Sensing with Soul (Part 6)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:05:12

At the beginning of this series of talks, I mentioned that I wanted to explore some of the philosophical questions involved in this whole endeavor—this opening up and exploration of soul-making—and particularly questions of ontology and epistemology.

Just to refresh your memory on these words, which I've been using fairly regularly over the last few years: ontology is, roughly speaking, the kind of philosophy that deals with or decides or tries to ascertain the reality status of different things. So what we count as real and what we count as unreal. To state it in a more refined way, ontology is the philosophical discussion of what kinds of reality different things have.

Epistemology is the philosophical investigation regarding how we know, how we know what is real. What qualifies as knowledge? What qualifies as a mode of knowing, a way of knowing? What qualifies as something that is knowable?

I said at the end of the first talk—which has now actually become two talks, "Aspects of the Imaginal" and "Sensing the Soul"—that I would like to visit those questions of ontology and epistemology, and also hopefully later on in the last talk of this series.

I want to open that up now a little bit because I think it's really important. But it's a huge subject, and I just want to open it up without letting the threads get too out of control or too sprawling, because they do have all kinds of implications and ways that they connect with all kinds of things.

For now, I want to open up this philosophical territory in questioning and rethinking regarding ontology and epistemology with respect to soul-making, sensing the soul, imaginal perception—and connect that with where I left off in the last part of this talk. There I made the observation that sensing with soul, whether it's so-called intrapsychic images, or purely extrapsychic, or a mixture of those, has woven into it a sense of values.

For instance, beauty. Kinds of beauty, love, goodness, nobility, courage—the sense of that, either explicitly or implicitly, consciously or less consciously, is woven into the very sense of soulfulness that we have when we are sensing the soul.

Also, a sense of the value of tradition or a sense of the value of its kind of complement or opposite—innovation, or perhaps even revolution. Humility, surrender, duty—these are values that we can sense not just in ourselves, in the relational poise and stance with respect to what we are sensing with soul, but also in the object. All kinds of values and all kinds of shades of different values are discerned, sensed, picked up on, attuned with, resonated with.

Can we say that they are known? This is where I want to tie these questions of ontology and epistemology with this particular strand of the observation that sensing with soul includes, involves, a sensing of values.

In our culture, modern culture nowadays—one of the things that characterizes the modern global world is just how much differentiation there is and how much plurality of cultures there are—but what we might call the dominant culture is characterized by a certain ontology and epistemology, and I would say a lot of confusion regarding epistemology with respect to values.

This affects or is related to how difficult it is for us to stake out or claim some respect with regard to sensing the soul or imaginal perception and the reality of that, or the possible reality, or the reality status of that.

One can imagine no one objecting if you shared with almost anyone: "I had an image and it was really lovely and it really touched me." The person would be either interested or not interested, or say, "Oh, that's nice," or whatever. A few people would say, "Well, that's very dangerous, because you might go psychotic or you might lose touch with reality."

But if you said, "I had an image, or I sensed this tree, and I sensed that this tree loved me. I knew that this tree loved me"—then people, many people would object. "You can't use the word 'know' there. You are making an epistemological claim that you have no warrant for." It's not the norm in our society.

When we try to open up and see what we can do with this question of ontology and epistemology with regard to the imaginal, we are confronted by a contemporary cultural viewpoint that limits severely the knowledge claims—the epistemological claims and the ontological claims—of anything that we might sense when we sense with soul.

I'm going to hopefully in the last talk pick up on this realm of values in the way that they are an element of, or a part of, our sensing the soul. As I said: love, kinds of love, beauty, kinds of goodness and nobility—that whole list we gave. Hopefully there I will offer some different pathways with all of this and ways that the whole sensing the soul can actually be navigated in slightly different directions.

Sometimes it's possible when we are sensing something with soul—say it's my beloved other, someone with whom there is a sense of the erotic imaginal perception—and perhaps we are holding hands. I am holding hands with her, with him, with them. In that touch, and perhaps in the sight, but let's say just in the touch, I'm sensing with soul, I'm perceiving imaginally with everything that that means.

Within that, one strand of that sensing with soul at that time might be her love, his love, their love for me. How do I know that? How am I picking that up? I can say I know it. I know it through the touch. Is someone going to convince me that I can't know that love—her love, his love, their love for me—through the touch?

