Beauty and the Buddha

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:32:42

I'd like to speak about beauty, and I hope that in doing so this will perhaps seed something, nourish something. In speaking about it, I'm going to try and tie together some things we've already touched on, and also open them out further—so both tie together and open out.

I'm not sure there's a linear path possible through what I want to communicate. Perhaps there is, but I can't quite see it exactly. Perhaps in the nature of what I'm trying to do, what we're doing, is shining light on what is already tied together, implicated together, mirroring each other, and what already opens out further, or suggests a further opening, so that a linear motion through the material is not really possible, just by the nature of the material and the way it's connected.

Many of us would say and feel very much that beauty is important, deeply important to us in our lives, and therefore also the whole realm and conversation, investigation of aesthetics and application of aesthetics, is also important. For some people, it's not, or it really doesn't seem to be that important. I know quite a few people for whom beauty is not something they invest in a lot, that they care about a lot, that they pay a great deal of attention to and support and care for.

There is a connection though with Eros and soul-making. It seems to me that those people for whom beauty is not that important are also people for whom there is not a great deal of soul-making movement happening in their lives, not a great deal of Eros. Beauty is a part and an element in soul-making.

If we look to the Pali Canon and see what it says about beauty, as far as I'm aware, we find something that might strike us at first as a little curious. The word beauty is only found in relation to the mind—and not only that, in relation to the mind or certain minds or minds in certain states.

So the fourth jhana—sometimes the Buddha and the texts refer to that as the beautiful jhana—that stillness and the radiance of the mind there, and the state therein of equanimity that goes with the fourth jhana. This is, as the Buddha said, equanimity based on singleness, when there's a kind of closing out or really deep fading out of the senses, and the mind is just collected into stillness and a kind of radiant presence of stillness and equanimity there.

Or the Buddha talks about equanimity based on multiplicity as a connected but slightly different state, where one is still open to sounds and sights and smells and touches, but there is equanimity in relation to stillness, and actually there is a degree of fading. So in both of those, whether it's equanimity based on singleness or multiplicity, there is a degree of fading. That's important. Fading of the perception of senses and sense objects.

So there is this reference to the beautiful, but only really in regard to the fourth jhana and beyond, or to a Buddha's mind, or an Arahant's mind, free of defilements, pure and therefore beautiful, or sometimes to the body of the Buddha, the physical body of the Buddha, which is full of the thirty-two marks of a great man and is regarded as beautiful.

With respect to the world, the world that we live in and the earth and the senses and what comes to us through the senses, the word beautiful and beauty is not used. Beauty is in or of the mind, and everything else is just talked about in terms of what is pleasing to the senses or sense pleasures. This bifurcation of language has all kinds of implications.

And more than that even, because the Buddha talked about sense pleasures being like a snake's mouth or a pit of burning coals or a torch of hay that one is carrying into a headwind. All these images of danger and pain associated with what is pleasing to the senses.

The whole Pali Canon, as we've touched on before, has this movement, this thrust, towards transcending the world of the senses—pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral—to the unfabricated, to the fading of sense experience in all six senses, including the mind, and through that to the ending of rebirth, an end of being reborn in the world of senses. So there is clearly a very negative connotation given to sense experience. It's not a realm of beauty. It's not where we look to for beauty.

That's quite interesting, and it has a legacy which I think we are still not clearly investigating, aware of, open to, sensibly confronting, questioning.

Bearing that in mind, and what's there in the Pali Canon, if we look at what is our phenomenal experience of beauty—what is our actual experience of beauty—we have, as human beings, at least most people have, at times, experiences of beauty. And I would say, and most people would say, that's more than just something being pleasant in the senses, and more than sense pleasure leading to a kind of craving.

Most people would say, when I experience beauty, it's something different than just a pleasure in the senses that the being, the mind or the body craves for. Something in the experience of beauty touches us. It's more than craving. Something is touched in the being. But by touched, I also mean more than an obvious emotion.

An obvious emotion is grief or compassion or some kind of passion for something that may be touched and triggered in the experience of beauty. But we are touched in the experience of beauty in our being in ways that go beyond or include more than what are obvious emotions.

I have a Buddhist friend who wrote a piece recently about beauty, and particularly about aesthetics, really, and his approach to aesthetics. He was saying that beauty was something that comes out of mindful experience, or mindfulness of experience, so that there isn't the craving, there isn't the tanha. And through mindful experience, for instance, on retreat, the world appears radiant. The things of the world appear radiant. And that radiance is a perception and experience of beauty.

Notice that this experience of radiance—and some of you will know this from being on retreat and being silent, being mindful, as the mindfulness kind of ratchets up its power—

There is a radiance in experience. You go outside—the grass, the sky, the cup, the steaming tea rising from it—all possess this quality of radiance that we can feel. It's a universal quality.

So radiance seems to, in that state of heightened mindfulness, pervade everything. Everything appears radiant. It's universal, not so much tied to particular objects. The radiance of this is not particularly different than the radiance of that. There's something universal present here, which I wanted to note.

A further thing to inquire into with this radiance is: what is it? What do we mean by radiance? Certainly not, in our friend's way of thinking, some kind of luminosity—and certainly not a numinosity attributed to the object or flowing through it from beyond in some way. I think what it actually is simply an experience of vividness, a vividness of perception of anything that comes into the realm of sense experience.

Why? Because with mindfulness there's less distraction. The mind doesn't dissipate so much energy; it accumulates energy, becomes brighter, more alert, more present. With that, the grime is wiped off the windscreen, so to speak. There is a vividness, a brightness, a radiance of perception. This radiance that's perceived and experienced as enjoyable—perhaps some would call it beautiful—is really just a property of mind or awareness in certain states. Some people even say it's a brain property.

