Sensing with Soul (Part 7)

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Now let's come back to the connection I made at the beginning of this talk between epistemology—epistemological questions and concerns regarding sensing the soul—and similar questions with respect to values.

Remember, epistemology is about knowing. Why is it okay to say "I had experience X and I had experience Y," but I am only allowed to say "In having experience X, I knew X," while I can't say "I know Y, I knew Y"? Some things we can say we have experienced, but in terms of knowledge—knowledge of reality—that's the epistemological remit. What constitutes knowledge? What qualifies as knowledge? How can we know? What are the modes of knowing? What is knowable?

Why can I say of some experiences that there was a knowing, and of other experiences they were just experiences? Epistemologically, they have second or third or perhaps fourth class status. There's that whole question with regard to sensing a soul, and it's linked to this similar kind of question with regard to values.

I can say, or it's deemed okay for me to say, "I know this bag of potatoes weighs X kilograms." That's fine. Or "I know they are potatoes." Or "I know we were in a car crash the other day." But once I get to things like "I know this is beautiful," then some people start to get a little bit nervous. "I know this is more beautiful than that." Or "I recognize, I know beauty, I know goodness, I know love."

This is a knowing of values. "I experience a sense of beauty. I experience this is good. I experience love." "I know" gets a little more tricky when values are involved, or people are less willing generally in the culture to grant the same epistemological status as knowing there are potatoes in front of me and they weigh X kilograms, or knowing that this piece of metal smashed into that piece of metal at X miles an hour.

If I say, "I know this tree loves me. I know this tree—this tree that I love—I know it loves me," versus "If I say, I feel that it does, or I experience that it does, that it loves me," that's generally more acceptable. People might raise an eyebrow too, but to say "I know that it loves me" seems like an epistemological step too far for our culture.

I want to really open up this area a little bit—ontology and epistemology—and I hope you can get a sense of how important it is. Can we just walk around in there and pick up some stones and overturn them and see what's underneath in that domain of ontological and epistemological questions?

Values have been relegated slowly in terms of their truth status in our culture. As I said, especially with modernism sort of rolling into post-modernism—or a certain kind of postmodernism at least, the

dominant kind of postmodernism—values are just regarded as historically conditioned, culturally conditioned opinions of what is beautiful, of what is good, etc. So to say "I know this value, I know it to be there" has had its status epistemologically and ontologically relegated.

The connection with sensing the soul is partly analogous, parallel. There's an epistemological parallel in the relegation. As I said, if I say "I know this tree loves me," or this imaginal dimension—"I know that"—again it seems too far for the modern outlook, the dominant modern outlook. So partly it's a parallel with the epistemological cramping with sensing the soul, and partly it's because, as I pointed out, sensing the soul includes a sensing of value.

These are bound up together—not just by analogy, but because one is included in the other. They weave together.

It is sensing with soul—the sensing with soul of others, of the world, of the self—that in our time needs epistemological validation.

When we come to purely intra-psychic images, as opposed to extra-psychic sensing the soul—let's say "that tree loves me, this tree loves me" as an example of extra-psychic so-called sensing the soul—when we contrast that with a purely intra-psychic imaginal image, it needs a different kind of validation, or that kind of validation less.

There's a kind of validation that most people these days would give—many people in our culture would give a certain epistemological validity to intra-psychic images just because we've had more than a hundred years of psychoanalysis post-Freud. Most people—well, let's say many people—would accept that the psyche has a kind of intelligence regarding our inner life and feelings, and a moral kind of intelligence of the psyche regarding its moral judgment of our actions in the world. The psyche manifests this intelligence through images, in dreams, in our imagination, and in many ways, in many forms—but dreams and imagination would be dominant ones, common ones.

So that degree of validation—there is a kind of knowing. If I get an image of something or a dream of something, it may be, or at least many people in our society would regard it as having a certain validity as some kind of knowing, but in regard to my inner life, my inner feelings, some part of myself reflecting on another part of myself or where I've acted or relationships that I have to certain people or certain things in my life or my childhood or whatever it is.

There's a certain knowing there manifested in the image and we can know that knowing. When we interpret this dream or this image in a certain way, that constitutes a knowledge of ourselves. We say then we're knowing it.

