Sensing with Soul (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:27:16

I hope these talks prove helpful in some way. As I mentioned previously, much of their content and structure emerges from my sense of what has been difficult to understand or frequently misunderstood. Sometimes I need to rebalance certain emphases—when particular aspects, approaches, or leanings have been stressed over recent years at the expense of others, contrary to my original intention. This is an attempt at such rebalancing, if necessary.

In previous talks, I described a process—an evolution of practicing with the imaginal. One might begin working with an image where eros is present, and that image becomes imaginal, sparking the soul-making dynamic. This involves, catalyzes, and ignites the whole Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic with their mutual insemination, mutual complication, enriching, deepening, and widening. We've discussed this as one way of understanding the essence of the soul-making dynamic as it unfolds.

Within this vortex of eros, psyche, and logos and their interrelations, there can sometimes be a spilling over of the image. When working with an imaginal figure intrapsychically, it begins to overflow into the extrapsychic realm—into the world itself. The soul-making perceptions, the imaginal perceptions, begin to spread and include not just the imaginal figure one might be working with intrapsychically, but also the self, the world, one's eros, and all elements of being—both intrapsychic and extrapsychic, but particularly in the extrapsychic realm and the world.

We use the word cosmopoiesis for this phenomenon—an unusual term in our time. Cosmo derives from cosmos, meaning both the world and the organizing principles of the world, the structure of the universe. Poiesis refers to a kind of poetic creativity. Cosmopoiesis describes what happens through the depth, vitality, and beauty of imaginal practice: this spreading of soul-making perception to include and involve the world around us. When one opens one's eyes or while sitting, walking, or simply standing, the world becomes imbued with imaginal perception influenced by the original intrapsychic imaginal perception.

The word poiesis is carefully chosen here. Cosmology typically implies truth—usually scientific truth. Cosmopoiesis implies a poetic truth, a kind of truth that one would not feel comfortable dismissing as mere illusion in one's integrity, completeness, and the fullness of one's being and soul. I provided many examples of this in recent talks on the path of the imaginal and during the "Re-enchanting the Cosmos" retreat.

This represents both a creative process and a discovery—discovery in the sense that there is some kind of truth to these many possible perceptions of the world, the cosmos, the universe. What occurs is a spilling over that spreads to include the world, self, other, world, and so forth in this cosmopoiesis. All perceptions

of the world are then shaped, colored by, or exist in relationship to the particular image one began with.

This doesn't mean that if one is imagining an imaginal figure—a god, goddess, divinity, or deity—the entire world is necessarily perceived as that deity. Rather, one might perceive oneself and elements of the world in relation to, in reference to that deity: as the lover of that deity, the consort, the food of that deity, or in countless other ways. All perceptions within this cosmopoiesis are shaped and colored in relation to the particular image that served as the starting point.

The possibilities for cosmopoiesis are infinite, truly endless, because of the infinite fertility and possibility of the soul and the imaginal faculty, the imaginal realm. In such perception, all those elements and aspects we listed as pertaining to the imaginal in the previous talk become elements of that cosmopoetic perception. In other words, it is soul-making. Some elements seem to refer more obviously to the subjective pole, others to the objective pole of that imaginal constellation, that cosmopoetic perception, that soul-making perception.

Actually, this kind of cosmopoiesis could be considered the larger subset of all possible cosmopoiesis. We can also include perceptions of the world when perception is influenced and imbued with visions of universal oneness that can arise from certain deep meditative states or formal meditation practice. These are perceptions of the oneness of love—everything is of the nature and substance of love; love permeates and forms the essence of all things. Or compassion, joy, or peace might be perceived as the fundamental essence. These represent different kinds of perceptions of oneness that become different forms of cosmopoiesis.

Again, one wouldn't feel comfortable dismissing these perceptions as mere fabrication or delusion. One intuits some kind of mystical truth here: everything is awareness.

The nature of all being is awareness, or is nothingness. There are, within this category of what we could call perceptions of universal oneness—cosmopoieses that are characterized by some kind of universal oneness—actually a finite number of possibilities. I mentioned this in the Unfettered series, and there are certain variations.

For instance, around the sixth jhana or practices of resting in awareness, either one can give rise to quite a few states where the essence of things that permeates everything is consciousness or awareness. They're not exactly the same, and if this is the kind of territory whose beauty moves you and interests you, it can be really fascinating to sail on those seas, to navigate that territory and make those discernments.

But that set of perceptions or cosmopoieses that involve a perception of universal oneness—of some kind of universal essential essence—they are more limited as final possibilities. Together with the ones that come through more imaginal practice, they form the whole set of all possible cosmopoieses, which is actually infinite. Although perceptions of universal oneness form a finite set of cosmopoieses, the others are infinite, completely open-ended. There's no limit to what the soul can conjure, weave, create, discover.

So one may be working primarily with a so-called intrapsychic imaginal figure, and then this spreads out into a cosmopoiesis that's shaped, colored by, or in relationship to that particular image one was working with. That cosmopoiesis is very particular, and there are infinite possibilities.