Love, as I said, is a value. How am I picking it up? I'm going to elaborate on this.

What about loveliness? Her, his, their loveliness. We are touching, we are holding hands, whatever it is, and within the whole kaleidoscope and multidimensionality of the perception, the total sensing that is going on when we are in that erotic imaginal space together and sensing the soul together, I sense her, his, their loveliness.

It's part of the sensing the soul and it's part of their particularities and my particularities and myself and all that. But there's a way possible of tuning in to just that element, just the loveliness. Now that is much more than just pleasant experience. It's a particular kind of pleasant experience. But if I go into it more, it's almost like I can open up and focus on and open up the very essence of loveliness and the essence of a certain value, in this case, loveliness.

And it's sort of her, him, them, but it's sort of kind of a universal beyond. It's some kind of essence of, in this case, loveliness. So it's almost like there's a whole other pathway that can be opened up when we sense with soul. I hope to return to this later as a sort of additional possibility, perhaps in the last talk.

But let's leave that for now. The main point is about values and sensing the soul involves a sensing—and can we say a knowing—of values. What does that have to do with the ontology and epistemology and those kinds of issues with regard to sensing the soul?

So first, I hope, a very brief sort of history lesson or historical perspective. Galileo—Galileo Galilei, brilliant scientist in Italy in the fifteenth, sixteenth century—believed that the world, he said, the book of the world, reading, understanding the world, is reading a book written in the language of mathematics. This was a sort of fundamental, almost religious principle that he held.

In that view, he decided to pick up on and reinstate a view that was prominent in one stream of ancient Greek philosophy, the atomistic view of Democritus and Lucretius. He said when we deal with the world, there are primary qualities. He didn't actually use that word—it was Locke who coined that phrase. But it's something like there are primary qualities. For instance, how heavy a thing is, whether it's moving or at rest and how fast, at what time it's happening, where, its location, its size, its shape, whether this thing that I'm talking about or looking at or trying to investigate is one thing or a collection of a few things or a collection of many, whether it's touching X or Y or not touching—all those are amenable to mathematical representation. They can be measured and given some kind of mathematical symbol or status.

Whereas qualities like taste or sound or smell or color, these are—again, it's Locke's actual phrase, but Galileo made the point originally—secondary qualities. He said these are more subjective qualities. There's something in the sensitivity of the sensitive soul, sensitive organism, and they're subjective. They are not real. Only primary qualities are real. They are secondary qualities, qualities of a secondary status.

Now, that idea, enormously brilliant and very fertile in terms of giving birth to the whole scientific revolution there, was picked up by Descartes, by Francis Bacon, by Locke and Hume and others, and gave birth to the whole notion of Cartesian dualism. I'm following the writings of someone called Marcus

Appleby here, who points out that people often think this Cartesian dualism—this is a little bit of a tangent, but I'll throw it in right now—the whole idea of mind and matter being separate and completely different things, originated with Descartes because of a kind of idea of a transcendent God, and that the mind, spirit, et cetera, was linked to that transcendent God.

But actually, Descartes was much more secular in his thinking than, say, someone like Thomas Aquinas who'd come before him, who was much more influenced by religious thinking and had a much less dualistic philosophy regarding mind and matter. So Descartes really kind of incarnated this what we call Cartesian dualism between mind and matter. Then the whole scientific method was born from Galileo with Descartes, Francis Bacon, et cetera, extended in the philosophies of Locke and Hume.

What came with that gradually over time was this kind of relegation, a whole ontology and epistemology and a relegation of certain aspects of our experience, aspects of the world, into what were called secondary qualities, meaning less real, and then what we might even call tertiary qualities, even less real than that—for instance, values.

This took a long time. So values, with the scientific revolution and the so-called Western Enlightenment and modernism, eventually became just regarded as historically conditioned opinions, really. What is beautiful? What is good? What is right or wrong? What is the nature of love? What is one's duty? All of this.

So there's a kind of hierarchy established over time, historically, starting in Europe and then in the West and then more globally, concerning what is real, and therefore, as I touched on in an earlier talk, what is respected and valued because it is more real, or real as opposed to not real. This happened gradually, and so the hierarchy of ontology and with it of epistemology and also of respect and valuing, and therefore also respect for different kinds of knowing, or eventually this kind of feeling that you're not justified to say you know X.

