Visions of the Beyond

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:43:59

I'd like to start by offering you a few questions to explore. These are admittedly big questions, so you might want to spend time with them now or take them away to contemplate for as long as feels fruitful or interesting.

Let me begin with one question: What do you love about the path? What do you love about your path? What do you love in practice?

When you drop that question in, what comes? What responses arise from your being? What do you love?

You can linger with whatever answers come, responses that arise from your being, and sense their resonances in the heart, in the soul, in the body, in the emotions. Feel their effects on you—the effects of the responses, the effects of the questions. What do you love?

Perhaps there's a whole stream of different responses and answers, aspects that you love. Perhaps it's one particular aspect or thing.

Now let me ask a second question, related but different: What do you want from the path, from practice? What do you want? Where are you going? Where do you hope you're going? Where do you conceive you're going on this path?

Some people feel themselves moving towards something. What are you moving towards? Or in a different conception, what are you opening to, or hoping to open to, to receive even? These different images—active and receptive—offer various ways to approach the question.

So what do you want? Where are you going? What are you moving towards? What are you opening to?

We could use different words here—your sense, conception, image of the goal, the destination, the aim. Or if you prefer, the result or fruit of the path, or simply the direction you're moving in. Whatever words or way of articulating it helps you. What is it that you're after? What is it that you want?

Again, feel into the effects of that question, the effects of the responses in the different dimensions of your being—in the body, in the energy body, in the heart, in the soul, in the mind. You can linger with the answers and feel their resonances, sense their effect on you.

Perhaps some responses have come to each of these questions—what you love about the path, and what you want from the path. But let me ask you this as well: Do the responses that have come so far feel complete, exhaustive? Or is there the feeling that yes, that's part of it, but there's something left over,

something you haven't quite articulated yet, or perhaps even discerned or identified? There's no right or wrong here; I'm simply asking.

You can return to these questions and reflect on them anytime you want, for as long as you want. But let me now bring to bear a few perspectives on all this—on path, on goal—from the point of view involving many of the ideas and directions of inquiry and exploration we're focusing on in this retreat.

I don't know if you realize this, but to some extent, the conception we harbor or entertain of the path and of the goal—let's call it awakening—and the fantasy of the path and of awakening, are going to be conditioned by what we read and hear.

The very way I think of the path and the goal, what it includes or what it is, what direction it's going to take me or supposed to take me, what it includes and what it doesn't—all that will to some extent be conditioned by what I'm exposed to: reading, hearing, teachers, friends, and others.

Some of this is dependent simply on the era, the age we live in, the time we are in. The sense of self we have now, that we just feel or most people would feel is completely obvious—this is what my self involves, this is what my self includes, this is the kind of interiority I have, this is the way I not just think of the self but feel the self, experience the self—that sense of self and also the freedoms I conceive or feel or hope or aspire to for that self, the kinds of freedom and the ranges and directions of freedom for that self, are different now than they were in the time of the Buddha in India.

One has only to read the suttas to notice the complete absence of certain kinds of relationships with the self, both difficult and exhilarating or interesting or opening or complex.

So that our very sense of freedom—the freedom for that self, or the freedoms, plural, for that self and of that self—are actually different. They're conditioned by the age that we live in and what comes to us from the outside, from the era, and so forth. To me, it's interesting to realize that. It does something to realize that.

Then we might ask, on the back of such a realization: if our views of all this and our fantasies of path and awakening are conditioned to some extent by my environment, what is a conception and a fantasy that is, so to speak, authentic for me? Or am I just a kind of puppet pulled this way by what I'm hearing or reading and what's in the air around me in my culture, in my time, in my society, in my spiritual fashions, for want of a better word? What would be an authentic conception and fantasy of path and awakening for me—authentic to me? I mean, authentic means like born of myself, in independence, actually related to the meaning of independence.

Now that question—what's an authentic conception of fantasy of the path—is not a question that the Buddha and other spiritual teachers of different ages would ever even have thought to ask. It would never even have occurred to them to ask it. Partly because we live in a very individualist culture now that didn't exist back then. That whole way of conceiving self and choice just didn't exist. The Buddha would never

have asked, "What's an authentic conception for you of path or of awakening?"

So that's interesting too. And I wonder whether even for us these days it's really a helpful question. Perhaps a better question—I think a better question—would be: which ways of conceiving and fantasizing path and awakening are soul-making for you? That's different. Again, it's related, but it's a different question.

So what ways of conceiving and fantasizing and imagining path and awakening are soul-making for you? That's actually quite a radical difference in approach and questioning.

Now, notice that if we come back to this point about our being to some extent conditioned—our views of what we can conceive of as a path and what awakening is, is to some degree conditioned by the culture—whether it's conditioned to a great degree for me or to a very small degree, my views and my conceptions, my images of path and awakening, how much it is conditioned for me by the culture is actually not the important factor.

So it might be a lot, or it might be a little, but what's important is not the so-called authenticity or independence. It's the soul-making. That's the test.

Just like when we talked about in imaginal practice: it doesn't matter if you deliberately introduce an image or change an image in some way and you think, "Oh, is that just my ego? I shouldn't be doing this." It doesn't matter. The test is in the soul-making. So here too, the degree or the extent to which it feels like "Well, this is just conditioned from my culture, from what I've heard"—that doesn't matter. From this point of view, the question is: is it soul-making? How soul-making is it? Is it supportive of soul-making or not? You understand?

But notice, too, a more radical distinction from the ways we usually think about these things. The goal—aim, destination, direction, result, fruit, whatever word you favor there—the goal that you conceive or fantasize is not just conceived of. The question is not just "Is that helpful for you to conceive and imagine that way? Is it healing or is it freeing?" Whatever those words mean, but "Is it soul-making?"

So that's quite, I would say, a radical difference of approach, of orientation, of entering into these questions.

Traditionally, in the Buddhist tradition at least, what seems to me unavoidable if you read the suttas—but actually I really don't care whether it's so-called historically accurate or not; it's not important, especially not important for what I want to unfold in this talk—but let's say traditionally, in the Pali Canon, the goal, destination, aim, fruit, et cetera, the path, was a realization of the transcendent unfabricated, meaning this transcending of the world of perception itself. Not just the world of labeling, but the world of sense experience, and the world of any kind of sense of experience of subject, any kind of experience of object, of space and time.