I have some questions about that experience of radiance and what's involved there. But our friend goes on to talk about the sublime, which we've discussed earlier on this retreat—this whole Romantic notion of the sublime. He means what is beautiful in terms of pleasing sense experience, but not just beautiful—also terrifying, dwarfing to the sense of self, the fragile human body and existence confronted by a vastness that could swallow it up, dwarf it, erase it easily.

Think of Turner's fantasy of being strapped to the mast of a ship in a storm—the colors and vividness of sense experience combined with that hugeness, that terrifying confrontation with or openness to nature. In this experience of the sublime, which is very important in our friend's notion of aesthetics, especially Buddhist aesthetics, something transcends the self here. There is a kind of transcendence.

But what transcends the self is really only impermanence, tragedy. It's seeing contingency and dependency—things being dependent on other things. There's a kind of emptiness there, but implicit in this understanding of emptiness is that it's tragic, that it really means impermanence. It just means these real things are dependent on other real things; material things are dependent on other material things.

What transcends the self is the existential predicament of the self that surrounds it, that is inevitably waiting for it—our unavoidable existential predicament of inevitably moving towards non-existence. There's a kind of transcending of the self there.

In his view, art is also regarded as transcendent, but in a slightly different way, because we can't quite

fully say what this piece of art or that piece of art means. Our friend says more: "This makes me uneasy, I feel uncomfortable. I want to be told what this painting I'm looking at means, what this sculpture means. I want to be told what it means, and I want to be told how to feel about it."

He connects this with the poet John Keats' notion of negative capability, which in Keats' words is "a state of uncertainty or doubt without any irritable reaching out after facts or reason." This is negative capability. Our friend takes that to mean being without any reaching out away from a state of uncertainty and doubt, except certainty and non-doubt about the existential predicament.

Here, what's important to our friend is the poignancy—the poignancy of the tragedy of our existence and the tragedy of impermanence, of our impermanence, of everything's impermanence. Making art in a Buddhist context needs to be about this, because this is what the Dharma is about: opening to this. Art is only really about that. There isn't then the possibility of an art that can expand beyond being about that poignancy and tragedy of impermanence.

This is all fine and legitimate. Everyone's allowed to have whatever view and approach to aesthetics they would like. But from our point of view—what we're trying to open on this retreat as ways of practicing and ways of conceiving—notice a couple of things.

One is that there is a limited and singular view of life here. Life is taken axiomatically, dogmatically, to be really about or to involve this absolutely real existential predicament: moving to non-existence, the tragedy of impermanence. There's a singular view of life—this is how life is. It's a limited view and a limiting view, limited to that singular perspective. And also of art: this is what life is, therefore this is what art, at least Buddhist art, should be.

Notice also that in this approach, any individual or anything is mostly or only interesting to us insofar as it moves toward obliteration, toward extinction, toward erasure in the universal facticity of impermanence. The thing itself may be different from that other thing—we can see that—but that difference isn't particularly interesting in itself. The individuality has no real depth to it. It's only interesting insofar as this thing shares with all things the tragic impermanence that characterizes existence—all things, all selves, all individuals.

As I said, all that's fine and totally allowed—no problem. But from our point of view, it is both limited and limiting, or from the point of view of what we're trying to unfold on this retreat and in other retreats and teachings.

Let me explore and flesh out a little what's involved in the experience of beauty—what are the facets or aspects involved in the experience of beauty, again from an almost phenomenological point of view.

First, in the experience of beauty, we're not just enjoying the beauty of the object, whether that's a sense object in nature or art or whatever it is. What's also involved in the sense and experience of beauty is that we are enjoying our sensitivity, our subtlety, our awareness or attention with respect to that beautiful

object. We actually enjoy the way that we are engaging with it. Do you see? We enjoy our attunement. We enjoy the arousal of being, of consciousness, of senses, mind, heart that is there in relationship with the aliveness that's present for us, in us, through us. We enjoy the state of intimacy and the relationship of intimacy. We enjoy the connecting connection.

All this means also that in an experience of beauty, we are enjoying our eros, our erotic connection, our experience of the erotic connection with the object. Part of the experience of beauty, I would say—whether we're fully conscious of it or not—involves seeing the beauty of our eros, of our response. You might not have realized it fully consciously, but when I have a sense of beauty, I'm also appreciating and seeing the beauty of our eros, my eros.

Another related aspect—and this is hard to articulate, or at least I'm finding it hard to articulate—is that if you pay attention when you're experiencing beauty, sometimes there's a sense of something within us resonating. There's a kind of resonance with whatever we're perceiving as beautiful. There's a chiming or an echoing between the object and the subject, or some kind of—it feels as if perhaps something is being echoed there in the object, or we are echoing the object, or the object is mirroring something in us, or something in us is mirroring it. A resonance, a chiming, an echoing, a mirroring of something within us with the object.

Now this isn't a state of merging in oneness and union. There is still the otherness there that's necessary to eros that we've talked about. The otherness is there. The polarity is there. The twoness is there—connected but two.

Maybe there's a sense of participating in something. I think there is. In a deep sense of beauty, we feel that we are participating in something, deeply. But what is it that we're participating in? What is the object of beauty? What is the beautiful thing? Again, whether it's a sense object or a mental object or an image or a piece of art or whatever it is, a piece of music.

What is that object with which we are resonating, in which we are participating, in which there is a participation together? That object itself, I would say, is magnified in that erotic connection, in the perception of beauty. The object is magnified, amplified, widened, so to speak.

If you listen to music—wordless music—and there's really a perception of beauty, it is not just bare sound. It is not just bare sound. I would say it's not even just pleasant bare sound. The object is, in the experience of beauty, somehow magnified, amplified, widened and deepened. What does this mean? How is it thus widened and deepened?

Thirdly, and I've just touched on this, an experience of beauty is more than—is not only—an experience of pleasant sensual contact or pleasant sense experience.

That is not an experience that qualifies as beautiful in the way we're speaking about here.