Or one can actually not start with an intrapsychic image, but rather begin with some object of the five senses—something one is seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, hearing. Some sound, smell, taste, touch, or a person that one is seeing, listening to—whatever it might be. One basically starts with the world and the things of the world, and the initial starting point in practice is with that sense contact, rather than with the so-called intrapsychic imaginal. One is starting with the extrapsychic.

And there too, in some instances when we practice, Eros and Psyche and Logos get involved in that sensing, in that perceiving. We speak of perceiving my beloved, my friend, my teacher, my lover—whatever it is—imaginatively. Or we use this phrase: sensing with soul. We're sensing this or that thing, this or that object. We're sensing the world with soul.

Sensing with soul—I introduced this phrase and I'd like to dwell on it a little today and over the next few days. The cosmopoiesis, the movement from an intrapsychic imaginal figure to that cosmopoiesis, is also a sensing with soul. So there too the world is sensed with soul. The order of practices by which we arrived at that point—whether we started intrapsychically or extrapsychically—is irrelevant. At that point of cosmopoiesis, we are sensing with soul.

So those kinds of cosmopoieses are subsets of a larger mode of being that we call sensing with soul.

As a kind of side point, the more traditional kinds of oneness perceptions of the world and those cosmic visions I mentioned earlier—they may be soul-making, as I've said before in other talks, and they may be a kind of sensing with soul if they are newer to the consciousness and so present a kind of beyond. "I haven't quite got my head around this. I haven't quite plumbed the depths of this perception." They present to the psyche a kind of beyond, which is more than I know, more than I'm familiar with, more than I can quite grasp or sense right now. And so they have allure and there's eros there because of the beyond, because of the pothos in the eros.

Those kinds of oneness perceptions can also be soul-making if there's a fantasy of the self in relationship to that experience, or in relation to a tradition that teaches and lays out the way to those kinds of experiences. So that could be soul-making. We could then also call it sensing with soul, when all that is present with a certain image, a certain sense of universal oneness.

Perhaps I'm too loose sometimes, or not caring enough about drawing rigid definitions of words. But another way to carve all this up is to say that soul has two directions of desire, two directions of eros. One is the direction towards unfabricating, towards the unfabricated. And those different states of perceiving universal oneness—love, peace, joy, awareness, nothingness—they are points along that spectrum towards the unfabricated. They are states and perceptions of less and less fabrication. We could order

them and delineate them along that spectrum.

And we could say something in the soul—it might not be alive for all people at any time—

But in other words, a person—this might not have come alive for them yet—but I would say that the soul has some desire, some eros in that direction, some pull and magnetic attraction to the beauty and the mystery and the wonder and the deliverance, in the Buddha's words, of those states, all of those states along that spectrum, all the way to the unfabricated. This is a hunger, a desire, an erotic pull of the soul.

And the soul has a second direction of its desire or eros, or the way its desire and eros points and wants to open, explore, expand, unfold. And that is towards—not so much the unfabricated, but towards what we could call poetic or soulful fabrications that include the imaginative faculty, the imaginal faculty.

So there's a movement towards unfabricating and everything that's on that spectrum, all those onenesses. And there's a pull, a movement, a longing, a love, an erotic movement and desire for poetic, soulful fabrications that include the imaginal faculty.

As I said, I sometimes feel I don't really care about the language too much. But let's just say for now, this last one, this poetic, soulful fabrication—soul-making fabrications that include the imaginal faculty—we're going to call or want to introduce the phrase "sensing with soul." In other words, sensing that is soul-making. Therefore, sensing this world, sensing this thing that I'm in touch with—this material thing, this person, this object, this element—sensing in a way that gives rise to some sense and concept of divinity, of sacredness, of meaningfulness, of beauties opening up. So sensing that opens all that up.

And this—this opening up of the sensing of the world in ways that are soul-making, in other words, opening up the possibilities of the sensing of divinity and sacredness and holiness in and through and not just beyond the world itself, and opening that up widely and infinitely in ways that really make a difference to the soul and to one's existence, opening up the meaningfulness and the beauty—this to me is the main point of imaginal practice. It's not so much getting fascinating images or this or that, but this transformation of the whole sense of existence, this redeeming and healing of the whole sense of existence, this open-ended creation and discovery of what exists, all of existence. This to me is really the main point. And that can be very subtle at times and very undramatic.

To me, the main point of even intrapsychic imaginal practice is not so much the intrapsychic images for their own sake. Yes, healing comes in all this practice, imaginal practice, soul-making practice. Personal healing comes. Yes, dukkha is healed, attenuated in all kinds of ways. I'll dwell on that in the next talk. Yes, all this imaginal practice, the way we're teaching it and the sensing with soul and all of that, catalyzes, fertilizes, works and brings to—I was going to say fruition, but it's also an open-ended process—what we could call self-growth or my psycho-spiritual process, your psycho-spiritual process. What a Jungian would call individuation, though there are significant differences.

In other words, yes, all this imaginal practice brings personal healing, brings the resolution of my dukkha

and actually also the dukkha in the world. Because we live, we see the world differently and we care for the world differently because we see it with soul, we sense it with soul. Our relationship with matter, with nature, with other human beings and other sentient beings is also deepened and enriched, made more beautiful, made more meaningful, made more importantly woven into our very sense of existence and value. So all this has huge implications for the reduction of dukkha.