And this dimension, āyatana, realm of the unfabricated or the deathless, transcendent realm, was something the Buddha put a lot of emphasis on, and one way of intuiting, sensing, understanding the coherence of the whole Pali Canon: it's all a movement of lessening fabrication, culminating in this opening to the unfabricated.

Something utterly beyond anything that we can say of it or describe it, except by talking about it for the most part in the negative, as the Buddha mostly does: not this, not that, beyond this, know this there, know that there, et cetera. Something utterly, utterly mystical and transcendent there.

Now, I'm not spending a long time talking about that in this talk, but I have in other places. Some people, in my experience, are very interested in this. And they hear about this realm, this dimension, this possibility, this opening of the transcendent, unfabricated, the deathless—whatever you want to call it—and it really sparks their interest. There's a fire there. Some people yearn for this opening, to move towards that, to know it in this lifetime, et cetera. And it's actually a central yearning and thrust of the whole way they feel the path, as it seems to me it really is in the Pali Canon as well.

And some people, other people, hear about this or read about it and are not interested in it at all, for different reasons. So that's just something to notice. And in the tradition, this realization or opening to the transcendent unfabricated was intimately tied up with the end of suffering.

So that in the moment of—let's say—experiencing that, for want of a better word, opening to that, the moment of unfabricated, that comes about through a complete dying down in the moment of the factors of clinging, push, pull, including avijjā, ignorance. In the moment, so that the clinging and the avijjā propel fabrication—if you know the teachings of dependent origination—in the moment when those are completely quieted, there is no fabrication of perception happening of self, other, subject, object, world, time, space, et cetera.

The arahant, the so-called completely awakened person, has just erased or eroded or cut off all clinging and all avijjā, and so at the end of their life they are not reborn. In other words, there's not the propulsion to create more fabrication of perception. So no perception, no world is reborn, if you like, put it that way.

They are not reborn into the world. This movement toward the unfabricated is intimately tied up with the view of ending suffering because one ends rebirth - getting off the wheel of rebirth, ending that whole cycle of death and rebirth.

Returning to our opening talk, some people have a yearning to know this unfabricated, this transcendent - a deep desire for that. Yet it's not completely captured or described as a movement where all they want is to end suffering. Wrapped up in that yearning is the desire and the longing of the mystic. It's not only captured by, or even primarily described as, a desire to end suffering.

There's a whole range here for people at different times in their practice. How much desire do you or I have for this? How much does any practitioner have for this opening, this realization?

Another thing to point out: other kinds of mystical experiences, including experiences of universal oneness - whether oneness of awareness, cosmic consciousness, infinite consciousness, universal awareness, universal love, or the universal ocean of being - are all connected on a spectrum of lessening fabrication, which has its endpoint in a complete cessation of fabrication. They're all degrees of less fabrication, grouped together along a thread of lessening fabrication.

In practicing different ways of letting go of clinging, one moves on that spectrum of fabrication, opens to these different perceptions of less fabrication, which involve less fabrication of subject and object, self and world, and that split and concreteness. One knows and experiences all the different kinds of beauty of those universal onenesses.

One thing this movement has in common is that there is a beyond. In all these openings, before I've fully opened to them - whether to universal love permeating the fabric of all existence, universal awareness, or this transcendent unfabricated - it constitutes for me a beyond. Beyond what I already know and have experienced. I might intuit it, have heard about it, or had glimpses, but it's still a beyond.

Recalling what we've been saying about the soul-making dynamic: where there is a beyond, one possibility that constellates in relation to that beyond is eros. Eros involves a beyond. This whole sense of possibility - opening to realizing different kinds of universal oneness, mystical experiences, this transcendent unfabricated - becomes something in relation to which eros constellates.

With eros allowed to do its work, it will constitute and constellate fantasies and images in regard to that beyond and the movement toward it - what it includes and involves, what's around it and associated with it. There is the erotic imaginal involving fantasy and image of awakening, of enlightenment, of realization, of the Buddha who showed the way or other teachers past and present who have realized what I haven't yet fully realized. Images of those who are showing the way, living that, exemplifying that. Fantasies and images of the path and of the self on that path.

All of this is soul-making rather than something negative. There is beauty that comes with that filling out of the erotic imaginal, that constellation. Beauty comes with it, meaningfulness, a sense of depth - soul-making.

Another possibility is that it constellates craving rather than eros. What determines whether it constellates craving or eros? What guides it one way or another, conditions it, sends it into craving rather than eros, into eros rather than craving?

When there is craving and its pain, a teacher will often say to a student who has this aspiration to realize the unfabricated but is struggling: "Drop it. Drop desire. Drop striving. It's not about getting anywhere or achieving anything. Nowhere to go, nothing to do."

This is crucial: What determines what happens? Is there a tendency when desire arises to emphasize the sense of lack rather than the desire and its beauty? Does a self-view become very reified and solidified in

relation to what I desire? Perhaps I assume I'm not going to be able to realize this.

Or the self-view constellates and hardens in some kind of relationship or construction of self-measurement in relation to this. Where am I on the ladder towards awakening or on this experience or that unfabricated or this thing? And measurement comes to be the dominant flavor and all the pain of a realistically conceived self-measurement. And the contraction of that.

Then what happens when we have that contraction? What do we do with it? And is one of the possibilities, the issues from a sense of contraction at some point or other, that I drop it. I just drop it. And I go into some other kind of relationship that has just dropped that desire and that view and that sense of possibility.

Or perhaps there is what we touched on when I was telling you about the psychoanalyst Douglas Fairbairn, and he talked about the anti-libidinal ego defense. That when we fear not being able to have what we desire, or being rejected, or the impossibility of getting it, there are structures in us that kick into place that actually prevent us from even wanting it. Anti-libidinal, they prevent the libido, the eros from constituting to even want that and come into relationship. They would just cut it off. Sometimes to the extent we don't even feel the desire at all.

So interesting to me and complex is so important. What goes on for us? What constellates out of that possibility of any kind of beyond? Beyond what I know, beyond what I already know, what I already experience. What happens with us in relation to that?

