On Blessed Ground: Fantasies of the Self on the Path

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I have to admit I feel a bit ambivalent about talking more right now. We are very conscious that it's a lot of content, and different people need different things at different times, digest differently. I still feel a bit unsure, but I think I'm going to go ahead. Tonight, just so you know, there won't be so much content. We'll have a different way of being together, so there won't be so much stuff coming at you.

I want to see if, without talking too long, I can say enough to open up something else—another possibility, a little bit connected to some of the material I was exploring last night.

When you're in love, or when you love anything, when you're devoted to anything, when you're dedicated to anything, when something is meaningful to you in a deep way, there is fantasy and image operating there. There is an imaginal constellation, and it's an imaginal perception of you in your life and of something in your life. In other words, it's not just intrapsychic. We're actually seeing others and self imbued with fantasy, so that the whole constellation of other, or thing, or object, or event—work, other, self, world, and time—all that constellation is ignited as fantasy, and also the eros, the desire there.

This also applies to the path and to our idea of awakening: our fantasy of awakening, fantasy of the Buddha, fantasy of teachers. All this is brought in or engulfed in the movement, in the beautiful movement of fantasy, wherever there's love, wherever there's meaningfulness to us, wherever there's that devotion.

Now, usual psychology says when you're in love, for somewhere between three and six months, you're a little bit doolally. There are the fantasies there, and we call it projection. And there's all that. Hopefully you make it through that period, and then you start to get real. And then that's proper love. But is that actually what happens? Is that actually, so to speak, the best thing to happen?

Or is it more that in time, as things progress, there is this attunement to and attention to the relationship, the needs in the relationship, the different psychological patterns that one confronts and meets in oneself and in the other? One cares for all that and cares for the relating and the dialogue and the interactions and the patterns. But at the same time, the fantasies don't and shouldn't go away. They might change, they might deepen, they might become more subtle, more attuned to the—let's use that word—realities, more nuanced, more sensitive.

What happens if they go away over the months, over the years in a romantic relationship? What happens?

It might be the end of the relationship—people get bored—or it might be the relationship just finds another way of being together that's more about metta and friendship, but the eros is gone. How common is this? The sex might still be there, but the eros might be gone. You can certainly have sex without eros.

Same with the path. When you love the path and you're dedicated to the path, whatever that means, it's imbued with fantasy. What happens when our path is not imbued with fantasy? What happens to it? We lose our inspiration, it becomes flat, or we go into a kind of fixation mode and it becomes about measurement: How am I doing? I've heard about these different stages of awakening. I wonder, have I got that first stage yet? Where am I?

And it becomes fixated, reified, concretized, rigidified into a kind of movement or a relationship of ego measurement. This is what happens for people who care, for people who love and invest themselves—how easily the eros and the richness and the beauty of the fantasy goes into craving and fixation. Probably everyone in this room knows that.

So what I want to see if it's possible to open up a little bit for us is to talk about fantasies of the goal, if you like—fantasies of awakening, fantasies of the path and what the path involves—but also fantasies of the self on the path. In other words, like I said, when there's image, there's a whole imaginal constellation. It's not just that object or that other person. We forget to see—this is so important—we forget to see sometimes the self needs to be included in that fantasy, is included in that imaginal constellation.

What's going on with the self image in the good sense? What is, so to speak, the fantasy of the job of the self on the path? What's your job on the path? And what's the image of the self walking that path?

Now usually in spiritual teachings, whether they're Buddhist or other, especially Eastern teachings, they're taught and framed in what we might call the medical model—a medical fantasy, the Four Noble Truths. There's suffering, there's a cause of suffering, there's the possibility of the end of suffering, and there's the way to the end of suffering. This is actually a medical formula that the Buddha adopted at that time in India.

This is how a doctor would talk to a patient. "This is your problem, this is what's caused it, you can be cured if you do what I say, and this is what you need to do—this is the prescription." So we've inherited that. That's absolutely the most central thing in Buddhism: the Four Noble Truths. And even if we don't consciously think of the Four Noble Truths—if someone asks "What are the Four Noble Truths?" and we respond "Oh, I don't know"—even then, we've become completely, or almost completely, imbued with this idea that what we're doing is reducing suffering. We're healing suffering. It's a medical model, and this is what we need to do.

