Sensing with Soul (Part 4)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:14:43

Let's continue. Let me pick up again our elaboration of this idea of sensing with soul and our exploration of the possibilities that can open as there is this opening of the field of experience and the senses—the sense of experience.

Let me start with one larger observation. Generally, it seems to me—and there are always exceptions—but generally, as soul-making practice matures, or evolves, or grows, there is an increasing mixture or interfusion of life and image. In other words, we sense more with soul in different ways. This is something I've observed quite generally, and there are several aspects to this development.

The first aspect concerns what becomes primary more and more—though often in quite subtle ways, not clumsy or ego-driven ways. What becomes more primary is the relationship between the imaginal and life. Whether we're speaking of intra-psychic images or extra-psychic ones, there emerges through the sense of demand and duty what needs to be expressed or manifested. This duty or demand is born from and comes with the image. Again, what I'm describing really isn't too clunky or clumsy—it's not an ego identification or reification, as those patterns have been loosened.

This brings forth the importance of the relation between the imaginal and life, and it can be quite subtle. It brings with it the question of *how*: What is demanded? What is my duty? How and at what level and in what domain does this image translate into an expression, a manifestation through my life? What is involved in that infinite echoing and mirroring I alluded to earlier? These are subtle and delicate questions.

There's always the problem of gross reification, literalization, and concretization—very oversimplistic translations of image into life. While not always the case, sometimes this can signal a kind of inappropriateness. So this is one aspect that comes with the maturing of soul-making practice: this mixing and meeting and interfusing, more and more, of life and the imaginal, and this opening of the sensing with soul.

The second aspect is that we sense life more with soul. More and more, the mode of sensing that we have is infused with soulfulness, is more soul-making, is more imaginal. We see—if we use the visual metaphor—we see life as image, more and more as imaginal image. This becomes, again, not a permanent state, but something we move much more often and regularly in and out of.

Part of this sensing life with soul includes a kind of recognition, in hindsight, of how much and how often the imaginal and fantasy—different fantasies—have already been operating in our lives. Image is

primary. Actually, one way of conceiving all this is that we are driven by fantasy, by image, in a good sense. Sometimes we ignore it, or we collapse it, or reify it, or make it too small, or don't recognize its divinity, or over-identify with it.

But with this growing maturity—both in the understanding and the experience of soul-making practice—one of the facets is that in sensing life more often with soul, and more deeply, more richly with soul, we come to recognize the primacy and frequency of how much and how often the imaginal and the fantastical is already operating in our lives—already primary, already driving, pulling us, calling us. We see and can understand, or rather we can bring this as a perspective—one way of understanding what has been moving us in our lives, what does move us, what galvanizes us, why we choose certain things, why certain ways of interacting tend to manifest themselves in expressions.

So there's this quality where it becomes more about the relationship between the imaginal and life. There's also this capacity where we simply see life more with soul.

Thirdly, there is the widening, the deepening, and the variegating—the making more manifold, creating more options—of our senses of sacredness. In other words, the ways and directions and places and levels at which we sense sacredness expands, gets wider, gets deeper, becomes quite varied.

I should mention that for me, this piece—the opening up and diversifying of the senses of sacredness, sensing the sacredness in life, in existence, in death, in all of it, and all the elements of that—for me, that's the main point. Now, of course, and I really do mean this, anyone is free to decide what for them is the main point. If one is taken with these practices and interested in them, anyone is free to decide what is the main point for them.

But just to say that for me, this is the main point. There's so much richness, so much bounty and gift through these practices, through these ways of conceiving—so much is opened up. But at the end of the day, if I'm just honest, for me, that's the main point: this opening up of the senses of sacredness.

I should add this, because it may not be obvious, and sometimes even that word "sacred"—people think, "What does that mean? I don't know. I can't relate to it." Or it's a problematic word, or a charged word, or a taboo word, or just a dead word.

But just to say, in case it's not obvious, that a sense of sacredness doesn't necessarily mean something solemn or stiff. So increasing the senses of sacredness that we have, that are active in our life, that are working and flowing and opening and dynamic, doesn't mean that we become more solemn and stiff. And sacredness doesn't always translate or manifest in some kind of always sober manifestation. Just witness the poems of Rumi when he talks about Shams. I got a note from a yogi quite a while ago, and she said, "I was with this imaginary figure and we were in hysterics together. It was hysterically funny." You never said that could happen, but all kinds of things are possible, and certainly sacredness does not always look solemn, stiff, and permanently sober.

So those are just a few general observations. But I said I was going to look in a little more detail, probe and open up through examples how this sensing with soul opens up. How does our sensing, when our sensing opens up to a sensing with soul, how does that happen? What supports it? What are the shifts or triggers or influxes or other openings that allow that?