So a sense of the beyond can constellate eros, as we say. When it's a desirable beyond, it constellates eros as a possibility. But the reverse is also true, as is so often the case with these dependent origination things, that where there is, let's say, a lot of eros in a person's being, in their soul, as it's flowing in their life, that lot of eros, that fire, that movement of water, if you like, that eros will constellate a beyond. It, as we've said, needs eros needs a beyond. And it will discover and create a beyond.

So the beyond constellates the eros, the eros constellates the beyond. The transcendent, unfabricated, or any of these kinds of stages on the way to that—of some kind of perception of universal onenesses—are one possibility of beyond, one direction of possibility beyond, of possibilities of beyond.

If dimensionality is allowed to the sense of existence, to the sense of consciousness, but also to the sense of the fabric of the world, if one allows dimensionality, one of the possibilities is that it moves in this direction—different kinds of onenesses, along the spectrum of lessening fabrication until eventually it's the unfabricated, opens the unfabricated.

So if dimensionality is allowed, this constellation of a beyond that comes from the eros, one possibility is that. If dimensionality is not allowed, it's not something that the psyche or consciousness or the logos or whatever allows, admits is possible. But then what happens to the eros?

Here is a person with a fair degree of eros, in the small sense, and it cannot open up into, or it cannot open up, other dimensions of perception. So there is just a one-dimensional world—this is it—and then that eros, in its wanting more, can't open, discover its more, get its more, have the beauty of the satisfaction, the fulfillment of more and an endless more in the opening of the perceptions of dimensionalities. It must go, so to speak, flatly outwards, horizontally, and move in one dimension, wider and wider. I need more, I need more, I need more. The eros wants more always.

And so more this, more that, in the one-dimensional world, more acquiring, endless acquiring of experiences or possessions or whatever it is. It's only got one way to go, and that's horizontal. It has no depth of beyond to move into. The beyond is just beyond, flatly, in terms of more that I can acquire, in terms of conquests or relationships or possessions or experiences or whatever it is. Facebook friends. Endless, wider and wider horizontal movement that eros has driven into what we call greed and craving in the Dharma language.

And conversely to all this, if there's not much eros in a being—and that could be because it's blocked for the different reasons that we've touched on and we can keep going into that and exploring that, how does it get blocked or limited in different ways, the eros and that whole dynamic. Or it could just be, you know, some people, just natural to their being, natural to their soul, is that there's just less eros.

Some people really have a lot of fire, a lot of rivers, torrents of water. There's a lot of eros moving in the soul. There's a soul with a lot of eros, and some less so. And there's no judgment here, or more or less. It's just natural to a being, because I'm certainly open to that point of view.

The question is whether it's natural to me, this much eros, whatever that much is, or whether it's blocked, or whether it's kind of forced and I'm straining for an eros, or a torrent or a fire that's actually not natural to the being.

But sometimes there's not that much eros, and so there's not enough eros to constellate much of a beyond. You understand? Not much eros, not much sense of a beyond, that which I haven't yet known and experienced and opened to and penetrated, and the excitement of that and the attraction and the beauty and the longing for that.

Not that much eros, therefore not much beyond constellated.

But with regard to this transcendent and that whole spectrum of lessening fabrication, the different kinds of mystical experiences of universal onenesses and the like—in regard to that, one of the questions and investigations for us as practitioners is whether we can notice if there is a sense, a relationship with the transcendent, and that eros for it, and desire for it. How does it move, when does it move, and why does it move between eros and craving?

Coming out of that question and investigation is: how do I take care? What is involved in taking care of the soul making and the eros in my relationship with the transcendent—this thing, this dimension, whatever

dimension it is that I haven't opened to yet?

This is a very different way of thinking about this. Can I take care of the eros here? Implicit in that means: can I take care of the soul-making? Which means: can I take care of the image in all this with its different aspects?

So it means in relation to that object—that erotic object, that whatever specific beyond that I have heard about and I intuit and I've glimpsed and I want to open to—the object, but also the self. Remember this imaginal constellation: object, self, world, and eros. So can I take care of the eros and the soul-making? Can I take care of the soul-making in relationship to this kind of beyond, a transcendent beyond, or whatever, in that direction—the object, the self, and the eros itself? How do I do that? What's involved in that? How do I care for that?

So that's one possibility—let's call it the traditional one, the movement towards transcendence.

The second possibility, which we've already touched on, is that dimensionality—any sense of dimensionality to existence, to the way that the world is—is blocked. It's absolutely refused, or at least not supported in the worldview, or for whatever reason it's blocked. Then what we get, from our small definition of eros as wanting more, wanting more contact, can only move in one dimension, and the "more" will just push it wider.

So I need, if it's in relation to a certain lover or whatever, more contact. And then at a certain point that's exhausted because I can't have any more contact with you, or I get tired because you're just one-dimensional. There's not more to discover in you, so I go chasing someone else, or I have affairs. Or I have this car and then I need another car. Whatever it is—I've been on holiday here, now I need to go there. And it's not coming from a limitation in the self; it's coming from a limitation of the soul-making dynamic.

So it becomes this kind of chasing of experiences or trying to accumulate and acquire experiences. And because it's flat and doesn't have the other dimensionalities to open up, to create, discover, to be revealed, to move into, it becomes in some way or another just a chasing of pleasantness, pleasant sensations, and a kind of avoiding of the unpleasant, and this movement to somehow prop up through this accumulation of experience the ego moving in a one-dimensional world.

Part of the tragedy of all this is that in our contemporary Western society, it's actually nowadays quite possible to keep chasing this quite a long time, even for people who don't conceive themselves as in the rich portion of society. Even people who, relatively speaking in terms of Western society, are not of greater means financially can still pursue this. How many TV stations are available? How much different kind of food experience is available? How many cheap holidays are available?

So it's actually, unfortunately, quite possible—with all the effects this has on the environment and all kinds of other consequences—it's actually quite possible, unfortunately, to keep chasing this really quite

far down the line. And there's an endlessness possible here, but it's flat.

What's not recognized is that this one dimension doesn't come alive as fantasy. It's all conceived as real—a real self having a possibility of accumulating or possessing real objects or real experiences in a real world. And if we are viewing it critically from a Dharma perspective, the eros there, or the desire—the craving there, better—is also viewed as a real thing.

