The Gift and the Artifice of Self (Part 1)

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

As human beings now, we almost all move in many different subcultures of the larger culture. It seems to me that our larger culture is a mix—we've inherited a mixture of historical cultures. We've inherited the perspectives of the Western so-called Enlightenment and scientific materialism, that kind of reductionist modernism of modernity I've been referring to. Yet still lingering, less ostensibly in their religious forms but still lingering, is the ethics or value system of Christianity.

In regards to the self—the views we have of selves, of what a human being is, the sense of ourselves and the parameters of ourselves—the larger culture is actually confused, simply as a result of history. We've inherited this reductionism that goes with science. We've inherited all that I've pointed out about modernity. But within that is, or part of that is, an emphasis on individualism. So it's a very individualistic culture and a humanist culture in terms of what a human being is—the range of that not really including the divine so much.

We've inherited all of that, and these ideas of virtue or value or sin, even if we don't use that word, that come from the Christian tradition. For example, pride is a sin and humility is a virtue. Now whether we don't consider ourselves Christian at all, those values in regard to the self—self-effacing, not blowing one's own trumpet too much—we don't like that when we see it in other people, we try not to do it because we know others won't like it in us. There's a kind of humility, which is often a false humility that runs through the culture, at the same time as being an individualistic culture, a culture of who's going to win, who's going to lose, of trying to pump up the individual in various ways, of the individual feeling alienated from society. All of this is wrapped up together and makes quite a confusing mix for us to have inherited in relationship to the sense and the view of self and other.

And then within that, in spiritual cultures, particularly the culture of Buddhadharma, we have this notion of no-self or not-self or the self is empty. This is, for a start, a difficult teaching for people to understand. I think it has lots of degrees of depth. There are many ways that we can talk about the self being empty in this way and that way. They're not the same. And there are levels there.

But what happens within Buddhadharma culture with that is that there's a suspicion of self quite often, or we tend to dismiss someone surrounded by, saturated by these kinds of teachings and attitudes. They tend to maybe lean their orientations in life in a way that self and the enchantment of self will sound suspicious, and maybe self and all that involves is a little bit denigrated and dismissed, or a lot. It happens less now as we have more psychotherapy imbuing dharma teachings or inside meditation teachings, but still, there's a tension here that comes from the complexity, the mixed messages in our cultures regarding

self and the sense of self and the view of self and what a human being is. Self and other.

I want to talk a little bit about re-enchanting self and other, and a little bit about what might be involved in that. We've touched on some of that already.

Not as an aside, but as something relevant, there are accusations from some, especially of a more secular persuasion within the dharma—a secular agenda within the dharma—that almost view the whole point, or one of the main thrusts of Buddhadharma, what the Buddha was saying, as this kind of shattering of any notion of soul or self or divinity. That was the Buddha's central project originally. And then what happened historically over time is he died and that message got lost, and then lo and behold, foolish humanity brings back in old ideas that he would have utterly rejected in his secularism—ideas of selves and souls and divinities and all that. So the Mahayana and the Vajrayana teachings are regarded as a pollution and a devolution, as opposed to evolution, of the teachings. There are impurities coming in from other systems, from human lack of honesty and stiff upper lip and clarity and steel in the face of our real existential situation.

All this is there. Now, I've touched on this before, but hidden in there is an unacknowledged fantasy, an image of the Buddha, of the dharma, of the history, and what Nietzsche calls the glorification of origins—a thing is more authentically itself when at the beginning of its so-called existence and then gets downhill from there. The glorification of origins or the glorification of beginnings. All of that is fantasy and image.

Now, we can point that out. We could also play the game a little bit and say, if we want to, that if we want to play this game of fantasy of origins, actually rather than concepts like divine, divinity, God, angel, self, soul—whatever these words that we use now and that we're seeking to give permission to and re-enchant—rather than those, we can say actually it's the realism and the reification that is so much at the core and at the basis of a lot of contemporary dharma, as well as many other spiritual traditions nowadays, contemporary spiritualities. That's more of a return to self, if you like, and God, if you like, to use these words in their larger context.

Self in the Mahayana means not just personal self, but also phenomenal self—the self of phenomena. Self really means any belief in this thing, whether it's a human thing or an inanimate thing or an atom or whatever. Self really means the belief in that as having inherent existence, and it applies not just to human beings, but it applies to phenomena as well. Personal self and phenomenal self—both are empty.

