The Holy Life (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 59:25

So I'd like to begin opening up more fully the exploration of where Eros is directed in our lives and on the path—the whole exploration of Eros on the path, Eros for the path, and Eros for awakening. This includes soul-making on the path, soul-making in the path, and the path as a path of soul-making: to what extent and how? Where does the Eros go in our lives? Where does the soul-making get to flourish? What are the possibilities there, and what are the limitations that we might inadvertently create and sustain?

There's quite a lot to this, so we'll take it gradually.

In the Pali Canon, the Buddha very clearly and very often puts forward as the aim of the path—intrinsically involved and wrapped up in the aim of awakening and enlightenment—the ideal, the goal of knowing, reaching, and experiencing the unfabricated, what is beyond the perception of any kind of world. In that sense, there's a real transcendent or transcendental thrust to the Pali Canon Buddhist teachings. Transcendent comes from the Latin *transcendere*, meaning to climb beyond.

If we open the Pali Canon, this is unavoidable to meet—this constant pointing towards the transcendent, as if the whole path is really aimed at that. There is this transcendent thrust, transcendent aim, or aim of transcendence.

I could read many passages from the Pali Canon that refer to this. Some of you will know these quotes, which to me are quite an important aspect of the path. For example, in the Samyutta Nikaya, the Buddha says:

"That sphere, that dimension should be understood, should be known, where the eye ceases and perception of forms fades away. That sphere should be understood and known where the ear ceases and the perception of sounds fade away. That sphere should be understood, should be known, where the nose ceases and the perception of smells fade away, where the tongue ceases and the perception of taste fade away, where the body ceases and the perception of tactile objects fades away. That sphere, that dimension should be understood, should be known, where the mind ceases and perception of mental phenomena fades away."

Great stress on this, isn't it? It's beyond any sense experience whatsoever. Sense experience here is fading, is not fabricated at that time. There is a movement beyond, a transcending of sense experience—the whole world, in other words. Not just the creation of stories and complications based on sense experience, but actual sense experience is transcended.

The Buddha calls this the end of the world. In a slightly playful moment in another quote he says, "I say

that the end of the world cannot be known, seen or reached by travelling. Yet I also say that without reaching the end of the world there is no making an end to dukkha."

So again, this transcending of the senses, this going beyond the world, the fading of the world, the fading of the senses, and the opening to whatever we can call that which is beyond, that which transcends it—this is central to the Buddha's project of awakening and ending dukkha. Without reaching the end of the world, there is no making an end to dukkha. And he's not talking about traveling. Very clear.

In the Majjhima Nikaya, the Buddha says, "There is the inferior, there is the superior, and beyond both, there is the giving up of this entire field of perception." There is the inferior, meaning ordinary perception of the ordinary world. There is the superior—the perception of higher worlds, the perception of what the Buddha called the fine material realm, the realm of jhanas and the immaterial realms, the realm of the formless jhanas, the four higher jhanas, the Brahma realms, and these kinds of things, perhaps attained through different meditations. There is the inferior, there is the superior, and beyond both of these, there is the giving up of this entire field of perception, the entire field of experience of things, objects.

Again, tying it in to the end of suffering—it's not just an interesting kind of experience that one can have if you want. It ties this in with the end of suffering. So it says, "Where nama-rupa"—which really means the whole movement and experience of mind and body, but more in detail it means sensation, *vedana* (pleasant, unpleasant, neutral), intention, contact, perception—experience, in short—"where nama-rupa, experience, together with impingement and the perception of form, cease without trace, it is there that the tangle is cut."

Nama-rupa ceasing also means *vedana*, sensation, is ceasing. There is the end, in that experience, of sensation of *vedana*. It doesn't just mean the end of unpleasant *vedana* or the end of pleasant *vedana* to some kind of neutrality—everything is just blank in the sense of being neutral or not registering a *vedana*.

It means beyond even the neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant. Sensation is, in a way, a more accurate translation for vedana. It's beyond sensation.

The Buddha speaks of this transcendence in the Udana, the Inspired Utterances from the Pali Canon. Addressing a group of monks, he declares: "There is, monks, an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unfabricated. If there were not that unborn, unbecome, unmade, unfabricated, no leaving behind of the born, become, made, fabricated would be discerned. But because there is indeed an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unfabricated, a leaving behind of the born, become, made, fabricated is discerned."