Of course, some people from a Buddhist perspective say, well, that's not a path. That's samsara, this endless flowing on. *Sara* means "to flow"—this endless flowing on, this endless chasing, endless thirst of *ta nha*. But that's one possibility of what happens with the germ of eros, so to speak.

Coming back to what people would consider—because that is a kind of path, I suppose, but people would generally not consider that a path. Buddhist people would not consider it a legitimate path.

But if we come back to Buddhist versions of the path, there are some approaches—particularly what some people might call secular Buddhism or mindfulness-based practices—that would state right away that there is no beyond. And certainly not a beyond that's anything other than fantasy in the pejorative sense: mere hope, wishful thinking, consolation. There's no real beyond. Any transcendence you might conceive of or harbor is dismissed as "just metaphysics"—in other words, nonsense.

In this view, the path is the goal. There's very little difference between path and goal. Both are characterized simply by this life, this experience of finite existence. This finite life—limited in so many ways—*is* the path. The goal is simply meeting this life: being open to it, letting it touch us, coping with that encounter repeatedly and endlessly until death brings the extinction of consciousness.

From this perspective, there's just an endless repetition of meeting life with its finitude, its tragedy, its existential limitations. We're asked to meet and cope endlessly with what life *is*—conceived quite flatly, one-dimensionally, bounded by strong existential limits. Eventually we might arrive at a stance of resignation, or what some would call equanimity, in the face of what's construed as reality—what contemporary philosophers call "facticity," avoiding words like truth.

This is what's conceived as real: this life, what I perceive through the senses. Life is just what it seems to be—what most people would agree upon. In this understanding, there's not much more than what appears obvious through sensory experience and conventional understanding of existence. There's not much beyond what I already know to discover or open to. Awakening doesn't constitute or involve much more than I already realize and experience. There's not much of a beyond there to discover.

Yet notice what happens when eros enters the soul. Life begins to acquire a capital L. It becomes somewhat romanticized and elevated in various ways—perhaps through celebrating the touch of breeze on cheek or the moment-to-moment flow of existence. Whether this romantic view preceded the path or eros later impregnated these elements with its elevating quality, something gets lifted up, though always constrained by the limitations of the worldview.

One possibility is that Life with a capital L encompasses the Sublime with a capital S. This concept, originating with Romantic poets and painters like William Turner, describes something simultaneously beautiful and terrifying—beautiful to the senses yet overwhelming because of its vastness compared to the small, fragile self. The sublime combines aesthetic sensibility with existential trembling before the hugeness of things, wrapped up with the tragedy of impermanence.

This becomes what life *is*: the sublime and the tragedy of impermanence. The path asks us to face this, to open to it, to feel its poignancy. These elements become central aspects of practice.

This does constitute a kind of beyond—beyond the fragile me, beyond my existence. The possibility of erasure in non-existence at death, which could happen anytime, anywhere, and the tragedy of that disappearance, this too becomes a beyond. So there is a beyond here, allowed by this limited logos, though any other beyond either doesn't occur to the practitioner, doesn't interest them, or is flatly disallowed a priori—completely disqualified as possibility. The very conception and image of a more expansive path or awakening is ruled out from the beginning.

The path becomes about, principally about coping with this—life conceived and sensed in a certain way with its existential limits, with its inherent meaninglessness and inherent tragedy. These factors, these aspects come to the fore, and that's what the path becomes about: coping with this.

In this kind of approach, the eros and the soul-making dynamic—the eros and the eros-psyche-logos dynamic—are limited. They're quite limited here, partly because of the realism. It's just that this is real. Nothing else is allowed. This view is what reality is—the facticity, if those words are used. Oftentimes words like "truth" are avoided, but this is real.

Because of that realist basis, and because of the refusal of any more dimensions to existence—to discover, to open to, to know, to penetrate—there's a one-dimensionality. That one-dimensionality and the realism at the base of the view limits the eros-psyche-logos and also how much eros may constellate or gather from that.

So in this view, there's a kind of rhetoric of being in touch with this, and everything that we said, but not the rhetoric or the invitation to any kind of opening or knowing or experiencing of what is beyond what is already pretty obvious. There's a little bit of that, but not much.

There are many possible reasons why that kind of view, for many people, has gained a lot of traction and is even attractive or seems inevitable or the only one they can get behind. The rise of secularism, of course. The domination of views of scientific materialism, the movement of existentialism in philosophy and psychology and psychoanalysis in the twentieth century. There are many reasons—we don't have to go into that.

I know you've heard me speak quite critically of this kind of thing in the past. But I really want to say: this is perfectly valid and okay for some. For some people, it really suits their soul. Maybe for them that view

of the path, that concept of the path and awakening, is actually soul-making to the degree that satisfies their soul and their eros. Maybe a set of fantasies of the self and the path and the Buddha and what awakening is constellate around that whole view, imbue that view and form that view in a way that's, to some degree, soul-making, or to the degree that satisfies their soul. So I really want to say: it's completely okay.

Again, the question is: is it soul-making? Is it soul-making for you? Is it soul-making for me or someone else? It might be that such a view satisfies because there's not much eros in that particular soul, and that's completely okay. Why should there be? Who's to say that's a good thing or a bad thing? It's fine. It's just natural, maybe. And so there's not that much eros-psyche-logos dynamic, expansion, the fire of that.

But the question is really: why? And is it soul-making? Or are there anti-libidinal patterns or blocks in the logos, or rigidity or fear, that's actually coming in and blocking the whole thing? So it's not actually as soul-making as it could be, or not, so to speak, genuine, authentic to that soul. These, to me, are the more important questions. Not: is it right, is it wrong, is it what the Buddha said? This is all a whole other level of view and story and soul-making fantasy that comes in around that.

The other possibility is what can happen when someone starts with that kind of view and that sense and that concept of the path. That's what they're given to understand from what they've encountered or read or what they've been taught. But that person has a lot of eros in their soul, so to speak, and the eros is not being blocked. Or rather, the blocks are not sufficiently rigid. The walls there are not sufficiently rigid enough to prevent the eros, the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, pushing on those walls and stretching the view and stretching the possibilities of experience that then that person opens to—stretching the logos and the conception, the whole sense of what awakening can be and what the path then is.