This spreads into all kinds of subcultures—the actual divisions of what is real and therefore what's worthy of respect and valuing. Different cultures have different demarcations, of course. For example, in psychotherapeutic cultures, what's real and therefore what's worthy of respect is slightly different, varying even among the different psychotherapeutic subcultures.

Different spiritual paths, whether so-called secular or religious, all bring in—either implicitly but more often explicitly—a certain ontology, a certain hierarchy or categorization of what is real, what is not real, what is more real, what is less real. With that comes a hierarchy of respect and value for things themselves and also for modes of knowing.

So there's an ontological, epistemological, and moral hierarchy that's rolled out implicitly or explicitly with any kind of culture. Each one will say: "This is real and therefore valuable, worthy of respect, and we respect the knowing of that real thing or aspect. But that, in contrast, is not real, and therefore we don't

respect and value it—and we don't respect and value the knowing of it—at least not as much, or not at all."

Originally, what started as a kind of liberation from religious dogmatism with the scientific revolution, the Renaissance, and the Western Enlightenment gradually became, over several hundred years, a kind of imprisonment. We are somehow told by whatever culture or cultures we move in that there is this hierarchy: this is real, this is less real, this is more worthy of respect, this is less worthy of respect, this kind of mode of knowing is valuable and worthy of respect, and this is not.

That can actually become an imprisonment. What started as liberation in Europe just after the Middle Ages becomes, in some ways, an imprisonment for us.

I want to make several interconnected points here. One concerns what we value—this changes with the dominant ontology and epistemology. I also want to make a point about the ontological and epistemological status of different values themselves.

Where I'm going with this whole talk is this: if sensing with soul includes the sensing, perceiving, and perhaps knowing of values, and if historically the knowing of values is dismissed—because values are not primary qualities, not even secondary qualities, but something else that doesn't conform to the epistemology of classical science and scientism—then sensing with soul, because it involves sensing and perhaps knowing values, cannot claim any knowing there. It's not given any place or platform, because values are not given any place or platform.

I also want to point out the incredibly powerful influence of ideas in our psyche, in our modes of discourse, modes of conceiving, ways of looking, ways of relating—our whole conception and sense of existence.

Actually, values can never be removed from our way of looking or conceptual frameworks and orientations. Values always orient us. Even the scientific method, which Galileo gave birth to and which was developed further with Descartes and Bacon, is in part an implementation of certain values—valuing this over that, valuing a certain mode of knowing, a certain way of establishing knowledge.

So even though values themselves may be ontologically relegated, they always come in—even to a system that devalues them or relegates their ontological and epistemological status. They still come in to inform, orient, and direct that system or culture.

More widely, we need to recognize that different modes of being, different ways we are in the world and relate to the world, are governed by different hierarchies of values. The mode of scientific investigation, the mode of poetry, the mode of art, the mode of politics and economics, the moral mode of navigating ethically in our life, the mode of soul-making—all these are different modes of being, each with a different hierarchy of values appropriate to it, a different way of organizing and relating to what is most important.

We need to be careful not to be stuck in one mode of being's value system or hierarchy when we're

actually moving into another mode of being, another mode of relating to existence, to the universe. Because certain value systems and hierarchies are dominant in our culture—established over hundreds of years through the education system, through the way people talk to each other, through cultural agreement—it can be quite hard to recognize: "Now I'm in a different mode. That value system, that hierarchy of values, that whole ontology and epistemology and what goes with it, does not quite apply here. I'm in another field now, another domain, another mode of being."

How do we decide between all these hierarchies of values? How do we decide and orient when we're in different modes? And how do we prevent one dominant hierarchy from overextending its influence, spreading like a kind of colonialism into areas that are actually beyond its reach, beyond its prerogative, beyond its purview, beyond its domain?

So again, two main threads here. One is about the influence of ideas—I'll come back to that—just to be really wary and conscious of the influence of ideas. I know I've returned to this strand often over recent years; I think it's so significant for us as practitioners and simply as human beings.