A leaving behind, a transcending of what is born, what is become, what is made, what is fabricated. All this world of creation, all this world of sense experience, is left behind. There is that possibility. There is a possibility of transcending that. The text implicitly points to this truth: this leaving behind is intrinsically wrapped up in what it means to awaken, what it means to be free, what it means to end rebirth in full awakening.

From the Samyutta Nikaya, the Buddha speaks of something we can know beyond the senses, beyond the body, beyond sensation, beyond perception and experience, beyond all movements of mind, beyond consciousness itself. His instruction is direct: "You should smash, destroy and demolish form. You should smash, destroy and demolish vedana, sensation. Smash, destroy and demolish perception. Smash, destroy and demolish sankara, mental formations. You should smash, destroy and demolish consciousness."

This strong language points to a meditative technique—learning to unfabricate this whole world of apparent forms, apparent body, apparent sensations, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. Smash it, destroy it, demolish it.

What is the Buddha saying in relationship to life? Life, as we consider it, consists of sense perception and the five aggregates: form, vedana, perception, sankhara, consciousness. So what is the Buddha's orientation? How does he orient the path and goal of awakening in relation to life? What is the place of life in the longing for awakening? How does life and the end of rebirth relate to the vision and experience of the transcendent?

It should be clear that the Buddha is not merely talking about a state of concentration. This experience of the transcendent is not some ultra-concentrated state where the senses don't impinge because you're absorbed in an object. All these passages make clear that this is intrinsically wrapped up in the whole liberating process—the ending of rebirth and what awakening truly means.

The Buddha typically refers to this transcendent or unfabricated in negative terms, because it's so transcendent to what we can usually perceive or experience. Being transcendent to the senses and aggregates, it's also transcendent to what we can usually conceive—conception being based on subject, object, time, and experience. So usually he speaks of what it's not, what isn't there.

Very occasionally he describes it in positive terms. In the Digha Nikaya, the collection of longer discourses, he speaks of going beyond the six senses—the usual five plus mind in Pali Canon Buddhism. With the cessation of these six senses and six sense consciousnesses, what remains is described more positively as "consciousness without attribute"—consciousness that does not look at anything, point anything out, or indicate anything. In other words, consciousness without an object. Consciousness without attributes, without end, luminous all around.

"Here, water, earth, fire, and air have no footing. Here, long and short, subtle and gross, pleasant and unpleasant, and nama-rupa—all that experience of mind and body, the movements of mind and body, the elements of mind and body—all are destroyed with the cessation of consciousness." Here, each of these is destroyed: earth, air, water, fire, long and short, subtle and gross, any kind of distinction, any kind of experience, pleasant and unpleasant, nama-rupa—all destroyed.

Here, each of these is destroyed—earth, air, water, fire, long and short, subtle and gross, any kind of distinction, pleasant and unpleasant, nama-rupa—all destroyed. But it's not a complete nothing. This is not

annihilation, not total erasure.

And finally, one more quote from the Udana, the inspired utterances also found in the Itivuttaka, another set of discourses from the Pali Canon. The Buddha says: "There is that sphere, there is that dimension where there is neither earth nor water nor fire nor wind. Neither sphere of infinite space, nor sphere of infinite consciousness, nor sphere of nothingness, nor sphere of neither perception nor non-perception"—those are the four immaterial jhanas, realms—"Neither this world nor the next world, neither sun nor moon. And there, I say, there is no coming and no going, no staying, no passing away, and no arising. It is without foundation, non-continuing, and objectless."

This is pointing to something quite beyond the jhanas, quite beyond any sense of materiality or perception of this or that or anything, quite beyond either impermanence or permanence. It's beyond time—no coming, going, no staying, no passing away, no arising, non-continuing. This is really talking about something utterly transcendent there, not just a state of concentration.

Clearly these passages are not pointing to a state of being in the moment. It's beyond a sense of the moment, beyond a sense even of the arising and passing away of things, beyond a sense of being with or reduced to or just open to the process of life or the flow of life, if you prefer slightly more poetic language. Clearly it's way beyond that. It's not continuing, no arising, no passing away. Utterly beyond the senses. Utterly beyond anything whatsoever. Can't talk about process or flow. Flow of what there? Utterly beyond, again, a sort of state or stance or ongoing experience of the touch of life or of meeting life. And certainly beyond anything that could be construed as being with things as they are. Utterly, really transcendent.