Either stretching it gradually or in stages, or shattering that view, breaking those walls—this breaking of the vessels I've talked about before, the *shevirat hakelim* they talk about in certain streams of Kabbalistic teaching. And because of the eros and the aliveness of the eros...

The expansion of that, the breaking of those walls, requires a new conception to be consolidated and constructed—a bigger conception that allows more, a bigger fantasy that allows more. Because some people do have a lot of fire, a lot of soul, a lot of eros, and there will be this movement toward expansion. Often there's a quickness with that, along with all the multi-dimensional, multi-aspected fertility of the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic. They need, or they create, or they discover, or they open to more.

So a fourth possibility is what we might call classically a kind of tantric view, or a set of views that we might call tantric, as a way of conceiving the path and awakening. If you've seen a lot of those tantric thangkas or icons—paintings or sometimes sculptures—there's the depiction of a Buddha as actually a couple in sexual union, erotic sexual union. There's the yab-yum. Usually it's male and female, the Buddha and the consort, but the totality is actually conceived as the Buddha. It's not only the Buddha and something else—the totality of that union is the Buddha, or is a Buddha. This represents and conveys

through an image a vision and a conception of awakening.

There is the union, depicted sexually—the union of emptiness and appearances. Sometimes it's conceived that way. Emptiness in that view, often in the tantric view, doesn't only mean emptiness of inherent existence in the way that I've mostly explained it in the past. It means really a transcendent, non-dual awareness—a non-dual wisdom awareness, a gnosis, a jñāna, a non-dual wisdom awareness that is not separate from appearances, that is empty in itself and that knows the emptiness of all things. So that jñāna is actually what emptiness means in some tantric traditions, not just the emptiness of inherent existence.

And that is, as I said, in erotic union, in sexual union—we're not separate from the senses, the world, experience of the senses, appearances. Those appearances are empty and divine.

Or in some explanations, this yab-yum, this erotic union, sexual union that's depicted there, represents the union of prajñā and upāya—wisdom and skillful means. Wisdom, which again is this wisdom consciousness, this wisdom awareness, this gnosis of a Buddha, of a fully enlightened being—what I said before, this jñāna, this empty, knowing, pervasive, universal, cosmic awareness of emptiness that is non-dual, not separate from means.

So there's wisdom and means, the two treasures of a fully enlightened being. The means is not just skill in teaching—it actually refers, in its deeper meaning, to the upāya as the mandala, which is the world, the world of divine appearances that appears to that wisdom awareness. So there's this union of wisdom and means, which effectively means the union of subject and object, of wisdom awareness and world, of psyche and physis, of soul and the world, soul and the world of the senses, the world of appearances.

Now in classic Tantra, at least in some streams that I'm familiar with, that constitutes a beyondness—something that I'm not quite fully realized yet that I want to know, want to experience. But notice that the divinity there and the beyondness there is both in the divine appearances, but they also have a place for the transcendent, the non-fabrication of perception and experience. Both are there.

There's the tantric instruction, the instruction in the Vajrayāna—the thrust for me, the central thrust of that whole yāna, really, of Vajrayāna—of seeing, sensing, knowing, recognizing all experiences as divine. Not just empty of inherent existence, but divine and empty of inherent existence. Knowing all experiences—not just some experiences, all experiences. So there are these radical teachings about eating feces and eating semen, about seeing unethical actions—all of it as divine. Can I see all of that as divine?

Now you're probably aware by now that what we're teaching here, what we call imaginal practice or soul-making, that whole movement, has a lot of parallels and connection points with that whole direction and movement of Vajrayāna teaching and tantric teaching. They're not the same, and I wouldn't want to equate them or claim that, but there are a lot of parallels there, obviously, with what we're teaching.

Both of those streams—just like the tantric—the soul-making direction, the sense of the path as a path of soul-making, the sense of awakening as a movement into soul-making, the movement of soul-making,

gives place to and gives an important place to the imaginal. That's characteristic of both tantric practice and soul-making practice, of course. And that includes the intra-psychic imaginal, of course, but also the imaginal pervading the world and opening up the world of the senses.

So there's not just this transcendence—there's this opening to the senses and the inclusion of the senses as part of the path. And there's the possibility of divinity not just transcendent to the senses, but in and through the senses in what we've talked about: theophany and cosmopoiesis. So the possibilities of beyondness here—to open to, to know, to fully penetrate, to fully explore and become intimate with—are many. In fact, they're unlimited, they're infinite. Do you get that? There are infinite possibilities of beyondnesses, because the ways that theophanies can manifest, the possibilities for theophany and the possibilities for cosmopoiesis, are unlimited. And the possibilities for imaginal divinity are just infinite. There's no limit on the soul-making creativity there and discovery there.

Notice too that in this way of conceiving things, awakening or the goal or fruit of the path becomes or is something infinite and something open-ended. In the Vajrayāna conception, because only a Buddha has that kind of awareness, is actually able to fully—for example, able to fully see the emptiness of things without that perception of whatever thing they're perceiving fading.

So only a Buddha, not an Arahant, not anyone else, is able to both fully perceive and cognize the emptiness of something and perceive that something at the same time. And so they have this full awareness of emptiness and divinity simultaneously—only a Buddha. And no one's going to say, "I'm a Buddha," or "I have reached," or even think they have reached that. So there's a kind of open-endedness that effectively constellates the path as part of the path itself. It becomes open-ended: "I'm not there yet, I'm not there yet." Do you see what I mean?

And from the soul-making conception, in that understanding of path and movement, because of the infinitude of possibilities of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic and what it creates and discovers and what is revealed and opened there, the path is also, and awakening is also, open-ended. At what point in this soul-making dynamic am I going to draw a line and say, "That's awakening now—finished"?

Notice, too, something even more radical. In different ways with the tantric conception and with the soul-making conception—let's focus on the soul-making conception now—there's a primacy given, as I've talked about before, a primacy granted or recognized to image, to fantasy. And so we come to recognize at a certain point that our sense of the path, our conception of it, our fantasy of the path, of awakening, of Buddha, of self on the path, is fantasy, is grounded in image. That's a really radical reframing of the whole venture—a really radical realization, a really radical reconstitution.

