Dukkha and Soul-making (Part 2)

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Let's continue by looking at some of the elements we need to take into account and bring into our awareness on this path of soul-making—if this vehicle, this soul-making vehicle of jhana, is not going to spring a leak, run out of steam, or blow a fuse. In other words, what are the elements we need to be aware of and care for if imaginal practices, sensing with soul, and soul-making practices in the broad range of what that means for us are not going to actually increase dukkha?

On Pacing

One crucial area is pacing. I've touched on this already several times on different occasions. You may have heard me say that one way of conceiving the goal—if we can even use that word—or the direction, or the delivery of this kind of path, is as a potentially infinite and endless opening of soul-making, of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic. With that comes the accessibility and development of facility and flexibility with a whole range of possible ways of looking and ways of conceiving. Broadly speaking, this could be conceived as the goal or direction of this entire path.

When we put it that way, the emphasis is really on flexibility and opening, and it sounds like there's going to be this kind of endless movement, always moving from one thing to another, always opening to the next thing. In reality, that would be misleading and would overemphasize the movement aspect, giving a sense of constant movement. Whereas sometimes what happens on our path—at any point in the path—is that we need to hold onto or stay with something.

I don't just mean the breath, but it can mean that. It might be a logos that's opened up: a new idea about divinity, or about self, or about soul, or something psychological. Something has just opened here. Then we need to settle with that new thing, keep that in our sights, keep that plugged in. We need to keep coming back to that logos, use it, orient from it and around it and to it, and let that do its work.

In other words, there's an opening, but then we need to hold on to something, stay with something. It could be an image. We've talked a lot about this in the past regarding pacing with images: when to deliberately bring in an image that has worked for us before, when to just be open for new images, or whatever comes. Or it may be a desire or a movement of eros. It's not just that we want to feel that eruption of flame in the being, the energy and the psyche—sometimes that desire or eros, we need to really steady with it and focus on it.

Let it fill the body, fill the psyche, let it align the being. This is incredibly important when it comes to steadiness, equanimity, devotion, and commitment in the long term. Just letting our desires run

deep—and because they run deep, they root us deeply. It's really like having a root deep into the earth. When we take time with our deep desires, let them run deep, let ourselves feel them run deep, and let ourselves almost be constellated or constructed—our very body and psyche constructed from the base of that desire—like it's one of the foundations of being.

So rather than just this desire, that eros, this image, another eros, another idea—all these aspects of eros, psyche, and logos may need us, after the initial opening which reveals the new aspect and presents it to us as a possibility, to really steady with that for a while. And that could be quite a while, or shorter, or whatever. We might need to return to it deliberately over and over, recall it deliberately, use it.

In principle, then, there's an opening, but then there's some kind of closing—closing around what has been revealed in that opening, what has been gifted to us in that opening, what we have discovered or created in that opening. Some kind of grasping of that new logos, new image, new desire, and grasping it for a while, consolidating it, strengthening our connection with it and our accessibility to it, the vividness of it, the power of it.

Otherwise, if it's only endless opening—certainly if it's only of ideas and logos or images or desires—it's just going to be chaotic. There's not going to be that steadiness, that strength, that grounding. And nothing really transforms. It feels like it's always constantly erupting new stuff and turning, and I don't know where I am. It can be kind of exciting, but one of the potential drawbacks, if it's just this kind of opening again and again, only opening, is that it's not actually, in the end, that transformative. It doesn't go deep and become fertile and potently meaningful and transformative in our lives.

So when we talk about pacing, some wisdom has to come in. Yes, a vision of increasing fluidity, flexibility, availability of ideas, conceptual frameworks, ways of looking—and also of that potentially infinite and endless expansion, deepening, widening of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic. But what that means from day to day, from moment to moment, is that there's a wisdom regarding fluidity and stability, consolidation, settling, staying steady with whatever that aspect is.

Integrating with Other Practices

Related to this—and I think I've said this before on a couple of retreats—if you're working with this material on retreat and wanting to incorporate soul-making practices into your retreat life and schedule, know that it's probably not good to be doing imaginal practices all day long and nothing else. We dip in and out, a little or a lot as suits and serves, into practices of the erotic imaginal. Within that context of moving in and out, when we move out, we move into other practices.

Other practices are really helpful complements and supports to practices of the erotic imaginal, sensing with soul. In a way, I would view them as one kind of larger mandala or integrated set of practices and approaches that form the soul-making path.