When it comes to extra-psychic images, it's really these that need the epistemological validation or championing or perhaps promotion after their relegation over the last hundreds and hundreds of years—and perhaps a different kind of promotion.

So this tree that I love, if we take that as an example—this tree that I love—how do I feel, sense that it loves me? How do I know that it loves me, that love flows between us? There's an epistemological, ontological question. How can I feel justified in saying, "I know that this tree loves me?"

Let's linger with this a little bit.

When my friend says she, he, they love me, how do I know that she, he, they love me? Saying "I love you," as any honest and mature human being knows, doesn't guarantee the truth of that love.

Consider someone incapable of expressing their love verbally or through obviously interpretable motion or gesture—say someone who's paralyzed. Did you see that film *My Left Foot* with Daniel Day-Lewis? It was many years ago, and I thought it was fabulous. He plays a boy with cerebral palsy who cannot speak and has very limited motion, just in his left foot. So he's essentially paralyzed and rendered incapable of communication for much of his adult life.

One of the things I found so touching and beautiful in that movie was the relationship he had with his mother and their love flowing both ways. But how did she know that he loved her? How did she know? He was incapable of expressing it, and even when it became a complicated thing—when he did eventually manage to express it—it was dismissed by some people around him. "He's just a vegetable," was the sort of view.

Very movingly for me, she said to him at one point when they were alone—she looks at him and says, "Sometimes I think you are my soul." Very beautiful.

But in that sort of situation, or with a pet or a dog incapable of expressing their love verbally or through some obviously interpretable emotional gesture, and in the absence of some scientific measure of love, how do we know that this being loves me? How do we know?

We could open it up even more. What is love anyway? Is love a feeling? Is love an action? Is love a commitment to action? Which actions and when? Maybe it's an attitude. Is love an attitude? Or is love a tendency to try to view and act in a certain way? None of those possible definitions is universally agreed upon or enacted by human beings.

So in relation to something like love, we have a problem epistemologically.

But this tree that I love loves me. I know that. I know that the way lovers know—the way lovers know not just that they love, but that they are loved. The way they feel that. How do I know it? By what organ of perception? By what instrument of knowing? By what mode of knowing do I know that?

I could say I know it in my heart. I know it in or through the soul. I also know it in my body, in the touch. This tree that I love loves me, and I know that the way lovers know.

So what we call perceiving imaginally or sensing with soul—perceptions of the imaginal, soul-making

perceptions—always involve, although they are not reducible to, they always involve sensing value. For example, beauty or loveliness or meaningfulness or whatever. And knowing values, like beauty or goodness or love, is not, it seems, as simple as knowing what is material, what is measurable, and what is socially agreed upon reality.

This is why there's a difficulty here for us nowadays. In the modern West, we find it hard, or it is not so generally accepted—and especially, as I said, after postmodernism—to claim we know something's beauty, or even something's goodness. We are only allowed, it's only politically correct, to claim a subjective perspective: "I find that very beautiful," or "I find that not beautiful," or whatever.

And there's really some intelligence in that—this escape from dogma and this freeing up of the individual subjectivity to grow in its own way and find its own sensitivities. But it's easy to go to another extreme here.

Because only a kind of—if even there is such a thing—completely dispassionate human being, and even then, only with regard to what does not involve him or her or them, only such a person in such a relationship or situation will say and really believe, regarding a sense of right or wrong in terms of value or beauty or whatever, will say and really believe when they say, "It's all relative and only a matter of opinion."

So for me to consent to the possibility that the Smurfs—do you remember the Smurfs? I checked with Mark and Ava, and they're much younger than I am, but they remember the Smurfs—so these were like these little blue, kind of dwarf-like cartoon characters, and they had a few hit singles, a hit movie, and number one top of the charts singles.

But for me to consent to even the possibility that the Smurfs' songs are as beautiful—if we take beauty as a value—are as beautiful as Beethoven's late string quartets or John Coltrane solos or whatever... Politically correct as it might be to say that one is not really more beautiful than the other, if I were to say that, or to be in a situation where I'm forced to say that, I can feel something—it does something in my soul and my cells.