At any time, whenever we lived, but certainly at this time, in this point in history. So that's one general point: the influence of ideas.

And secondly, this idea that there's something about the way that values and a sensing of values are woven implicitly or explicitly into sensing with soul. The epistemological confusion and quandary and relegation with regard to values that we have in our modern culture—generally speaking, in the dominant culture—there's something about that epistemological confusion that relates to our hesitation or shyness, our non-permission with regard to the ontology and epistemology we might develop or claim with regard to sensing the soul.

With regard to that brief historical perspective, we could trace that thread back to Galileo. This developed and developed, becoming more and more entrenched and more and more taken for granted, really woven into the actual normal perception of human beings and how they spoke to each other—the dominant discourse.

Unfortunately for that whole perspective and the dominance of that hierarchy of values and perspectives, just in the realm of physics, if we follow that thread from Galileo, there came Einstein's theories of special and general relativity and the quantum physics revolution in the early part of the twentieth century, roughly the first quarter century.

In those discoveries of relativity and quantum mechanics, all of Galileo's primary qualities were rendered, if you like, non-objective. His whole point was that these are objective elements of reality. Everything else—taste and sound and smell, color—is subjective, and then later, values even more subjective, and therefore less real.

But with the quantum revolution and the revolution in physics—relativity and all that—all these primary

qualities, mass, velocity, time, even the simultaneity of events, like what came first and after, location in space and time, size, length, shape, whether something is even one or a few or many, whether things are part of one unit and touching or not—all these so-called fundamentally, objectively real aspects of reality were exposed as being not objectively real, anywhere near the degree to which we thought they were.

What the quantum physics and relativity physics revolutions exposed was just how much all these factors—mass, velocity, time, location, size, shape, one or many, contingency and all that—were dependent on the observer, dependent on the observing object. So that whole differentiation that Galileo and Locke made between primary qualities and therefore more real, and secondary, or even what we might call tertiary qualities and therefore less real—that just dissolved.

The current state of physics makes it really hard to justify a belief or the sustaining of that whole notion, of that whole hierarchy. In a way, what we realize is that all of these things, all of these elements of experience, including value experiences, all these aspects of reality, aspects of the world, involve the subject, involve the observation. Participation is implicated in all of them. They do not have purely objective reality. So that whole hierarchy, that whole structure, that whole edifice, that whole tower crumbles.

Sometimes, if we're not careful, or sometimes I get the sense that it's possible to pick up on certain Dharma notions and construct a similar-ish kind of hierarchy. The notions of bare attention, for instance—a notion that the Buddha never used—but that whole notion, if I cling to it too tightly, too rigidly, believing, "Oh, this really is bare. This really is as it is, as things are." Now I'm really being with things as they are.

Or certain limited ideas related to that in relation to mindfulness. Again, not what the Buddha taught, because the Buddha's mindfulness included: is there matter, is there not matter? What is of value, what is not of value? Even just pleasure and pain, pleasant, unpleasant. The Buddha did not have such a pared down lens and a pared-down ontology and ontological and epistemological structure. It's true that there was a certain simplification and reductionism that he encouraged, but it wasn't that reduced.

But similarly, with science influencing the wider culture, and in a way, this whole Western Enlightenment, modernistic and scientistic influence coming in then to so-called spiritual cultures and implementing implicit or explicit ontological and epistemological hierarchies there with ideas like bare attention—the idea of what's real, what's more real, what's less real. The sensations in the chest, the complexity of the emotion, the story, papañca—this can tend to bring an implicit value judgment about what's real and what's worthy of paying attention to, what counts as actual knowledge and what's just fabrication in the negative sense.

All that can get woven into our Dharma practice in ways that aren't fully questioned or elaborated enough, I feel. And then also into just obviously the way we live and how we relate to existence and how we relate to others and what we care about and what we invest in and what we stand up for.

So these ideas influence reality notions of ontology and epistemology. Ideas get a grip and shape our cultures—plural. We move in different cultures these days. Ideas get a grip and they shape the cultures we move in and therefore shape our beliefs, assumptions in a really fundamental way, particularly regarding our basic sense of reality, unreality, more or less real—ontology and epistemology—and therefore what is of value, and all that's related.