But we could also just refer to all this—personal healing, reduction of dukkha, individuation or something akin to it, personal meaningfulness and relevance, personal process work—we could include all of this under the term "sensing with soul," where the self also is sensed with soul. In that way, with regards to one's own person, one's own existence, one's own self, the self becomes an object of soul-making. The self becomes an erotic other. The elements of the self become erotic beloveds to our own soul. The self and my existence and my journey and my struggles become pregnant with meaningfulness, amplified with different meanings and meaningfulness. I start to see the beauty of myself, the beauty of my journey, of my struggles, of my aspirations, of my efforts. I start to see the divinity of myself. And that has nothing to do with ego.

As we talked about on the Re-Enchanting the Cosmos retreat, there's a re-enchanting of dukkha, of my suffering, of my travails, my tragedies, what life has given me to work with, to deal with, to face. The whole sense of self is opened when it's sensed with soul. And all that self-process and soul-fertilizing of the self, soul-making of the sense of self, is happening in a context where the world and others and objects and the things of the world are also re-enchanted.

So all that is happening—something akin to individuation and personal healing and personal reduction of dukkha and all that. But the main point is this sensing with soul, sensing existence with soul—existence and the things, the elements of existence with soul. To me, that's the main point. That's where all this is going.

I want to quote a little bit from a philosopher that I've been getting acquainted with over the last six months or year, named J.N. Findlay.

He's dead now. And he was very unfashionable when he lived. I think he died in the 80s, so he lived, born in the early twentieth century. And he would be interested in certain philosophers and branches of philosophy and directions in philosophy that were really not fashionable during the period of his life, so that he spent a long time kind of really in the provincial outskirts, sort of banished because people thought he was a bit of a fuddy-duddy.

But I find a lot of what he says and writes and what he's trying to get at and trying to open up and trying to emphasize the importance of—I find it very beautiful, very touching. And I just want to quote from an essay that's slightly autobiographical, and he says of himself: "I myself have always been constitutionally mystical, feeling that certain kinds of rapture concerned with work, beauty, love, and a few other things, are the only things absolutely worth having." Listen to that. The only things absolutely worth having.

"I dropped my mysticism for a long period, partly on account of certain disillusioning experiences in my twenties with certain spiritual groups" that he was involved with, "and partly out of deference to the dry methods and doctrine that prevailed in British philosophy."

Then he says, latterly, however, increasing age—he was only sixty-two when he wrote this—has brought him back to his openness to mysticism and his seeing of just how important that is. And these aspects of beauty, love, work, beauty, love, and a few other things are the only things absolutely worth having.

And he also says, also seeing "the completely nugatory accomplishments"—that means the completely trivial accomplishments—"of purely unmystical analysis." So he was a mainstream philosopher in that sort of very dry Anglo-American tradition that prevailed for so many years and still is quite popular. And he knew all that, he worked with all that, he was respected as a proponent of all that in academic institutions. But then, as he approaches the end of his life, seeing the completely nugatory, trivial accomplishments of purely unmystical philosophical analysis, "I have found myself reverting increasingly to my original mysticism."

Sometimes, you know, maybe it's certain teachings, or maybe it's certain kinds of philosophy, and you just think, well, so what? So what? So for me, and one could even say, even with working with the imagination, it's like it can be, oh, so fascinating, and it's also so kind of sexy-sounding, or whatever. But the main point to me is this sensing existence with soul. For me, of course, you're free to make whatever is your main point, and whatever's most important to you, but for me, and my intention in sort of even starting with these teachings was always that. It's the re-enchanting of existence, the opening up of the possibilities and the legitimizing of and making accessible the possibilities of genuine, vital, and meaningful, and deeply transformative senses of sacredness—in the plural, senses of sacredness. That's my sense of what's most important here.

So in all this, there's a process or journey of opening to make more accessible and more refined this soul dynamic, soul process of the creation slash discovery—or the creation and discovery—in very individual ways as well as collectively or socially together. This creation and discovery of senses of sacredness, sensing the world with soul and the possibilities there.

Life and death, existence, self, others, objects, world, matter—all the elements of being become image, can become image. That doesn't mean all the time, twenty-four hours a day, every day. But the access to that, the refinement with that, the flexibility, the depth and breadth of that, it grows. It gets worked, gets opened over time. And all of that, all the elements of being—matter, self, other, world, life, death, existence—can be perceived imaginatively in the infinite different ways that that is possible, in the infinitely richly and bountiful ways and helpful ways that that's possible. All of that can get sensed with the soul. And that, to me, as I said, is the primary thrust, or where this is going, the intention of what is being opened.

Now, just a little bit, again, I mentioned it already in the first talk at some point, but about vocabulary

here. So we've been using this word imaginal, and we're still using it, and I personally don't intend to necessarily give it up. But I am aware, of course, as I said, that it can be confusing for some people, or it has been confusing to some people, whether they're aware of it or not, or limiting for some people. So I just want to say a bit about these different vocabularies—imaginal and sensing with soul—and really kind of, again, introduce or wave the flag for this new phrase, sensing with soul, alongside the word imaginal as a complement or an alternative. And actually, say they can be used almost interchangeably, I think.

