discover both.

So again, as we said so much right from the beginning of the retreat, all this that we're talking about in the re-enchantment of self—aspects of self, elements of self, dimensions of self, and of the whole of existence and the cosmos—all of it is allowed by the flexibility or the elasticity of our concepts, of our ideas, the ability to move between different concepts or stretch concepts, or that the conceptual frame we start with in the beginning is ample enough to include these ideas of creating God, becoming God. All this is ample enough, the ways that we can see the self, right from the beginning.

So our views and our ways of looking and our practice and our re-enchantment can grow into a much bigger space. It has a much bigger space to grow into right from the beginning.

You get this idea of levels of soul—if we just talk about the concept of self or soul, you get this framework quite sophisticated and ample, amply spaced, having a wide range—in Plotinus and Neoplatonism. Apparently in the Upanishads, although I'm not sufficiently versed in them to know, and also in Buddhist Vajrayana, these ideas of levels, of dimensions of being, and also of worlds. But there's already there quite a lot of space for different views and flexibility of views of what the self is, all of which allows re-enchantment.

So conceptual frameworks that allow all this to happen in terms of the re-enchantment of the self—but these are not just intellectual frameworks. The conceptual framework needs to be translated to ways of

looking, to seeing the aggregates as not just *anatta*, not just non-self, but as divine, as Buddha nature, seeing self as Buddha, seeing others as Buddha, as deity, and making that an actual practical vision, sense, perception, way of looking that we can practice and develop and move in and out of.

And when we talk in that vein, then we're talking about dimensions and levels of experience, not just conceptual levels of defining soul. Sometimes when you read this stuff—Plotinus and all that—it seems so intellectually elaborate. You realize he's talking, I would say, and for us it's absolutely necessary—we're talking about dimensions of experience. Yes, a conceptual framework needs to be translated to practice, to experience, levels and dimensions of experience of the self.

So we see that, and I mentioned before, one aspect is at a certain level, then timelessness, for example, is something that is included both in the sense of self and in the sense of other things. Other levels of conception and practice and view and sense of self doesn't have that timelessness in it. It's more locked into time. And that has its validity as well. But experientially, we experience certain levels where timelessness as an aspect of those dimensions becomes just—we can't not see it. It's integral to that perception.

So whether it's the awareness or the consciousness that's regarded as Buddha nature that's seen as timeless, the consciousness of this perception, or maybe I'm looking at a field and the sun or the trees or whatever, and I get a sense, a felt sense—this knowing of that is timeless. This perception is timeless. This moment is eternal. These are not just conceptions of self; they're perceptions, senses available to us. And actually even frequently available with practice.

So we really get the sense of moving between levels of perception of self and the aspects of self, of dimensions of being, and also across a wide range, as we talked about earlier. But we need, in relation to the self, again, we need conceptions or conceptual framework that will allow this mutual opening, expansion, deepening and enriching of eros, of psyche and of logos. The very conceptual framework itself needs to be able to expand.

And through this, which we've talked about in other talks, through that movement, that soul-making movement, even the smallest act in our life, the smallest, most seemingly insignificant act has a sense of infinite ramifications, infinite resonances, infinite depths to it. It touches on the infinite. It moves into the infinite and towards the infinite. To quote a Kabbalist, it becomes woven into the soul's garment of splendor.

When I am able to view the smallest act of my life, the smallest instance of my self-manifestation, self-expression, self-acting, in certain ways that re-enchant, that allow this soul-making, this seeing through a conception, allows this eros-psyche-logos, mutual fertilization, then even that small act is woven into the soul's garment of splendor. Lovely language.

So we need conceptions, again—I've said this so many times—and we need conceptions that will allow

soul-making and will allow an infinite potential for that soul-making because it is open-ended. The pothos in the eros will continue to want more, deeper, fuller, wider connection. The psyche needs the image of myself, of this other, of this thing that I love, of this object, of the cosmos needs to keep expanding. There's infinite potential, infinite space there for all that to expand. And with that, the logos, the conceptual framework as well.

And it's not that that infinite sort of expansion and deepening happens without difficulty. We stagger, we stutter, we stall at times. But that's all part of it, because the suffering also is enchanted. Not that this is all smooth and gleeful all the time. But the conceptual frame of it needs to allow the soul-making, the infinite potential of that dynamic of soul-making. It needs to allow meaningfulness. It needs to allow enchantment for the self, for others, for things, for cosmos. All of this is necessary for all of that, for the re-enchantment of all of that. For the ongoing, open-ended discovery, creation-discovery of senses of beauty and senses of sacredness in all of it, in all of existence—self, other, things, cosmos.

Thank you for listening.

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