Dwelling in the energy body with that sensitivity permeating the body. Either developing samadhi or

metta or being with the emotional life. Emptiness practices of different kinds, to whatever depth one's familiar with—and one can always develop that too, alongside or before or afterwards. Mindfulness of any kind. All these are really helpful complements to the soul-making practices.

say auxiliary - that makes them sound secondary - they all fit together to form, to tessellate together, to form this bag of (not really tricks, but) practices and approaches that are really helpful to the whole movement and ship-shapedness of our vehicle, if you like, and also the efficacy of the soul-making practices - their sustainability, but also their depth in the moment.

So really, any practice that decreases fabrication of perception in the moment - perception of self, other, world - will be a good mix with the soul-making practices and imaginal practices. As I've said, most imaginal practices are actually practices of skillful fabrication. In contrast to practices that fabricate less in the moment, fabricate less perception - emptiness practices, metta, samadhi, even mindfulness fabricates less to a small degree. These are all practices that fabricate less perception. Imaginal practices and sensing the soul are practices that fabricate perhaps a tiny bit less, but are actually engaged in skillful, what we might call skillful soul-making fabrications of perception.

So another way of conceiving of this mix is that there are practices that, again very broadly speaking, build equanimity directly. For example, samadhi practices, generally speaking; metta practices; brahmavihara practices; mindfulness; emptiness. Generally speaking, although they can also be quite exciting in terms of the energies they release at times, the movement of those practices is toward more equanimity. So you've got that on one side, that group of practices. On the other side you've got what we could call the practices of eros - actually opening to the desire and the eros and the erotic imaginative.

One can think about loosely speaking having a balance of those practices. It doesn't need to be fifty-fifty, and the balance itself will be fluid of course. But we need both. We can't just be plugged into these super intense erotic imaginal practices all the time. It's super exciting, but it's going to tip the boat over at some point, or just burn the engine.

I've talked before, particularly in the Eros Unfettered retreat, about the possibilities of working within the erotic imaginal practice, with the sensing the soul, and actually by a nuanced, delicate responsiveness and skill in those practices, balancing those practices at the same time as one is engaged in them. So instead of going back and forth between these kinds of practices and those kinds of practices, actually giving attention, for example, to the spreading of the soul-making toward self, other, and world equally; to the ways the energy might expand or need to move in the energy body; to bringing in different ways of looking; to ways of relating to desire, for example, with the opening to the current of desire practices; to being aware of where in the soul-making dynamic which of the elements of Eros-Psyche-Logos may be inhibited right now and may be blocking the soul-making and so kind of tipping things over or drowning them a little bit. And allowing it to spread there, and so helping to balance the whole soul-making process.

We've talked a lot about that. But broadly speaking, there's a back and forth one can engage in between

different kinds of practices, and also a perhaps more sophisticated balancing at the same time within the practices of the erotic imagination, within the practices of sensing the soul.

Again, if you've listened to a number of talks already - and sometimes I know we're supposed to listen in order and I know that people don't - if you've listened to our series, and perhaps you're on retreat or something and trying to practice with this stuff, just to say it's really not necessary to do all the practices or anything you don't feel comfortable with. You shouldn't force yourself. If that's not obvious, I'm saying that now.

And even more broadly to say, this soul-making business and these kinds of practices - it's just not everyone's cup of tea. Some people will never be interested in this stuff, and that's completely and utterly fine. Souls are different, and they're drawn to different paths for lots of different reasons. So if you're listening to this stuff, please don't buy into some should. If it just doesn't attract you, let it go. There's plenty of other practice possibilities. Even if you're ambivalent, don't force yourself to think, "I really need to do that practice and that practice. That one sounds a little hairy, but I should make myself do it." Please don't think that way.

So again, there's pacing with all this. Many people do find themselves ambivalent. They're deeply drawn to these kinds of teachings and practices, and at the same time, they're really ambivalent, really unsure for different reasons. If that's the case for you - if it's not just a question of "Actually, this isn't really my thing, I'm not really drawn here," but there's this ambivalence - then I would encourage, first, perhaps talking to one of the teachers that's very versed in the soul-making paradigm and sets of practices. But also just a gentle questioning with yourself: What actually is the fear? Why do I feel reluctant to engage or explore such practices? What assumptions perhaps are involved in whatever fears might be operating or concerns?

Really, as always with fear, it's generally good to let it become more conscious. Oftentimes - I've said this many times before - oftentimes we're bullied, pushed and pulled and inhibited and shut down and directed this way and that by fear, and we're not even fully conscious of what exactly it is that I'm afraid of, what exactly it is that I'm assuming here. So I'm saying this as an invitation to a real gentle, caring, careful and thorough inquiry, not as just another fancy way of saying "get over it and move on and push yourself through into these practices" at all.