But it's that return to the phenomenal self, to the kind of belief in the reality, a basic reality of things, whether it's an atomistic reality or just the reality of the existential situation, the reality of matter—all that conceived of in a certain way—that is the return of self. And God—words like life with a capital L or this—they are the god of secular modernism. They're kind of trump words that trump everything else. They're four-letter words that get used actually vaguely, but as if they're something real, as if we're talking about the same thing.

So it's the realism and the reification, one could say, that is more the return to self and God. And it's evident in all these different kinds of teachings and the conceptions of the path and the goal, and the almost ubiquitous language of "what is," of "bare attention," of "being with things as they are"—a phrase that the Buddha did use. The Buddha didn't use "bare attention," but used that phrase, "things as they are," though he meant it in a very different way. He meant things as they are—things are empty. "Be here now," "life as it presents itself"—we've touched on this before, but we could say that actually it's in the realism and the reificationism that the teachings are polluted, if we want to play along with that game of fantasies.

The most important thing is to acknowledge fantasy—the fantasy of Buddha, fantasy of Dharma, fantasy of history, all of that. So it's complex within this confusion that I was alluding to earlier, the confusion of cultural messages and cultural inheritances. And it's confusing.

As we've been unfolding on this retreat, we've explored different types of enchantment. When we talk about enchanting the self, we don't mean only what we might call spiritual enchantment—the kind that dissolves the person into universal oneness of this or that flavor, oneness that doesn't emphasize particularity but moves toward the universal. We've also been differentiating from what we've called, somewhat clumsily, immature imaginal enchantment and mature imaginal-based enchantment.

So all this is complex. When we come to the question of how to unfold or find a way forward with a re-enchantment of self and other, it's complex for all these reasons. It's complex because we have psychological needs, and there are certain psychological paradigms mixed in with all that about what constitutes a healthy self, a psychological self. These too are historically conditioned.

Again, we tend to think that our current view from modern psychotherapy and history—or depending on your allegiance to different contemporary psychologies—we tend to think that's real. Whereas a notion, say, from medieval times or ancient times about what constituted a self, what even a self was, and what constituted a healthy or unhealthy self, is vastly different now, historically vastly different. We just take it all for granted as reality, as, again, this subtraction story of shaking off prior illusions, encrustations, unnecessary veilings of what is a basic truth about self, reality, health, and psychological health.

So into this complexity as well is the whole delicate, complex question of psychologies, self-notions, psychological paradigms, et cetera. Somehow we need to include all this and navigate among all that in talking about re-enchanting the self and the other. I can only do a little bit of that in this talk, but we'll try.

One of the characteristics of modernity, of the dominant view of the culture in the West today, is that self and divinity have become separated. Or rather, in the dominant view—and this goes back even before modernity to certain entrenched dogmas in Christianity—there was a separation of the human and the divine. In the more mystical traditions, that separation was either never agreed upon, or different practices and teachings came in to re-wed the human and the divine in many different ways and at many different levels, both as a starting conception and as something to move toward. We'll maybe touch on some of that.

But within the dominant contemporary paradigm is this separation of the self and the divine, if there's any divinity, sense of divinity, or concept of divinity left at all in the general picture of what a human being is and what the cosmos is.

The philosopher Charles Taylor, the Canadian philosopher, in his massive tome *A Secular Age*, offers one way of defining what constitutes secularism: it's characterized by being a time in the evolution or history of human society where it's quite possible for many, if not most people, to have a goal in life of flourishing—purely human flourishing. In other words, one can live one's life, and really everything in one's life—one's work, one's relationships, whatever else it is, the food one eats—it's all seen from the perspective and with the goal of only human flourishing.

At a certain point in the West, in the last hundred years, that became quite possible and quite acceptable as the orientation to life that many people were able to have. Taylor claims it's the first time in human history, though I don't know if that's true, because actually reading the Pali Canon, you get the sense that there were certain sects or teachers who promulgated just such a view. How popular that was in the wider society, I don't know.

But this is his almost defining characteristic of secularism, or one of them. And I think it's quite interesting—this word "flourishing" has become so popular in some sociological and psychological and political discourses. Purely human flourishing. In other words, with no reference or need to have a relationship with divinity, or the flourishing is something that is a flourishing of something more than the human. What Taylor calls "self-sufficing humanism."

The human as conceived according to modernity, with that kind of flatness and exclusion of divinity that I've been alluding to repeatedly, and living one's life for the sake of flourishing within those parameters of purely human flourishing—very, very normal nowadays, very normal in our society, characteristic of secularism.