Very generally and broadly, we might say that in order for something in the material world—whether that's a person or an object or an event or whatever it is, or a feeling, an emotion, a state that one is going through—in order that something in the material world or the experiential world is sensed with soul, we could very broadly, very generally say that, loosely, four things are necessary.

The first is that we need to be open to this thing and intimate with it. So this thing, whatever it is, and I'll give some examples, I need to actually meet it and touch it with my consciousness, with the senses. I need to be present to it and I need to be intimate with it. For example, if it's my dukkha that I'm experiencing at a certain time, just in a moment, or it might feel like it's a lifetime of a particular kind of dukkha that I struggle with again and again, I need, in order to sense that dukkha with soul—or in different language that we've used before, for that dukkha to be re-enchanted—this pain, this suffering, this sorrow, this thing that actually I don't like, I need to become intimate with it. I need to open to it and become intimate with it. And this is a sort of sine qua non. It's basic. I can't skip this step. So whether it's my dukkha, whether it's some object, a material object, or some thing, or whatever it is, any phenomenon, I need firstly to become open to and intimate with it.

When I outline these four, I don't necessarily mean that they happen in time, in some linear order. It might be mixed up which comes first.

The second factor or element that needs to be present is, again, emphasizing the inclusion of the whole energy body pervaded by sensitivity, by that kind of delicacy of attention that fills out that whole space and that whole openness to the whole range of vibrational possibility there in the energy body. This, again, serves as a platform, a key, a door to sensing with soul.

Thirdly is some reduction in clinging. Now, not so much that absolutely everything fades. If you're familiar with deep emptiness practices, actually all perception begins to fade. That's actually too much because sensing the soul is a perception, of course, as is internal, imaginal perception. Any sensing of the soul, intra-psychic, extra-psychic, involves the fabrication of perception. So there can't be too much of a reduction in clinging because then all perception or most perception will fade, certainly the level that we call sensing the soul. But there can be actually quite a lot of range. There has to be some reduction in clinging, some kind of loosening of maybe the habitual grip we have, either pushing away or holding on to a certain idea or a certain perception or an energetic relationship with something. Some loosening of clinging is a necessary element in sensing the soul. Again, there's not a temporal linearity to these elements.

And lastly is a kind of whole bag of tricks which we've touched on before. I would say just some

receptivity or tuning into whatever the most helpful other element of the—what we call element or aspect of the imaginal or node of the imaginal constellation. So it might be, for instance, humility, it might be the neither real nor not real, it might be anything within them, the meaningfulness, the beauty, anything at all of that list that we went through.

So there are these four elements: openness and intimacy with whatever object we're talking about, and in whatever realm of objects, whether that's intra-psychic, intra-personal, as an emotion, or dukkha, or out there in the material world, or another person, or whatever; whole energy body sensitivity with that openness of what might be included there and the range that might be included there; some loosening of clinging, grip, fixation; and then a kind of open, opportunistic receptivity or tuning into whatever otherwise is the most helpful element of the aspect of the perception there, of the imaginal perception of the sensing of soul.

Now these four elements are often going to be mutually dependent arisings anyway. They're mutually dependent. In other words, as one gets ignited or illuminated or fired up with the imaginal, the fullness of the imaginal, with the sensing of the soul, then it tends to influence the others and open them too. Especially between the second and the third, the sensitivity and awareness, permeation of the whole space of the energy body with the sensitive, delicate energy...

awareness and tuning in there—that factor, that second factor—and the reduction of clinging tend very much to show an easily observable mutual dependency between them. So as we open up to include the whole energy body and an awareness of that, and the sensitivity to that, including that awareness and sensitivity in how we're relating to some object, inner or outer, that opening up of energy body sensitivity tends automatically to attenuate, reduce, and loosen the clinging in relation to that object and in relation to other elements as well—other factors in our being, in our perception.

And vice versa. When there is a lessening of clinging, the availability of the sense of the whole energy body—that kind of awareness of the body as energy body and that space as energy body and all that that means and might be—tends to open up or just present itself, become more accessible or become noticed as there's less clinging. It becomes, if you like, maybe not the default, but one of the strong options for how we then sense the body. As there's less clinging, the body tends to be perceived more as an energy body.

So there's a very obvious, easy-to-spot, mutual dependent arising of the second and third factors of that little list. And with practice, that mutual dependent arising will also be easy to spot with the fourth. The whole list of what we went through—what we're calling the nodes of the imaginal constellation, or the nodes of the lattice of the imaginal constellation—anything there, as I said: humility, reverence, duty, meaningfulness, that whole list, will be included. So we can, in tuning into that, something happens with the energy body and the clinging. And in reducing the clinging, finding ways to reduce the clinging, those elements or one of those elements will present itself, become more accessible, become more available to be receptive to, to tune into.