Nor, I would say, is it simply a matter of a pleasing arrangement of visual elements or sonic elements. What is it about a Rothko abstract painting? Yes, certainly there are pleasing proportions and arrangements of colors and shades of color on canvas. Or William de Kooning, another abstract painter. Or in wordless music, yes, of course there's a temporal arrangement of different timbres and sounds. But the experience of beauty is more than just being pleased at the arrangement of pleasant sense experiences.

I would go further and say that to me, it's not that we can reduce beauty to "it just means this or that." This painting means this, this piece of music means that. When we reduce art or sense experience in nature to meaning—"it means this"—there's a kind of monovalency, a singularity of meaning. Even if it has one or two meanings, we've reduced it, we've limited it. That's different from the notion of meaningfulness. Again, it may not be the best word, but there's an openness to that. It can include specific meanings, but there's something more in the experience of meaningfulness. And that, I would say, is more characteristic of the experience of beauty. It's not a reduction into a kind of monovalency—"it means X or Y."

Nor is it, as I alluded to before, that the experience of beauty is confined to an emotional experience. Or certainly not just that. It may include emotions triggered by whatever is beautiful, emotions associated with or referring to my personal narratives, things that have happened in my life, or human narratives in general. It may include all that, but I would say there's something more—it needs to be open.

So experiences of beauty, if I'm exploring the phenomenal experiences of beauty that we have as human beings, I would say partly what characterizes them is this sense of *more*, of *beyond*, of unfathomability, of inexhaustibility. As I just said, also of meaningfulness. And as I said before, there's an involvement in the experience of beauty of, as well as the object, also the self. And again, maybe not so obvious, but of the world.

So our sense of the world is transformed when there's a deep experience of beauty of anything. It affects our sense of the world. And also our eros is involved. So again, we get that fourfold constellation that's always involved in any perception: self, world, other, and desire—in this case, eros. The involvement of all of those is, as we've already said, involved in a sense of beauty.

Can you see, can you hear how the characteristics, or some of the characteristics of the experience of beauty echo, mirror, are similar to many of the characteristics of imaginal experience? There's some relationship between our experience of beauty and our experience of the imaginal.

And I shouldn't need to say this at this point in the retreat, but I will: by imaginal we do not just mean so-called intra-psychic—the images that come to me when my eyes are shut and out of contact with the world of the senses. This is so crucial. The imaginal really involves a set of perspectives, of perceptions, ways of looking. It involves soul-making beauty, and it can be right there in my perception of this room right now, of the ground beneath me, of my own hands, of you as I'm looking at you, of this tree. Our perception of the world can be imaginal.

So there's a mirroring, an echoing, a similarity, a correspondence between the characteristics of the experience of beauty and the characteristics of imaginal experience. So much so that I would wonder: does beauty actually imply—does our experience of beauty imply that there is soul-making happening? It implies already some opening up of the imaginal with respect to this piece of art, with respect to this piece of music, with respect to this flower that I'm looking at, with respect to whatever it is.

So it involves depths, dimensionality. That's part of the experience of beauty. And these are open-ended. There's an openness of depth, an unfathomability. The dimensionalities that might open are without limit, without preordained limits.

Again, referring back to our friend's aesthetics—in this awareness of the sublime, there is a *more*, there is a kind of *beyond* that's part of the whole aesthetic sensibility and project. As we talked about the sublime in previous talks, there is a meaning there. But the art has this kind of singularity of meaning. It means, it refers back to, it points towards always this poignancy, this tragedy of impermanence.

But as I said, relative to what we're trying to open up here, it's a limited perspective on both life and art, and it's limiting. There's a monovalency—it has one meaning. And that meaning is the poignancy of the tragedy of impermanence. The fantasy, the image, the soul-making is only in those kinds of perceptions, those kinds of perspectives, and in those artistic endeavors that would come out of that and be restricted to that. The fantasy, the image, the soul-making is only with respect to that tragedy. It's limited by that.

The transcendence is also limited. It's monovalent or, if you like, bivalent. As we said, there are two kinds of transcendence that one might consider: the transcendence of the art and the transcendence of the sublime transcending the self. But it's just that—two kinds of transcendence. It's bivalent only, and only refers to the uncertainty in regard to the art and the tragedy with regard to persons and things.

My friend and I have quite different—I would say, though it might sound quite similar at first—quite different views, conceptions, interpretations of emptiness.

And this is part of what's at the root of the difference in approach to life, practice, beauty, aesthetics, and a whole range of other dimensions.

For my friend, the teachings of emptiness and the fact of emptiness are actually tied to a fantasy of tragedy and opening to tragedy—the tragedy of impermanence and the fact of existential uncertainty. His understanding of emptiness implies dukkha. Because there is dukkha, because things are empty. And there is tragedy, because things are empty.

This is quite the opposite of most of the Buddhist tradition, where emptiness implies and leads to freedom. Our confrontation with it, our exploration of it, leads to freedom. Knowing the emptiness of things, opening to the emptiness of things, brings freedom. It's not tragedy, not dukkha—quite the opposite. It's a remedy for dukkha.

The teachings of contingency or dependency—everything being interconnected, not having one basis or being based in itself—are really used in those other approaches just to say: don't get excited about any one thing, because any one thing relies on everything else, is connected with everything else, depends in some way on everything else. So don't get excited about any one thing.

The whole premise and tenor and directionality of the teachings of emptiness is really quite different than the way I would present it or view as being the basis for our work here.

In our friend's presentation, there is not this inclusion of the dependency of things on the way of looking. There is not the allowing of different ways of looking because things are empty. There is not the allowing of a flexibility of ways of looking, and there is not the practice of the flexibility of ways of looking. There is, in fact, just one way of looking, which is geared toward seeing this impermanence and tragedy. At least one kind of sanctioned way of looking.

Rather, in how I would understand it and how I've taught it, emptiness means the emptiness of something means it's not independent of the way of looking. There is no independent reality independent of the conception and way of looking at any time.