So for some people, it seems that the word imaginal seems to imply a necessary involvement or centering around an intra-psychic visual image. Just the word image in our common usage in the wider culture seems to imply something visual and seems to, for meditators, imply something intra-psychic as opposed to like an image in an advert or something. And then we've been through this as well and some people say, well, I don't get any of those. I don't get any images. So there's still this idea of intra-psychic visual images.

So I thought about it, and it occurred to me that maybe the phrase sensing with soul would be a helpful complement to the word imaginal, perhaps, for some people. Why? Because sensing with soul would imply, or it seems to me to imply, that it includes seeing, hearing, touching people, being touched and the use of the kinesthetic sense. Tasting, smelling, thinking and imagining. Any and all of those, if we say seven senses, if we count thinking and imagining as the sixth and seventh. And you'll know that classical Buddha Dharma counts the mind—whether it's thinking or imagining or all that—as the sixth sense.

But any of those senses—seeing, hearing, touching, being touched by, tasting, smelling, thinking and imagining—can be engaged with soulfulness or in ways that are soul-making. So sensing with soul means using any of the senses in ways that are soul-making, using them with soulfulness.

Now, of course, this just begs the question: what do the terms soul, soulfulness and soul-making mean? That needs explaining, which I've done elsewhere, but I will explore again. So there's a kind of circularity of definition, but all the most... well, I was going to say all the most important things in life have circular definitions, but let's just say this one does. And that's fine, because hopefully you will really get a sense and a taste of what we're talking about here.

This phrase then, sensing with soul, implies an involvement or inclusion of both intra-psychic phenomena—images—and perceptions of this world and material objects and others in this world. In other words, sensing with soul embraces both the so-called intra-psychic and the extra-psychic.

It may be that the tendency with the phrase "sensing with soul," because of the emphasis on sensing and our usual association of sensing with the five senses and hence the link to the extra-psychic and the material world, might drift the other way for some people, away from the intra-psychic. But no phrase or term is going to be perfect and eliminate all incompleteness of understanding or misemphasis or unfair emphasis of direction. So I want to introduce it as a kind of complement, or for some it will be an alternative to the word imaginal—as I said, embracing both the intra-psychic and the extra-psychic.

But also the phrase "sensing with soul" hopefully makes it clear that images are not necessarily visual. We could give so many examples here, but I think it was in the talk "Image, Mythos, Dharma," in the first part of that talk...

Some of you may be really dedicated musicians, deeply into that art of music and that whole life. And in the way that a musician who is really into it, in the moment when they are playing with soul, their instrument—the way they touch the instrument, the way they move their fingers or their lips, the contact, the manner, and all the extreme subtleties that you would be really hard-pressed to even analyze into their components or sum up—that way of touching and playing an instrument is part, of course, of their technique. It's part of how they are accomplished in the way that they get the instrument to make the sound that they want it to make. But it's also imbued with soul.

So again, if you're a musician, you'll recognize this: when you're playing with soul, then the way you're touching the instrument, the movement and the contact and the kinds of contact with the instrument, the actual physical impact, is being perceived with soul, perceived soulfully, sensed with soul, and also moved by soul. So the whole thing—all that touch and contact—is imbued with soul and actually involves a perception of the self, some kind of other, which may be the instrument and the music and the sound and maybe other musicians in the present moment that one might be playing with, and also other musicians in history that are alive as images somehow imbuing your music-making creative process in the moment. And also the world and the audience and the sense or the imaginal perception of the audience's participation and listening and involvement and enjoyment and openness and appreciation of the music.

There's nothing necessarily visual there. The imaginal element of sensing with soul is really happening in the touch and in the listening. It's happening... and if we're talking about the way of touching the instrument, it's very, very subtle, and the way it's woven into touch there is very, very subtle.

Maybe more accessible for a lot of people would be an example of the way lovers touch when they're in love. Of course, it's sensually pleasant. Of course, there is goodwill communicated. But there's another element there of the erotic imaginal in and through the touch. Even if one has one's eyes closed...

You understand, so sensing with soul, or sensing and acting with soul, involves all kinds of perceptions of self, other, object—could be in any of the senses—and world. All seven senses.

Actually, on that musician example, some of you know B.B. King, the blues singer who died not too long ago, a great blues singer and guitarist. And he, you may know this if you know him, called his guitar Lucille. So his guitar was, for him, a feminine person that he had a real intimate relationship with. So there's an imaginal relationship there, and maybe a sensing with soul. But that's relatively gross. If you just say, "Oh, his guitar becomes a person," that's a relatively gross sort of sensing with soul, a relatively gross imaginal perception.

When someone might not personify their instrument that way, for example, and the whole sensing with

soul is happening, as I said, through the touch or through the sense of the audience or through the sound or through the kind of historical connection that's happening so subtly with previous musicians who are images for us... but the main point here was that it doesn't have to be visual. So it can be extremely subtle and can happen through any and all of the senses.

And again, notice that when I made kind of seven senses there, thinking is included in sensing with soul. So again, in the thinking, in the conceiving mind, there can be a soul-making fantasy of thinking, of my thinking, of the thinking happening itself.