And yet to imply that it's not so, to imply that one is more beautiful than the other—and I know that is kind of not politically correct—we're not granted that epistemological validity of knowing with regard to beauty. And what we know in... You see the connection here? Why are we talking about the Smurfs now?

The question of claiming, making knowledge claims, epistemological claims with regard to values—and so with regard to beauty, with regard to the Smurfs—is related to our hesitation, our shyness, our withdrawing, our non-claims, if such there be, or possibility of making knowledge claims with regard to sensing the soul. Because what we know in soul ways of knowing, as I said, always partly involves values and ideals, not only what is measurable or material or socially agreed upon.

So if we remember that when we talked about the spectrum of uses of the imagination, we said there's

papañca, and then there's a kind of possibly mindful images and mindful healing images and imagination and intrapsychic images and we could say extrapsychic sensing the soul images. It's really, in that little list along that spectrum there, it's really the epistemology and the ontology of that last category, the extrapsychic sensing the soul, and to some degree the intrapsychic, that's the category that's tricky for us. The papañca we just dismiss.

Even if we insert into that little spectrum the kind of image that comes with ESP, or extrasensory perception... It's really that last one because we can find a category, oh, it was valid. That dream I have that turned out to be a premonition of this happening or gave me some information in advance, so to speak, of some event happening. Something that minds can do under certain conditions, in a way it's really not a big deal, but on another level it is a big deal because it has lots of implications. But that in itself, it's easy to find an epistemological and ontological slot there. It's like, oh, okay, so I knew this in advance somehow, and even though it wasn't proved until that thing actually happened and I found out that it was true, there was clearly some kind of knowing in advance. And so we can give it that place in... We can support it with its own kind of ontology and epistemology.

The thing that's difficult with the epistemology there is just that, as I said, we don't know its knowledge until we've checked it with asking our friend, were you in such a place there? Or they do call when we dreamt that they would call, or we get some news when we dreamt that the news would be such and such as opposed to something else. And we only know, get it checked off as knowledge at that point. But still, epistemologically and ontologically, it doesn't seem to create that much of a problem.

But particularly the extrapsychic sensing of souls, that's tricky for us. If we connect that to what we've been saying about values, images that might come—and remember images might mean any sense modality—but dream images or some kind of extrasensory perception images in any of the sense stories, don't seem to involve a sense of values so much. I mean, this is just my observations. I think it's fair to say. They don't feel imaginal. They don't have those qualities, those aspects and elements that we ran through in the list. It's almost like just a communication of information. They don't have... They're not permeated by a sense of beauty or meaningfulness, or maybe meaning, but not meaningfulness, not depth, not unfathomability, etc. They feel, ESP images, if we can call them that, feel just kind of matter of fact. They're bits of information only, really. And they don't have that whole imaginal constellation of elements and aspects that we ran through in the first talk.

So ESP experiences feel very matter-of-fact, ordinary in themselves. Perhaps when we reflect on the fact that we can even have such experiences at times—it's really the mind under certain conditions has such experiences; we look at it that way, it has nothing to do with ego—but perhaps when we reflect on the fact that we can have such experiences and reflect on what the implications are for understanding the nature of awareness or mind, consciousness and its relationship with matter, then that whole reflection and acknowledgement and recognition can be and feel soul-making for us if it's a new reflection and a new opening of the logos there. But the sense and texture of the actual ESP perception or image itself is often

very ordinary. It doesn't have a sense of holiness or divinity or all the rest of it to it.

There are other kinds of perceptions. I'm going back to this kind of—I think I put it right at the beginning of the Path of the Imaginal Retreat—this kind of classification or categorization of different kinds of uses of the imagination. Because there are other kinds of perception. Someone was telling me about being present at her grandmother's death and being aware somehow of her grandmother's soul or awareness entering another realm, leaving this realm and entering another realm and sensing the joy and the gift and the wonder and the revelation of that.

Now, in that kind of perception, there's immense meaningfulness, a sense of beyondness, depth, divinity, wonder. The energy body, as she experienced that, was harmonized and open and all the rest of it. So those kind of perceptions are closer to imaginal perceptions, though they are taken as true and real rather than in a kind of very theatre sense, in that imaginal middle way sense that we were emphasizing.