Instead, reading the Pali Canon, for me it's unavoidable—these kinds of passages and how everything kind of funnels towards that. The whole path is constructed towards this understanding as central in the opening of liberation. So you can try and explain it away or try and de-emphasize that, but you've got quite a job there. If you try and do that, it's not something you can really ignore. You are confronted with these many, many passages and the whole way everything kind of moves towards that, as I said.

Something, as I said in one of the talks, somehow we need to account for this unfabricated, and the Buddha's emphasis on it, and also our experiential experience of unfabricating and the whole understanding of dependent origination there, and emptiness that we talked about much earlier.

But in a way, the Buddha is mostly saying, in another passage: where all phenomena cease in this transcending, where all phenomena cease, all manner of speaking, all ways of speaking cease. It's only possible to talk in negatives. It's not this, it's not that. There's the absence of this, there's the absence of that. This is not there, that is not there.

And there's what's called apophatic language, or apophatic theology is the equivalent in the Christian and other theistic traditions, or the via negativa. So there's not only that this transcendent lacks any attributes that we can talk about, it's actually that the way to it is a via negativa, a negative way—meaning a putting

aside of this, putting aside of that, letting go of this, letting go of that, and going beyond this, going beyond that, going beyond anything, any sense perception, any form, anything, anything conditioned or created. So any experience in the normal sense of the world, of some kind of thing experienced. One goes beyond that, one puts it aside, and one comes to something that is also via negativa in the sense of lacking in attributes that one can ascribe to it.

This kind of thrust is common, I think, probably in all the major religious traditions, spiritual, mystical traditions, certainly because we're really in the realm of mystical experience now. So certainly in Buddha Dharma—or in some Buddha Dharma, let's say—and certainly there in the Pali Canon, in Neoplatonism, in mystical Christianity, Islam and Judaism, etc. And from many of those, or within strands of many of those traditions, it's absolutely intimately linked, if not equivalent, with the supreme goal of the path. So knowing that, opening to that experience—that is entirely conflated with the supreme goal of whichever mystical religious tradition we're talking about.

And so again, in relationship to the world, and in relationship to what we must call life, there is this longing and this aiming for and this pointing out of the availability of something beyond all this, beyond the world and beyond life, beyond sense experience, beyond the aggregates that make up life and our experience of life, self and life.

So Gregory of Nyssa, great saint of the Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition, says, "For the thirst of human souls, the thirst of human souls requires some infinite water. How could this limited world suffice?"

So there is, in these different traditions and in the Pali Canon Buddha, this yearning, this longing. And as I point out, the Buddha was extreme in his dedication for wanting to go beyond and open to this. There is this yearning, this longing, this desire, this eros for this transcendent. This exists—this eros, this yearning exists—and it exists very, very strongly in some people. And some people a little bit less so, and some people it doesn't seem to exist much at all. In fact, there might be a turning away from that, a rejection of that possibility, fear of it, all kinds of things. We'll come back to this.

But one possible direction of our eros and our whole movement and longing of the soul is towards this transcendent, towards knowing it, towards opening to it. We want something that...

In Gregory's words, this limited world doesn't suffice. We'll return to that quote because I want to explore the different possible directions for eros and soul-making, so we'll revisit it later.

But one possible direction is towards this transcendent. The eros, the thrust of the eros, and the yearning to open—again, if we use sexual, metaphorical language—is towards this, or in relationship to this transcendence. That transcendence I don't know yet, for some people and to differing extents.

And it's transcendent, clearly, from those quotes. One could read numerous quotes from different traditions—Neoplatonism and the various mystical traditions of monotheism, the monotheistic

traditions—but it's beyond. Beyond what? Beyond the world, beyond appearances, beyond even certain knowings of oneness, as I said. Beyond a oneness of love, beyond a oneness of consciousness. It's beyond, transcending—it climbs over, *transcendere*.