As I said, two points woven together: what we value, because of reality notions here, ontological and epistemological notions, and also the ontological and epistemological status of values, like beauty or goodness or whatever it is, love. Two themes I want to weave together. I am weaving together here.

But ideas—the point right now is about ideas and just how influential they are and how important it is to be aware of that so that we can get a little freedom, so we're not just caught in a kind of indoctrination there.

So Jung very wisely wrote, pointing out that at the time of the Renaissance—some people use that word Renaissance interchangeably with the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution, and other people point out there were three different movements going on there, but around that time, they all happened around the same time—

Jung observed how, during the Renaissance period, "the newly won rational and intellectual stability of the human mind nevertheless managed to hold its own and to penetrate further into depths of nature that earlier ages had hardly suspected," despite the persistence of old religious dogmas. But then he makes a crucial point: "The more successful the penetration and advance of the new scientific spirit proved to be, the more the latter, as is usually the case with the victor, became the prisoner of the world it had conquered."

In other words, what was initially a liberation has, to a certain extent, become a kind of prison for us - a prison of view, of assumption, and therefore a prison of limitations on value and care in regard to the world.

From a soul-making perspective, we could see the scientific revolution as initially involving a kind of shattering of the vessels. There was a widening and deepening of what we might call the eros-psyche-logos dynamic of the cultural Weltanschauung - the whole way culture saw the world. The eros, the impetus of scientific investigation, expanded along with new images of humanity in that endeavor, new images of what the world was, and new concepts of what was real, what a human being was capable of, and what nature itself was.

Science sought to know things more widely and deeply, to penetrate their nature and workings, and to discover the laws governing their behavior. These physical laws - whether Einstein's $E=mc^2$, Newton's laws of acceleration, or Maxwell's laws of electromagnetism - represent another dimension of the being of things. In some ways, they're similar to the imaginal dimensions we speak of in soul-making. The laws that

govern an electron's movement belong to the electron, but they constitute another dimension of its being.

So initially, there was an erotic movement, a movement of imagination and logos, a shattering and opening. But in time came the shrinking down to scientism - the belief that everything can be reduced to physicalist, materialist, usually atomistic explanations. Only with this rigidification did the soul-making dynamic of the culture become frozen.

What if we could keep the scientific method open as one mode of knowing, one mode of being and investigation with its own hierarchy of values and ontology-epistemology, while also opening soul methods of knowing? These two could live together, complementing each other and expanding both further. Perhaps what's needed now is some kind of meta-level ontology and epistemology that allows both movements - the scientific method and the soul method of knowing - to expand and complement each other. This might be a step toward unfreezing the eros-psyche-logos dynamic of our dominant culture.

Ideas influence. Dominant ideas that run through culture, education, and the ways people think and talk influence, constrain, and direct our existences - our movements and expressions of care. They direct our practices, which then shape our perceptions and values according to those very ideas. It's a self-reinforcing cycle prevalent not only in the larger culture but in psychological and spiritual subcultures as well.

I once read an article in The Guardian by Stephen Tompkins that made a striking observation: "The Bible doesn't state anywhere that it should be read literally." Yet for many Christians, Muslims, and Jews, a literalist approach is core to their faith - an all-or-nothing belief that if the world wasn't literally created in seven days, or if Jesus didn't physically ascend to heaven, then the whole edifice collapses.

But as Tompkins points out, "Biblical literalism is by no means an essential Christian tenet. No creed says anything about how to read the scriptures." Christians believe the Bible is the word of God, but why should that fact "mean it has to be read with naive absolutism?" In other words, if it's God's word, why can't we say that God is a poet? Why can't we understand that spirit speaks poetically?

It was written by the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit speaks and writes more as a poet, more as an artist.

And then he points out—and many of you will know—part of the problem is historical, that something happened with the Protestant Reformation. I don't think it was actually primary in what Luther intended, but one of the things that he favored and that came out of that was a very literal interpretation of the Bible and a real limitation, a tight circumscribing of the range of how scripture could be interpreted. It's a really fundamental shift that happened there, and part of the result of that was religious fundamentalism. And that influences so much in the way one then sees existence and the whole hermeneutics, the interpretation of our existence, of our perception of existence.