So with practice, those three—the last three factors of this little four-item list—it becomes obvious, their mutual dependency. Also the first, but it's not necessarily the case that someone opening to and becoming intimate with something, in the usual ways that we talk about it in insight meditation—we put a lot of stress on that, broadly speaking, in the insight meditation tradition. Can you open to it? Can you be with it? Can you become intimate with it? Whatever it is, this experience that's passing through right now.

We put a lot of emphasis on that, but it won't be the case that someone doing that in the context of a more conventional insight meditation approach will then necessarily open up the others. There won't necessarily be a huge reduction in clinging. There will be some, just by virtue of approaching and opening to the object. There won't necessarily be the inclusion of the sensitivity of the whole energy body.

But with practice, these four items or factors of this little list become—one can see the mutual dependency and actually use that to catalyze or enhance or deepen the whole process, the whole movement of opening into sensing with soul.

Let's look at a few examples. I've just chosen a few to give you a sense of this process—what's involved in, what can be involved, the kinds of things that can be involved in experiences, but also what can be involved in the processes of how that transition into opening, into sensing with soul happens.

A student sent me an email some time ago, and she was just describing what was going on in her explorations, in her practices. She was getting very interested in the whole imaginal strand of practice. She was also interested in others—in samadhi and emptiness and all kinds of things. But she was reporting that she was noticing, in her words, "even the emptiness practices are getting consumed by the imaginal."

So the example she gave was: "One minute I'm tracking vedana." She's observing, in other words, the arising of vedana in relation to whatever—she doesn't actually say. It could be the totality of experience, it could be one sense door, it could be one particular experience. "One minute I'm tracking vedana," she says, "and perceiving it as empty."

So that's an extra kind of way of looking. She's training her attention on the vedana, keeping it lightly there, and employing some mode of looking that perceives that vedana as empty of inherent existence, of which there are many, and we've talked and written about that plenty, so I'm not going into that now. Just the fact that she was employing an emptiness way of looking in regard to the vedana.

And then she reports, "and in the next moment, it becomes holy. The vedana becomes holy and turns into leaves fluttering from branches." There's a beautiful image there.

So in our language, there's the emptiness practice and the intimacy. Tracking vedana, one has to be intimate with it, because actually it's a felt experience. One can't do that intellectually. One can't do that kind of at a large distance. One actually has to feel pleasantness, unpleasantness, neither pleasant nor unpleasant—all of which is an intimacy, an intimacy of attention, an intimacy of feeling, basically, as

vedana sometimes gets translated as "feeling."

So there's the intimacy there, and there's also the emptiness. And emptiness ways of looking, as you probably know, as I've harped on so many times, naturally bring a reduction, a loosening of clinging, which allows a loosening of perception, a lessening of fabrication. Less clinging, less fabrication. Less fabrication means this thing that I'm perceiving—a vedana, whatever it is—is then less fabricated, less rigidly, tightly, solidly formed as a thing. It becomes, to borrow an alchemical metaphor that we haven't used for quite a while, water. All things become water. If you remember from some years ago, we used to say that a lot in relation to the imaginal.

Don't proceed until all things have become water. That's an alchemical maxim. All things becoming water means all things not so rarefied, not so concretized, not so rigidly conceived of and perceived as just this. This is what they are. And then the self in relation to that also, this is what it is.

So all things become water through the lessening of clinging that goes automatically with an emptiness way of looking and the lessening of fabrication. The solidity gets fabricated less. The thing is fabricated less as this rigid, solid, concrete whatever. And this happens quite regularly for some people, this loosening.

In the context of trying to do an imaginal practice, automatically in the making water, making liquid – don't proceed until everything is liquid – in the making liquid of the perceptual field, we could say, either images arise, intrapsychic images arise in that water, or whatever is in that field begins to be sensed with soul. So there are two factors here: the lessening of clinging, in this case, came from the emptiness practices. And there's also the intimacy that's implicit in the very practice that she was doing.

Some of you listening were present and participating in the retreat that we did – I think it was the last retreat, the Alchemy of Desire at Gaia House. You'll remember the ritual we had, I think it was towards the end of the retreat, involving the tangerines and the kind of sanctification that happened there. So I want to remind those who were there and also try to explain what happened because I don't think we recorded it in any way. Probably one would need to have filmed it to get a sense without being there.

