In Love with the Way: Images of Path and of Self

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:34:31

Often it seems to me that there is so much to say, so many angles of exploration and perspectives to open up, directions to explore, dimensions and openings to make available—aspects and pieces of a jigsaw, pieces of a larger picture that feel potentially quite significant and might be very helpful for different people at different stages in their own explorations and considerations.

With so much to try and communicate, I often find myself hurrying through pieces that I would do better not to hurry through. When listening to new material, especially when something is communicated in a hurried way because I'm trying to get on to the next thing, it's not easy for the listener to actually discern what might be significant. Something might be a really potentially significant opening or avenue of exploration, but because of this hurrying or simply because it's new, it's not always obvious what's significant. It's not always obvious where something that is presented fits in a hierarchy of significance, of important ideas, of potential openings.

I apologize for that tendency I sometimes have. But I'd like to redress it a little and take more time to explain something we talked about the other day, to explore it more and actually invite you to explore it in some way.

We were talking about eros—eros for the path, eros for awakening, for the goal, if you like. What is it to have an erotic relationship with the path and with that movement towards awakening? What does it mean to have an erotic relationship? Are you in love with the path? Are you in love with practicing? Is there a sense of beauty? Is there a sense of the richness and dimensionality of the path itself and of yourself on the path?

Is there enough of a sense of a beyond, a more—more to discover, more to open to, more to realize—that allows the eros to be there? And is there enough richness and authenticity and power and fertility to the fantasies and images of the path and awakening? In the sense of a kind of other there—the path and awakening—and also of the self and also of the eros. As we said, these fantasies of other, self, and eros—in this case of path and awakening, self and eros—will constellate together. They will be pieces of a larger imaginal constellation where there is eros, where we love, where something is deeply alive for us in that way.

Also wrapped up in that, and often with fantasies, is some relationship with past and future—in this case with tradition. What's the relationship of the path as I sense it, as I vision it? Path and awakening. Myself

on that path. What are the images of all this? The image of my love. The image of my desire on the path. My love for the path. And the image of the tradition that, if you like, goes with that path or that hands us the path.

All these aspects will be involved in a really fertile, rich erotic relationship with the path and with the movement towards awakening. And it's particularly this aspect of fantasy and image of path and awakening, of self and of the desire and of the traditions—particularly the fantasies of the path—that I want to explain a little bit more about and explore with you and invite you to explore.

For most of us, the usual presentation of the teachings and of the path—and this doesn't go just for a Buddhist context, but the usual presentation in a lot of spiritual contexts, not all, but many—is as a movement to end or at least reduce suffering. And with that, to replicate, if not the Buddha's awakening, at least some of the Sangha of old, the enlightened ones, the Arahants of the past.

So one is essentially discovering or rediscovering for oneself, or following the instructions of what some sage or mystic in the past discovered for themselves and offered as teachings and a map. One is essentially seeking to replicate that awakening. So the awakening is something that's reconstituted, if you like, or sought from the past, from what was given to us in the past. Someone else's awakening that we're reconstituting.

This is not necessarily only Buddhist. We could be on all kinds of paths trying, in a sense, to reconstitute the kind of awakening that we get a sense of—for instance, that Ramana Maharshi seemed to have discovered, or Nisargadatta Maharaj, or Krishnamurti. It might be put in a secular context or a Buddhist context. It might be Advaita, Indian, this or that, or whatever—Buddhist, traditional Buddhist, secular Buddhist—which also has a certain vision, a certain idea of what it means to end suffering, and a certain movement to replicate the Buddha's awakening.

Even if a path is just about mindfulness and we're seeing that as somehow the way to end or reduce suffering, we're replicating that way from whatever we conceive of the tradition there, whether it's Buddhist or not. Usually, there's the ending or reducing of suffering and the replication of someone else's past awakening or something close to what they seem to be pointing to and trying to articulate in language or in their being.

But usually those aspects of the presentation are not recognized as fantasy. They're just presented as "this is what we're doing." It's often not quite stated so boldly that we're trying to replicate something, but those are the two principal thrusts. I'll come back to the fantasy aspect of those.

That's the usual presentation that most of us encounter, whether you're in the Gaia House tradition, or the Insight Meditation tradition, or the Buddhist tradition, or Neo-Advaita, or whatever else it might be. It's a similar kind of presentation, a similar kind of fantasy of the path—a double fantasy of the path there.

These two strands of that presentation, when we talked about this before—and I felt like I hurried through

it and wasn't so clear—these two strands we could say constitute what we might call the medical patient fantasy.

So in the Buddha's time, the physicians and doctors of his day would present their medical assessment in a particular formula: diagnosis of the disease, its cause, the possible prognosis if the full course of medication was taken, and then the prescription itself—the main treatment and what else was involved.

This is actually, if you can hear it already, the presentation of the Four Noble Truths. They are modeled on this medical formula. And so we, so to speak, are to follow the doctor Buddha's—the physician Buddha's—orders.

He says: What's the diagnosis? There is suffering. What's the cause? The patient is craving because they have avijjā. So let's say craving and avijjā—what we were calling clinging. The prognosis: if the patient will take the full course of medication—meditation and surrounding activities—they can realize a complete cure of this disease, the end of suffering. And the prescription for that is the Eightfold Path.

So we follow, as patients—as good patients—the Buddha who has diagnosed us and given us a prescription, a possible prognosis and all of that. We're to follow the Buddha's orders. And if we do so, we can end suffering, or at least reduce it to the extent that we're really able to take fully on board his recommended prescriptions.