It becomes imaginal. The thinking itself, our sense of our own thinking becomes imaginal—we perceive it imaginatively, we sense our own thinking with soul. Then the thinking itself becomes an image, becomes erotic. Our thinking, the thought, the thinker, ourselves as thinker.

And also, a distinction we've already made: there can be a soulful conceptualizing of, or a soul-making with respect to or in relationship to, one's conceiving.

So all of the senses can be arenas—spheres, to borrow the Buddha's word, ayatana—for soul-making. Soul-making can happen through and with and in all the senses.

In some respects it's useful to make a distinction between intra-psychic images and extra-psychic sensing with soul—intra-psychic sensing with soul, extra-psychic sensing with soul, or the imaginal perception of this material world. Let's say sensing the soul includes the intra-psychic imaginal, and we can just about use the words interchangeably: imaginal and sensing the soul.

If we explore a little bit the nature of sensing, the phenomenology of sensing, and this notion of sensing the soul, I'll just highlight a few things.

One could say that there are good, justifiable reasons for saying—from a certain point of view, or a certain way of thinking about things, analyzing things—that any and all perception, which means any and all experience or any and all appearances (I use those words perception, experience, and appearance pretty much interchangeably), is fabricated in a way that involves or mixes or relies on the cooperation of or is infused by four elements, dimensions of our being or aspects or factors.

One is conception, and I've emphasized this before. That includes everything from the most gross conception to really, really subtle conceptions and assumptions about what is real and what knowledge is. Any kind of delineation of perception involves a delineation of conception, whether we're conscious of what's going on conceptually or not—and for the most part we're not. So conception.

Secondly, intentionality or desire is also a factor involved in, mixed in with, cooperating in and infusing any fabrication of any perception. Any perception at all. So that means: what is actually the intention in perceiving? What is the desire? What kind of desire is it? Is it clinging—and if you know the way I would explain the phenomenology of perception and the whole ways of looking and fabricating, it needs to be

some kind of clinging. Is it craving, though, or is it eros?

Some kind also of aspiration, which might be very developed—the aspiration to see along some kind of dharmic lines, to see impermanence, or the aspiration for liberation, or the aspiration to sense with soul. It might be quite a developed and conscious aspiration, a sophisticated aspiration, or it may be very, very subtle. It may be conscious, it may not be conscious. But some kind of intentionality or desire or aspiration is involved as a second factor.

The third, we could say, is just sense data.

These four factors—the fourth being the imaginal faculty—are all involved and mixed together, or they cooperate, or they infuse each other. We could say they're in dialogue with each other. Sense data, the imaginative faculty, conception, and desire, intentionality, aspiration, are in dialogue with each other to inform, shape, influence our perceptions of anything, of life, things, and existence in any moment.

Though dialogue is not really a good word because it implies a kind of separability—this is in dialogue with that. The imaginative faculty is in dialogue with the sense data as if the sense data was something raw and pristine and we could arrive at it and separate it on its own. We can't. That's not possible despite the sort of teachings of bare attention that used to be quite common in the Dharma world.

These four factors are inseparable. They are mixed together in a way—we're artificially separating something just as a conceptual structure right now that's not actually separable. So sense data is always mixed with conception. It's always mixed with intentionality and some degree of imaginal faculty.

So each of these four—conception, intentionality or desire, what we might call sense data (in inverted commas), and the imaginal faculty—they are all involved to some degree or other. In other words, you can have a really rich involvement of the imaginal faculty, and it can be shaped this way or that way, like towards more papañca, or towards more soul-making, or colored this way or that way. And as I said, there can be a really sophisticated, conscious involvement of the conceptuality, or just a very unconscious and not very sophisticated involvement of conceptuality.

So they all can be more or less, each individually and relative to each other, and they're inseparable and there's a confluence—they're all influenced, they're all mixed together.

We can say that with some justification as a sort of way of conceiving what's happening with any and all perception, any and all experience or any and all sense of an appearance.

When we talk about sensing with soul, one way of understanding what we really mean is that those four factors are working in a way that brings soul-making, that opens soul-making. So the conception operating, the kind of desire or intention or aspiration operating, and the imaginative faculty operating, are operating in a way that supports and opens and nourishes soul-making in the moment, so that the imaginative faculty is not papañca, towards papañca, nor is it so reified—that would be a good distinction

to make.

but it's more imaginal with all those elements.

So sensing with soul is simply those four factors mixing and cooperating, each existing in certain states, and through the way they blend together, soul-making emerges as the result. This offers another way of understanding what unfolds in these moments.

When there is extra-psychic sensing with soul—meaning material objects or persons present to us in physical actuality are perceived imaginally—there is an obviously direct meeting, mixing, infusing, or involvement of the imaginal faculty. When I perceive my beloved and see her, him, them imaginally, when I sense them with soul, or sense this tree or mountain imaginally—perceiving it with soul—the involvement of the imaginal faculty becomes very obvious and direct in that imaginal perception of things, of life, of matter, of world, of objects.