Earlier in the retreat, we'd actually spent a day reminding people of the importance, generally, of being able to put things down in the sense of not clinging, move away from an image, give it up, go back to the breath, go back to the energy body, whatever it is, not get so caught up and have some freedom in relation to that. We were exploring the whole idea and a few practice possibilities in the realm of just letting go – letting go of clinging, letting go of grasping, letting go of holding onto this thing, whether it's a wonderful, fascinating thing or a difficult thing.

We offered the possibility of bringing mindfulness, really careful mindfulness, to a meal. I think it was before lunch. This is quite common to do on an Insight Meditation retreat – very important, beautiful practice. And also looking at the craving and the clinging that might arise in relation to the whole eating

experience and queueing for food and so on, complex for us as human beings what comes up in relationship to food anyway. We had given that as a practice and we actually intended to follow that through on the retreat as a theme and then look at what it would be to open up the possibility of actually relating to food imaginally or sanctifying the whole experience with food. But because there was so much on the retreat and we really wanted to be cautious about not overloading people in a week's retreat at Gaia House, we let it go and didn't follow that through.

However, somewhere I think towards the end of the retreat, Catherine led this very beautiful ritual, and part of what it involved – these are my words now – is a kind of sanctifying of food, in this case tangerines. If I remember some of the elements, we created a special space by moving into a circle from the semicircle we'd been in, moving into a kind of loose circle around a lovely blue velvet cloth that Catherine had brought.

She had a little sort of, I don't know what to call it, it looked a bit like a kind of half an oyster shell, but it was gold inside. It was laminated with gold – quite a beautiful thing. Someone had given it to her, I think, and she talked about that. She placed it in the middle, so we were in a circle around this central sort of altar of dark blue velvet and placed it there and talked about gold and luster, the luster of gold. So there was this gold oyster shell thing, beautiful thing, and she asked us, if I remember, to reflect on what has or is becoming gold for us on this retreat – meaning what is precious for us, what's a treasure, what speaks to us or resonates with us in any way of what we deeply, truly value in our being.

So how and where has gold, this sense of treasure or value, been showing up for us? It may be conceptually, intellectually, heartfully, imaginatively, energetically, in relationship to the body. We were exploring all these different elements and more. So the gold, the sense of treasure, deep treasure, and gold itself, obviously, is an image, and this oyster shell of gold was placed there as an image, or at least as a touchstone, really, of that whole sensitivity to the sense of value of gold in our lives, in our practices over those days.

And gold might be sacredness and dimensionality and the kind of beyondness that calls us and that we're pulled to and that we want to move into and connect with when there's Eros. So this bowl or oyster shell, painted or laminated with this gold luster.

Catherine then explored a little bit the etymology and the history in relation to the word lust and pointed out that the word lust only became a kind of negative term in English in the West in the 16th century. Before that, it was actually somehow luster and lust were associated, or at least could be associated for the soul.

So there's this association of gold and shining brilliance, luster, related to Eros, related to lust, related to the Eros in the way that we're using it. Eros is something that will make sacred, that will create and discover dimensionalities and beauties and sacrednesses and meaningfulnesses. Lust making luster, lust making the luster of gold, lust making treasure, making gold, lust discovering treasure and gold—lust in

the sense of Eros in the way that we've been talking about.

So we can talk in a much fuller way about, if you like, a healthy appetite in and for the senses. Rather than the senses—we went through all this in the Eros Unfettered retreat—the senses as merely a problematic area for us to either disconnect from in our move to the transcendent, or kind of hold at bay in this limited way with some notion, limiting supposed notion of bare attention, supposed bare attention.

So there was this kind of altar created and a togetherness in the group, entering into the ritual together, and the ritual space, if you like, was created. Catherine was bringing this object and speaking about gold, about luster, about the shining brilliance there, about treasure, and asking us to reflect on where the gold is or was for us on that retreat. And feel into that.

This is important again: intimacy, opening to, connection with, sense into that actual knowing. So it's not just an abstract intellectual list—"Oh yes, there was that on Tuesday morning or whatever." There's this sensing into the knowing of this. And then further—I'm partly elaborating on this because I'm actually quite interested in ritual as a way of sensing the soul, but that's maybe for another talk—sensing into that sense of gold, where it has been for us. Not abstract, not intellectual, getting the body and the emotionality and the soul involved.

And then we were invited to, in our own time, while everyone was chanting together in a kind of open chant, if you like. It was actually Om Ah Hum. And I think I said something about this represents the body, speech, and mind of all Buddhas, or the primordial Buddha, if you like. Om Ah Hum—body, speech, and mind of primordial Buddha. It's kind of quite an open chant in terms of people can enter into all kinds of relationships individually with that chant in ways that each person finds useful, so it wasn't too formulaic or too tightly circumscribed.