Now, why am I calling that a fantasy? I'm drawing attention to the fact that there are fantasy elements inextricably woven up with that, as there are with actually all perception—or most perception, or certainly a lot of our perception when we're involved with something, when we love something. Partly, this is fantasy because it gets enriched through the eros and through all kinds of ways that it becomes filled out and meaningful and beautiful to us, and we really care about it.

Partly, also, it's fantasy because—as I've addressed in a few talks in the past—what does suffering mean? It sounds like an obvious thing that we're all talking about the same thing, but what actually do we mean by dukkha, the Buddha's word usually translated as suffering? And what does freedom from suffering mean?

We could have a vision of the path as just coping with the more obvious difficulties, stresses and strains and unpredictabilities and fragilities of our life. Something like continuous mindfulness allows us to meet again and again the incessant stream of the next thing that life throws at us, and cope with it by meeting it in this way that reduces suffering.

There's a kind of minimal sense of what suffering is and what freedom from suffering is possible—what those first and third truths are really referring to. One minimal way is coping through mindfulness—actually extracting just one term of the Eightfold Path—while also acknowledging that some dimensions of existence are just really hard. This is our existential situation. It's brutal, it's meaningless, etc. And we can do our best to bear up to that and cope with it by meeting it without too much demand or expectation, by going with the flow, by bringing bare attention or mindfulness and not superimposing

religious ideas or hopes. That's one kind of fantasy already wrapped up in that approach.

Another way is around the whole healing paradigm: healing of body, of energy system, of our psyche—the kind of psychotherapeutic meditation, healing the wounds of the past, healing the ways our personality has gotten twisted from events or situations or just pressures, long-term pressures of family or history. The fantasy that's now quite rich in the culture—the typical psychotherapeutic fantasy, of which there are actually many—makes the path really about that.

In that kind of picture, what does suffering mean? What does it really refer to? And what's freedom from suffering? What does it look like? What tone does it have?

Even somewhere like Gaia House, if you listen to enough teachers over the years, you really get the sense that what people are talking about or pointing to or holding up as a possibility or the goal for practice is quite divergent in terms of what suffering means and what freedom from suffering means and looks like and what its range is. There's actually a huge range in the interpretation or presentation of that third Noble Truth, and by implication of the first Noble Truth as well.

Some teachers at Gaia House and elsewhere say, "I do not suffer. I do not suffer." And you know, at quite the other end as well.

As I've said in the past, in a way, the Four Noble Truths' teaching about suffering and freedom from suffering is more like a skeleton. To borrow the Buddha's image of fleshless bones—an image he used in another context relating to the senses that we talked about—the Four Noble Truths are like fleshless bones in a way. What do they mean for us? What do we make them mean? We need to flesh them out.

We share vocabulary, but it's just like a skeleton. And within that shared vocabulary, of course, it can sound like we're all talking about the same thing, but there's... It might be that for the most part all we have in common is that vocabulary and the kind of reference of belonging to a certain tradition.

But that fleshing out, that filling up of the skeleton happens how? With Psyche and Logos. What are we referring to? How does it work? How does it look like? What does an awakened person do? What do they look like? How are we on this path? Where are we moving to? What's it going to be like? What is it like now? What are the pressing issues that I feel are to be faced, to be opened to, to be explored now?

So there's this medical patient fantasy, as we said, that's part of the usual presentation. And there's also, I would say, religious fantasy wrapped up in the usual presentation as well. Again, whether it's Buddhist, whether it's some other spiritual tradition, it's still presented that way. Freedom from suffering, and you're replicating something that he or she is pointing to in different ways, usually in a certain style of linguistic communication. And those styles can differ hugely as much as the fantasy of what it looks like and what it involves.

But why I'm calling it religious is because one of the things we could say, one way we could use that word

religious is in the sense of re-ligio. Ligio is from the Latin, like ligament or legislation. Something that binds. So it's binding us, re, again, to re-bind us to something. In other words, to bind us to something from the past.

Whether you accept that etymology or not is kind of irrelevant, but there is something about religions, as far as I can see, for the most part, in that they place their authority in the past. The authority is in the past. We've touched on this a little bit on this retreat, and I've certainly touched on it in other retreats.

So you can hear that in replicating the Buddha or whoever it is, Nisargadatta or Ramana Maharshi or Krishnamurti, and replicating that kind of, the sense that we get of the awakening that they're trying to communicate and are somehow trying to replicate it, even if we're not thinking in terms of replication, that that's actually what's happening there. That kind of movement of replication and the authority in the past.

Even if this person is still alive, it's their past awakening that we're referring to. They say, well, on such and such day or whenever this happened and now I'm like this. And we say, wow, that's amazing. And we try and replicate that.

So I'm placing the burden of the meaning of the word religious in religious fantasy for now, not necessarily with respect to the subject matter, but with respect to this kind of fantasy of having the authority in the past. Some people say, no, religious has to do with believing in some kind of metaphysics or metaphysical beyond or transcendent or believe in life after death or you believe in God or divinity or that kind of thing. You could say something like that if you want.

I think just for now, given the flexibility of how we're using words, what I want to point to is this: it's not so much that, but the fantasy about the style, the style of fantasizing self on the path. That's what I'm talking about in these four kinds of fantasies that I've offered already, and I'm just elaborating a bit more. The fantasies of, or the style of fantasizing the self and the path, and the self on the path.