So there's all kinds of divisions here in terms of ontology and epistemology. How to distinguish these different perceptions of other dimensions or realms from what we're calling imaginal images and soul-making perceptions, sensing the soul, how to tell the difference.

It may well be that some of what we classify today as imaginal - neither real nor unreal - may at other times and places in human history, both past and future, be classified as real and accurate perceptions of matters of fact. Just because, as I said before, ideas in history change, and that influences massively our sense of what is real. Even if we're not philosophers and have never heard the words ontology and epistemology, ideas in the culture massively influence our understanding. This will shape how we think of all these different kinds of experiences involving the imagination.

But there is a certain subset of experiences that we might call ESP - extrasensory perception regarding matters of fact in this material world that feel very ordinary and unimaginable in the sense we've outlined, lacking the imaginal constellation of elements and aspects. So I think this is very complex. Can it remain an open question? I don't know anyone who's figured out - certainly not to many other people's satisfaction and agreement - some kind of categorization of the ontology and epistemology involved in different sense perceptions, if we include sensing the soul and imaginal perceptions. Perhaps there are grey areas, perhaps there are crossovers and in-betweens. Complex, interesting, complex.

I think for us right now, apart from wanting to walk around in this area and turn over some stones that maybe haven't been turned over for quite a while, to create a bit of space in what can usually be a domain that doesn't have any space to walk around in - it's just given to us: this is how things are, this is what's worthy of respect, this is not worthy of respect - so just wanting to walk around in there.

At a minimum right now, we could say that experientially, even when we do hold to this imaginal middle way - not really saying it's real, not really saying it's unreal - those perceptions, those imaginal perceptions, that sensing the soul can have a huge effect. Even with this middle way held regarding

ontological status and reality, that sensing the soul, that imaginal middle way, can have a huge effect on our conceptual frameworks, on our orientations, on the directions we have in life, on what we're devoted to, on our whole sense of existence, and actually on our ontology, epistemology, cosmology.

Picking up on that point, it may be that humanity may never arrive at a conclusive and finally complete answer regarding the ontic status of imaginal images, of what we sense with soul. It may be that there's no way of finally knowing any of this for sure. But phenomenologically - that is, in our experience - we can notice that adopting or finding ourselves in the imaginal middle way, sensing images or soul-making perceptions as neither real nor not real, automatically and often effortlessly allows us to have and feel, with respect to an image or perception, a sense of devotion with freedom and relative non-attachment, a sense of sacredness and meaningfulness without fixation or tightness, senses of depth that are still open to more discovery.

So phenomenologically, the stance of the middle way, the poise of this middle way, is a very helpful and fruitful perspective. We can notice that, we can notice how it feels for us as we receive the gifts of freedom, of energy, of wonder, of beauty, of joy. This poise of the middle way is very fruitful and helpful in terms of freedom, energy, wonder, beauty, joy, devotion, soul-making.

Conversely, we can see and notice, we can feel what happens when an image is reified or literalized. We can see what happens, we can see what dies. Something tends to die when that imaginal middle way gets squeezed, when the theatre goes out of it. Something dies in the whole experience, and those gifts of freedom, energy, wonder, beauty, joy - particularly the freedom - are often unavailable when an image is reified or literalized.

As is often the case, we need to look to the effects of our way of looking to inform our choices, our stances, our attitudes, our perspectives and conceptions. What we can say is that the stance of the middle way, the stance of the imaginal middle way, brings really good results. We feel its bounty, its fruitfulness. When we're talking about theatre, it's powerful, it has effects, but we recognize the theatre of it. And one of the fruits is the soul-making.

At the same time, we could go a little further with the ontology and epistemology involved here. Adopting that middle way is, in some respects, very fruitful. In some respects, it's also a relatively cautious approach.

I think at the end of the Eros Unfettered talk, I mentioned a phrase - I don't know who coined it - about metaphysics and a disparaging comment that metaphysics is that branch of philosophy which, for some people, translates as anything spiritual or anything we would call soulful, equivalent to being in a dark basement, a pitch black basement, looking for a dark black cat that is not there. That whole way of talking about other dimensions and divinity is something equivalent to that - quite a disparaging comment.