And then as that chant was going on, Catherine invited us, if we wanted to, to come to the center of the circle and make some gesture—actually either in the center of the circle or wherever we were sitting—some gesture of the body. It could be anything at all that kind of expresses or reflects this honoring and this recognition of gold, this sense of gold that we have, this sense of the beauty and the depth of meaningfulness of whatever it was that we felt that in relation to, that sense of preciousness and instinctual sense of soul value.

So one could do that through the sound or through any gesture, no matter how subtle or involved or gross even. There was an openness and a freedom there to connect the body with the sense of sacredness and with the honoring of that, and actually join them through the expression.

Before the invitation to express with one's body or one's voice, we divided up some tangerines and placed the segments there on the cloth around, just sort of around in an aesthetically pleasing manner, around the gold bowl or oyster shell. And so the dark blue velvet cloth in the candlelight with this lustrous gold bowl and the deep orange of the tangerines was there as a sort of focal point for our energies and our

attention and our gestures and our coming together there in this ritual.

I can only speak for me, but what happened through that is there was a focusing, bringing to consciousness and to visceral feeling and sense, to the soul sense, of the sense of sacredness. It was connected with the bowl. It was connected also with the group and the circle and the togetherness and the invocation and the power through the gesturing and the voicing together of the chant and the singing together. We were allowed to improvise however we wanted with the chanting as well.

All that created, if you like, a kind of soul field or soulfulness field or soul-making field or force field of soul, whatever we want to call it. And so what happened was that, at the very least, I would say for me—at the very least—what happened was these different elements became kind of sanctified together, or in other words, they became imaginally perceived together. They gained dimensionality, meaningfulness, resonance. There was reverence in relation to all of them, beauty, all of that.

So the tangerines then, as much as the chant, as much as each other and togetherness and the bowl and the sense of gold and all of that, became—kind of each element there, each sensual element became infused with soul. We sensed it. I sensed it with soul, and I sensed what other people were as well. There was a sensing with soul of the tangerines, which, in fact, I don't think anything had actually been said—we haven't said anything about the tangerines. I don't think Catherine has said anything. We just placed them in proximity, in this field of focus, if you like, in this soul field.

And through proximity, through the kind of contingency, the touching—contingere, to touch, to touch together—through association, if you like, the tangerines became sensed with soul. And whatever that might be for each individual person, there's going to be individual variations. But it will involve these general elements of sanctification, meaningfulness, beauty, dimensionality, depth, divinity, all that stuff.

And so when it came time to eat the tangerines again—slowly, mindfully, ritually, individually in whatever way we wanted—people were also given the possibility of feeding a tangerine to another in the group in a ritual manner of their own choosing. When that moment arrived, the tangerines themselves had become holy food. It was food of the gods. It was the blessing of the earth. It was all of that. It was spiritual nourishment, soul nourishment, which is so much more than just material biochemical nourishment for the biochemical processes in the cells of the body.

Again, if we analyze a little what was happening, there's this coming together through association, proximity, contingency, and through the element of value—those two together forming the prime elements. And there is also something about field, which I'll come back to soon. The field of others, if we're open to them and if there's not some problem there, then the field—the social field we're in—can become a soulful social field, a soul-making social field, so that it becomes catching. In other words, the tangerines caught soul, if you like, through being in close proximity with the bowl and with the sense of sacredness, and caught it from us, and we caught it from each other.

I may come back to that whole question of field in this series of talks. But these two central elements were deep value and association. So again, if we're analyzing—I don't want to be too technical about this—those were the primary elements there. We could also note the involvement of the body in the chanting and the opening of the body, the involvement of all the senses—hearing, seeing, moving the body—the involvement of the body in gesture and the invitation to express through the body whatever devotion was there.

We had, by the way, opened the retreat with a similar invitation to express in the body one's devotion to Eros and devotion to the mystery of desire, even if one didn't actually understand or that wasn't completely clear or free of problems. So this ritual also had a connection, following on from that previous soul-making ritual with which we opened the retreat.

But in terms of conceptual understanding right now, there are these two factors. When we sense with soul, we sometimes sense something with soul through association with something else that we're sensing with soul, through proximity to it. It gets caught up in the field, if you like, infused with soul-making sensing, and also through value. This is something I might return to—when we feel into our sense of deep, deep valuing of something, the goal, the treasure for us, and we feel it, that also can be an element that stimulates soul-making. So in that whole ritual there, I certainly was really touched by it. I thought it was very beautiful. There we can begin to understand how that process happens.

I think I'll give another example. It's actually a lot more involved, and there are many elements at work here. So I'm going to read from an email that a student sent me a while ago—I have her permission to do so. But there are many elements, so I'm going to intersperse it with commentary, drawing out for our attention the elements that involve what's happening in this process of opening to sensing with soul, or transforming, if you like, the perception, the sensing, so that it becomes more soul-making, more soulful.