So there's something, as I said, replicatory here with the authority in the past. Now, it may be that this path, or our vision of the path, may involve a kind of felt promise of this more, or beyond, which we can discover later regarding how we perceive self, other, and the world. In other words, the perception of things, our sense of the path might include this promise of something beyond what I already know. It could be just a little bit beyond, not that different. It could be something massively beyond, radically different, opening up in the perception there of self, other, world. And it could be that that sense of what's radically different is an obviously, quote, religious difference in the way some people use that word.

But that actually could be present, that beyondness could be present in any of these things, any of these four fantasies. And it could also have the kind of religious flavor of beyondness or transcendence or et cetera that's opened up in the perception. But that's not the key thing I'm pointing to because it could be in any of these four.

But as I said, the two sort of interwoven strands of fantasy in the usual presentation of the path or the usual way that most people tend to consciously or for the most part consciously fantasize their path is the medical patient fantasy and what I'm calling the religious fantasy.

And compare that, or either of those, or both of those, with what I was calling a third possibility, I've changed the order here by the way, but let's call it now the third possibility of the scientific researcher fantasy. In contrast to putting the authority in the past, science also looks to the future and anticipates, in its very assumptions and in its very project, anticipates making new discoveries in the future that it does not know today and that were not known in the past.

So yes, it uses the past, but it remains quite prepared to make radical breaks with the past and throw out anything from the past that no longer works or no longer serves as part of the most coherent and economical framework for understanding things.

But science, in contrast to the religious fantasy that looks to the past for its authority, looks also—or let's say predominantly—to the future. There's this... And I think I gave this example a few years ago in a talk. Let's take the scientific study of gravity. We had Galileo and Copernicus making initial observations and hypotheses about the movement of planets and about gravity at the time of the scientific revolution. Then along came Newton who synthesized Copernicus and Galileo with a theory of gravity related to the whole new physics that was emerging and the whole new scientific method. This rested on certain assumptions about scientific method, about reality, about all kinds of things wrapped up in that theory. He drew on Copernicus, he drew on Galileo, and he drew on many others as well—both the scientific methodology and the ideas about planetary motion and gravity.

Then a few hundred years later, along comes Albert Einstein, and in effect, to a certain extent, demolished Newtonian ideas of motion in space and time. Later, Einstein did the same with the Newtonian theory of gravity, replacing them with a whole other theory of gravity that was really quite different in fundamental respects regarding what was assumed to be real, the whole structure of the theory, and what its implications were.

Nowadays, what's at the cutting edge of research in modern physics is trying to synthesize theories—having realized that Einstein's general theory of relativity, which is a very successful and beautiful theory, doesn't actually work well with the other main theory of modern physics, quantum theory. So various theories have been proposed—none anywhere near proven yet—like quantum loop gravity and superstring theory.

If a scientist were to say, "I believe that Copernicus was right, and I'm only interested in Copernicus. Anything beyond Copernicus is a pollution of the tradition. It's not proper science. It's a devolution," this would strike us as... I'm not sure about this person's scientific standing and authority and how they're thinking about things. It's only the religious fantasy that puts all the emphasis on the past like that.

So you get this fixation on "what the Buddha said." Someone was just telling me the other day about a teacher who said, "This is where Buddhism went wrong, this is where Buddhism lost its way"—going on about the Unfabricated. "This came after the Buddha. It was put in by Vedanta people—the jhanas, the Formless Jhanas and all the rest of it." And it's like, how strange. What is going on there to have this insistence on what the Buddha said as being the ultimate authority? What's going on there? It's a religious fantasy.

A person might be absolutely committed to secularism in the sense that they find exactly that—the idea of an unfabricated or a transcendent—abhorrent, but still there's a religious fantasy. There's a religious secularism there, or secular religiosity or whatever. Am I aware of the fantasies? How come I've just decided that the Buddha is the ultimate authority? Can I not see that there must be a fantasy going on there?

And a person might admit, even within that fantasy, "Yes, well, he was a little bit conditioned by certain views of his time and the limitations of the Indian worldview—perhaps around his political views. I could be wrong here, but he didn't seem to speak up much against slavery, against the practice of owning slaves. Or his attitude towards ordaining nuns seems a little dubious." But still, apart from those kind of slightly minor details, he is the fundamental authority and we are trying to replicate something. We're trying to find what he really said, assume he's the ultimate authority and somehow replicate that.

The scientific researcher does rely on the past and uses the past, but may jettison or shatter models of truth from the past, assumptions about reality, directions of investigation, all kinds of things—as we said with Einstein and Newton. And I think I mentioned this the other day, that the scientific research fantasy may be an open-ended fantasy. If you talk to some scientists, they would say, "We'll never fully understand everything about the universe completely. There's always more to understand." It's open-ended in that sense. Or it may not be. You talk to other scientists and they actually think there will be a time when we've pretty much figured everything out. Slightly comically...

Slightly comically, there was an English physicist who said exactly those words just a few years before both the quantum revolution and Einstein's theories of relativity, which threw everything into disarray and showed how much more there was to understand.

But there is, whether it's open-ended or not in the fantasy, this openness and interest in the new and intentionality towards discovering new discoveries. The emphasis is towards new discoveries in research science.

Relating that to what this means in terms of Buddhism or whatever—the newness here is not so much presenting old teachings in slightly adapted ways to new groups or demographics. Rather, the possibility here is of really different understandings, really different insights.

I remember when I first used this idea of the researcher fantasy. I just tossed it out playfully when I was

talking about the beauty of desire in part two of this series. What was so interesting and striking about the material in that talk was this shouldn't happen. I felt like I'd discovered something—I'm not saying other people hadn't discovered it, but for me, I had not seen it before. And this shouldn't happen.