When the sensing with soul is more intra-psychic, the involvement of the imaginative faculty with life, events, and material objects is present, but seems less direct. We have discussed this kind of mirroring and echoing—sometimes it is not so obvious. Yet in both cases, whether intra-psychic or extra-psychic sensing with soul, the imaginal faculty is involved in both ways it meets the world. In the intra-psychic sensing, the meeting of the imaginal faculty with the world is sometimes not so directly apparent.

But whether we speak of intra-psychic or extra-psychic sensing with soul—and you can tell I don't really even like those terms—all sensing with soul implies that reverence is present. All sensing with soul involves reverence, involves humility, involves love, involves the perception of and being touched by beauty. Beauty opens up the perception of beauty in ways that are deeply meaningful. This involves love, a sense of duty or duties, a sense of unfathomability—something beyond my perception and conception that the eros, the pathos within the eros, wants to reach toward, connect with, know, become intimate with, open to.

All sensing with soul includes dimensionality, a sense of dimensionality, and eventually a sense of divinity. It involves soft, elastic edges, some attenuation of grasping, and eros as well. It will preserve the twoness we discussed, even while we remain aware of an underlying oneness. All sensing with soul, if we stay with it, will eventually reveal a sense of participation and a conception—even if vague—of participation, and so forth. Essentially, the entire list we explored before, all those twenty-three elements and probably more we didn't include, will be present when sensing with soul. All of those elements and aspects are important components of sensing with soul.

If we place this in a slightly different context and consider sense contact—borrowing this phrase from the Buddha regarding sense experience—we might ask: what are the possible skillful modes of sense contact?

Before outlining these, let me point out that "skillful" is a word the Buddha used. But what constitutes a skillful mode of sense contact? Several things come into play. First, what is skillful is contextually

determined by at least two factors. One is tradition—the tradition we inhabit determines or decides for us what kind of sense contact is skillful. It establishes what skillful means.

If opening to seeing Christ in everyone and everything is the goal of the path or an element one wishes to cultivate, this obviously determines what skillful means. If one interprets Theravada Buddhism along certain lines, then skillful carries quite a different meaning. Even within Buddha Dharma, you can see how this word means quite different things to different interpretations of the Pali Canon. What does skillful sense contact mean?

We must always remember that all of this is contextualized by tradition. We are informed by, persuaded by, sometimes indoctrinated by the tradition we inhabit. Whenever we use "skillful," it remains relative to a certain tradition or according to a certain tradition.

Related to this point, the word skillful—or the label skillful for any kind of sense contact, thought, or conception—is also contextualized or contextually determined by one's long-term and short-term aims. For instance, my long-term aim might be to explore all this imaginal territory and open up the eros. But it might be that right now this is not the right approach, and I need to move into another mode. So presently, the skillful sense contact would not be to open up more eros—the fire is already raging in a way that's not helpful, and I need to relate to sense contact differently.

If the long-term goal is knowing the unfabricated and eventually not being reborn, this forms a long-term aim that informs what skillful means. But the short-term aim might simply be making it to the teacher's talk tonight. So I cannot be unfabricating too much because I won't be able to get there—I won't be able to find the place or function in the world if I'm constantly unfabricating like that.

We can make many such distinctions. The point is that when we speak of skillful modes of sense contact, we must understand this as a contextualized word dependent on various factors.

That said, we could delineate four possible skillful modes of sense contact, of sensing. One is simply the normal way we engage sense contact when moving through the busyness of life, encountering objects and tasks that need completion. There's a kind of perfunctory mode of sense contact—

And of course, this is perfectly fine at times. We need such moments. We simply move through the world—get in the car and drive it, get on the bike and ride it to reach our destination. Sense contact is delineated for practical purposes. We're accomplishing something toward some other end, hopefully a beneficial one. This mode is completely appropriate, according to the Buddha Dharma, when accompanied by a certain level of mindfulness—just a basic level of what the Buddha calls *sampajañña*, usually translated as clear comprehension. I know where I am, what I'm doing, how my body is positioned, where I'm going, and what my intention is. This basic mindfulness within a normal mode of sense contact—moving through a busy life, getting things done—is fine and completely appropriate at times.

A second possible skillful mode of sense contact involves what we might call a slightly more intense mindfulness, specifically a more narrowly focused mindfulness directed through the lens of some dharma concept. For example, sense contact viewed through the lens of the second foundation of mindfulness, or the first foundation, or aspects of the fourth foundation when the Buddha delineates certain lists. This might involve sense contact examined through the dharma lens of the six sense spheres, or fields, or the eighteen sense constituents—organizing one's experience according to this more intense and narrowly focused mindfulness. In other words, focused narrowly according to this dharma lens.

This second approach has the effect of simplifying things through a certain reductionism. By virtue of this kind of lens or grid through which we examine experience—three kinds of *vedanā*, three kinds of reactions to three kinds of *vedanā*, and so forth—we're simplifying through reductionism, through a certain kind of helpful reductionism. Even the idea of bare attention as a dharma concept becomes a dharma lens. It's simplifying and helpful. The same applies to the four elements—earth, air, fire, water—or simply the idea of contact, or the twelve links of dependent origination.