With this soul-making, as I touched on just now, what happens then, if you get the sense of this movement, to the whole idea of attainment? There's just this infinite possibility of opening of the soul-making. It's endless, potentially unlimited. What happens to the idea of attainment? What happens to the self-sense in relationship to whatever happens to the idea of attainment? What happens to that whole

self-measurement construction? Do you understand?

So there's quite a lot to notice here. I'll just point out a few things—they're all connected, so it's not in any particular order, but I want to highlight a few things in addition to what I've already pointed out. Some of them we've already touched on, but I want to draw them out a bit more and make sure you realize them, recognize them.

This I've already said, but just to reiterate: In what I was calling the traditional perspective on things, this movement either towards the transcendent, unfabricated, or to some point of oneness—universal oneness of some different kind on that spectrum of lessening fabrication—the stages on that thread, on that spectrum, are actually limited in one direction. There's just a movement of lessening fabrication. We could probably enumerate the typical experiences, the different kinds of oneness and so forth, and eventually this transcendent unfabricated. There's a kind of finite series of perceptions, of openings to different dimensions, different kinds of senses of divinity that go with those openings when they're very strong and deep for the being, for the opening of consciousness there.

But there's a finite series, and that series moves in one direction—the direction of lessening fabrication. It might get flavored a little bit differently, with tender compassion versus awareness or whatever. There are a few different flavors, but they tend to be a finite series that are grouped together around this spectrum of lessening fabrication.

In contrast to that, we're trying to open up a path that really places soul-making quite centrally, or at least has a place for soul-making, that would allow and give a place to all that—definitely that movement along the spectrum of lessening fabrication, all the different finite series of perceptions of oneness and less fabrication and eventually non-fabrication that happen along that spectrum. But in addition, there is an infinity of other possible directions because of the endless diversity and creativity of the imaginal faculty, the imaginal dimensions.

So theophany can happen—theophanies can take this form, or that form, or this character, or that flavor. Instead of just going along one line into less fabrication, having a few similar-ish kind of experiences that are quite common for spiritual practitioners who practice with a lot of dedication and depth, there's actually a kind of movement out in every possible direction. All the creativity and discovery that can happen in different kinds of cosmic places, different kinds of theophany. You understand?

Second thing, and again, I've touched on this too, just briefly: Some conceptions of the path—actually probably often, but some more than others—some fantasies of the path more than others, don't realize or would be very reluctant to admit or refuse to admit that fantasy is part of the whole movement there and part of what's constellated there. That there is fantasy of the Buddha, fantasy of what awakening is, fantasies of the self in relationship with tradition, in relationship to what the path is and moving on the path—not realizing that or admitting that. And I'm thinking particularly of the third conception where there's no beyond, this kind of almost existentialist Buddhism that's popular among some people who

conceive themselves as secular Buddhists.

that the whole thing is kind of dependent on realism—that the world really is like this, that the existential limitations are real as I perceive them, that this is the facticity. I might avoid the word truth, but the whole kind of sense of what would happen to the sense of tragedy, what would happen to the bravery that's required there, to open to that and feel the poignancy of it.

If I acknowledge that it may not be real, that this is just one view, one way of looking, one perception, the whole thing collapses without the realism that underpins it and the belief in the reality of this difficult existential situation. That's the reality of things. The whole thing collapses. It can have no traction and no kind of power. And it's hard then to create a fantasy around it. Hard for it to become really sustaining.

Third thing to point out right now. And again, I touched on this before, or hinted at it before. Notice that in each of these four possibilities I gave—the traditional possibility of moving towards the unfabricated or different kinds of oneness; the possibility of just moving in the world, really acquiring more experiences because there is no dimensionality; the third possibility of insisting on one-dimensionality but then the path is coping with that and being resigned and having some equanimity in relation to that, opening to that reality of the one-dimensionality of existence; and the fourth possibility, what we call the tantric or soul-making vision and conception.

In each of those four, notice that each implies something with respect to the senses and the world, to how we then view and relate to the senses and the world as part of the path or as not part of the path, or just how the path situates itself, and awakening—however it's conceived in each of those four types—how it situates itself in regard to the senses.

So for example, what I was calling the traditional view, that whole movement to the transcendent, unfabricated—beyond the senses, beyond anything remotely like sense experience, and that movement towards the ending of rebirth, if it's really classically conceived—that says something about the world of the senses, and you get this in the Pali Canon. It's something to be let go of. It has nothing really to do with the path. There's nothing good in the world of the senses. It's just something to be put up with in this lifetime, but eventually to be transcended.

In the one-dimensional view, in the craving, samsaric, non-path kind of view, the senses are just something one is trying to acquire. You see, they all imply something about the senses and the relationship we have, or the path has, and then the view and the attitude constellated with respect to the senses in the world.

In the soul-making or tantric view, there is a beyond, but that beyond includes, yes, a transcendent beyond, but also the beyond in and through the senses. So there's a beyond, so to speak, that's not beyond the senses. In and through this experience of this beloved other—this tree, nature, the world, my body, whatever it is—when we come into erotic, imaginal relationship with that thing, that sense experience,

there is a beyondness. There's more to it, there's more to fathom, to connect with, to open to, to discover, to be revealed, to enjoy, to penetrate.

So we'll come back to this more, the implications for the senses. And related to that, there's an implication of each of these conceptions of the path with the whole movement of fabrication. So again, in the transcendent model, the movement is to end fabrication. The whole thrust is towards less and less fabrication. Everything on the path in a classically conceived model moves in the direction of less fabrication—pretty much everything on the path. And eventually one wants to not fabricate at all, have that experience enough that there's this complete non-fabrication of the world of experience. And there's the elevation of that.

Whereas in the soul-making view or the tantric view, there's the recognition of the importance of that, but also the recognition of skillful, or let's say soul-making fabrication, beautiful fabrication. One knows it's empty, sees image as image, and one consents to, allows, opens to, supports that beauty of the soul-making fabrication.

Can you see, do you realize how the questions that I asked you right at the beginning of this talk were potentially questions about eros? I don't know if you see too implied in what I've just been saying in the last few minutes that if the eros is strong and if it's allowed, then the one-dimensional view won't be enough. It will, as I said, crack at a certain point or be expanded at a certain point.

If the eros is strong and if the eros is allowed, it will expand the actual view and conception and image, if you like, of path and awakening and all of that beyond. It has to open up more dimensions and thus more possibilities and more of a sense of beyond to discover.