According to the teachings of the Buddha and the Pali Canon, as I understand them, desire, wanting—unless it's in very specific directions—basically brings suffering. But if you find that you can actually go deeper into that desire and hold it in a certain way, as we'll explore in this retreat, it actually does not bring suffering. It brings joy and fullness and abundance of being. Well, that shouldn't happen. So that's really interesting.

That's like Max Planck at the start of the quantum revolution presenting his findings in the laboratory. He really didn't want to present them because he knew this contradicted everything we think about radiation, black body radiation and how radiation is emitted by hot bodies. He said, "I don't want to share this. Something is really up here." And he did anyway, thankfully, though he felt very ambivalent about it. He knew something was up.

This is really what I'm talking about by the researcher fantasy—things that don't fit, areas that don't fit, directions, insights, openings that actually move into new territory, new insights.

In comparing these different fantasies we're outlining, one may be a researcher into mystical states, for example. One may be a researcher into insights and approaches that some people would deem religious or spiritual. But the fantasy of the movement, how the self engages, how it sees itself, how it images itself in that movement in relation to a path—this is what I'm calling the scientific researcher, the person who can discover, make new discoveries.

These four fantasies overlap, as I mentioned. It's a matter of emphasis. What's dominant for you, for me? What's dominant at different times? Do we have flexibility with them, or am I just stuck? Can I only look this way, only fantasize this way? Is there flexibility?

The fourth is what we're calling the artist fantasy. This is also quite different.

You might ask, what is art for? Is it for the end of suffering? Some art clearly is—politically motivated art with a message. But not necessarily. Even the scientific research fantasy may not be for the end of suffering, or even the reduction of suffering. It might just be an interest in mystical states, an interest in consciousness, an interest in experience, an interest in dependent arising that's not motivated so much by wanting to end suffering.

So what's art for? And who can answer that question? Who is to say what art is for? Is the impulse for art so deep in the human being, in humanity—let's say, because it's not in some people, obviously, but in humanity—that it can't be contained by a certain statement of purpose?

We might also ask what is the artist's relationship with tradition.

So most artists—and I'm speaking of artists one would take seriously—would never confine themselves to merely replicating the masters. If an artist declared, "I only paint like Michelangelo. Anything after Michelangelo is rubbish, and I'm simply trying to replicate his style," we might respect their freedom to hold such a view, but it would sound remarkably limiting. Such a stance would suggest a rather constricted artistic vision.

On the other hand, a serious artist would hardly remain ignorant of their tradition. A painter would likely study not only Michelangelo but what followed—the Impressionists, Cézanne, Picasso, the abstract expressionists. There would be learning to replicate the tradition, perhaps dialogue with it, maybe even fighting against or transforming it. But if an artist were either ignorant of their tradition or wished only to copy Michelangelo, we might question their depth, capacity, power, or fertility as a creative force.

So what might it mean to have a fantasy of self and path that we could call artistic? Let me leave that question fairly open for now.

I believe it was in the talk "In Praise of Restlessness" some years ago where I first broached this radical possibility—a fundamentally different conception of the path and of the self on that path. A vision, a fantasy of the path as art and the practitioner as artist, in a way that goes far beyond mere technique. In the two talks preceding that one—"Questioning Awakening" and "Buddhism Beyond Modernism"—I attempted to expose gaps in the constructions of belief and view that prevent such a vision. Those talks provided groundwork for this artistic fantasy, creating space for its possibility. And certainly in our last retreat, "Re-enchanting the Cosmos," we explored the poetry of perception and the art of perception, further supporting this possibility.

Let me point out another dimension of the artist's fantasy that reveals its deeper complexity. The artist—whether dharma practitioner, soul-maker, painter, sculptor, or musician—may sense or imagine that their discoveries and creations are actually participations in divine creativity itself. They become part of the art of the divine, of Buddha-nature, of God, of the daemons. Their discoveries and creations participate in that divine movement, that divine outpouring, that divine discovery and creation of new logos.

This introduces a profound level of participation, where one's art becomes a conscious collaboration with divine artistry. I mean something more here than the common report of "going with the flow" or "getting out of the way" so that the poem writes itself or the painting paints itself. This vision may involve tremendous struggle, sketching, working out, trial and error, thinking, planning. It shouldn't be mistaken for a merely passive "let it flow and don't think" approach.

This sense of deeper participation in divine creation could apply equally to the researcher fantasy. The creation and discovery of new observations, ideas, logos, frameworks, and conceptions might also be experienced as participating in the becoming of God, the evolution of the divine, the unfolding of Buddha-nature.

This brings me to an important point about overlap. These fantasies are not hermetically sealed categories. The artistic and research fantasies can interpenetrate, as can others we've discussed. These four fantasies I'm outlining might appear neat and separate, but they actually blur into one another. They're also not exhaustive—there may well be many other possible fantasies for envisioning ourselves on the path, our relationship to awakening, to goals, to tradition.

The degree of overlap depends partly on the scope and permission we grant ourselves within each fantasy. Take the researcher fantasy, for instance. The crucial question becomes: what's the scope of research I allow myself? What am I given permission to inquire into, question, and investigate?

You might hear me or other teachers emphasizing play, experimentation, discovery—encouraging permission to be creative. You might apply this when facing a difficult emotion, experimenting with different qualities of attention. Will you laser-beam it with microscopic, intensely energized attention? Hold it in soft, spacious awareness? Touch it delicately like a feather? In that moment, you're researching, experimenting to discover what's most helpful.