This is actually interesting historically. When Freud wrote his book *Civilization and Its Discontents*, he said there are two purposes of civilization or culture. One is to protect human beings against nature, and the other is to adjust the mutual relations of human beings in different ways, in terms of laws and things—protecting against nature, adjusting mutual relations.

Probably, well, maybe thirty years ago or some decades ago, a lot of politicians and sociologists would have said, "We've accomplished these now in the West." I would put a huge question mark on whether we have been so intent on protecting ourselves—so-called protecting ourselves from nature—that now we are actually more in danger from climate change and loss of species and environmental pollution and degradation. And as to our mutual relations, it seems to me that also needs quite a lot of work, though a lot of people would have thought that way.

So these two purposes that Freud pointed to were considered done, and the purpose of civilization was

then allowed to expand and add this human flourishing. The very purpose of our civilization nowadays—now that we are, you know, much more protected from nature, many of our mutual relations are taken care of—despite all the lacunae there and the glaring problems that remain, what came in as an implicit or explicit purpose of culture was this goal: culture, or civilization, served human flourishing, humanistic flourishing.

Human flourishing. But again, what does it mean? What does it mean, this word that's so commonly used now—flourishing has become popular. "May you flourish," "allowed to flourish," and so forth. What does it mean? What is it assumed to involve? More than just the basic requisites: food and home and water. And again, even in the United States and the United Kingdom, even these requisites are not guaranteed to every member of society.

But over and above that—the thrust of this talk is not about that—but over and above the requisites, what is human flourishing assumed to involve? And what is left out or actually overlooked in what it means for a human being to flourish or what is a part of human flourishing?

It's worth pointing out that historically, arenas or containers or forms or avenues that care for and provide for and allow and nourish soulfulness—historically they have been part of the stable civilizations and cultures of the human past for millennia. It's only the modern West that is, historically speaking, strange in its lack of emphasis on soulfulness, in the way that it doesn't really integrate that need into its forms, into its rituals. It comes in anyway—it can't help but come in—but it's not really consciously thought about or provided for, probably in the best ways that are possible, because it's simply not part of the dominant paradigm in discourse.

So it gets squeezed out of public spaces, it gets squeezed out of public discourses and public activities and engagements. The self is regarded a certain way, and the whole movement of one's life between birth and death—what it is to be a human being—is all regarded in the dominant way within our different subcultures and all this complexity. But this leveling, this "only human," this secular humanism and the way the human being is now regarded in the culture...

Compare that to something I heard a few months ago: that in Burkina Faso, in Africa, in the tribes, in the countryside, in the rural villages, when a woman is pregnant—at about six months—the elders of the village or the tribe call the woman to a kind of council, a meeting. They put her into a trance, or she goes into a trance, and they address themselves, the elders of the tribe address themselves to the baby in her womb. They ask that baby, while the mother is in trance, two questions:

"What do the gods want to manifest through you?"

And the second question: "What needs to change in the village to make space for you?"

The mother in her trance is spoken through by the baby, and the elders listen, and they take it in.

Can you hear the way that the human being is being seen? The depth of the respect, the beauty of that, and how such a notion simply has no space in our contemporary society—not just by virtue of the structure of the society, but also by virtue of the structure of the thinking.

Compare that kind of reverence, orientation, respect, openness, sacredness of the human being, of the self being born into this world, being born into the world of society and manifestation, and being born into its individual place within that society and its calling. All of this is there.

Compare that with what has been exposed by various Western philosophers and social critics over the last few hundred years: a kind of individualism that's actually manipulated by capitalism and by the market economy. So we are regarded as pawns for the advertising industry, for the whole way the economy works—consumerism is necessary, you know, all these things. Michel Foucault talks about the objectification of subjects. The human subject, the human self becomes an object in a kind of power play. And the depth of one's humanity, what it means to be a self, is effectively disregarded, reduced in the most complete way.

Before Foucault there was the Frankfurt School—Adorno and Horkheimer that I alluded to earlier—who talked about the culture industry, the way that a whole industry was being set up through capitalism that really manipulated individuals in lots of different ways. Very, very different scope, range, sense, view of human beings.

Again, compare that with Islam, where they say the cardinal sin is the forgetfulness of who one is. In other words, to forget the sacredness, the depths, the range, the divinity of the human being, of the self, of your individual self and your individual callings and all the aspects of yourself. That's actually the cardinal sin: this forgetfulness of who one is.