In fact, the very inquiry I'm talking about now—this process I'm trying to illuminate—was the very inquiry that this person was working with when they opened in this way that they then wrote to me about. So I'll read what she says.

She says, "I've also been working with what I'm calling transitioning into the imaginal. I know that we are imagining twenty-four hours a day, but the soulful quality is not always present. So this has become a question for me: What do I bring to the imaginal that allows the soulfulness to blossom and feed me?"

This was actually a question she had asked on retreat. I will point out, now that we've said everything we've said in the first talk of this series, that I would change the wording there. She says, "What do I bring to the imaginal?" I would rather say, "What do I bring to the imagination, to the use of the imagination that allows the soulfulness to blossom and feed me?"—in other words, that allows the fully, authentically imaginal to blossom or allows a sensing with soul.

There are many elements here, as I said. Partly, notice that she's starting with an inquiry—her imaginal

explorations are infused with a certain inquiry that she invented. Actually, she'd asked me something about this on retreat, which I had at the time only given a limited answer to. So she picked it up on her own—I don't think with any further suggestion from me—but there's this impetus, this willingness to inquire, and that's really, really important to me.

As you'll see in what she describes, there's a lot of flexibility. There's this willingness and availability to play, to experiment. Let's see what happens. Let's try different things. Let's just have fun, even, in the context of this inquiry, this curiosity, and also a deep yearning and longing for these kinds of openings.

So she has this question, and then she says, "One of my discoveries came during an eating meditation." This actually links to what we were talking about before—the sanctification of food within the bigger subject of sensing with soul. She continues, "I had decided to continue with your instruction of taking a few meals meditatively"—this is after the retreat where I'd given those instructions before lunchtime. "I decided to continue with the instruction of taking a few meals meditatively, but decided that rather than emphasizing the emptiness, I would draw out the imaginal."

I made some hummus and prepared a plate of vegetables and then sat down to eat. I began with the more horizontal contemplation of all the hands that had touched this food—the growers and the transporters and the supermarket workers, and so forth.

A couple of things here. What she means by "horizontal" is that there's a spreading out of awareness of what's involved in this thing: the hummus and vegetables and my sitting down to eat. What are the dependent arising factors in the material world that contributed to this? Many of you will know this is a favorite contemplation of insight meditators, and certainly of Thich Nhat Hanh, who speaks extensively about this. Can we spread the field of awareness to see that this plate of hummus or vegetables depends on so many factors coming together to be now on my plate, and that I'm able to eat this? As she says, the growers, the transporters, the supermarket workers, the growers' parents, the transporters' parents, their education, their everything.

So there can be a horizontal meaning—it spreads outwards to involve more and more of the world. But "horizontal," she's saying, is in contradistinction to a sense of verticality, or dimensionality, which is the term I'm currently favoring.

She said, "I began with the more horizontal." There's even an awareness: "Okay, I'm not doing imaginal yet. I'm just spreading it horizontally, this awareness." And in so doing, there's already a loosening of the thingness of things, of the tight center. This is a plate of hummus. It's nothing but a plate of hummus. This piece of broccoli or carrot is just that. It has very clear borders. There's a loosening of that through the contemplation of this horizontal interconnectedness and the conditions.

Also, with that sense of interconnectedness, metta and compassion probably open and soften the heart somewhat, because then you become aware of all the work and care—oftentimes sacrifice—that might

have gone into this plate of vegetables and hummus from the growers and the people transporting and the people working in the supermarket who might be tired or whatever. In the sense of interconnectedness, it also conditions or forms a basis for the softening of heart with metta and compassion, heartfulness. So I point that out as well—we're looking at the factors that support, catalyze, and make possible this transition to sensing the world, sensing things in the world with soul.

And then she continues: "And then I looked at the vegetables and tried to 'see' all the water and sunlight and earth that made up the walls of their cells." So again, the interconnections, the horizontal interconnection of meditation is broadening even more to these more subtle elements: water, sunlight, earth, in the thing, so to speak. And so she's aware—she puts "see" in inverted commas. And again, there's a kind of furthering of this loosening of the sense of the thing and the concept of the thing.

Actually, again, as Thich Nhat Hanh points out, the rain is in this hummus. The rain is in this carrot. The soil is in this carrot. And if the rain is in it, then the clouds are in it and the sea is in it, and so forth. Very beautiful. But for now, what's important is the sense that this is part of the loosening.

And she continues: "Which led to this desire to taste all of that—all of the water and the sunlight—on the tongue." So, and she continues: "To taste the dreams of the children whose parents had operated the machinery." How beautiful. To taste the dreams of the children whose parents had operated the machinery.