But notice how this experimental research remains nested within the medical-patient fantasy—it's oriented toward reducing suffering, which is perfectly fine. However, the scope and permission I grant to my researcher identity remains quite limited. Other things might be occurring in practice that I don't dare pick up on or question, perhaps because I feel I'm still developing my basic capacities—learning to work with difficult emotions, explore the energy body, practice emptiness, navigate the imaginal realm and its new language.

And so, quite rightly, one doesn't start researching at full depth until one has had a certain amount of training. Perhaps the table is a little cleared in terms of not being too overcome with other difficulties.

So there's a place for all this, but sometimes we simply do not give ourselves permission to expand the scope of our research fantasies and to dare to question. We may not even notice certain things that are perhaps worth questioning or might open up a whole new area of investigation, some new discoveries, just because we haven't given ourselves that permission. We haven't given that self-image, that self-fantasy and the relationship with the path and awakening enough scope.

So there's overlap. These four categories are not exhaustive. And to reiterate, all four of these that I'm laying out are valid. They're all lovely and wonderful things. I'm not wanting to imply any kind of hierarchy—first you do this, then you move to that, but if you're really, really good, then you have this one.

The question is: what is authentic to you? What way of fantasizing self, path, awakening, and tradition is authentic to you? That's a different question than simply thinking, "Oh, the artist—that sounds pretty cool. I think I'll go for that one because it sounds more interesting or rarer." We're asking what's authentic to you, and that's not necessarily an easy question. I'll return to that in a moment.

I can also point out something I alluded to a few moments ago: we can be so used to a certain mode of relating to and seeing and fantasizing self on the path in relationship to the goal—for example, the medical patient fantasy or the religious fantasy—so used to a certain fantasy that any venturing out or opening up to another fantasy quickly gets shrunk back down and put in the box of the habitual fantasy again.

For example, maybe I see that I've been in the religious fantasy, with this idea of trying to duplicate or discover for myself this awakening that I hear teachers talk about. They speak of different levels, and I wonder where I am. What happens is that this fantasy easily, as I said, squeezes into a kind of ego measurement.

Then maybe I hear about these different ways of fantasizing self and the path and awakening, and I let go of that whole religious fantasy model—moving towards some awakening which someone else is talking about that's supposed to be fantastic. When I let go of the confines of that religious fantasy and everything it seems to imply, all the baggage it brings with it, I realize, "Oh, that's better. I can breathe now." There's the letting go of that whole structure of self-measurement.

And lo and behold, with that letting go, there's less suffering. I feel unburdened of a kind of suffering because there's less of this ego measurement: Where am I? Am I there yet? Why am I not there yet? Why do other people seem to have got it and I don't? Am I going too slowly?

I let go, there's less suffering. Then very quickly, I relate to the whole idea of different fantasies back in the frame of: "Oh, it's good. When I let go of that one, I have less suffering. So which of these will bring less suffering?" Right there, I'm back in the medical patient fantasy. I'm thinking in terms of less suffering.

There's nothing wrong with that. It's perfectly valid. The question is: A, is it conscious? And B, is it authentic? Is it the most soul-making? What are we actually steering towards? What's possible here?

Because in what I just described, I've found my way—probably not that consciously—back into the medical patient fantasy with the logos, with the view and conception that it's about less suffering, and that's what matters most.

So it's tricky, all this. I'd love to simply say something about these four categories and have it be very simple, very cut and dry—hey presto! But you can see how much things overlap, how there are other possibilities. It's really not that simple.

When Jung introduced the idea of the archetypes in his way of thinking about things, he insisted on something people often don't realize: you don't ever get a pure archetype. Archetypes, if you like, their—what was his word there?

always in, his word was contamination, they're always contaminated, they're always mixed, was really his word, with other archetypes. You never get a single archetype on its own.

Again here, you never get a single fantasy on its own. It's variable, it fluctuates, depends on how we're relating, it moves in time, it moves depending on all kinds of conditions, and they're mixed. You have multiple things going on at the same time, multiple fantasies even going on at the same time in different mixtures and emphases.

And then this word authentic is also not so simple a word. When I say it's important which fantasy or what fantasy—better what fantasy, because it might not be just these four—it might be something outside of these four. Which is authentic to you?

Now, that could mean which is the fantasy of the path that's kind of given to or for your soul, so to speak. What are you called to? What is the impression, the fantasy that is summoning you, if you like? Already that question, putting the question that way, implies already a certain fantasy in a certain concept or logos of autonomy, as if the soul has a certain calling in a certain direction, has a certain archetypal influence, that's given to us and waiting to be discovered. Either we're authentic to that or we're not, we're in it or out of it, we're in it to a certain extent or in some situations or not, in others and not others, more or less. I'm not saying it's a bad idea—I think it's a very powerful idea.

But contrast that with the possibility that I would somehow like to hold as well: that we can experiment and try different fantasies. In this case, we can try different fantasies of the self on the path and fantasies of the path and of awakening and of self in relation to tradition. We can experiment, we can create our own or discover slash create, as we said before, new fantasies for ourselves. Try on different ones and see which is the most soul making, so to speak.

So this word authentic might replace which is the most soul-making, which we can either feel into and sense what's calling us, or we can play with things and experiment and find out and try different ones on. I would like to hold both of those fantasies of the approach to soul-making in relationship to these fantasies. I would like to keep both of them open.