So timing - again related to pacing - timing with all this, and timing with also questioning oneself or inquiring what's going on for me if I feel ambivalent. Time is a matter of respect and sensitivity. I need to sometimes respect my concerns and my fear and be sensitive to when is the right moment to turn to them and say, "Now what's going on for me? What's going on in my heart and soul that there's this...?"

This fear or refusal or ambivalence about taking another step—sometimes that needs to be respected, sometimes we need to be sensitive to even the fact that it's there and not push through something, a kind of ambivalence that we haven't even noticed because we weren't paying attention to how we felt.

So on the one hand, timing is a matter of respect and sensitivity. On the other hand, there's also a place for courage and boldness and fire in these explorations—certainly, but also in the exploration of the relationship with the explorations, if you follow what I mean.

Some people may well think, and I know people have said to me, that these practices and these teachings are dangerous, or they sound dangerous. It's usually they *sound* dangerous, because it's usually someone who's not really engaging who's saying that. And I mean, you might say, "Yeah, maybe, but dangerous to what? What is it that you're thinking or assuming or concerning yourself with there?"

So oftentimes a person will worry that allowing eros to arise—especially allowing sexual eros to arise, or allowing other desires and their energy to open, as we teach in different practices in different ways—that this can only be encouraging and feeding and reinforcing the kilesas: movements of greed, because greed and desire are the same, or delusion, because fantasy and image must be delusion, or attachment, and so on.

This is really important to check out. I can say to you, it's not the case. Practices with wisdom, with sensitivity, with care, with responsiveness—soul-making practices and entering this kind of conceptual framework with all that care and responsiveness—it's just not the case. Now, only you, if you have that concern, can actually verify that for yourself. But I think you will find that it's so. And in a way, what we're talking about in this talk now, in these different parts of this talk, is: what exactly do I need to care for? What exactly do I need to keep my eye out for? What exactly needs to be in place in order that we don't just end up feeding the kilesas and thus feeding dukkha?

A second concern sometimes that people have, related of course, is that sometimes people are happy talking about using the word "imaginal" and using it in a slightly different way, as I pointed out in the first talk, and using it in a way that I would say is a little more tame, a little less radical, a little kind of safer, and a little more under the thumb of the self, really, of the ego. And so this relates to sometimes the way Jung would encourage people to think about things. So people often say, "Yeah, working with the imaginal and kind of engaging the sub-personalities."

And I just want to point out again that that wouldn't be—that way of thinking about things wouldn't be quite what we mean by the imaginal and by sensing the soul. "Sub-personalities" in the very word, in the nomenclature there, implies "sub." It's less than something. Less than what? Less than the ego or the self. There's something that's got the final say and is bigger than. "Sub" means less.

So this self is keeping my eye on things, keeping sort of in charge and organizing and overviewing, of which there are these little sub-personalities which can be fascinating and really helpful and bring some healing to integrate them into this bigger, superior personality or ego or whatever. And it can be really, really useful. And some people, that's what they want to do. That's the extent of their interest and engagement. And that's the extent of the kind of logos or conceptual framework that they're willing to play with. And that's absolutely fine.

I think we're going beyond that. And because of this sense that these elements that I outlined in the first talk—part of the imaginal, part of recognizing what we call the imaginal, an imaginal figure—means autonomy, means divinity, means unfathomability, means in some way, I cannot figure out or get to the bottom of this imaginal figure. In some ways it's bigger than me. In some ways I am gifted something by something, by something I don't understand, by something that is larger, more mysterious than me.

Sub-personality, therefore, is really the wrong word. They are autonomous persons. We are, at least—let's say—we are entertaining that conceptual framework more often than not in our logos. So we're not putting these things in our pocket or harnessing them or something like that. There's a different stance, a different relationship, essentially really a different, as I said, different conceptual framework, deliberately entertained.

We can move in and out of that, absolutely, and put it down, adopt another one—even adopt the sub-personality one—but at times at least, and probably the favored one, is not to box them in and diminish these imaginal figures as sub-personalities.

So sometimes a person hearing that—sometimes people don't hear that and they just, again, just hear the word "imaginal" and assume sub-personality because they've heard that elsewhere in some psychological paradigm or other. And so they don't hear the difference. I've dwelt a lot on the differences. And sometimes people will hear this kind of, if you like, more radical vision, and it will be scary. "I'm going to be a split personality, I'll have split personality disorder," or "That sounds bonkers, isn't that what crazy people do?" and all this. So that might be a fear.