In the opening up of the interconnectedness, the heart opens, and part of what opens is this desire to taste all of that. Desire and intimacy. Yes? And she continues: "And the dukkha that might have arisen in this long chain." Okay, so there's the compassion and wanting to taste, wanting to become intimate with that dukkha. Yes, in the imagination, but still, there is this desire, element of desire, expansion, and a kind of desire for something intimate there. She said to taste all of that on the tongue.

So at this point, we've got elements of imagination, desire, heartfulness, love, all of that. And then she continues: "And I could feel in my body that the imaginal was operating. This feeling of liquidity and a bit of electric charge." So now she's—I read it as referring to the energy body.

The energy body feels different when imagination is operating—something electric, alive, energized, less solid. She continues: "I still hadn't eaten anything. I was just opening to that charge." She's approaching this very consciously with mindfulness and sensitivity, aware of the different elements at play.

"When I thought of you"—she's writing this to me. Jane, some of you may know, has been so kindly and beautifully preparing food for me since I've been ill, with such grace and loveliness. This person knew of Jane's generous service and my severely compromised digestive system after the operation and chemotherapy. "I was just opening to that charge in the body when I thought of you and Jane and the food that she was preparing for you. And I thought, how dearly I would love to feed you."

Again, heartfulness here—love, eros in our expanded sense (not sexual, remember; eros encompasses

much more), perhaps devotion. These elements will be present for any beloved, erotic-imaginal other in our understanding. It might be a friend, partner, family member, teacher as in this case, historical figure, or as I've described, certain musicians, artists, or spiritual teachers from the past. It could be a literary character, a fully imagined figure, or someone from a film. But these elements will be there—devotion, love, eros in our sense, heartfulness.

"And then the words 'my body is your body' were offered into the mind, and there were some strong body convulsions as you and I merged."

Much is happening here. Notice how, as we explored extensively in the Eros Unbound talks, self and world, as well as other, are included in the imaginal perception—here in sensing the soul. It's not just about me or the food, but "my body is your body" offered into awareness. There's an opening in the energy body, something happening at another level. It doesn't have to be convulsions—it can unfold very smoothly and subtly. In this case, it was stronger.

"As you and I merged"—self and world become involved, as well as other. That trinity of self, other, world becomes subsumed, drawn into the whole imaginal perceiving, the whole sensing of soul, including the food she was attending to.

"And this food perceptually had the potential to heal you." Again, love and care, knowing about my situation with cancer, chemotherapy, the operation. There's a transformation of perception involving self, world, the vegetables, the food itself, and me. The food is sensed as having potential to heal.

She continues: "It was sacred, holy food, because it had been touched by everyone and everything, and it could offer its rain and compost and human emotionality into your system." Very beautiful. Do you see how everything becomes involved, drawn into the soul-making vortex, the soul-making dynamics?

"The feeling of you entering me, of this kind of fusion that happened, of us consuming the food as one body and yet still two—it's truly indescribable. I'm struggling to describe it, to convey it in words."

Again, there's inquiry, flexibility, many elements involved, all approached with careful, attentive, soulful mindfulness. There's experimentation throughout. In this case it involves me as the imaginal other, but in a way that's healthy and beautiful, with very clear boundaries functioning as a temenos that allows this opening into the imaginal without needing concretization or feeding anyone's ego.

Her inquiry continues: "Since then I've tried to recreate the above"—she puts "recreate" in quotation marks—"with varying results." She's following a thread of inquiry, which I find so important.

Her inquiry continues, and she writes to me: "Since then I've tried to 'recreate' the above with varying results." She places "recreate" in quotation marks, recognizing something important about this word choice. Again, she's following a thread of inquiry here.

"I feel like there is still so much to know and learn about the conditions that align when the imaginal is

most potent." This is exactly what I've been exploring throughout these talks—understanding the conditions that support and nourish imaginal perception.

She reflects further: "Perhaps the clue is in the word 'recreate,' which suggests that these sacred visits from the imaginal, from the soul we might say, might be just the result of tinkering with the conditions and gaining 'control' over when and how they appear." But then she recognizes something crucial: "This lacks the erotic thrust, the sublime impregnation of how I experience these moments. It's like you've said many times—they have a divine autonomy. The element of surprise and grace is flattened by believing I, anyone, as a human being, could fashion it alone."

In other words, it's not all simply up to technical mastery. There is that dimension of skill and understanding conditions, but there's also this element of grace that I tried to include in the first talk of this series. If we look back at one phrase from her earlier description, she had written: "And then the words, 'my body is your body,' were offered into the mind." This exemplifies the element of grace—something was simply given, occurred to the mind, planted itself, landed in consciousness.