But however we relate to that movement and that question, as I said, we need fantasy. We need a fantasy of the path for there to be eros. We need fantasy. And if we love the path, and if we love practice and everything that's involved in that, or a lot of what's involved in that, if there is love, where there is love, there is fantasy. There's a fantasy operating. But to be in love with the path and to have an erotic relationship with path, we need fantasy—we need rich, fecund, beautiful fantasy operating.

So this is, as I said, I wish I could just say something simple, and here's these four and it's very simple, it's very cut and dry and hey presto. But you start to go into things more and you realize that it's not so simple. It's not so simple.

So just drawing attention to some of the complexity of what we're presenting here without hopefully overburdening it with so much complexity that it becomes just utterly confusing and a kind of thicket. But to pretend that it's so simple would also not be very helpful, because very soon you would discover as you

experiment and inquire into these ideas that actually it's not so simple.

And can you also hear that there are many levels of this idea of participation involved in what we're talking about? Many levels of this idea, for me, of a very profound idea—the idea of participation, participating in the divine, if you like, participating in the Buddha nature, however you want to put it. In this case, we participate in the creation, in the creating of what awakening is. We participate in the creating, or creating slash discovering of what awakening is.

Which is a different idea than there is something called awakening, sort of there and waiting as a possibility, and you either have it or don't have it, are it or are not awakened, or you're at a certain stage of awakening—you're at the second stage or whatever. That's the usual notion.

What is a radically different notion? We participate in the very creation of what awakening is and can be. Usually when we hear something like that, we tend to think, well if I'm creating it, it must be worthless. It's not real. The only real, the only worthwhile thing or worthy thing is something that exists independent of my creation of it.

I don't know, can you get a sense of a whole other level of ideation here? To me, a whole other level of beauty of an idea, or profundity of an idea, that we actually participate in the creation, and possibly delineation, of what awakening is.

So, going back to these four possible fantasies, what I really want to do is just open up, if you like, a basic notion here, a very basic notion about fantasy with respect to awakening and the fantasy of the self on the path to awakening and in relationship to tradition. Just that as a really basic notion. And just waking up to that fact, if you like, that we fantasize in relation to all that. And that it's not a bad thing, it's an important thing. And so to understand this, understand what other possibilities might be there, and if you would like to somehow stimulate your inquiry into all this.

And that's important to me. I said at the beginning of this talk, to me this is actually very significant, or potentially it's extremely significant, what we're talking about—this fantasy of the self, how we fantasize the self on the path to awakening, all that constellation of fantasy there. It's potentially extremely significant and far-reaching, but it's only potentially significant if we find our way into those ideas and those fantasies and have something move there.

If we don't work this material and this inquiry for ourselves, then the significance and the ramifications of it and the effects of it only remain potential. They don't actualize.

So I wonder if it's possible for me to offer some lines of inquiry for you to ponder, to take away, to carry into your heart and soul and let them do their work. Perhaps we can work with this material together—on the cushion, away from the cushion, in your life. Hopefully we can plant some seeds here.

Let me suggest four threads of inquiry, rich threads that can guide this exploration. The first thread has

many elements to it, quite a constellation actually. And of course, you may discover your own threads of inquiry—that's part of the whole creativity of this process. That creativity is itself part of the fantasies we're exploring.

The first level of inquiry asks: Do I recognize where and when there is a fantasy operating—alive and fertile—of the self, of the path, of the self on the path toward awakening and tradition? This whole constellation of self, path, awakening, and tradition. Do I recognize when this fantasy is alive and inspiring, informing and motivating, doing its soul work?

Can I discern the contrast—where and when what dominates is more of an ego-measuring relationship with this same constellation? When is fantasy and soul-making fertile, and when has ego-measuring gained the upper hand? And where is it neither? Where there's no particular fantasy nor ego-measurement lens operating—just nothing much going on.

This first place of entry simply asks: Am I even aware of the difference? Can I tell the difference? What does that require? What kind of looking?

Fantasies can be subtle—the kind I'm speaking of are indeed often very, very subtle. Perhaps it's best when they are quite subtle, functioning as background colorers and inspirers, givers of beauty. This subtlety can make them difficult to notice.

But as I said, where there's love, where there's eros, it implies fantasy. Sometimes what happens is that because of ego-measurement coming in, a fantasy gets squashed. Or perhaps temporarily, or in a certain area, it's simply been suppressed. Or there may be areas of practice where fantasy has not yet arisen.

So this first platform asks: Can I recognize where and when there's fantasy, in contrast to where and when there's ego-measurement, and where there's neither?

Let me nuance this a little. In looking back over your years of practice and involvement in Dharma—or other spiritual practices—you might recognize different periods where the fantasies in play were markedly different. At different stages in your practice and life, for various reasons, different fantasies were dominant or operative. In reflecting on this, in feeling into it or noticing the colors and effects of fantasy and their influences—or their absences—you may see they shift significantly across different periods and stages.

Now let me add another strand to this inquiry. It's important to see that fantasies include not just self, path, awakening, and tradition, but also fantasies of others—images and fantasies of others. For example, the Buddha (which connects to tradition), or other teachers who mean a great deal to us, with whom we have heart connections, soul connections. Fantasy is involved there. They may be alive or dead, we may know them only through books or quite intimately.

It's crucial to recognize that this constellation of images and fantasies, in order to be fertile, must include

some fantasy of others: Buddha, Sangha of the past, teachers, present Sangha, friends, co-creators, fellow wayfarers on the path.