But again, is that really what happens? Is that really the consequence of this practice when we take care, when we develop these elements, when we cultivate responsiveness, when insight and wisdom emerge? I really don't think so. Rather, something more powerful and radical and far-reaching opens for us. A much vaster landscape of soul is revealed when we don't limit what emerges—for example, constraining an imaginal figure to the category of sub-personality.

A third area that can generate concern—and again, it's a valid concern—is that this work sometimes involves a radically different way of conceiving and thinking about practice, path, life, existence, being, and every element of existence and the universe. This isn't merely engaging these thoughts idly or abstractly in ways that don't make a difference, but actually employing them. Again, when I use the phrase "entertaining certain conceptions," I mean plugging them in, seeing through those lenses, sensing through those lenses, and actually feeling palpably in the body, emotions, and soul what difference this makes to our sense of things.

In engaging these concepts and practices, there can be what I've discussed over the past few years—this "breaking of the vessels." This Kabbalistic concept describes something that stretches and sometimes shatters some old way of thinking, relating, conceiving practice, or understanding self. There can be this fracturing, this breaking of the vessels.

While there's a gift in this process, it's not always easy when we reach certain points. When a vessel breaks that we've grown accustomed to, or when it stretches to a point of tension and discomfort, the experience can be challenging. It's not always a smooth cruise. When these periods arrive in our lives—and I hope they do, because this is how psyche works at times, through the breaking of things—they become part and parcel of growth, of movement, of the opening and deepening of the soul-making dynamic over time.

When these experiences come, whether in small ways or larger ones, they require tremendous equanimity and wisdom to navigate the fracturing, opening, and rebuilding of something new. Someone hearing these teachings might sense the potential for breaking out of structures they've grown accustomed to, structures that may have supported them for a while but have passed their expiration date and become inhibiting. This possibility can feel worrying or daunting.

Returning to what I mentioned earlier—first, the larger-scale pacing involved in this path. This breaking of vessels, as the Kabbalah calls it, can happen across different domains of our life. Sometimes it occurs even when we're not engaging in soul-making, as part of maturing and growing up as human beings. It happens anyway, so it can be part and parcel of what this path catalyzes for us.

As I said, the path doesn't involve constant opening and fracturing, with endlessly new things slipping and sliding. There must be times for integration, consolidation, settling, rebuilding—for getting used to new structures, building new ones or allowing them to be built, then learning from them as I mentioned at the beginning. There's a movement between what we might call building and breaking, consolidation and shattering. This rhythm is part of our life anyway, as it should be. If it's absent, one might wonder what's happening in one's life—one would probably feel quite dead as a human being without this dynamic.

The second point I mentioned concerns questioning and the encouragement to inquire. Inquiry and questioning are dangerous endeavors—very dangerous because of exactly what we've been discussing: the breaking of vessels. When we inquire and question, we push against old structures, challenging them. Sometimes inquiry carries enough force, vitality, and soul that things break, whether intra-psychically or extra-psychically.

Yes, questioning can be dangerous. As I've said, it requires respect, sensitivity, and not forcing, but also courage, boldness, and fire. Questioning can be dangerous, but what's more dangerous than questioning—always in the long run—is not questioning. In fact, if we never question, there's an enormous cost to the soul from living a life without inquiry.

Just a couple more points for today. A reminder regarding typical areas where people feel nervous, ambivalent, or unsure about these teachings—obviously not just regarding eros generally, but specifically when the eros is sexual.

So when engaging and exploring the sexual, erotic, imaginal in practice, some people find this worrisome.

I'm not going to repeat this endlessly, but we're talking about cultivating deep mindfulness, sensitivity, care, and respect—all in service of the movement toward opening divinity.

What one will quickly realize—and this bears repeating—is that when an image is truly imaginal, including an erotic sexual image, it has that quality of being iconic, as I mentioned. This means it's almost non-narrative in nature. For sexual erotic imagination, this translates into something quite remarkable: it doesn't tend to escalate. Unlike the sexual fantasy or imagery we might usually relate to, which builds toward some final denouement or climax, imaginal erotic imagery has a different quality altogether. It might simply be a single instant captured like an icon, something we resonate with deeply. It has this quality of not needing to escalate.