That movement, I think—that literalism, that biblical literalism—affects and influences not just those who

we might call these days religious fundamentalists. It also affects many other people who consider themselves religious, and the wider culture, even secularists or people who consider themselves secular and non-religious. Something happened in the whole regarding of the ontological and epistemological status of what we call in our language sensing the soul and an imaginal perception—an imaginal reading of scripture, an imaginal reading of the texts of reality, the text of existence, the text of body, of matter, of world, of others. Massively influential.

And disturbingly, in another article by someone called Harriet Sherwood, also in The Guardian quite some years later, there was a survey or study, and I find this a little disturbing myself—but that just betrays my biases. They found that when a church emphasized a literal interpretation of the Bible, that actually helped increase church attendance and brought in a much younger congregation. So many more people are attracted, it seems, by a literalist interpretation of scripture, and for some reason, younger people are as well.

There's something here—again, the larger point has to do with the ontology and epistemology of our endeavor, our exploration of what we're calling imaginal perception and sensing the soul. And we're talking about large cultural ideas that really influence, limit, circumscribe, prohibit certain modes of knowing, modes of being—but also even more significantly modes of knowing, or what we might even try to state, to claim as modes of knowing.

So this happens in all kinds of ways. There was a Christian example, but we could give a more Buddhist example regarding the way we see bodies, or our body. Now that, of course, is dependent on the way of looking, which always includes a conceptual framework and the mind state. So when I use the word "way of looking," you know that it means a lot of different elements within that concept and also just what we call mind state or state of mind or mood or whatever.

So I remember many years ago, I think it was almost twenty years ago, I did a retreat completely on my own in a cabin in the woods when I was living in the States. And I'd never done it. It was a really, really solitary retreat. I didn't take any books, any dharma talks, no recordings, nothing. Just me in the woods. I think I saw one person in the whole ten days by accident. And there was an intense heat wave during that time, and then it rained for two days straight, and I was just on my own and in really total solitude.

At that time, something really happened in terms of my jhāna practice. I went really interested—I had had a bit of an opening, quite a significant opening before in terms of jhānas, and I really sensed, oh, I wonder what will happen. I really want to explore that. So I went, and the first four jhānas really began to open up, and I was really excited by that.

And I also had, in terms of fantasy and image, running through those ten days a very sort of vague background, faint fantasy of being a monk—and actually filled out the fantasy. It was actually a Theravādan Buddhist monk. And that kind of sustained and gave some soulfulness to my days there and my explorations and my efforts and my solitude.

At that time, I had no articulation or words or even interest in imaginal practice. I wouldn't even have—I'd never heard of it, never heard of any of this, and certainly hadn't thought about it and explored it the way we have now. But in hindsight, I could say that that was running through alongside everything.

And I remember at some point there was a sort of large mirror, broken mirror that was outside the cabin. And I remember washing—I would get water from a well nearby and wash outside my cabin. There was no one around. And just at some point catching sight of my naked body in this large broken mirror fragment. And it looked so strange. My body looked so strange to me at that point.

Something happened in the course of those days in regard to my body awareness. Because of the way I was practicing and because of the fantasy and because of the practices I was doing, something occurred that influenced and shaped very much my perception of, in this case, my body.

I was eating very simply and not eating much at all. There was a surprisingly easy renunciation with regard to sense pleasure that was very much helped by the opening up of deep equanimity in the third and fourth jhana. So in regard to the senses and particularly to body and materiality, I was - I can only see this in hindsight - but what struck me right then was just how strange my body looked.

With the jhanas there, the view of flesh is kind of one of anatta. It really just goes very quickly to the sense of not me, not mine. And in that whole complex - the fantasy, the Theravadan monk fantasy that was operating there, and secondly in the jhanas, and renunciation with regard to eating and sense pleasure - all of that together, there was no sense of the body as anything sacred. No sense of this body as something wondrous and sacred. If anything, it just looked a bit like a strange sort of animal. I could see my animal nature, almost as if it were kind of an appendage.

It wasn't that there was hate or aversion, nor was there love. There wasn't any self-judgment - no "oh, I wish I had bigger biceps" or whatever. Nor was there any aversion to the animal nature. But there wasn't either any sacredness or any particular interest or opening up of that sense of materiality.