This has to be okay. It's part of how the soul works, part of how soul-making works. It's immature not to realize this, immature to try to eliminate it. What's psychologically mature is recognizing it and allowing its depth and function, recognizing image as image.

But the particular nuance I want to open right now concerns different areas of practice.

Because it might be that in different areas or different practices or strands of practice, you actually have quite different fantasies operating around those different directions or domains of practice—different old fantasy constellations of self, others, path, awakening and tradition.

So if I ask you to reflect, in relation to five different areas of practice or directions or strands of practice, on what tends to be the kind of dominant fantasy or fantasies in those directions or domains.

For example, the first of these five: What do you notice is for you the common or dominant fantasy of this constellation—self, other or teacher, path, goal, and tradition—in relationship with deep emptiness practice? That's the first of the five. How do you tend to...what kind of relationship of view do you tend to get into in relationship to the whole area and direction and domain of deep emptiness practice?

Could be...some people say, "Well, when I realize deep emptiness, I will end rebirth. I won't be reborn again," et cetera. Could be that idea is involved. Could be—and probably what's maybe very common is—"When I realize, or if I realize deep emptiness, then I will end suffering. I won't suffer anymore, or I will at least significantly reduce my suffering." And that would be very understandable if that idea was there. That's part of the fantasy. It's part of the logos and it's part of the fantasy involved.

But let's see if we can really open this up and bring in a kind of openness of view and assumption, also a kind of honesty here. And ask: Is that—is ending rebirth, or is ending suffering or significantly reducing your suffering—is that what you most want? What you really most want, what you really most love, what you really most care about? Is that what you feel called to?

It may well be. Or it might not be, or it might be of some importance, but actually there are other things that are more important. So what I'm really interested in here, again, is this authenticity—opening up this territory of inquiry.

And there might be other elements that come in that are important for you. Perhaps there's something about the tradition: "I love hearing the Heart Sutra. I love those kinds of enigmatic-sounding mystical quotes that go back thousands of years. And when I'm engaged in emptiness practice or reading about it or hearing about it, I somehow feel connected with that tradition and it does something." You just recognize this is part of it—this is a thread of the fantasy that's alive for me and important.

Or it may be that that person just says, "Yeah, well, it's not so much all of that, not even so much that I

really hope to end suffering. I just kind of enjoy it. I enjoy playing in those ways. I enjoy what that whole framework of moving deeper into emptiness and understanding of that and the practices involved. I just enjoy what it opens up in my perception and my conception and my assumptions and my—I enjoy the way it supports a kind of liberation of ways of looking, that all these other ways of looking become available and all these practices and there's a kind of beauty and art in them."

Which fantasy would that be similar to in our framework of four possible fantasies?

Or again, it might be that in relation to the whole deep emptiness trajectory, it's just not alive for you yet. Or it might be that it very often gets squashed. There may be a love, there may be a fantasy, but that fantasy often gets squashed into a kind of ego measurement thing, and it gets too tight. Too what? Realist? Lacking in soul-making? That would be the first one for you to kind of reflect on, ponder, see what comes to you, see if you can feel into.

The second area or direction of practice would be imaginal practice. And right away we can—for me at least—point out a distinction there. To me, I'm not sure imaginal practice has a goal, has a final arriving point. With emptiness practice, I suppose that at least in the way I would think about it, you can kind of reach a final arriving point, right? You could kind of say, "How much of the time am I able to dwell in that realization of emptiness without getting kind of shifted out of it temporarily or to some degree or whatever?" But basically, it might be one way of conceiving it is just: once one has realized the emptiness of everything, then tick that box kind of thing—it's done.

Whereas imaginal practice, at least in the way we're conceiving it, it doesn't have a goal. It's characterized by not having—it's open-ended, as I said in several talks in the past. There's no end to soul-making. It might be, you know, if you're new to it and these words—what is it that cosmopoiesis means again? And what's the difference between just having an image, using my imagination...

Once you get oriented—and it might take a little while to become familiar with the logos we're setting up, the conceptual framework, and some of the skills and techniques in practice—but once that foundation is there, imaginal practice simply exists without a goal. And because it doesn't have a goal, a kind of scale of measurement can't really fit onto it, as much as the ego might like to do that. It doesn't really stick. There's nothing to grab onto, unlike something like emptiness practice, which can tend to have depths and stages. Even if it's not formulaic, there's a trajectory that you can kind of measure—in a way, you could assess where one is on that scale of realization. In imaginal practice, I'm not sure that's at all possible.

So the second area of practice: how do you tend to fantasize in relationship to imaginal practice? That whole constellation of self, other, path, awakening, tradition—how does that operate for you?

The third area we could explore is samadhi. Traditionally, at least, the Buddha pointed to eight classical stages of jhānas—four form jhānas and four formless jhānas—a beautiful exploration and trajectory there. How do you tend to view that? Or you might be stuck in the idea of nailing the mind to one thing,

like the sensations of the breath coming in and out of the nostrils or the abdomen, and that's what samadhi means to you. How does the self fantasize itself in relationship to samādhi practice? It partly depends on what I consider samādhi practice to be, of course, but still—I see so much how this shrinks into a kind of ego measurement for people. So much, whether one views it in terms of jhānas or simply as "how focused am I on the breath?" or "how continuously am I in the moment?"—whatever definition one is using of samādhi. But the question again: can I be aware of what's operating for me in that constellation of self, path, goals, tradition, others, with respect to samādhi practice?