This kind of gifting is very common in imaginal work. It's as if we're given something by soul, handed something as if the soul has its own intentionality, its own direction that it wants to stimulate in us. But we still need to assent to it, to pick it up with skill and sensitivity and responsiveness and free will.

So here's an example involving many elements, all subsumed into a larger inquiry with considerable flexibility and experimentation.

Let me offer a few final observations for this section. When there is sensing the soul—whether extra-psychic or intra-psychic—the conventional perception of the physical or material world doesn't necessarily disappear. In fact, most of the time it won't. I'm still seeing what anyone might see through conventional perception. It's just that dimensionalities have opened up—meaningful sacredness and other elements have emerged not in place of that object, but imbuing it, filling it out, enriching and complicating it in that soul-making way through these imaginal aspects.

In all this sensing of soul, it's actually possible to have two perceptions simultaneously. One might be the very conventional level of perception that anyone in normal consciousness would have in that situation—the sensation of body sitting, touch with cushion or chair, feet or legs on floor, all the normal bodily sensations of sitting. At the same time, there can be an image of the body or sensing of the energy body that's very different from these conventional physical sensations.

So one can feel sitting still in a chair while simultaneously having an essential experience of the energy body doing cartwheels or dancing or flying or coiling around the vertical central axis of an erotically beloved imaginal other, or experiencing the body as a light body of a certain color. This imaginal perception can occur alongside conventional perception of sitting wherever one is sitting.

Or one might be in the physical presence of a beloved other, seeing them as one normally would, as

everyone would see them, while simultaneously holding an imaginal perception of them as angel or cosmic king or queen—infinite possibilities. This imaginal sensing might be sensorially vague; we might not be able to clearly discern details but know it's angelic or this cosmic queen presence. Sometimes it can't be precisely described. But as I've pointed out many times, the vividness of the image to the senses isn't what matters most. What matters are these other elements of sensing the soul, these other aspects of imaginal constellations.

One last point about intention. I've talked on recent retreats about different fantasies of path and goal, including what I called the medical model—the approach many spiritual teachings employ, sometimes unconsciously. This was actually pointed out by some Greek philosopher whose name escapes me: philosophy as medicine for the soul. The Buddha used this analogy explicitly and consciously—Buddha as physician diagnosing, giving prognosis and cure, with the Eightfold Path as regimen of treatment.

In this medical model, one's trying to end suffering, or for most people, simply decrease it, whether momentarily or long-term. But sometimes this very intention to alleviate suffering as the primary goal may block or stifle the fullness of soul-making that's possible, the authenticity of imaginal perception, the richness of sensing the soul.

We discussed in the first talk how fullness of intention is one element of imaginal constellation. This is complicated, because I don't mean that the desire for alleviating suffering isn't present as part of exploring these practices. But at some point, it may well not be the primary intention, and that's perhaps the crucial piece.

Imaginal perception, sensing the soul, may indeed end certain suffering, may totally dissolve particular forms of suffering.

It very probably and almost always attenuates or alleviates, sometimes to a remarkable degree, some suffering. So that is very probable. But again, in my way of thinking about things, at least where I am right now, it's not really the point of this work. It's somehow included in the package more often than not, but it becomes something that's not the primary point of what we're doing.

Oftentimes what happens is the suffering is translated, if you like, or it's cast differently through the sensing with soul, through the imaginal perception. The sensing of the soul puts the dukkha in a different light, in a different context, if you like. It sets it on a different stage. And this kind of allows or brings soul-making. In soul-making, that's what's happening—not necessarily the ending of suffering.

But this is complex, and I will actually return and devote a whole talk in this series, I hope, to some of the strands of the very complex area of dukkha and soul-making. But just to say for now, this piece about intentionality can be significant in sensing the soul, because if the primary intention is getting rid of dukkha or just alleviating dukkha—which is a fine intention, and very appropriate at times, and completely valid and everyone should be free to choose that at times, or even all the time if that's what

they want—there will be times when, if that's the primary intention, it actually blocks and stifles and prevents a fullness and a full deepening and opening of the sensing of the soul.

It may be, as one explores all this, that there may be some dukkha, some grief or suffering of some different kind, and one starts with the intention of just wanting to alleviate that dukkha—that's very understandable and very normal. But then when the suffering is alleviated just enough or just a little bit, the sensing of the soul begins to emerge or become possible, and maybe that then becomes the primary intention, and through that maybe the suffering is decreased further.

Or it may be, like I said, as the imaginal opens, suffering is decreased. So there's also fluidity in terms of intentionality that can be possible here. But just to draw attention to that briefly right now.

Okay, I think that's enough for today. Thank you for listening.

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