In the teachings of Buddha-nature, in the Buddha Dharma, your true self—if one uses that language—or your essence, or at least your capacity, is for divinity. So the human being is something much, much more in its range and dimensions than this flatland version.

And again, in the Christian tradition, they talk about the imago Dei, being made in the image of God. And the possibility of the—in the mystical tradition—the possibility of imitatio Dei, but more than that, the incarnation of Christ, the mystical incarnation of Christ in the depths of my mind, in the depths of my heart, in my soul. There's a transformation, a transubstantiation that's already there in potential and at one level in actuality, but that can be incarnated in the fuller sense of that word—brought into manifestation, brought into this world of materiality as we see it in the different ways we see it.

So in modernity and nowadays in our Western culture, we get mixed messages regarding the self and the individual and individualism. Just as we get mixed messages—and this is all woven together—about desire versus greed, and how desire is trumped, and greed is bad, and sexuality. Mixed messages are hugely confusing. And all these aspects of self—I'm going to come back to this.

So we're getting mixed messages about all kinds of things. And yet many people, though it may not be clearly articulated, are suffering from what we might call the disenchantment that's integral to modernism. We're trying to enchant the self.

People are living within these paradigms—oppressed and constrained by them, constrained by social structures. Something within them wants to re-enchant the self, wants to have an enchanted sense of self and other. People do find ways of doing this, or at least limited ways—on occasion, when in love for a period of time, and so forth. But they're trying to enchant the self without allowing a sense of depth and divinity. That's not permitted.

Often this attempted enchantment comes through what modern society and technology provides—in some ways a vast set of toys to play with. But in another way, we're given a very thin, meager palette and set of tools with which the self can be re-enchanted. So many people are trying to fashion a unique, interesting self—to appear to create something, to fashion and manifest what appears to be "this is me and I'm unique and I'm interesting."

Yet there might not actually be that much genuine interest there, because the whole view of the self is constrained. It can't be that interesting. And what are we given to accomplish this with? Consumption. Consumerism. You can buy these clothes, create a certain look, buy that car, whatever it may be.

We are rich—we live like kings compared to people in the past. Our standard of living is equivalent to what royalty would have experienced historically, probably way beyond that. And yet at one level we are poor. We are poor in terms of what we receive regarding our view of who we are, what the self is. We are impoverished and unable to re-enchant deeply within that paradigm and with those opportunities we're given.

In fact, the opposite happens. The superficial self-sense seeks enchantment through the manipulations of capital and consumerism—being manipulated by it, being a pawn in a larger game, but given just enough possibility to try desperately to fashion something interesting so that our money and consumerist thrust might accomplish that. But all that trying at that level actually goes back to create or preserve a superficiality of the self-sense.

Because the self-sense is superficial, we try to re-enchant it. We have very limited possibilities for that, and those very possibilities keep the self-sense superficial. So we're caught in something here, potentially.

Add to this another common idea—again, quite a modernist notion though we wouldn't recognize it as such—the idea of the authentic self, the real me. We feel we're told that we need to be authentic, that there's a true me, and we really feel that at times. This pulls me one way, while on the other side there's social pressure arising from how society is structured and the lack of inner depth in how a human being is conceived and felt to be.

So I have this other pressure: what do others think? As long as I don't have access to that depth, what

others think and the social anxiety and pressure to conform or avoid judgment becomes enormous. These forces pull in different directions. I've got to be authentic to myself—there is an authentic self that I need to be somehow true to and in touch with. And on the other side: what do others think of me? Is it okay? Am I okay? Tell me I'm okay. What can I do and manipulate and spend on to make others think I'm okay? How am I in the eyes of others? Am I okay? Am I enough? Am I singled out as faulty in the eyes of others?

All this creates so much tension and, if you like, creativity-inhibiting confusion and constraints around this whole wish we have for an enchanted sense of existence and of self and other.

And we've talked about this—I'm repeating myself now—but if I see the self, if I see what a human being is as only really a product of evolution, of biological evolution, then this is what we get down to when we're really talking about what's real. You are a product—in your behavior, your choices, the way you perceive—it's all the product of evolution, all the product of neurology, of neurophysiology.

Now, for some people, that view can be enchanting. But if we're only that, it's probably not that enchanting. If we're regarded with a reductionist view, a biological reductionist view, it's difficult to have a sense of a really enchanted self. Reductionism inhibits that.