And if eros is allowed to impregnate and catalyze the eros-psyche-logos dynamic and the soul-making dynamic, the view of a one-dimensionality where I'm just endlessly chasing more experiences and pleasure for the ego, horizontally, wider and wider—that also won't be enough. Something will open up and we'll realize, oh, I can get, there's another kind of more, other kinds of more I can get as I go deeper, as the dimensionality opens, the facets of things open.

But actually, what I want to say more than that right now is that if the eros is strong and if it's allowed and if it's allowed to galvanize that eros-psyche-logos dynamic, and if that's allowed to self-fertilize and do its thing, then both the eros for the transcendent and the eros for what we might call the immanent—the sense of beyondness in and through the world of sense experience, the sense of divinity in and through the world and the world of sense experiences—both the transcendent thrust, the transcendent opening, and the immanent, or the opening to the immanence, the divine immanence, both will eventually be open to, just because of the tendency to...

unlimited and multi-directional expansion of the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic. Do you understand?

And that could happen in any order. Someone might be really at the beginning, you know, really wanting

to know the transcendent, and that's really what they want to move towards. But when they've opened to that, when they've experienced that and, so to speak, drunk from that well and that whole spectrum, then something might turn around back to the world of the senses, and that might start opening up in its imminence, in the sense of divine imminence there, and the whole soul-making dynamic with relationship to the senses.

Or someone else might do it the other way around, and the soul-making happens first with the imaginal and the whole world of the senses, and then at a certain point, the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic also recognizes that another kind of dimensionality can be had in the progressive lessening of fabrication of perception.

But if the eros is full enough, it will actually eventually want both. And why not have both? Why not be able to move into both? Not in any particular order necessarily. It could happen both ways.

These four possibilities that I've described a little bit are not intended to be an exhaustive list. But there are possibilities for the ways we conceive or imagine the direction and the aim of our path, or that anyone conceives or fantasizes the direction or aim of the path.

Now I know this is a lot and I really don't want to overload you here. But as much as there are, or as well as there being conceptions and fantasies of the direction and the aim, we can also open up an investigation of the fantasies of the self on the path. Now this is connected with what we've just been through. And again, I don't mean to be exhaustive here, but I just want to mention this because we'll actually come back to it tomorrow.

We could, for example, delineate a few possibilities of different fantasies—the way the self imagines or conceives what it's doing on the path, its relationship with tradition, with the job that it has to do, if you like. So this is a little bit different, but related to what we just talked about. And again, this list is not exhaustive.

We could—and most people do, I think—conceive of the path in what I might call the fantasy or the conception of the medical patient or the medical doctor. This is actually how the Buddha originally presented his path, in what was then the language of the doctor's diagnosis, prognosis, and prescription. So basically, we tend to talk and conceive of the path as a movement towards either eradicating suffering, or for most people, just reducing suffering, so that it's the increase of peace, calmness, and well-being, and getting rid of or reducing suffering.

And so we are the patient, so to speak, receiving the medicine, the prescription from the Buddha, from the teacher. Or some of you are teaching already, and in that case you are the doctor prescribing. So there's this very—this is extremely common because it's the language of the Four Noble Truths, which is the principle building block of Buddhism. It's conceived and presented as a movement about what? About the First Noble Truth, about suffering, and the investigation of the cause of it, and the movement beyond, or to

lessen it in the Third Truth, and how that happens in the Fourth Truth. So the whole structure of Buddhism, the whole language and conception of it is very much planted in or imbued with a whole medical patient, medical doctor image and conception.

A second possibility that's very common is to have what I would call a religious fantasy of the path and the self on the path, in which, as is characteristic of religious movements, the authority is in the past. So there's a great emphasis on tradition, and what one is doing—the self then in this path, in this fantasy of the path, in the religious fantasy—is really attempting to reproduce an awakening that has been achieved and taught by some religious figure, authority in the past. So it looks to the past, and in its tendency to scrutinize texts and seek authority in the past, in the text, in the explanation of the Buddha. The Buddha said this, the Buddha this, the Buddha that. And then what I'm trying to do is have some kind of awakening that's, to some extent, replicating the awakening the Buddha had. That's the kind of awakening I'm going for.

Moving through these very briefly—we're going to come back to it. So this is the medical patient, this is the religious fantasy, the second one.

The third fantasy, and I think this is quite unusual, is the fantasy of the scientific researcher. So that one is on the path, but one is perhaps motivated more by curiosity. I'm curious about consciousness. I'm curious about states of consciousness. I'm curious about perception. I'm curious about what can be discovered there. I'm open to the fantasy and the possibility that I might discover new things about consciousness, and we might discover new possibilities of perception and conception and experience and theories and all of that. In that model, the ending of suffering, or even the reduction of suffering, may at times not be the primary thing. The primary thing is interest, curiosity, understanding, opening of discovery.

A fourth possibility is what I call the artist fantasy. And again here—and I've talked about this in the past—what's the point of art? What's art for? I don't think there's an answer to that question.

Human beings cannot fully circumscribe or define or capture what motivates us, what motivates an artist, what motivates our love of art. Why is the artist doing what they do? Some art makes a political statement or tries to alleviate suffering in some way, but most art has nothing to do with that. It goes well beyond the medical fantasy – the artist fantasy.

This relates to beauty, yes. To creativity, yes. And what's the relationship with the past then? We might, as an artist, imitate past masters and know how to work in this style or that style, but the conception of art more generally is of something open-ended, just as some conceptions of science are. They look more to the future rather than the past in the religious fantasies. Art is open – I don't know what new forms, what new ways of thinking about art, what new creations will come. It's not just that we're trying to reproduce something from the past. And what's it for? What part does beauty, in the range of that word, play in that?

So there are four. When a person might have an adventure fantasy, the path is just an adventure. Maybe

I'm slaying demons, or maybe I'm just – I don't know what. Or it could be – that could be a fifth one or a sixth one – a lover. The whole path is fantasied as a lover. And what is a lover? What's the movement of a lover or the fantasy or the sense of self? The path as lover. Lover of what? And what do lovers want? And what do lovers do?