So this whole idea and fantasy—this medical fantasy—imbues our thinking so deeply that when a person talks about their practice or thinks about practice, or when someone's teaching, it's always somehow related to freedom. What's it going to help free us from suffering? What's going to help alleviate suffering?

The entire way we frame practice to ourselves and to others, the whole conceptual framework, the complete relationship with the path and the self on the path and the job on the path—all of this operates within this medical fantasy model.

Coupled with that in spiritual teachings is what we might call a second fantasy: the religious fantasy. By that I mean something relatively specific, though all these fantasies I'm going to explore are quite broad, with lots of wiggle room. What's characteristic of what I'm calling a religious fantasy is that in my practice, the job of the self is essentially to replicate as closely as possible someone else's awakening. It's the Buddha, right? He had this awakening, and we're somehow trying to get something pretty close to, or at least in the direction of, that awakening.

The characteristic of religion—and I use that word loosely, in different ways at different times—is that the authority is in the past. You understand? The authority is in the past. We look to the past, look to the tradition, and the self fills out this fantasy with beauty, with reverence, by replicating something. So in a way, there's not much new in the religious fantasy. It's not that we're going to make new discoveries. We might open up the demographic of where we take the Buddha's teaching—Mark is working in prisons, taking that to that demographic; Jamie's doing some wonderful work—so we're opening up the demographic, but essentially the discovery is not new. We might use research on what mindfulness does to your brain, but this is just a kind of corroboration with culturally sanctioned ideation that supports what's already there.

There's nothing wrong with this. This is all beautiful and lovely. But sometimes—you may have noticed this—what do you actually want in practice? What do you actually want? Now, at times, of course you want an alleviation of suffering, and that's why you're practicing. But all it takes is a little bit of honest inquiry and reflection, and you see that some portion of the time—maybe even a lot—that's not actually what you're primarily most concerned about. It's something else. If we keep talking about it as if it's that, and keep prioritizing that, it's as if we're looking at the world, looking at ourselves and reality in a kind of blinkered way. We're not being psychologically honest, perhaps.

So we've been using this word soul-making, but sometimes when one sees what one actually wants, whether one uses that word or not, it's actually soul-making. I'm more interested in that at times than I am in the reduction of suffering. Is this making sense?

The fantasies of the self can be larger than or other than the religious fantasy and the medical fantasy. When I say something's a fantasy, it doesn't mean it doesn't have any "reality" to it—of course it does. What I want to say is there are other fantasies possible of the self on the path and of the job of the self on the path, as much as there are of awakening and all of this.

Maybe there are loads, but let me offer some possibilities to open this up a little bit. One could at times have the fantasy of—how am I actually seeing my practice? Who am I when I'm practicing? What am I doing? And one might have the feeling that I'm researching. I'm a researcher, I'm a research scientist.

What am I researching?

Well, it could be the end of suffering within the medical model. It could be that I'm actually researching consciousness, or I'm researching perception, or I'm a phenomenological researcher of some kind. But then the whole job of the self and the fantasy and what gives juice and aliveness is different there. Do you understand?

It may be that it's bound up—and there's certainly an overlap—with this reduction of suffering and the relationship with the Buddha's discoveries and teachers who are important to you. But there's a different fantasy of self operating there. What's really exciting and galvanizing at times is this possibility of discovery.

If we think about a scientific researcher, what's the relationship with time? The religious fantasy looks backward to replicate. Science uses the past as a platform, but it's looking to the future. It is presumed in science that the science of a hundred years from now will know more than the science of a hundred years ago—not just the same. There's a forward movement.

So what would it be to have a fantasy of the self that you could make discoveries that are not discovered yet? That you could be researching in a way that's moving forward? What is the job there? What's the goal of that fantasy and the aliveness there? It's not just the reduction of suffering. There's more involved. It's not just functional in that way.

Or there could be—so that's a third possibility—the fantasy of the artist. I've talked about this elsewhere. What's the job of the artist? What's the purpose? If my practice is art, I'm playing with these ways of looking and really—like we called the last retreat—the poetry of perception.