So the pothos... Remember, the pothos is what wants more with the eros. The pothos wants this more, and it's kind of set this really transcendent more, this really profound—if you like, or very high, depending on up or down in the analogy. The pothos projects it there, or smells it there, intuits it there, has heard of it there. That's where the more, the pothos, that's where the more gets placed, the sense of the more, and that's where the eros gets directed.

So there's not the spreading of eros in the small sense in one dimension. Yes, the pothos wants more, and so I just get more cars, more sexual partners, more tasty food and different cuisines of different countries, more traveling, more whatever it is. It's not spreading into one dimension. There's actually another dimension, or other dimensions, because usually this unfabricated is mapped—not just conceptually, but experientially—at the end of a series of dimensions.

In a way, you could conceive of the jhānas, the eight jhānas that the Buddha of the Pali Canon points to, as I've said before on this retreat, as states of progressively less fabrication. Each of them is a dimension. So the realm of infinite space—we could say the dimension, same word, *āyatana*—sphere of infinite space, of infinite consciousness. These are different dimensions or realms of being, realms of experience, realms of perception, dimensions. And transcending the eighth, the next dimension, if you like, is this unfabricated. Sometimes actually referred to as nibbāna.

But the pothos is moving into other dimensions and has as its ultimate aim, or what it believes is its ultimate aim—which is something I'll come back to—this ultimate dimension of the transcendent, unfabricated.

Nor does the eros just accept one-dimensionality. So it doesn't just accept that there is only one dimension. And although I have this desire for some other dimensions, what I really need to do to be free of suffering is just accept the experience on this one dimension. In other words, what the senses give to me, the apparent or seemingly obvious finitude of my life, the difficulties that I encounter—all of that. And my job, to be liberated, what I'm moving towards is a stance, hopefully an ongoing stance, of just accepting, not craving, in relationship to this one dimension. Because there are no other dimensions, so don't look for anything there. Rather than spreading out to just want more and more on this one dimension—more cars, more partners, whatever it is, more experiences—the liberation is in just accepting and kind of containing or cutting off the movement of the pothos, the movement of the eros, of the more. And so being accepting of just what is given to me in this one dimension.

So what is the relationship, as I said, of eros with life, if you like? How is eros directing itself in relationship to life and the world?

The holy life—some of you will know—is something that the Buddha talks about and refers to frequently in the Pali Canon texts. It's a very clear, common phrase: the holy life. There are stock phrases in relationship to it. So he might say, or there might be a story, this person or that person, man or woman, received the going forth into the homeless life—so they became monastic. Actually, they were more homeless then because they didn't stay in one monastery; they tended to move around. Then to spend the rains perhaps in one monastery, or short periods staying in this monastery or that monastery, but generally speaking, they were on the move. They were much more homeless than most monastics are today.

But so-and-so received the going forth into the homeless life, and then a little later, or a long time later, this so-and-so reached the supreme goal of the holy life. So the homeless life and the holy life—the holy life, if it's a Buddhist homeless life, is regarded as the holy life. In other words, you can be homeless in another tradition that doesn't have the Eightfold Path, but that's not the holy life. So the holy life is the tradition of the Buddhist monastic practicing the Eightfold Path.

She reached the supreme goal of the holy life, knowing and realizing it, the supreme goal for herself in the here and now. He knew, she knew—and this is the person speaking, what they say at liberation. It's a stock phrase when they've become an Arahant, fully liberated: He knew, she knew, "Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled"—or "the holy life has been led. I've done it, finished the holy life. Done is what had to be done. There is nothing further for the sake of this world."

So there's an Arahant—there's nothing further for the sake of this world. The holy life, in other words, the path of practice in a celibate, renunciate, monastic tradition, is the holy life. So life itself is not holy. The holy life refers to something very specific that's actually oriented towards what is the end of rebirth, if you like, the end of life, the ending of future lives. So it's not life as a kind of wonderment of biological evolution and diversity.

It's not life as in just this amazing, changing kaleidoscope of experiences. That's not holy. What's holy is getting beyond all that.

Nor is the holy life really just living the ethical life. So it's not a holy life if it's just ethical. Ethics, the sila and a celibate life in this case are indispensable. They're also admirable and praiseworthy, but they're not the point or the end. An ethical life is not the point or the end of the path. It's actually just a prerequisite, a necessity for ending rebirth. It's part of the path if you really want to become awakened. And that's what makes it holy: the end.