So rather than emptiness being tied in with impermanence and equally tragic, the emptiness of things, or the realization of the deep emptiness of things, means understanding that things—all things—are neither permanent nor impermanent. Neither impermanent nor permanent. They are beyond the categories of impermanent and permanent. Neither impermanence nor permanence are ultimate truth.

The Mahayana teachings in particular are full of these kinds of emphases and point this out repeatedly. For example, in the Prajnaparamita Sutras, form, feelings, vedana, perception, mental formations and consciousness are not permanent or impermanent—are neither permanent nor impermanent. In another Prajnaparamita Sutra, the perfection of wisdom does not describe any phenomenon as permanent or impermanent.

So to keep harping on about impermanence and to rest only in the view of impermanence is not a perfection of wisdom. It's a certain relative wisdom that needs to be transcended, deepened, gone beyond.

Nagarjuna, who is the paragon teacher of emptiness in the Buddhist tradition—second really only after the Buddha—also wrote in some of his main texts: "In a relative sense, everything is impermanent, but in the absolute sense, nothing is permanent or impermanent." And again, he writes: "There is no origination, there is no destruction. The customary usage of origination and destruction, and otherwise impermanence, has, however, been expounded by the Buddhas for practical purposes." It's a stepping stone teaching.

So to limit our dharma understanding, our exploration, our perspective of life, and also our approach to aesthetics and art and sense experience just by a limited understanding of impermanence and a limited exploration of emptiness—well, it limits.

How might we open up the possibilities for beauty and also for our aesthetics and our practice? And in that, open up soul-making, because they're connected—beauty and soul-making.

Perhaps we need to explore more deeply the nature of objects, of things, of life. If we feel like we say, "Oh, life is uncertain, life is this or that, it's huge," but we've actually nailed it down, nailed what it is and given that a reality—what is it? Well, it's this tragic impermanence and this hugeness that might dwarf me or erase me or extinguish me and my existence at any moment, the fragility of that. You see, that's what life is. We need to perhaps explore more deeply the nature of objects, things, and life to open up the possibilities for beauty, for aesthetics, and for soul-making.

And also, we need to open up and explore more deeply if there are, for instance, this view of life, these feelings, these emotions in regard to selves and things—this what my friend would call the unbearably poignant feelings, emotions of unbearable poignancy, seeing this fragility, impermanence of things, seeing this sublime.

Going deeper into those feelings, not just stopping there with the first sense of them and then perhaps intellectually formulating them, but not stopping—really feeling into them, certainly not avoiding or brushing them away, but going deeper into them, exploring them, opening to them. Do you have the skill to do that? Go deeper into these feelings, care for them, see how that actually transforms the feelings themselves—not by avoiding them, not by brushing them over or painting them pink, but through deeper exploration.

Don't arrest that exploration of what you're feeling if it's painful, that unbearable poignancy. Deeper exploration transforms the feelings, because everything is dependent. The transformation of the heart transforms the self-sense and the sense and the perspectives, and then the very sense and experience of things and of life—just through going deeper and exploring more and caring more and being more careful with the feelings.

So both poles—both the object pole, so to speak, and the subject pole of experience—need more exploration in order to open out the possibilities for beauty and aesthetics, and also soul-making. Both poles, subjective and so-called objective.

Beauty is in-between. Beauty is not wholly within, nor is it wholly without. Beauty is in-relationship. We say beauty is in the eye of the beholder. It's not just in the eye. It's in-relationship—of subject and object, just like image is. The image is not just there, nor is it just here. Image in the sense that we're using it, imaginal image. And just like soul is—what we mean by soul is in between, it's in the between, it's in the relationship. And actually, just like existence is, and life is, and being is, and world is, and the senses are—there's an unavoidable, inextricable link between the subjective and the objective.

They are inseparable, subject and object, these poles. There's a mutual involvement, a mutual dependency of object and subject, a dialogue, a conversation, a mutual participation. And the same with the soul and

the world.

So if we're stuck, or rather in order to open up further our sense of beauty, both poles—the subjective and the objective—need working with. We can explore fruitfully both poles, where they are limited, where they are less pliable.

In the pole of the object, we see that it's empty, in the sense that it doesn't exist independently of the way of looking—it doesn't have an inherent existence. It's empty in all kinds of ways, in fact. We're not reducing it to a scientific materialist or reductionist materialist view, because then I've limited the object. I've decided that it is this. And that kind of reductionist materialist view of things or objects or sense experience doesn't hold water if I investigate it. If I limit my view of objects, things, to a one-dimensionality, then it's almost like I'm not investigating them properly. I'm limiting what I can see there, what I can sense there. So this one-dimensionality needs to open up to the dimensionality, to the experience of dimensionality in sense objects.

And also, as I said, the subjective pole, the pole of my experience—taking care of the heart, the emotions. Catherine was talking about the senses connecting to the heart, an experience and a conception of the senses as connected with the heart. This will also support the sense of beauty and the opening and deepening of beauty.

We can also say that, as we touched on already in the retreat, in experiencing, in coming into sense experience with something, the whole energy body is involved. So I'm taking care of the subjective pole by bringing the whole energy body into contact with it. It's not just my eyes that see. What is it to look with my whole energy body as well as my eyes? What is it to know with my whole energy body as well as with other senses? So this whole energy body is included in the knowing. It's epistemically and epistemologically included. We're not shrinking down and dismissing other ways of knowing. There is no epistemicide or epistemic cleansing, which has been so rampant in Western society in the last few hundred years.

This knowing—or rather involving the whole energy body and the whole image of the body in the knowing, in the sense experiencing, in the looking or whatever it is—is also a way, as we've touched on, that supports eros to arise in the sense contact. How do I move from craving to eros? One of the ways is getting the whole energy body involved, so that the imaginal and soul-making can open up.