Why do people make art? Why do human beings make art? What's it for? It's a rhetorical question, because what I want to say is whatever answer anyone gives—I'm sure there'll be loads of beautiful answers—you're never going to capture it. You're never going to capture that urge, that human urge to create and to be involved in art. Art is always going to be bigger. Why does the artist do what they do? Why do human beings make art in the broader sense? What's the purpose of it?

So if I'm fantasizing and feeling my practice as artist, what's the purpose of it? And I keep trying to talk about it in the medical model, but actually something is relating in a different way. What's the artist's relationship with the movement of time, past and future?

An artist who really gives themselves to the art—most artists will want to explore the past, the past masters, and absorb those styles, replicate. But they don't want to stop there. And the whole idea with art is that it can go in a million different directions. It's going to be new. It's not predetermined even where it's moving. And what does the artist create? What does the artist make? What does the practice artist make? Artists, we say, make things or create things.

What about an adventurer as another fantasy? What's the adventurer's relationship or fantasy of their place in time? The relationship with tradition? What's the job of the adventurer? What's the goal? Does an adventurer have a goal? Or is adventure the goal of the adventurer?

What about the lover? Fantasy of self on the path. What am I doing? My job is to be a lover.

What does that mean? What does it mean—my job is to be a lover? Lover of what? Lover of whom? What is the job, the duty of the lover, and what is the sense of self and sense of goal that the lover would have?

I was working with someone not too long ago, inquiring into this with her. In just one session, she explored what makes you feel most alive in practice—when you love it, when something is really ignited in you. What is it that you love at that time? What is the fantasy operating then?

Feeling into it, exploring this several times with different answers, I asked: "Who are you in that? What's the fantasy?" She said, "I'm a landing place. I'm a meeting place for all these threads and characters"—from her history, from her life, from the culture, from the intrapsychic realm. Her job was to be that meeting place, that landing place, and simply to open. You can hear that's a much more receptive fantasy, really beautiful. That was her job, her fantasy of self.

A little while later she said, "I'm a lover—a lover of psyche. I'm a lover of psyche." Very different, a different fantasy operating entirely.

So again: where there's love, there is fantasy. Fantasy exists as a ground of the path. There's usually a mix of fantasies, in fact, but the path is not just functional. It's not merely accumulating techniques to reduce suffering, though sometimes we talk or present things as if that's what's happening.

All of this is good, all beautiful. There's certainly not one fantasy that's better or right or wrong than another. If I am in that reducing-suffering fantasy, maybe it's not just functional or utilitarian. Where we love something, there's always fantasy involved.

Of course, there are people who go to a class and learn a couple of stress-reduction techniques. That person may or may not fall in love with practice. If they don't, then it could remain purely utilitarian. But once we start to get involved, practice becomes imbued with fantasy. Even that medical, functional reduction-of-suffering fantasy gets imbued with other fantasies.

No right or wrong here, but can we see this? It's almost like waking up psychologically. Can we recognize that fantasy runs through our life wherever there's meaningfulness? Can we acknowledge the necessity of fantasy, the inevitability of fantasy, the beauty of fantasy and the gift of fantasy?

For many people this is a completely upside-down way of thinking. I'm feeling more and more that a psychology which doesn't realize the necessity, inevitability, beauty and gift of fantasy and eros almost inevitably ties itself in contradictions. People say one thing, but what's really driving them is something they're not quite fully admitting—or they have no conceptual framework to flesh it out and support it.

There's almost a kind of incomplete integrity in not admitting the place of fantasy and eros.

To me, I'm beginning to feel more and more that psychology needs to be more sophisticated to truly shine light on something that's already there for us. It's just that we don't have words for it so much. Often we don't realize—we don't think this way—something that's already present in our life, ebbing and flowing, getting ignited and illuminated, then ebbing away. We don't realize that fantasy is involved almost as the ground of our path, the ground we walk on.

We often don't realize what the fantasy is that's driving us, supporting us, inspiring us—or what they are, plural. And we don't realize the implications of all this.

What are the implications? I think there are many, and they're far-reaching.