Enchantment needs this beyond. We need to be more than that. So of course, biology and neurophysiology and evolution and all of that, historical conditioning, everything. But there needs to be something beyond, something more than, in order for a sense of enchantment, as we said right from the beginning.

And again, you know, Dharma circles are so common nowadays. If we're talking about the self, view of self and other, there's this sometimes dogmatic kind of conclusion or assertion: "The Buddha said, or the truth of the self is, what the self really is, is a process." A biological process and a mental process. Sometimes, in some cases, the mental process is reduced to a biological process, a neuronal one, a brain process. But the self is the process. And sometimes people say, "I've cracked what the Buddha was saying. The self is a process. This is the true nature of things. Anything else is a bit of a delusion. The self is a process."

Now, I would say that's a certain level of meditative view or a way of looking at perception that's available to us—to feel ourselves as process moment to moment, aggregates arising of sensation and vedanā and perception and consciousness and intention. Useful at a certain level. A certain level of freedom will come out of that. But it's only a way of looking. It's only a certain level of perception.

It's not ultimately true. It's not ultimately true the self is a process. I've talked about this in other talks. I'm not going to go into it now. It's not ultimately true. It's definitely not the deepest. That perception of the self as a process does not yield for us the deepest freedom. Absolutely not. And nor is it particularly enchanting as a view of the self. The self is a moment-to-moment arising of conditioned, mechanistic flow, a conditioned arising of a moment of sensation and perception and neuronal functioning. We can try and enchant that view of process and talk about words like flow and bring in river imagery and all that kind of

stuff, maybe to a certain extent. But there's problems with that. Not ultimately true, doesn't bring the deepest freedom, doesn't really open up the capacity and the range of possible enchantment.

Or then there's another kind of view: the self is really one with cosmic awareness or one with cosmic love or one with God, or the self is nothing, the self is a total illusion or whatever. And that's the real nature of the self. And that also, I would say, suffers from the same three lacks. It's not ultimately true. It's not ultimately true that the self is one. It's a level, it's a deep mystical experience, a level of perception, important, beautiful, as is the sense that the self, the perception of the self is nothing—it's absolutely nothing. But it's not ultimately true. I'd say it's wonderful and important to have that as a perception, as a level of perception and understanding. It's not ultimately true, it's not the deepest freedom, and it will not open up the deepest and the fullest enchantment.

What is necessary for re-enchanting, for really full, really deep, really wide re-enchantment—and delivering us from what is not ultimately true, what is not quite deeply freeing—is the flexibility of view that I keep harping on about. Flexibility of self-view and the insight legitimizing and underpinning that flexibility. Do you see all these different kinds of meditative and mystical experiences moving in and out and understanding how they arise and how they disappear? Seeing that fabrication, dependent arising of both self and perception. And then you start to see what's really true is this very flexibility. The flexibility of self-view legitimizes that flexibility and the moving in and out and the adopting of different self-views. There's an insight here of what actually is ultimately true.

And we need a conception, an insight, that allows, supports, and actually insists on a flexibility of self-view. Allows, supports, and insists on a flexibility of self-view. It's this that most fully allows not just the biggest freedom, is congruent with the ultimate truth, but also most fully allows the re-enchantment.

So we can add to this, if we ask this question: okay, there's all this confusion and this disenchantment in our worldview, our view of the cosmos, and our view of self, our sense of self. And to have a soulful re-enchantment of self and other—

Whenever I use "self" in this talk, everything I say about self applies to other as well—other selves, both as an idea and as applicable in practice. I can practice viewing an other in these different ways.

What's needed in re-enchanting self and other is a view and a conception of personality and of the personal relevance of what arises for us. Both within and without, in terms of the ideas of fate or destiny—including the difficult—somehow that needs to get included. I'm going to come back to this. That also needs to get included, not erased out in a universality.

We somehow want a kind of enchantment that really includes and even emphasizes not just the universal, but also the very personal, the very particular and the personal relevance of what arises for us inside and outside in our lives. And included in that is the difficult, is the dukkha.

So that view allows and supports senses of sacredness of the person and of the personal relevance of what

arises for us. The events of our life are somehow integrated into a whole view of sacredness, of the sacredness of the self, of the person.

Does the conception of the self—view of the self that we're entertaining, or the wider view of the self—does the conception of the self, but also the conception of its relationship with experiences, and its relationship with the cosmos and time, allow a transformation in our relationship with suffering that becomes soul-making? So that suffering becomes soul-making.