And then we've said before, again talking about how to open up our possibilities for beauty and deepen the possibility for aesthetics, we need to allow the fertility of the imaginal. We need to allow psyche, and we need to allow logos to expand. And we need to allow the eros to flow through and in our relationship with sense experience, or art, or whatever it is, so that through this allowing, the eros-psyche-logos dynamic can expand, can enrich and widen, deepen.

And there is the perception, eventually, of dimensionality and divinity, both of object and of subject, as

we've touched on. We need to allow ways of looking that are legitimized because of the emptiness of things. Allow this diversity and flexibility, plasticity of ways of looking, including, for instance, deliberately sensing this sensation, or this vedanā, or this perception of an object in any and each of the six senses as divine. Deliberately sensing this as divine—so this is a deliberate practice—or as from the divine.

Or deliberately sensing and viewing—a way of looking that deliberately senses and experiences and perceives or conceives this knowing, this awareness of this thing right now, in this moment, this knowing itself as divine or as from the divine, or that in that knowing I am, you are participating in divine knowing.

That kind of deliberate divinization of, if you like, the experience of the object or of the self or of the eros or of the world—that deliberate divinization may be, the capacity to do that may be developed from that experience just spontaneously arising through similar perceptual shifts where any of those aspects, any or all of those aspects—self, other, world, or eros—appear to us as divine. We have that sense through practice, through soul-making practice.

Or it can come through, or be supported through emptiness practice—ways of looking that see this object, or this vedana, or this sensation, or this knowing, the awareness itself, as anatta, not self.

And that loosening of the self-appropriation—"this is my knowing, I am knowing, I am the one who is aware," or "this is my awareness," or "this is my hand," or whatever I'm looking at—this loosening of that identification and self-appropriation with regard to experience and the aggregates, the so-called five aggregates, also opens possibilities because of the loosening. Then it becomes much easier to see them, for instance, as divine. Not mine—they're divine.

But these possibilities are supported in different ways through practice. I'm talking about how to open possibilities for beauty, possibilities for aesthetic conception, possibilities for soul-making. And oftentimes, again, it's the logos that limits our sense of beauty, the range of beauty that we can experience. It limits our aesthetics and limits our soul-making.

So for example, to have just a body of teaching that, either directly or indirectly, ends up saying there is no beauty to the world and in the senses—it's all just craving at sense pleasure. And then because of that implicit or explicit teaching, one moves into a mode of relating that avoids or dismisses or denigrates sense experience and the world, the world meaning the world of sense experience. And there's the movement to transcend that, as we've talked about. Or we just get the more modern Western version: enjoy but don't get attached. How does that work exactly? It's not really a very well fleshed out teaching or something we can have a lot of integrity with.

The relationship with the senses is implicit in and directed by a whole metaphysics that comes with teaching. The relationship that we have with the senses and that we try to pursue with the senses is

implicit in and directed by the whole metaphysics that comes with whatever teaching we're exposed to and following. There's a logos of what is real and what's not real and how we can know and what the world is. And there's a fantasy wrapped up in that, completely wrapped up with the conception, the fantasy of the path and what awakening is and how that relates to the world and the world of the senses.

So someone saying, like our friend, "Buddhist art is about impermanence, tragedy and the sublime." Why? Because that's what is believed to be real. These are real things. Life really is like that. These are real. So again, there's a metaphysics involved that ends up determining the relationship with the senses, with art, with beauty.

What would it be not to limit art, not to limit beauty and the possibilities of beauty, not to limit the possibilities of soul-making? That they are actually open-ended, as we've discussed, potentially infinite in their directions. So notions and fantasies about reality and the relationship with reality, including some kind of beyond, are tied up in the aesthetic sense.

We talk about physicists and mathematicians talking about a beautiful theory or a beautiful equation. Part of that sense of beauty is not just the elegance or simplicity of the equation or the theory. There's something, there's a dimension there. It reaches to a dimension of what isn't yet known, what is not obvious. And in another way, that's a way of saying depths, isn't it? The deep is what is not immediately apparent, what is not obvious. The theories that are beautiful connect the apparently unconnected, and they penetrate and open to what's beyond understanding, to another level.

So there's metaphysics in physics, there's this movement, and that's part of the whole perception of beauty, the whole sense of beauty, and the aesthetic sense.

And when it comes to practices, we also might be engaging practices that may limit the experience of beauty and the experience of soul-making. Bare attention to sense experience, to art, or to something in nature—bare attention will not bring a sense of beauty by itself. It will not bring a sense of beauty or soul-making. It might bring a sense of vividness and that radiance. If it does bring a sense of beauty, I would say at that point it's no longer bare attention. We actually haven't realized that it's not actually bare attention. It doesn't bring a sense of beauty and soul because it doesn't allow other depths and dimensions and the imaginal to open up in relation to what is perceived and what is sensed.

Or for instance, Mahasi practice, where there's this very focused, narrowly focused, sharp attention—kind of microscopic attention to the details of experience. And what comes down is these moments of sensation, moments of vedana, moments of perception of heat, cold, color, whatever it is. And there's a kind of atomism, which we've touched on in previous retreats. This atomic seeing, this deconstruction or reduction of the world to atomic moments of experience and elements there, is regarded as real. And being regarded as real in the logos, it creates a limit. This is the limit, because this is real. We've reached the base of what reality is—reality is made up of these extremely fine grains of sand of experience.

But then because there's a limit there and that's taken as reality, there isn't this unfathomability, this inexhaustibility, this mystery to things, to experiences, to perception, to sense experience. There is in that teaching a beyond sense experience, a transcendent, the unfabricated, but it's not in and through.

The beyond there is not in and through. It's away from experience. It's with the erasure, the fading, the cessation of experience.

Or as a third example of practices that might limit the opening of the senses of beauty and soul-making: a practice where one simply receives experience and abides, rests in a kind of openness of awareness. This will, as it progresses and deepens, lead to a sense of one taste. Everything, all experience has one taste—probably the taste of awareness or love—just has one taste, insubstantial. It might be infinite spatially because the awareness opens up as if vast. But in terms of dimensions, it reaches only that one dimension. This one taste of everything is awareness, or everything is love, or whatever it is. But the dimensionality doesn't open up either beyond that or more than that or wider than that. There is not the fertility of soul perception.