We're going to talk more about this, but I don't know if you can get the sense – I've alluded to it already – how each of these casts into the larger imaginal constellation that each one of these fantasies creates. The past is cast in a certain way. How I view authority, the past of the Buddha, the tradition – my relationship with that. And also the future and the direction. Also cast differently is what the self does. What is the job of the self? What is the interest or the priority of the self? What gives joy, and what supports eros. So all of these are different depending on the fantasy. Eros and image go together, so of course it's dependent on that.

So here are some questions. Again, unfair, too quick, and so forth. But do you realize that you have a fantasy of the path and of the self on the path and of awakening? Do you realize that there's fantasy operating there? Maybe that's a better way of putting it.

Can you – and implicit in my usage of the word "fantasy" is not that it's a bad thing at all, quite the opposite: important thing, necessary thing, beautiful thing that gives rise to beauty. But do you realize that it's there? The fantasy is there. Do you recognize what it is? Or let's say what are the dominant fantasies? It might be more than one. Do you recognize what they are for you? Or what it is for you? What's dominant? What fantasy dominates? Tends to dominate?

And this can be complex. I'm aware of this because they can be mixed, or different periods or times in our practice where one or the other is the dominant fantasy, or different in relationship to different streams of practice. But can you start to get a feel for this? Are you aware of it?

More importantly, I'd say – am I, are you, locked into a certain fantasy? Just locked into that medical model?

I'm trying to fit everything into that, and the whole way I construe the path and the self and my movement is caught within that framework—or perhaps trapped within the religious model, or whatever pattern has taken hold.

Where am I in relation to how well I have replicated what I hear my teacher or other teachers talk about or describe—what they seem to be living, embodying? Am I locked into a certain fantasy, or is there flexibility? Is there some creativity in the whole way I imagine myself in relation to the tradition, in relation to the goal or the aim or the direction? Locked in or flexible? We want flexibility.

And again—I know this is moving quickly—is it authentic? In other words, where has this fantasy come from? Am I simply adopting the medical fantasy and fitting myself into that framework because that's how ninety-nine percent of teachings are presented, not just in Buddhism either? We talk about freedom,

talk about liberation, talk about healing, talk about meeting suffering or easing pain or peace or well-being—different flavors, and that's so much the tenor of the language, so much the presentation that we can't help thinking that way. And there's also this sense of "Well, he was the Buddha, or they are this teacher, and they must know, and therefore I'm trying to replicate that."

But is it authentic? I'm not saying these approaches are bad at all, but the question we might ask—perhaps more appropriately now—is: Is it authentic to you? And again, the deeper question: Is it soul-making?

Are the fantasies that are in play, the fantasies in which you move and in which your path moves, and which, if you like, cast the path before you—are they soul-making for you? Do we realize, do you realize the implications of simply the fact that there is fantasy operating in our construal, in our relationship, in our conception of path, of awakening, of Buddha, of teacher, of self on the path? Do you realize the implications of that?

And more questions, but going back to what we asked at the beginning about what you want from the path—if you answered those original questions by saying you wanted peace, or ease, or less suffering, or whatever it was—just to check, and I asked this at the beginning: Is it only that that you want? Is it only ease or peace or less suffering?

Certainly at times that's the dominant thing we want, and probably appropriately. I'm not saying it should be or shouldn't be. Just check: Is that all you want? The ending, or even just the reduction, of suffering? If you want just peace, just ease?

I think it's worth pointing out—and I know this is quite radical—that if we emphasize the medical patient or medical doctor fantasy as the most fundamental one... It's fine to have a bit of the artist, or a bit of the adventurer, or a bit of the lover, or the scientific researcher, whatever it is. But if most fundamental is this medical patient, medical doctor fantasy, I think it's worth pointing out that giving it fundamental status—even if you're not usually conscious of this—will probably limit the soul-making potential.

If that medical patient fantasy is too fundamental in how you're conceiving your path or how you're teaching, soul-making may be allowed, of course, but it's somehow always within or in service of the medical fantasy or the medical model. Soul-making is valued because it presents different ways of healing, or whatever.

Of course, we could ask: What does healing mean? And we could talk about the healing of the soul in a bigger sense than just healing of suffering. What does that mean—the healing of perception? I've touched on this before: *tikkun olam*, the restoration, the healing of the world, the healing of perception through soul-making, the opening of soul-making.

And with the artist, of course—what does the artist make? The artist is creating what? One answer could be: they're making soul. In the poetry of perception, they're making soul. The artist makes soul, creates soul. We could construe that as the purpose of the artist. And the researcher is researching soul. So you

could construe it this way.

And the lover—what does the lover want? What does the lover love? Not an abstract lover, but your lover. The lover in you. Or the hermit in you.

So again, you can take these questions away, or if you're listening to a recording, press pause at any time and sit with them if they feel fruitful, if they're interesting and opening. But what is your response, or what responses are triggered in you when you realize that your love and your devotion...

to the path, your love of the path, your devotion to the path, and all that's involved in that, when you realize that it's partly at least based on and imbued with fantasy, how does your heart respond to that?

How does your thinking respond?

How does your body respond?

How does your soul respond?

You realize there's a certain basis in fantasy, a certain inextricable involvement of fantasy. What's the response of the soul, the response in the body?

And if you feel like somehow this takes the rug out from underneath things, and there's a kind of deconstruction of the fantasy and the concept of the path, that doesn't last—if that's even what happens. But that won't last, because we need to construct, and we do construct.

So the question becomes: what is constructed in the aftermath of that deconstruction? There will be a construction. What is constructed? And is what's constructed a realist construction, given a kind of realist belief and conception as a basis, or not?

So if there's a deconstruction, what is constructed in the aftermath? And is it a realist construction or not?

With all this, we could ask: what is driving and pulling me? What is driving and pulling all this love and dedication? Well, it's Eros. That's a big part of it. Eros is involved. And where does that come from?

We can say the soul loves soul-making. We said that as a kind of axiom: the soul loves soul-making. So the Eros is for soul-making. The Eros of the soul is for soul-making. The soul loves soul-making. But whose Eros is it? Whose soul-making is it?

Whose soul-making is it? Whose soul is getting made, so to speak?

So then with all those questions, what is the view that I have of this Eros? What is my relationship with this Eros? Those questions have a large bearing.

Thank you for listening.

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