I'm certain this is landing in different places. I hope that for some people—hopefully now, but maybe sometime soon—you can sense there's a whole other level of liberation possible when you start to open this. A whole other level, a kind of meta-level of liberation.

On the other hand, some people might be thinking, "I'm not really sure what you're talking about." And others might feel, "This is really, really disturbing."

So I'm really aware of that and want to be sensitive to these different responses. It might be that some of you are thinking, "Well, if you're talking about being on the ground of fantasy, aren't you just pulling the rug out from under my whole path and my whole sense of what I'm doing? You're just saying it's fantasy, and the whole thing kind of crashes and deconstructs." And it might be that we're left without any juice, inspiration, or fire, because we've lost the fantasy. Because we've realized it was fantasy, we conclude it can't be real, therefore we can't trust it, and so forth. This might feel horrific, disorienting, disconcerting.

At some point there will be... but that's not the point. In other words, that's not the real possibility I'm pointing to here. There will be a reconstruction. We construct as human beings, we fabricate, we fantasize. There will be a reconstruction. The question is: what's my belief about that reconstruction? Is it realist or not?

This is only horrific if our view is too realist. If I really understand that fantasy imbues our life, imbues our love, and that it has its juice precisely in the non-realism—if I get that, there's a whole other level of liberation here. Is what's reconstructed as fantasy realist or not? Or is it, let's say, poetic or not?

With all this, one of the questions becomes: am I locked into a certain fantasy? Maybe I don't even realize it—am I just locked into a fantasy that doesn't really fit me, but I'm simply stuck in it? Maybe there's just a kind of mono way of seeing. Or can there be flexibility here? Flexibility in the fantasizing.

As with images, it doesn't matter to me at all whether the fantasies that are supporting you, inspiring you, driving you, drawing you on, pulling you forward—it doesn't matter whether they're your inventions, so to speak, or your discoveries, or whether they're just received fantasies. That's actually irrelevant. It

doesn't matter at all whether you read them in a book, heard them, or received them from a teacher. The question, as always, is: are they soul-making? In other words, do they open up the inspiration, the ignition, the dimensionality, the depth, the beauty, the meaningfulness, the eros?

So what is going on, what is inspiring, what is igniting, what is beautiful when you feel most alive in practice? What is it really? At those times, what is it that makes you feel alive? What is it that you love? There's a lot of room here. I've just run through six possibilities, but there are all kinds of others.

And then, what does this particular fantasy that I'm in—how does it fantasize an ending? Is there an ending? Is there a completion? When I asked the woman, she said, "I'm a lover of psyche. I'm a meeting place for all these threads." I said, "And is there a completion to that? Is there an end?" "No end." "Is that a problem?" "No." Whereas with other fantasies, there definitely is a problem—we're wanting to arrive somewhere. Or are we?

Wrapped up in all of this is even the question: is there an end, is there a completion? Does this make sense, what I'm talking about?

I'm going to stop there. I just wanted to see if this could be opened up a little bit and maybe put those seeds out—just sprinkle some seeds and let them land where they land. To borrow someone else's phrase, we may revisit this and work with it as an exercise. We'll see. But this is—I don't know if it even makes sense—as I said, there's something immensely potent here, potentially at least, in this kind of re-looking or opening up.

So we may revisit it, but I just wanted to scatter some seeds a little bit.

I wanted to explore this territory with you, to see if we could open up this inquiry together and perhaps plant some seeds. Like scattering seeds in fertile ground, they will take root where conditions are right.

There's something immensely potent here—this kind of re-looking, this opening up of our fundamental assumptions about practice, about completion, about the very nature of our spiritual journey. We may return to this exploration and work with it more systematically, developing it into a practice exercise. We shall see where the Dharma leads us.

For now, I simply wanted to scatter these seeds of inquiry, to invite this quality of questioning that goes beyond our habitual patterns of seeking and attaining. In this willingness to not-know, in this embrace of the mysterious nature of our unfolding, perhaps we touch something essential—something that cannot be grasped or completed, but only lived and embodied moment by moment.

The path continues to reveal itself, not as a destination to reach, but as an endless deepening into the mystery of what we are.

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