So I would say, why limit? Can we not limit beauty, art, soul-making? I would actually say, just like eros and just like soul, beauty also will always be larger than however we define it. It will not be captured in any definition. Why? It's part of the mystery of being. Beauty and our capacity for beauty and our sensitivity to beauty and the existence of beauty is one of the mysteries of being. We will never exhaust it in experience. We will never exhaust it in our creation of it. We'll never come to the end of the possibility of creating beauty or experiencing beauty. And whatever definitions or ideas of beauty we hold will never completely exhaust what beauty is, will never arrive at a final comprehension that captures it. Just like eros, just like soul. And also, just like divinity, the divine.

Some people hear that word—divinity, or the divine, or God—and think, "What on earth do you mean?" Or they assume you mean some figure they've heard about: a guy sitting on a cloud, meting out judgment to people with a long beard, or whatever. Sometimes people find it very perplexing. "What do you mean when you say that—God, or divinity?"

Maybe what might help for some people to open to that word, if one is curious and has enough looseness and flexibility and permission in the soul to allow that word or explore what that might mean, is opening up that relationship to the word divinity by analogy to beauty. Something analogous here.

If someone said—which people of course do say quite commonly these days—"There is no divinity, there is no God, there is no Buddha-nature, there are no metaphysical dimensions. None of that. Or if there is, it's irrelevant..." In a way, that would be similar to saying—if I pursue this analogy a little bit—similar to saying, what if someone said, "There is no beauty in the world anywhere. There is no beauty in the world, there is no beauty anywhere. And anyway, even if there is, it's not important, it's irrelevant."

Of course, a person can say that and they can believe it, and that might be their own experience: there is

no beauty in the world anywhere, and even if there is, it's not important, it's irrelevant. But surely it's too much to generalize that for others and just claim that everyone who perceives beauty or for whom beauty is important is simply deluded or deluding themselves. So fine, if a person has that experience, but one cannot generalize that for others.

Divine, as I am using the term, or divinity, refers to experience. Just like beauty, it refers to experience. And the way I am using divinity has, again, parallels to beauty—an analogy to what I mean by beauty—because I am not claiming that divinity exists independent of perception, of a way of looking, of soul. Just like beauty.

So it refers to experience, and I'm certainly not claiming that divinity is something that exists independent of my perception, independent of certain ways of looking, independent of soul. Now, if a person wants to say, "Ah, so it's basically an illusion—you just said it doesn't exist independently. It's an illusion. It's non-existent. It's just a fabrication"—again, this would be silly on a number of counts, such a statement, because show me something that's not fabricated. Show me something that's independent of the way of looking. All things are. Bring that thing to me. Show me. Point to it. There is nothing that's not dependent on the way of looking.

Nothing that's not fabricated. And if a person were to say that beauty is non-existent, an illusion, just a fabrication in the poor sense of the word—would you really believe that? If someone tried to convince you there's no such thing as beauty, that it is merely an illusion, or if they said people believe in beauty or seek beauty as a consolation—people say that about divinity, don't they? We believe in divinity, we seek divinity as a consolation.

It's possible that some people do approach divinity this way, or beauty. They either believe in it or seek some kind of experience as consolation. But really—and divinity is so charged and has become so problematic, so translate that to beauty—if someone said to you, "You believe in beauty or you seek beauty as consolation," possible maybe at times, or for some people at times. But really, as a kind of psychological assessment of what's going on within our relationship with beauty? It's hardly accurate, hardly comprehensive, let's say. It doesn't really flesh out what's actually happening for us in an experience of beauty.

It's not that we desperately create beauty to console ourselves against the reality of a meaningless universe and the finitude of our existence. As much as we might seek beauty or create it, it finds us. As much as we might seek or create it, it finds us. We are struck by beauty. If we are only open—and open means more than heart, more than just heart, more than just the senses—open means soul open.

There's something to recognize here. There's a mystery to beauty. It's always going to be bigger than the reasons why—the reasons why we create beautiful things, the reasons why beauty is important to us, the reasons why we experience beauty. We make those reasons, and beauty will transcend them. It will be more than that. Our whole relationship with beauty will always be more than that, just as with divinity

and what I mean by the experience of divinity and the conception of divinity. So I'm making a parallel here.

And what's more, certainly in the way that I would like to open up that exploration of divinity and inclusion of that notion and that experience—divinity, like beauty, is not outside of sense experience. So there is certainly a dimension or aspect, if you like, of divinity, of the transcendent, unfabricated, that might be wholly transcendent of sense experience. Sure. But divinity, like beauty, is not outside of sense experience, in the way that I would like to open that up.

This is an analogy. I'm not saying beauty is God or God is beauty or anything like that. I'm not equating the two. I'm making an analogy. If divinity is just a baffling notion to you and there are all kinds of reactions, think about and explore your relationship and your notion and your experience of beauty. There are, I think, many analogies there with the experience and possible notions of divinity.

I could use actually love or mercy or intelligence rather than beauty, because in mystical experience and mystical perceptions that are possible to open up, we can have experiences of love or mercy or intelligence or many other qualities pervading the cosmos, being present throughout the cosmos. But those kinds of experiences are less common than an experience of beauty in the cosmos, in the universe. Even though beauty can be harder to find at times, most people have had an experience of beauty. We don't think of it as a mystical or rare perception, a rare experience, though actually it is a kind of mystical perception.

I'd like to say more about the experience of divinity and the breadth and range of those kinds of experiences, but I'm aware of time, and I've talked about it recently elsewhere, so I'll leave that for now. But just to say that when I'm talking about the experiences of divinity and that notion of divinity, we're really talking about infinite folds—infinite possibilities, infinite folds of the infinite, if you like. Infinite aspects of divinity that can open up for us everywhere and in everything.