When the Mahayana came, this began to shift a little bit. With more popular versions of the Mahayana, there's a shift. The bodhisattva ideal became quite prominent—someone who's fully awakened or almost fully awakened and who makes the choice to stick around, not to end their rebirths, but to remain out of compassion, out of love for other beings who are suffering. So the holy life actually becomes more tied in with an ethical movement as we would tend to understand it, meaning a movement of love and a

commitment of love. This person is sticking around, not ending rebirth. There's a shift in that with the Mahayana and with the populist understanding of Mahayana teachings about bodhisattvas.

Also in the Mahayana, there's much less of a distinction—there's a kind of non-duality between the unfabricated, totally transcendent realm and the world of fabrication, the world of senses. But as I said, in the Pali Canon, whatever one decides to bring to our interpretation of it, we unavoidably have to deal with this transcendent thrust that's there.

The Buddha talks about escaping from this world, and the jhanas, as I said, have been progressive states of less fabrication—they're actually progressive states of escape. The Buddha described the first jhana as an escape, and then the second jhana as a better escape from the world, and so on. The eighth jhana is the best escape minus the last one.

In talking about vedana too, the Buddha makes a distinction between worldly vedana and non-worldly pleasantness—for instance, the pleasure of the jhanas. It's not coming from the senses. The rapture, the bliss, the ecstasy of the jhanas is not coming from sensual touch, taste, smell, sight or sound. The Buddha also in the Pali Canon talks about the supramundane, beyond the world, the loka—meaning the transcendent.

So there is implicit in all this a kind of relative denigration of the world, a denigration of life. Life is only serving something that goes beyond life. Life is only good to the extent that we use it to get beyond life. And the world is something to be transcended, something to be gotten beyond.

Now, this is not that popular, or rather it's not really brought out much in a lot of modern Western teachings. Sometimes people really try to make the case that the Buddha or the Pali Canon absolutely didn't have a transcendent thrust, and that it's really about being in this life and being open to everything. I find that a little hard to twist things that way in an interpretation of the Pali Canon.

But it's interesting. Why is there that insistence by some that the Buddha of the Pali Canon did not have a transcendent thrust? That to me is very interesting for different reasons. Some is purely individual, having to do with the soul of the person and the soul calling of the person. But a lot of it is also cultural.

In our modernist culture, in our modernist society, with the views that we've grown up with, there's a kind of abhorrence for various reasons for anything that is transcendent in that sense. It's too close to a kind of life-denialism. And if life is all you have—which is what a lot of modernism asserts, that there's just this, and when you die you die and that's it, and there's nothing beyond—and there's absolutely no place for metaphysics, there's no place for anything beyond the senses or what you can see through the senses or through a microscope and infer from that.

So there's a real thrust of that kind of absolute dogmatic ruling out of metaphysics from modernist philosophy and actually most postmodern philosophy, and that has spread into the culture. A cardinal rule is nothing beyond, nothing beyond—there's just this. And we have to find what we're looking for in

this, in just this, meaning the experience of the senses, meaning what comes to us empirically. It also means what science seems to tell us, though that gets a bit more confusing if you take science a bit deeper.

It's not that simple because although many people nowadays clearly believe this is it and when you die that's it, a lot of other people clearly believe in some kind of life after death, some kind of spiritual world beyond where they'll be with grandma again and their spouse. But that kind of beyond is not at all like the unfabricated. It's still a realm of experience, pretty much like this one, only it sounds nicer in some way, and it's not subject to impermanence. There's a kind of split between people who believe that and people who believe there's just extinction, but this whole unfabricated something beyond experience, or a series of dimensions that move beyond all sense experience, all perception—

This perspective feels, I think, for many people too much like extinction, or it simply lacks attraction for various reasons. And so we find ourselves squeezed—with this refusal of transcendence—into either hoping for something better beyond death, where there's this eternal being with one's loved ones, or we're compressed into "just this," into "just life."

The version of Dharma that emerges from this compression into "just this" or "just life"—perhaps reduced somewhat atomistically into recognizing that the self isn't real, that what exists is process, but everything else is also just process, atoms, and so forth—somehow squeezes us into what I might call an existentialist version of Dharma. This approach closely resembles existentialist philosophy or draws from existentialist psychoanalysis.