I can't remember if I made the point, but what if I hung out in such a basement wanting to find such a

black cat, and maybe someone gives me infrared goggles...

Or maybe I start not looking with my eyes, but touching with my body, with my hands and the feeling and the senses there. Maybe my eyes just get used to the dark. And actually there is a cat there and I experience that cat for myself.

And then what was called metaphysics just becomes the valid conceptualizing or attempt at conceptualizing and forming conceptual frameworks with regard to what I experience. Because here I am touching this soft, warm, furry thing that looks and feels and sounds like a cat, a black cat.

So just as science is the endeavor of creating valid concepts and valid conceptual frameworks of what we experience, Buddhism—whether it's "religious" Buddhism or "secular" Buddhism—involves a valid conceptualizing of what we can experience and what we do experience, or at least what some people experience.

If it didn't occur to me to start sensing with my touch to find the cat, if my eyes didn't get used to the dark, if I didn't spend long enough for my eyes to adjust, if no one gave me or I didn't find infrared goggles there I could use, I wouldn't experience the black cat and I would consider this all just ridiculous waste of time conjecture—metaphysics in the most disparaging sense of the word.

But once I experience things through my meditative dedication and work and practice and opening up and careful intelligent practice, once I experience them, then those things come into the realm of why I need some kind of conceptual framework for these things. And if I experience them regularly and extensively, and if they make a difference in my life, I'm going to need some kind of valid conceptual framework around that. Just like science, just like actually any kind of philosophy, whether it's educated philosophy or just everyman's working philosophy.

Again, with regard to ontology and epistemology, science and philosophy debate ongoingly the being or non-being or ontic status, reality status of what seems most evidently there. Ontological debates still go on in science and philosophy regarding things that we experience and things that seem really obvious: chairs, chariots, cats, quarks—all this is still up for ontological debate in the realm of science and the philosophy of science and also wider philosophy.

Same with gods, same with divinities, same with soul. We experience it. It seems evident to our senses with practice. And so it can be drawn in. There's a validity to drawing it in to the ontological and epistemological debate. Experience must be accounted for, generally speaking.

Philosophy—even if it's not worked out philosophy or conceptual structure—we account for experience with our ideas. Somehow, we try to account for experience with our ideas.

And again, we inherit or receive, are impacted by, a whole set of hierarchies and value systems regarding ontology and epistemology from the cultures that we move in. So if we regard someone who's tone deaf or

color blind—obviously being polite about it and not offensive—but we somehow regard them as having something inadequate or not quite competent or deficient in their perception, or as a perceiver.

Or an autistic person—one of the theories of what's going on there is they can't read emotions in another person. So it's as if another person is devoid of emotion for them, of emotional reality. There's no reality to them. They can't actually perceive it. And again, generally in terms of psychological diagnostics, we regard autism as a kind of pathology. There's a perceptual deficiency, inadequacy, incompetency there.

Now, some people—and again, it's not quite politically correct, but it's pretty dominant—might regard, let's say, a pre-modern, so-called pre-modern tribe, an indigenous tribe somewhere, and that whole worldview, and regard them also as deficient or incompetent perceivers and conceivers and thinkers because they don't have science in the way that we do. They don't have that scientific methodology or that scientific directionality.

But we could ask, isn't that an epistemological colonialism? We've got this view and we're convinced this is right and this is better. They are deficient, just like an autistic person is deficient in their perception and conception, just like a colorblind or tone-deaf person is also deficient in their perception of color and sound. There's a kind of bias there of what we could call epistemological colonialism. Our culture is right. That culture is wrong. We know what's real. They are barking up the wrong tree with regard to reality.

Why, just in principle, doesn't someone who thinks that way accept this culture's regard for your inability to perceive souls or spirits, for example, in nature—something we might call akin to sensing the soul? Why don't we perceive that as a deficiency? Like that's a kind of autism. We are simply unable to see some aspect of reality, like tone deafness or like color blindness.

We, our culture or the dominant culture, has ruled out that as qualifying for reality status. It's got a relegated ontological status and any kind of knowing that one might claim is not justified. Any kind of "I know this tree's spirit" or "I know this forest's spirit"—that's not given epistemological validation.