Every facet of our being and every facet of existence can be divinized or experienced as divine in infinite ways. Because of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, because of the expansion of soul-making, of the movement of soul-making, everything that involves and implies and galvanizes, there is the ongoing possibility of the creation and discovery of divinity everywhere, in everything, in every facet. Even the creation and discovery of facets that we haven't, that we don't even yet perceive in things, in ourselves, in our being. And then those too will be divinized, these new facets, these unknown facets.

Now sometimes, of course, people really don't like that word "divinity" or "God" for all different reasons. And so sometimes people might use the word "Buddha nature," and actually I could use them interchangeably as far as I'm concerned. In Buddhism, Buddha nature has, you know, a whole range of teachings, divergent teachings. People disagree about it.

People argue about it—a whole range of ways that word and concept of Buddha nature is used.

One of the ways it's used, especially recently, has come to mean simply your nice qualities, your good qualities. So you might feel that you lack generosity or compassion or patience. But actually these things are there in you, just waiting to be unearthed. This teaching helps us in regard to self-judgment because we recognize this innate goodness.

Some streams of the tradition use it in a second way—related, but different. Buddha nature means your potential to be enlightened, to become a Buddha. The possibility of you becoming a Buddha is your Buddha nature. Why is that possible? Because the mind is impermanent and the factors of the mind are impermanent. So if you're stingy and not generous, if you're judgmental, if you're impatient, these are just impermanent factors of mind. Because they're impermanent, they can go away and you can cultivate opposite qualities—generosity, compassion, patience. In cultivating them, you grow towards Buddhahood.

There's another way, which I prefer to speak about, which is what I mean mostly when I talk about Buddha nature. This refers to something much more mysterious, mystical, transcendent—or transcendent in some respects. It refers to the Buddha mind, the cosmic Buddha awareness, if you like. But it's not even just an awareness. It's a non-dual awareness. It is empty in itself, but it's inseparable from what it knows. And what does it know? It knows the world, the world of appearances, which are also empty, and it knows that they are empty.

So it's a knowing of emptiness and the totality of both the knowing and what is experienced—the awareness and the world. It's, if you like, the whole intersubjective field that we call included when we talk about subject and object, the whole field together. It's the gnosis, the ultimate knowing of a Buddha, the ultimate intersubjective field of a Buddha mind, but it's cosmic knowledge. This is more what I would like to infer when I use the word Buddha nature.

Buddha nature comprises, in the Mahayana tradition, dharmakaya as one aspect or dimension. In some teachings, dharmakaya really just means—kaya is body and dharma is consciousness. One meaning of dharma is mental factors. It's just the body, if you like, the collection of the Buddha's mental factors, of the Buddha's mental dharmas. In the Prajnaparamita Sutras, it means much more than that. It's not just the collection of the Buddha's mental factors possessed by a certain individual—Siddhartha, Gautama, or whoever. It's actually referring much more to this non-dual, empty gnosis that's inseparable—subject and object, awareness and world—that whole cosmic intersubjective field that knows the emptiness of things, is empty itself, and includes both awareness and world, subject and object, all being empty.

Actually, Buddha nature also includes not just dharmakaya, but also sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya. We don't have time to go into that, but I've talked about this before. If we don't restrict the meaning of those words and these kayas to just an individual, historical individual, or one possible individual in this finite form—their Buddha nature or this person's Buddha nature—and regard it more widely, more cosmically, then the dharmakaya and the sambhogakaya and the nirmanakaya really include this cosmic, universal subject, if you like, the whole realm of imaginal perception, the imaginal realm, and the world

of physical appearances or appearances that appear physical to us, whatever that means.

All of that brings us to something much more mystical, much more inclusive and much less dualistic as well. With a certain understanding of Buddha nature that I would like to relate to the use of the word divine or God as well. Can we move towards that? What would support that kind of opening of the view, that kind of platform of a view, actually in experience as well as in conception?

We know, for example, with just a little bit of reflection, that my body, your body, though it looks like a distinct thing, is actually in constant permeable exchange physically with the material world—the air we breathe, the food we eat, what we drink, what we excrete. There's permeability between my body and the world's body, if you like.

As we go more into and allow more and support more the soul-making dynamic and the igniting and the fire of eros-psyche-logos, we begin to be able to perceive and to sense, not just conceive, but to perceive and to sense—because things that we perceive and sense become erotic objects for us, then the whole eros-psyche-logos dynamic, as we've described—we start to perceive and sense those things, and the world of things, and everything, and every facet, and every fold, and every dimension, gains a kind of autonomy. We sense it as having a certain autonomy, a certain intelligence, a certain soul, psyche, and also its own eros.

This tree has a certain—comes alive as soul. It has soul. It is soul. It also has eros. So psyche and eros and intelligence and all the rest of it and autonomy are not just in the human or animal minds. Actually, with the eros-psyche-logos dynamic expanding, deepening, widening, fertilizing, we start to sense ourselves and conceive ourselves in an ensouled world, a world that has soul, that is soul. An animate world—the word animate actually refers to anima, has soul, which is Latin for soul.

The world becomes animated. The world of things, of objects, of so-called inanimate objects becomes animated. The whole open field of being becomes the field of eros and soul and eroses and souls and psyches.

So psyche is not just in here. Soul is not just in here, or in you, somehow. And we've already actually implied this by saying, in the use of the word psyche, we said yes, it means soul - my soul, your soul - in the subjective citta sense. But it also means, in the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, the totality of imaginal perception. We said that, if you remember. In other words, the totality of objects and perceptions. So it's already implicit that psyche is not just in here, so to speak.