"This is it." This becomes your arena to somehow find, to eke out some kind of okayness or freedom or acceptance of this undeniable existential situation—that this is it, that there is this life that's essentially meaningless, essentially finite.

But the question here is: when there is this rhetoric of "just this" or "life," what is actually meant? I've spoken about this before. When you say "this," what do you mean by "this"? "There's just this." What do you mean by "life"? Especially when you give that word a capital L—do you mean just the senses? Do you mean bare attention? What's revealed by bare attention, or something else? Or something incorporating much more than that?

Broadly, in this non-transcendent approach—this refusal of the transcendent—we could distinguish two possibilities. There is what I just alluded to: a kind of existentialist path where there is just this one dimension that comes to us through the senses. There's nothing more than that. We refuse anything beyond what is obvious to most people in Western culture, beyond what the senses of most people in Western culture can perceive. In other words, we're simply going along with what most people in our culture of Western scientific materialist modernism can actually perceive through their limited training in perception.

So there's a kind of flatland of one-dimensionality, and the question becomes: what freedom is available

in relationship to that one-dimensionality, taking it almost as given? As I said, it might be acknowledged that the self doesn't really exist and is more of a process, as is everything else. So what's the possibility for freedom there? What's the possibility for soul-making in such a one-dimensional flatland that refuses any kind of other dimensionality or transcendence?

Where does that possibility lie? Is it that working within and accepting that range of possibility—that flatland freedom and flatland soul-making, whatever freedom and soul-making are available there—is actually an individual soul-calling? Might there be, for some people, a genuine calling of the soul to see the world this way, not to see it in ways more expansive or beyond that, and to create soul-making and freedom within the limitations of that view?

Or is it actually the limits of the *eros-psyche-logos* process for that person—limits that have been reached and become somewhat stuck, cramped, or confined, as we've discussed before? Is this coming from a kind of indoctrination from the culture, or from fear of not going along with mainstream opinion, whether academic, cultural, or from one's various communities?

All these questions—whether it's individual soul-calling, whether it's the limits of a certain soul, whether it's indoctrination from culture—we could also apply to the transcendent view, to the perspective of a transcendence which one wants to know and open to, having heard about it. Again, it could be an individual soul-calling, it could be some kind of limit operating, or it could be indoctrination or cultural conditioning.

So there's this transcendent option for the movement of soul-making and *eros*. There's this refusal of transcendence into what we might call a flatland, a one-dimensionality. And then there's a third possibility that we might call immanence.

Immanence is related etymologically to "remaining in." Here, what I mean by immanence—and what it means in most religious traditions—is that the divinity remains in the world, in life, in form, in matter, in the senses. It infuses all this. It's not, at least in the way I would like to use it, limited to that. In other words, there might be a beyond. I know I've been deliberately open with the definition of what I even mean by divinity—we'll revisit this—but one aspect is that divinity has some kind of beyondness to it, relating to dimensionality.

So whatever this beyond is that carries a sense of divinity is both beyond and also in life, form, world, matter, senses.

In terms of individual orientations, reactions, and transformations in relation to all this, some people will recoil from the transcendent thrust and transcendent teachings. Something in them is either not satisfied, afraid, or resistant. So it's interesting to consider what's happening for someone who doesn't accept that transcendent dimension, and perhaps also doesn't accept the flatland either. They may want, or have the intuition of, divinity not just beyond but in and through. Or some people refuse that transcendent

beyond—it's just "in" somehow. Still, I would say it has some kind of sense of beyondness.

We'll revisit this in terms of beyondness and divinity.

In terms of individual orientations and reactions to these transformative possibilities, some people will recoil from the transcendent thrust and transcendent teachings. Something within them is either not satisfied, afraid, or simply resistant. It's interesting to observe what's happening for someone who rejects both the transcendent path and the flatland approach, yet still wants or intuits divinity not just beyond but in and through everything. Some people refuse the transcendent beyond while sensing something sacred just "in" somehow—though I would say this still carries some sense of beyondness. We'll revisit this in terms of beyondness and divinity.