From the very beginning of teaching the imaginal, I have encouraged—with varying emphasis at different times—the inclusion and trusting of what we might call darker images. This means moving beyond the nicey-nicey, the all-white angels and cherubs, though these certainly have their place in the landscapes of the soul. But there are darker images too: more voracious, more carnal, sometimes seemingly violent. We've spoken of images of devouring and such things. I don't know if I mentioned this before, but "devour" may be related, for the soul, to "devoted."

These images are often not what the mind fears them to be. Even if they seem genuinely unhelpful, there are usually ways of relating that can redeem them, transform them, liberate the sacredness that's actually within them, reveal the treasure they contain. It's not a matter of evil or doing something strange. It's all in the ways of looking.

So there's this encouragement—again, at your own pace and only when it feels comfortable—to include what we might call darker imagery, including the sexually darker. For some, this comes very easily; it's already part of what they feel comfortable with in their sexuality. For others, less so. There are many reasons for this difference—education, past history, wounding. And souls are different. Some souls, if you like, have more darkness in them. This isn't good or bad; it's simply character. Some have less.

Part of this whole discernment process with soulmaking involves recognizing what is given to me rather than trying to fit into some pattern that's actually someone else's soul pattern. But with all this—with the sexual erotic imaginal and with the darker images or darker sexual imagery—when they're there, they're there. The divinity becomes clear. And as we've established, that aspect of divinity or theophany is one of the elements of the imaginal.

One starts to see that sacred presence, to feel the dimensionality, to sense the love—and implicit in love is respect—all these factors begin to emerge, and one starts to trust the whole process more. Sometimes, as I've pointed out, just a drop of trust at the beginning can allow these other elements to reveal themselves, and then we can let them become more illuminated and amplified.

But for me, what's possible here and what's most important is this logos and potential: the expansion of

our sense of sacredness. Even in those areas that seem like the opposite of what the mind says is sacred, or that can't be sacred, or where I tend to feel sacredness only in certain expressions—this whole movement of soulmaking offers an important potential for recognizing the particularity of different kinds of sacredness. Not just a universal "everything is sacred, everything is perfect," but this particular theophany, that particular theophany, through this particular thing, that particular expression. This is central to the opening up of soulmaking.

But really, with all these cautions, what I think is most commonly at the root of people's fears, concerns, or ambivalences is the issue of realism. It's perhaps the most basic problem, sometimes underlying other apparent difficulties. This is what we encounter most frequently.

A person might be dealing with an image that feels scary, that doesn't fit their idea of what's holy or acceptable. Sometimes they fear this means something specific about them—that they're bad, that they have some strange pathology. There's a kind of reification, really an identification, and this brings up fear. It's fear that the image is really saying something definitive about who they are.

On the other hand, there can be fear that this image or entertaining this image is precisely not real. By engaging with what is not real—simply because it involves imagination, or because it doesn't conform to consensus reality, the socially agreed-upon, dominant cultural worldview—they fear they're practicing and reinforcing a dangerous disconnection from reality. They worry about being out of touch with something called reality.

With either of these fears—whether it's fear of what this means about me, or fear that I'm encouraging myself to be out of touch with so-called reality—the question becomes: what will be the consequences of either of those concerns?

With either of those fears—whether it's a fear of what this means about me, or that this will somehow manifest, or because I have an image and it must be a premonition, or it's a fear that I'm encouraging myself to be out of touch with so-called reality—the consequences become: "I will do this, it will get out of hand," etc.

Underneath all this, underneath what we're talking about with the fears around sexual, erotic, imaginal—with almost anything—most common underneath it all, most basic as a kind of issue or problem that needs attention, is the realism. That's why we talk so much about the imaginal middle way, about the theatre quality.

So let's come back to that. The imaginal middle way recognizes that images are neither purely subjective fantasies nor literal objective realities. They exist in a third space, a sacred theatre of soul where meaning unfolds through participation rather than belief or disbelief. When we approach our inner images—whether erotic, mystical, or otherwise—with this middle way understanding, we can engage them fully without the paralyzing fears of either "this must mean something concrete about me" or "this is

dangerous unreality."

This theatre quality allows us to be present with the image, to let it reveal its depths and teach us, while maintaining the wisdom that we are participating in a sacred play of consciousness. The image becomes a doorway to understanding, to beauty, to the expansion of our being—not a threat to our sanity or a burden of literal meaning we must carry.

In this way, the imaginal becomes a profound spiritual practice, a way of engaging with the depths of existence that honors both the reality of our inner experience and the creative, non-literal nature of the soul's expression.

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