And eros too. I told you about Eros always being with Pothos and with a band of gods or demigods called the Erotes. Well, another character, as well as Eros and Pothos in that little band that always goes together, is Anteros. This is responding or returning eros - the mirroring of eros. And what we see with our imaginal experience, whether it's a purely so-called intra-psychic image or an imaginal perception, the deepening of the soul-making perception of something in the world, is that that thing, whatever it is, or

that beloved other, we start to sense that they have eros for us. The eros is returned; it flows both ways - from us to them, from them to us. The world of things loves us. It has eros for us. It has soul. It is soul. Souls multiply, become more manifold.

So in all this, we're collapsing, or if you like, going beyond the sort of typically now ingrained assumption and perception of Cartesian dualism that Descartes made between mind and matter - cogitans and res extensa. Actually, reading recently, quite interesting - it really started with Galileo, not with Descartes. That's interesting anyway. But this - not so much collapse, but opening out of that dualism, dissolving of that dualism - becomes not just an idea, but a lived sense. It's sensed, it's felt, it's experienced, as well as conceived.

So that movement happens, as I said, just through soul-making and supporting soul-making and being interested in that and exploring it. And that expansion there through the whole eros-psyche-logos dynamic, as we've been explaining, it will move to that place. And then that place will just keep becoming more manifold - the senses of divinity, the perceptions, the experience, the dimensions, the facets, creation, being created and discovered, all of that.

It may also be supported - and again I'm answering this question, how do we open up that sense of the divine? What supports it? - it can be supported for many people through emptiness practices, really deepening. For some people they need to go through that route.

So we see with the way I would teach emptiness and that whole line of exploration, we begin to realize through playing with ways of looking that the mind fabricates perception. And through that, this thing or that thing, this perception or that perception, this object or that object is empty, is fabricated. And then we also see that this mind or this awareness too is not-self - it's anatta. And we can play with that view and see what happens. And we recognize eventually that this mind, this awareness that fabricates, it too is empty in itself. It's not only not me or mine, it's also empty in itself.

We see more than this in this whole opening. We see that time is empty. And because of all this, fabrication itself is empty. The whole duality between what is fabricated and what is unfabricated, what seems illusory in some sense and real in some sense - that collapses. All of it, including the mind, can be perceived as sacred, as divine.

And we can say yes to a certain, or in a certain manner of speaking, a certain relative truth: the mind fabricates, but the mind that fabricates is this divine mind. It's not mine. It's the divine mind, which is not separate from the things and the world, because we've seen all that through the dependent origination, through the understanding of emptiness. It's the divine mind that fabricates all perception - so-called physical, so-called imaginal, so-called combination perception. And this view becomes, this way of looking becomes available. It's a possible view. We can move into that.

So I can engage that, deliberately, that view - that it is the divine mind fabricating, the divine mind that's

timeless, that's empty, that's beyond all that can be said about it. That divine mind is fabricating a world of perception - the world of things and objects and selves and others and all that. It's not separate from those fabrications, but it's that that's fabricating, not me, not mine.

As Catherine has emphasized, we could say mind, but we could also say the senses or include within the word mind the senses. We tend to split these things; they're not really separate. The word, the Pali word and Sanskrit word, I think, is ayatana.

The Pali is certainly that, āyatana. And it gets translated as sense bases or organs, so ear, eye, etc. Or agents, implying this active role that they have. Their extent, their reaches, their fields—this is also a perfectly valid translation and is implied in the meaning of āyatana.

So that word āyatana encompasses much more than how we tend to divide those meanings up in English. If we say ear, we don't tend to think of the whole field of aural perception. Or eye—we don't tend to think of the whole field of visual perception, but actually that's included in āyatana. And so it includes the objects as well, the objects of sense perception, the fields of sense perception, the activity of the agency, the way that it is actually active and participatory. The senses are active and participatory, and also the so-called physical organ or base.

Again, this āyatana points to this intersubjective realm, this non-dual sense, if you like, that we can have of the whole realm of experience.

So through the view of emptiness, if we go through the practices of emptiness, for some people, it's what opens up the possibility of a certain view of Buddha nature, of divinity. And implicit in that is a certain soul-making practice—a view of soul and the soul's participation. And it can form a basis of possible further ways of looking and conceptions, a basis for the flexibility of that and being able to entertain, because we've seen the emptiness of these things. And because of that, further soul-making, and as I said, further folds, further facets created, discovered, come on that basis of that sense of participating and being in this divine field, if you like—the world as divine, the experiences of the senses as divine, ourselves, our minds, every fold, every facet of the being as divine. And that can be multiplied and deepened and enriched because of the eros-psyche-logos dynamics.

Now, it may be that someone is listening and thinks, "Yes, but is that real? Is that true?" If you have this sense...

I hope that it's obvious by now from everything we've said in previous retreats that we have moved beyond, we have deconstructed naive notions of reality and truth. We are in the playing field, the realm opened up by the Middle Way—neither existing nor not existing, neither is nor is not, as the Buddha said. "I teach neither is nor is not"—the Middle Way. That is a basis, a result of emptiness practice, and if you like, a basis but also a refinement or product of the refinement of imaginal practice.

So is it real? Is it true? In a way, we get locked into very naive—philosophically naive and psychologically

naive—notions of reality and truth.

And what are we doing here? I'll say this again. I've said it before. What are we doing here? Is this whole exploration, whether it's of eros, soul-making, beauty, aesthetics—are we wanting to serve something called truth? I mean, maybe that's partly... I think it is actually a part of it. But so often when people hear that word, or "reality," or whatever, they just have some idea—we just have some idea of something that's singular and objective, existing independently of the way of looking. Is it that we're trying, this whole movement of practice in the service of reaching some singular, objective truth? Or is it soul-making? And that's a different intention.

We need to really open up what we mean by truth. But for me, we're in the service of soul-making. We're interested in supporting that movement of soul-making. And in the movement of soul-making, there will be an expansion. By definition, soul-making means an expansion of perception, an expansion into perception of dimensionalities and divinity, divinities and Buddha nature and all that. Limitless creation, discovery, revelation. This is the movement of soul-making. This is what we want to serve.

Thank you for listening.

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