Fourth: what about mettā and the brahmavihāras? You might find this is just the same with all areas of practice—though it might actually be quite different in relation to one area versus another. That's why I'm going through these five. Mettā and compassion may be very alive for you. There may be a real beauty or fantasy there of what you're moving toward and what you're dedicated to, and others who inspire you in that way. Or again, it could be something contracted into ego measurement and self-judgment: "I'm such a mean-hearted person. I'm so judgmental. I should be more kind." Or it simply doesn't register for you—"Yeah, mettā, never was much interested in that." And if it's a fantasy, it's not just saying, "Oh yeah, there's a fantasy there," but really, really sensing what the fantasy is—sensing its beauty, its multidimensionality, its fantastical nature and everything involved in that.

The fifth area, for now at least: what about ethics and the whole domain of ethical practice? This is an interesting one. I've talked about this in the past—in the talk "The Necessity of Fantasy" was one place—but Buddhist ethics, at least, is predicated and set up for the sake of reducing suffering, actually primarily for reducing one's own suffering. So we may be fantasizing Buddhist ethics and thinking of our ethical practices just in terms of the medical-patient model. I know one of my teachers would think of it that way: you're staying out of trouble, making sure your mind isn't bothered and hassled by regrets and worries about being found out for saying something or someone chasing you for this or that. It's not restless and worried about all that.

Or again, it might be that with ethics there's actually a much richer fantasy going on—that something really moves you about purity and goodness and straightforwardness and openness and transparency. There's something deeply touching and beautiful and calling to the soul about the ethical life, whatever that means and looks like to you.

Or it may be that in relationship to ethics, the fantasy of the domain of ethical practice is really as inquiry. In a globalized world, with issues like climate change and very different political systems and possibilities for destruction—destruction without destruction being consciously intended, through the environment or consumption or consumerism having global impacts, all kinds of other things, or ethics around sexuality—we live in a different age now. What might be beautiful to you about ethics is precisely as a domain and arena of inquiry. And that's the fantasy of the self in relationship to the path of ethics. That might again have certain people who are inspiring to you, a certain sense of what you're moving toward, a certain relationship to tradition.

But what often happens in contrast, in relation to ethics, is...

One relates to it out of fear. I better keep these precepts or commandments or whatever it is in a different tradition or these laws or whatever. We just follow authority or what we've been told, kind of out of fear.

Or again, it might just be that ethics—and I think this is the case for quite a few people—is just not interesting. There's a lot more kind of interesting stuff in Buddhism, and so it's just not an area that the fantasy life has enriched and made fertile and made beautiful. It's just, "Yeah, well, probably keep the five precepts," but it's not really alive imaginatively.

So that may help this inquiry into this whole area of fantasizing the self on the path in relationship to the goal and tradition and others. These five strands of practice are just offering possibilities for investigation so that you can till this soil and make it fertile in relationship to this whole imaginal dynamic and constellation around self and path.

So all that was the first area. It was really about recognizing and inquiring where and when fantasy is operating, where it's more ego measurement, where there's just nothing operating particularly—different periods, different arenas of practice or directions of practice.

The second possibility of inquiry to add to that is: Could you play with, could you take for a spin, so to speak, a test drive of these four fantasies, separately perhaps at first, and try them on? Experiment with them. Imagine your way into them. Imagine relating to the path from, say, the researcher fantasy, or whatever it is. Think your way into that.

So just as a kind of experiment in creative inquiry, as a way of extending and loosening up the soul and the soul-making process there. Again, part of why I'm saying all this is we get—it's so easy for us to get tunnel vision, but also just stuck on a railroad track without the ability to steer ourselves in any direction, experiment and be creative and move things and create more space and more possibility there.

So could you, just in your imagination—or even in actual practice—try on these four fantasies that I've been outlining: the medical patient, the religious, the researcher, and the artist? Play with them and think about them and what that would mean and what it would look like and what it would feel like and what it would imply. I think it would probably be fun and informative to do that.

The third inquiry here is really what we mentioned before: What fantasy or fantasies work for you? It doesn't have to be one of these four that I've outlined. It could be something else. You come up with your own, or it chooses you, if you like, if we use a certain language—giving soul more intelligence and autonomy. This fantasy chooses you, calls you.

Again, this word: What's authentic to you? What works for you? How do I recognize that? This presupposes, as I said right at the beginning of outlining these inquiries: How do I even recognize where a fantasy is alive and fertile and offering, irrigating the soil, inflaming the soul, giving fire, giving beauty,

giving depth, giving richness, stimulus? Can I even recognize that compared to its absence or compared to the constriction of a more ego-measurement relationship?

But what works for you? What's authentic? What's fertile?

And then the last sort of question or inquiry is: How do you feel about this idea or possibility of the path being open-ended?

It's one thing to be handed and to receive from the tradition a sense that the path has an end. A person might think, "Well, yeah, but I'm never going to reach that end. Other people can." But it can be possibly quite a different thing to actually view the path itself as potentially open-ended because of the possibilities that we've been talking about.

How do you feel in relation to an open-ended path? And how does that idea, or that possibility, affect the possibilities of then how you fantasize self in relation to such a path, and others, and tradition?

That would be another way in, possibly, to all this. But I hope that one way or another you can work this soil a little bit. It doesn't have to be immediately, but maybe carving out a little time or a little intention—setting up the intention to, as I say, till the soil, work the soil, turn it, to bring these questions into the soul, these possibilities into the soul.

I really want to open up—as I said, to me it's quite a basic notion, really potentially significant. Something to understand here, something to stretch the soul a little bit through inquiring into it, into this area.

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