So we could really push at this circumscription, this cramping that has been given to us, imposed on us by the dominant culture.

In regarding ontology and all that, I actually regard it as a never-ending exploration. I don't think humanity will ever fully answer these questions. It's more like the questions themselves and the positions that various cultures take with regard to them over time is part of the story of humanity. It's part of the soul evolution of humanity.

Conceptual frameworks, ontologies, epistemologies reflect and engender soul-making. Certain conceptions, certain ontologies, certain epistemologies can open up possibilities for soul-making. Certain emphases of conceptual frameworks open up soul-making differently, so that ontological and epistemological conceiving becomes part of the whole soul-making movement, potentially.

What's quite popular in a lot of modern philosophies—some philosophers such as Richard Rorty, for instance, who's quite popular in some circles—is to almost look back in history and just acknowledge that the whole philosophical and scientific endeavour to arrive at a kind of conclusive ontology and epistemology has proved unsuccessful so far. Therefore their attitude is just to drop that whole investigation, just kind of shrug and give up and leave it and poo-poo those whole threads and investigations and explorations in philosophy.

What it seems to me, reading someone like Richard Rorty more closely and people who say that kind of thing or espouse that kind of thing, is that they're saying to drop all ontology and epistemology. But actually what happens is there is a default reversion to just whatever is the dominant unconscious and usually unquestioned ontology of the main culture. In other words, Rorty often lets slip—I don't think he's even quite conscious of it—that his notion of reality is a kind of atomistic, physicalist one of atoms moving in space according to random, meaningless laws. That's underpinning, or hidden—it's his hidden default ontology and the epistemology that goes with it.

Despite the talk of "let's just drop all this talk of ontology and epistemology, because people just argue; let's just keep everything open so that we can move forward together in a spirit of harmony," actually underneath there's a real entrenchment and preference for one kind of ontology and epistemology. In other words, the secular, modernist, scientific, materialist, dominant ontology and epistemology over and above anything so-called spiritual, religious, soulful.

So if there is this kind of never-ending philosophical possibility, if soul-making is potentially never-ending, and part of soul-making is logos, and that too is never-ending, and part of logos is the exploration of ontology and epistemology and opening them up and trying different things out and shifting ideas—and if soul-making is endless, then part of that endlessness is the endlessness, the never-endingness of ontological and epistemological exploration or conceiving, creation, discovery, play.

And it might be that one of the ideas that perhaps its time has come might be this idea of participation. Because up to now, the dominant philosophical and scientific modes have really veered towards a kind of objectivism and subjectivism. This goes all the way back to Descartes and before: reality is what is objectively independently real, and you can talk about what's subjectively true for me or my opinion or my taste or whatever, or my just being a pawn of the culture and being totally culturally conditioned and moved about by trends in history and historically contingent. But basically there's a gulf between subject and object.

A notion like participation is in a way a very ancient concept and goes back to Plato. I don't know much about how he used it, and I know that he was actually quite vague—he never really filled out what he meant by it. For me, it strikes me as a very important and possibly very rich and fertile notion and a really key concept. And again, it's hard to fill it out, but one of the things that we touched on before about participation is it does not fall into a kind of view of subjectivism nor a view of objectivism. Not "reality is

what is objectively independent" or "everything is just dependent on the subject."

There's some kind of mutual participation of what we typically conceive of as object and typically conceive of as subject. What we typically conceive of as truth and what we typically conceive of as a knower of truth. So instead of truth being objectively independent, real, we are participating in the creation slash discovery of truth. Creation and discovery of truth. There's some word between or straddling or encompassing both creation and discovery that the word participation hints at.

So it's a really deep concept that embraces and involves ontology and epistemology and reality and notions of God and all of that, even notions of awakening, as I mentioned in one talk. So none of these things—matter, reality, selves, subjects, objects, truth, liberation, soul, divinity—all of them are participated in. We participate in creating, discovering all of that.

To me, this is a very profound and potentially very fertile concept as perhaps a new step in our play in logos, which is part of our great play in soul-making. A new step in our play with ontology and epistemology, conceptual frameworks, and how involved in that play is also what we perceive, what we sense, sensing the soul, perceiving imaginatively.

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