This approach is extremely valuable at times, as you know if you've practiced this way. Because of the simplifying and other factors, there's a relative degree of lessening of clinging and craving. There's a relative degree of less fabricating. Things simplify and are fabricated less to a certain degree. These modes of sense contact or ways of looking are extremely valuable—really helpful, genuinely beneficial skills to develop.

A third kind of possibly skillful mode of sense contact is one that senses or sees, if you like, or knows oneness. We've explored different kinds of oneness—love or awareness or peace, or even the emptiness of phenomena. The sensing then becomes a different kind of reductionism, not so atomistic. When this is really deep, there's almost a mode of sense contact that doesn't buy into the whole idea of contact. It's not so much this touching that, this sense sphere touching that. Instead, there's a sense that all is one essence.

Rather than this sense base touching that sense object, there's more a sense that both the so-called sense base and so-called sense object are really just waves or foam in the same sea, the same ocean—not so much this touching that. This too is extremely valuable at times, extremely beautiful. With it comes probably an even greater degree of lessening of clinging and craving and fabrication.

Actually, as we discussed before, one can unfabricate so much that even the perception of sense contact fades. One doesn't actually have bodily sensations, and sometimes even vision or hearing fade—there's actually a dissolution. In this third mode, in what we could call the direction of unfabricating or seeing different kinds of oneness, the whole structure of sense contact begins to melt into oneness and actually into a kind of fading and disappearing.

Then we could say there's a fourth possibly skillful mode of sense contact, which is what we're calling sensing with soul—imaginal sense contact, imaginal sensing. In this mode, my personhood and the personhood and particularity of what is sensed is preserved. There's no reduction to merely seeing some

kind of process with different constituents, as in the second mode, nor atomization, nor dissolution into some kind of true nature of love or being or awareness or other kind of oneness. Instead, there's a preservation of both my own and the object's personhoods, souls really.

This mode also liberates and makes present different kinds of senses of beauty—and again, beauty means much more than just pleasant *vedanā* or pleasant sensations arranged. It liberates and brings to presence a sense of meaningfulness, much more so than the getting-things-done quality of the first skillful mode of sense contact. It liberates a sense of mystery, unfathomability, holiness, value—all these elements of soul-making we've been discussing.

This fourth approach, this sensing with soul, this sensing in a way that is soul-making and involves the filling out of that dimensionality, that amplification, the expanding of all that's involved—this too decreases craving and increases equanimity. So we talk extensively about eros and fire, but we shouldn't overlook the fact that this sensing with soul...

generally also brings equanimity in a different way, but at a very deep level. And it also involves a reduction, in the moment that we're sensing with soul, a reduction of craving. And I will also say more long-term. When we sense food with soul, and that becomes more a common and frequently accessible perception of our food, for example, then the whole kind of craving for—I need to eat X or Y or this tasty food, or it has to be like this, or it has to be whatever—it gets attenuated, it dies down.

We are fed by something much more important than pleasant vedanā, much more nourishing than pleasant vedanā. The body is nourished by the food and the soul is nourished by the soul-making perception of the food, by sensing the soul. And as I said, this kind of sensing with soul and sensing one's existence with soul brings, I feel, a really profound and widespread equanimity.

If I speak personally, there is a very immediately accessible example: just in relation to my cancer and the possibility, being given such a dire prognosis, the possibility of dying very soon. When I am able—when I sense my existence and myself and my illness and my life and my death with soul, and confronting, including, embracing with soul the very real possibility of death soon, and all the disability and the impediment and the restriction and the unpleasantness and the difficulty and the incapacity that being ill long-term involves—when I sense that with soul, and in all kinds of different possible ways, I honestly say what a deep equanimity comes.

It comes in a very different way than just seeing it's empty. Oh yeah, it's impermanent. Life is impermanent. Health is impermanent. Very different way than just applying mindfulness to unpleasant sensations. Different way than oneness. There's a whole different realm of possibilities for the letting go of craving and for the deepening and strengthening and widening of equanimity in one's life in relation to the most difficult elements that can be faced or experienced.

Just the point right now is this fourth possibly skillful mode of sense contact we can move in and out of. A

developed, mature practitioner will move between these skillful modes of sense contact. But this fourth one, sensing with soul, different than the others, also involves, to some degree, less fabrication, but still preserves fabrication. It involves less craving, but more eros. And it brings equanimity, as should the second and the third.

A second point, perhaps, in contextualizing this idea of sensing with soul: sensing with soul must include, at least implicitly, sensing with mindfulness. Now, people use the word mindfulness in quite broad ways and emphasize different aspects of it according to different schools and ways that it's taught. But sensing the soul must include, at least implicitly, sensing with mindfulness, which includes then, to me, the qualities of presence, wakefulness, careful attention. These are central to what we mean by mindfulness, of course. And there's no sensing the soul without presence, wakefulness and careful attention.

Sensing the soul also includes the qualities of sensitivity and responsiveness. So sensitivity and also the capacity to modulate our mindfulness or where we direct the attention or how we respond—that's part of mindfulness, at least in the way some people would teach it. It's not just a blanket, one-gear sort of passive mode of attention.