What I really want to explore are the individual reactions, the different stances and gut responses to these three possibilities. These orientations can change over a person's life and practice, and each carries its own shadows, limitations, or potential weak points.

Consider first the transcendent orientation. We can see how someone might want to go beyond the world, rejecting it and directing their longing toward the unfabricated, toward transcendence. But this could become confused with *vibhava taṇhā*—craving for non-existence. The movement might be polluted: "I want to get out of the world, I've had enough, I don't want to be reborn, I want this experience that turns everything off, and then I want to end it all." This represents a confused interpretation, not what the Buddha was actually pointing toward.

There can also be aversion or fear of the body, wanting to transcend its messiness and sexuality, even an aversion to soul-making itself. This becomes a shrinking or avoiding movement—hoping for transcendence while skipping over all the earthy, messy, confusing realm that John Keats called "the vale of soul-making": body, eros, embodied existence. But this movement arises from avoidance, fear, and contraction of being.

Another shadow of extreme transcendent orientation is potentially not caring for the world: "I'm out of here, I'm on my way out, this world has no value." In an extremist transcendent view, the world serves only as a stepping stone at best—there's no inherent divinity in the world itself. This represents an extremely dualistic transcendent stance, yet I know people, including Buddhists, who hold this view.

The second orientation—the one-dimensional existentialist approach—carries its own limitations. There can be attachment to a limited view of the senses, to a narrow logos, to the flatland perspective. This creates narrowness of perception, experience, and even ideation. Paradoxically, though it seems opposite to the transcendent view, this too can lead to lack of care for the world. When we refuse any beyondness or divinity to the world, it becomes difficult to generate deep care. While the humanistic, modernist, secular paradigm may care for human beings and environmental concerns because degradation affects humans adversely, it's challenging to cultivate profound care for a world viewed as merely meaningless

matter.

This approach may also limit both the depth of freedom and the range of soul-making available, because the actual sense of the world remains very constrained.

The third direction—embracing divinity in and through the world—has its own challenges. It demands tremendous rigor from us intellectually, ethically, and in terms of practice artistry. If we're truly going to open to body, soul, sexuality, and eros as fields of divinity, it requires integrity, clarity, and scrupulous attention to these areas. It's easy to adopt certain language while lacking genuine rigor intellectually, ethically, and meditatively.

These three directions reflect patterns we can observe throughout history. Sociologist Robert Bellah has investigated what he calls "the history of world rejection"—how religious movements relate to and view the world. Building on Max Weber's insights, Bellah acknowledges that world rejection has manifested differently across various world religions and historical periods. However, he notes a striking pattern: "I want to concentrate on the fact that they were all, historically, in some sense rejections, and that world rejection is characteristic of a long and important period of religious history."

Bellah contrasts this with "an equally striking fact, namely the virtual absence of world rejection in what he calls primitive religions"—those existing before the first millennium BCE, prior to the Buddha's time—"and in the modern world."

So historically, we see primitive religions with virtually no world rejection, followed by a middle period where world rejection became quite pronounced in various forms, and then the modern period with again virtually no world rejection.

"Primitive religions," Bellah explains, "are on the whole oriented to a single cosmos. There is no beyond. They know nothing of a wholly different world relative to which the actual world is devoid of value. They are concerned with the maintenance of personal, social and cosmic harmony." The overriding goal of salvation that dominates world-rejecting religions is almost absent in primitive religion. The idea that salvation, freedom, liberation, awakening, or nibbāna involves getting beyond the world simply wasn't present in these earlier traditions.

"World-rejection is no more characteristic of the modern world than it is of primitive religions." This observation is particularly relevant for understanding what influences us culturally, how we read backwards into the Pali Canon, and how we orient ourselves in our spiritual lives.

So this is really what I want to explore in more detail: the relationships with these directions, what I'm calling the transcendent, the sort of existentialist flatland that refuses transcendence, and if you like, the immanence—which may include a transcendence, but actually insists, if you like, on a divinity, some kind of divinity in the world, in life, in matter, in form and the senses.

So, how does soul-making work in these three directions and inclinations? How does the eros work there? Where does it go? And as I said at the beginning, what is the movement of eros on the path or for the path and for awakening if the path and awakening are construed differently in these ways?

Thank you for listening.

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