In the fourth jhana, in the first four jhanas, as you might know from the Buddhist description, mindfulness saturates the bodily sense. So we're not talking about being disconnected from the feeling of the body at all. But it's a very particular kind of body sense, and with it comes a particular kind of body conception and view - with that particular practice and with that whole complex of ideas and fantasy that goes with the Theravadan monk thrust in relation to body and flesh.

I remember a colleague, an insight meditation teacher colleague, referring to her body as "a sack of meat" or something like that. It wasn't that it was particularly aversive, but she was saying it because it's a way of referring to the body that represents one of the strands very strong in the Theravadan lineage, in which she was very firmly rooted. And it wasn't that there was aversion or hatred, at least not obviously, but it's a certain way of regarding it - not sacred, not having this dimensionality, not as something that the eros can open up, but something with regard to which we want to let go, see it in a way that leads to dispassion,

disinterest.

As I said, in the first four jhanas, the Buddha called them rupa jhanas. They're really body awareness jhanas primarily. That's the dominant experience. But the body awareness undergoes transformation. The awareness is of the energy body, of that space, and then the different frequencies or textures of that space change. It's not that we're out of the body or disconnected in some way. Body awareness is saturating and suffusing the body sense. But there's no real interest or focus on the materiality of the body, and certainly not an opening up of that sense.

And when there is focus under the Theravadan insight rubric, it's hardly ever sacredness or wonder or a kind of erotic interest that is cultivated with regard to matter or body. It's more letting go, disinterest, a minimum of involvement - just enough to keep it together so that you can liberate yourself - or regarding it as just the four elements in a kind of reductive way. Let's not get too excited about this. It's just the four elements. Or it's kind of on its way to being a corpse. It's already a corpse, one imagines. The body is dukkha.

The point is, here was a certain fantasy and set of ideas that I had absorbed and was really taken with - borrowed from the Pali Canon, Theravadan Buddhist logos and fantasy and set of teachings regarding body and materiality - and that massively influenced my body perception and conception at that time, vividly and immediately, in the perception as I caught sight of myself in the mirror there.

Regarding the body or materiality or anything else, I say it so many times: the way we see it, the way we experience it, the way we feel it, the way we conceive it is always dependent on the larger conceptual framework. Whether that's Pali Canon Theravadan Buddhism, whether it's Tantric Buddhism, whether it's popular secular culture and we tend to regard the body in terms of self-judgment or certain body types are elevated or denigrated or ego identification gets involved. Or if it's the larger conceptual framework of the cosmology of, say, an indigenous Amazonian person.

Always that larger conceptual frame, the larger idea - ideas influence. The larger set of ideas, as well as the mind state in the moment, and there's a huge range in that, as well as the feeling in the body and the image of the body. And that image overlaps with the conceptual frame of the idea.

Idea and image overlap. It's something I want to come back to later in this set of talks.

So something like body and materiality is hugely influenced by all that. The point I want to make now is how much it's influenced by idea—how powerful ideas are—and what ideas we're absorbing, certainly from the wider dominant culture, but also from the individual cultures, the subcultures, if you like, that we move in and are educated by.

This brings us to a crucial recognition: our experience is always being shaped. Nothing we encounter—whether it's our body, our emotions, our sense of self, or the world around us—exists in some pure, unmediated state. Everything comes to us through the lens of our conceptual frameworks, our

conditioning, our moment-to-moment mental states. And this shaping is happening whether we're aware of it or not.

The question then becomes: what kind of shaping do we want? What conceptual frameworks serve our liberation, our understanding, our capacity for love and wisdom? What ideas open up possibilities rather than close them down? What ways of seeing support our deepest intentions for practice and for life?

This is why the dharma offers us not just techniques or methods, but entire ways of seeing, complete conceptual frameworks that can transform our experience from the ground up. When we truly understand the dependent arising of all phenomena, when we see through the lens of emptiness, when we recognize the constructed nature of our perceptions, we're not just learning concepts—we're being offered tools for the complete transformation of how we meet reality.

And this is ongoing work. It's not that we adopt a dharma view once and then we're done. These frameworks need to be cultivated, practiced, lived into. They need to become not just intellectual understandings but embodied ways of being that naturally influence how we perceive and respond to each moment as it arises.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.