Mindfulness also includes appropriate attention. That's a translation of the Pali yoniso manasikāra, which is sometimes emphasized and sometimes not at all, but it's linked with mindfulness, and the Buddha placed a lot of emphasis on it. It was a very important concept for him. I would translate it as something like minding, or knowing, or even thinking by way of the matrix, or by way of the womb—yoni means womb, matrix. This implies that involved in the whole way we're paying mindfulness and involved in the intention of mindfulness is an interest in exploring and investigating and an attention to the dependent origination of what arises and what passes.

So in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta when it says attending to the arising factors, attending to the dissolution factors, some people just translate that as noticing arising and passing—in other words, noticing impermanence. But the Pali word that goes with it is samudaya, which really means dependent arising—the same word used in the arising of suffering and the arising in dependent origination. So in its broader sense, I would tend to emphasize that that's what appropriate attention means or includes: this awareness of the dependent origination of what is arising and what is passing.

Similarly, when we're sensing the soul, we're attuning to, interested in the dependent origination of what is happening. Sensing the soul is not just a kind of passive receiving in a fixed mode. It's agile, responsive, flexible, and aware of and interested in the dependent arising. Like, if I trust a bit more, then the image opens up more.

dwell with my sense of humility, or whatever it is, then the thing becomes more imaginal. As it becomes more imaginal, I see that the self becomes image. All this is the dependent arising of the imaginal perception, the dependent arising of what is sensed with soul.

And so for some people, that is an important part—that appropriate attention, as it's sometimes translated, *yoniso manasikāra*, is an important part of what mindfulness means and likewise an important part of what sensing the soul involves.

The third of the qualities of mindfulness that we can just highlight right now of sensing with mindfulness that is also implicit in sensing with soulfulness is reverence, which we've touched on before. Mindfulness is nowadays taught in different settings, with different intentions, with different slants, with different contexts of cosmology and all kinds of business. But many people in teaching mindfulness actually very beautifully emphasize that mindfulness involves a kind of reverence. It's included either explicitly—maybe not that word exactly—or just implied as an aspect of mindfulness in many contemporary mindfulness teachings.

Reverence for what though? So sometimes it might be, again, implicit or explicit. Reverence for this moment. Sometimes that's what's communicated. Reverence for life, with a big L. Reverence for what is. These are all either explicit or implicit communications that go along with the different ways mindfulness is presented.

Still, those kinds of reverences or objects of reverence, if you like, are different than a reverence for soul—with all the open-ended creation and discovery that is implied and involved in the word soul. And a reverence implicitly then, in the reverence of soul, implicitly for the possibility that this experience, this experiencer, the self, me, this object, experience—that this matter, that is also soul. So when there's a reverence for soul, there's an implicit possibility that all that too can be included as soul. It is soul or can be ensouled, if you like—come to be sensed as soul.

So when the reverence in the sensing for soul, sensing with soul, the reverence is really for soul, which may be quite different—that may not be in the circumscription of certain mindfulness teachings, where the reverence may be more for nature, or this moment, or life, or what is, or whatever it is. Reverence for soul that's included in sensing with soul is broader, more far-reaching, more multi-dimensional, as we've explained. But anyway, reverence as an aspect of mindfulness—and because sensing the soul includes, at least implicitly, sensing with mindfulness—reverence is there. There are overlaps.

And mindfulness, actually, again depending on how it's taught, but basically mindfulness includes, implicitly at least and usually explicitly, discernment regarding what leads to suffering and what leads to a decrease in suffering. Because mindfulness, the teaching of mindfulness, is actually embedded in the centrality of the Four Noble Truths, which concern themselves absolutely fundamentally with what leads to suffering, what leads to locking suffering into place, what leads to increasing suffering, and what leads to freeing from suffering, decreasing suffering.

Sensing the soul also involves a discernment along these lines. It involves discernment generally, as we talk about all kinds of discernments, but also discernment between eros and craving. And here again, it's like the movements of desire that not just lead to more suffering or less suffering, but also soul-making or

not soul-making. And discerning between imaginal perceptions that are more going in the direction of *pap añca*, and ones that are more along the spectrum towards the imaginal. And discerning between concepts and *logoi* that nourish and open and support soul-making, and those that imprison soul-making and also imprison the being, and those that don't.

So discernment is actually a factor of mindfulness, and likewise it's present in sensing the soul. I would say that the range of discernment is broader in the sensing the soul as well.

And last, just to point out—to repeat, I've already said it—but sensing with soul involves play. Play is an element in the sense of the permission and the capacity for flexibility, fluidity, experimenting, trying things out, curious responsiveness and experimentation.

And so play, as I would understand it, needs to be part of the image and the idea, the logos, of practice, of my path, and of my goal. That actually liberation, awakening, enlightenment—actually one of the things that means is a liberation, a freeing up of the flexibility of ways of looking, ways of relating, ways of being. That's what's liberated. That's what's opened. One of the most significant features for me of what liberation might mean, awakening might mean.

So the image of playfulness and the idea, the notion, the logos of playfulness needs to be part of the image and idea of what I have of practice, of path, of goal. Sensing the soul needs that too, as I've pointed out before.

All right, let's stop. Thank you for listening.

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