Does our conception of self, its relationship with experiences, and its relationship or constellation with regard to the cosmos and time, allow a transformation of the relationship with suffering, with our suffering, all kinds of suffering, so that that suffering becomes soul-making? And how fully does it allow that and support that transformation? How deeply does it allow and support that transformation?

This is what needs to be included and involved in a soulful re-enchantment of self and other.

At an even more subtle level of what self means—just as subject rather than object, just as consciousness—what does it mean to be enchanted, to re-enchant that subtle level, just consciousness, that level of self as subject? Again, purely the complexities of neurology—there's a certain enchantment in that. How full, how deep?

Some ideas of Buddha nature, some versions of the idea of Buddha nature in Buddha Dharma teachings, some philosophies in the West—certainly in Neoplatonism and other currents through Western history, but also in Hegel, the German philosopher—regard the human subject, in one's subjectivity, meaning in one's consciousness, as divine, as included. There's a view that can be re-enchanted by giving it other dimensions and divinities. We'll come back to this.

But as I said a few minutes ago, somehow an opening of the view, the views and the conception of self, of what a human being is, and a flexibility of views and conceptions of self and other—this is necessary to re-enchantment.

This is again something from Nietzsche. He says that the belief that regards the soul as a monad, as an atomon—meaning as one thing, as indivisible—this belief ought to be expelled from science. It is not at all necessary, though, to get rid of "the soul" at the same time. In other words, we don't need to get rid of this idea of soul. But it's the idea of the soul as just this—one thing that's rigidified and fixed, where there's a singleness of you.

But the way is open, he continues, for new versions and refinements of the soul hypothesis. And then he runs through a few different possibilities, such conceptions as soul as subjective multiplicity—in the sense of plurality of soul and plurality of views of what the soul is.

He's saying, don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. There's something in the concept of soul. Or rather, we can extend and give a range of meanings to what we mean by soul that actually might be very

fruitful. Don't run screaming or cry "that's illegal!" when people use words like self or soul. Concepts, when they're skillfully handled, when they're related to with insight, actually open things up. And I'll come back and say more about that.

Then he continues with this opening views up this way. He says the new psychologist, by precisely that act of opening up the notion of soul, condemn themselves to invention. They condemn themselves to invention. In other words, you have to be creative in the view and in the perception. We're back to this idea of art and creation.

And he says, by precisely that act, they condemn themselves to invention and—who knows—perhaps to discovery. So again, this ambiguity about creation and discovery. Right there, invention and discovery through the skillful and open use of a concept like soul.

In another work, Nietzsche offers a profound insight: "Some souls one will never discover unless one invents them first." This points to a deep understanding of the fundamental interplay between creation and discovery that characterizes our relationship with soul, self, and other. We are simultaneously inventors and discoverers of the very depths we encounter.

This is why we need the kind of elasticity I've been describing—an elasticity of concept, whether we speak of self or soul or any fundamental notion. This elasticity allows the soul-making dynamic to flourish fully. The eros, the psyche, and the logos—the eros and the images, the imaginal sense and the conceptual framework—can then feed each other, fertilize each other, open and expand and enrich and deepen each other. All of this vitality depends on the elasticity of the logos, of our conceptual understanding.

When that conceptual framework becomes elastic enough, then we can fall in love with the self. The sense of self—whether the self of other or the self of self—can become endlessly deep, complex, enriched, and filled with image. But if we regard a human being merely from a reductionist point of view—through the lens of biology or cognitive science or mechanistic reductions—then the image of self dies. It loses that essential element of mystery, of inexhaustibility that an image needs to remain alive, as we've explored in other talks.

There needs to be a kind of undefinability as part of that mystery and inexhaustibility. Any concept that serves soul-making—whether self or love or the divine, whether dharma or anything else—requires this quality of undefinability. This allows for an endless moving into mystery, ensuring there is always a beyond, an inexhaustibility that feeds the soul-making process.

Anything that matters deeply to us needs to retain a certain amount of undefinability, mystery, and inexhaustibility. Reductionist explanations that claim to sum everything up cannot allow for this essential quality. But I want to emphasize that we're speaking of undefinability and mystery as something fertile—not merely something undefinable about which we shrug and turn away, not something we dismiss as nonsense simply because it cannot be neatly defined or because it remains mysterious. This

mystery is generative, creative, alive. It is the very ground from which our deepest discoveries emerge.

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