Dukkha and Soulmaking (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:44:12

Let's continue our consideration of some of the ways in which we can perhaps get hold of the wrong end of the stick, so to speak, with imaginal practice—grasp it in the wrong way, relate to it, and conceive of it in ways that actually bring unnecessary dukkha. Opening up that awareness, what do we need to pay attention to? What do we need to consider and take care of in order that this jhana, this vehicle of soul-making, works for us and is actually able to do what we intuit that it can do, and perhaps even more?

Let's continue and pick up where we left off in the last part of this talk with the whole issue of realism, reification, and identification in relation to images and what we sense with soul.

In this part of the talk, I certainly want to offer some hopefully helpful advice regarding this whole question of what we need to care for and how we can actually make sure that we're not just increasing dukkha through trying to engage in imaginal practice—how we can actually prevent that.

So part of what I hope to do is offer some hopefully helpful advice. Another strand of what I want to do is less about me telling you how it is, me having the answers and disseminating them, but rather trying to open up some questioning, open up the discourse around certain aspects of existence. I want to in part ponder out loud with you without having the answers myself.

Some of what I want to touch on regarding ontology and epistemology, and how that weaves into this paradigm of soul-making, this path of soul-making, and the practices of sensing with soul—some of all of that, regarding ontology and epistemology, is perhaps not given to human beings, and perhaps never will be given to human beings, to know definitively. These are open questions of ontology and epistemology.

How we relate to the impossibility of arriving at some final answer regarding ontology and epistemology that satisfies everyone in every realm of existence—the fact of that, how we relate to that fact of impossibility—either we make it interesting and fertile, or we just close it down. It becomes a barren wasteland, an area that is not supporting soul-making and that itself is not opened through soul-making.

So some of what I'd like to go into is really just opening up a discussion, pondering, wondering out loud with you.

When I survey the problems we get into with sensing with soul and imaginal practice, realism of one kind or another is the most common problem. In many ways, it's at the root of other problems. A problem or difficulty one encounters, or a way that dukkha is created, might seem at first that it's not to do with realism, but we can expose or trace it back to some kind of realism going on underneath. In that sense, it's the most basic as well as the most common problem.

Included in that are the kinds of ways it spins out or tangles a web for us. Something in us concludes: this image or this sense that I have of whatever I'm sensing with soul means this or that about me. Either we get puffed up by that because we're believing that to be true, or we worry about ourselves—we worry about our sanity, we worry about our goodness or badness, we worry about all kinds of things.

Another possibility is that I perceive this such-and-such imaginally, this image or imaginal figure, and then we take it as indicating: this is what will happen in my life, this is what will unfold in the material world. Or we take it as meaning: this is what I should do. In the squeezing of a sense of duty, there's too much concretization, too much literalization of the image. What I should do becomes too clumsy and clunky and too plainly translated into life.

Those are some of the obvious and immediate ways that perspectives of realism—usually unconscious, in that we don't really quite understand that we're in the grip of realism—can manifest.

One of the symptoms of realism is that it often goes with a kind of pendulum motion, an almost violent swinging from one extreme to the other. Realism tends to lead to swings in view—big, diametrically opposed, polarized swings in view or opinion, and also in the sense of things.

For example, between a kind of self-elevation on one side and then swinging to self-deprecation or self-abasement on the other side. In other language, swinging between a kind of grandiosity of the self and inner critic putting down of the self. Realism will tend to pick up those extremes and believe in them and swing between them without much in the middle. We're either pumping ourselves up and believing that kind of reification of grandiosity about ourselves, or the opposite—we believe in our worthlessness, failure, badness.

Similar and related to that is the swing between what we might call mania and depression, to use words from clinical psychology—the high of mania and the low of depression. With that comes a believing in a concretized, reified self-view, a rigid identity in either extreme, and also a believed-in, rigidified worldview that goes with either the extreme of mania or the extreme of depression.

These swings are indicators that we haven't really found that territory of the middle way. If I look at my history and experience and see that swing, that pendulum swinging between these poles, it's a signal that something around realism and the imaginal way needs more opening up for us, more vivification for us.

I'll add this as well, as it's related: what I also notice is a kind of swinging between what we might call realist religious dogma or religious fundamentalism on one hand, and a realist secularist dogma or fundamentalism on the other hand. This is quite an interesting thing to witness as well—that a person can be so entrenched in some kind of religious dogma, really fundamentalism in the sense of "this is true, I insist that X is real and true," whatever that religious belief is.

And a little time later—sometimes just a year or whatever later—they're just as entrenched in what we might call a realist-secularist dogma or fundamentalism, denying the reality of what they used to believe

in and insisting on the reality of a more so-called secularist view.

Or if there's not this kind of pendulum swing, then there's this very awkward and strange sort of coexistence of the two. So one's an ardent secularist while also having all kinds of strangely superstitious beliefs or attractions to the magical, the mystical, the spiritualist.

These kinds of patterns—this swinging pendulum between extremely entrenched views, opinions, and senses of things—are symptoms, as I said, that something about realism needs a bit more turning of the soil, a bit more opening up, a bit more space, a bit more investigation.

In a way, those kinds of manifestations of realism and the problems they cause are somewhat more obvious, and the answers with respect to them are also, I would say, a little bit more clear-cut. There's a whole realm—at least in my current thinking—of questions or manifestations around ontology and epistemology, manifestations of what possibly is a kind of reified identification or general reification, that are actually more subtle.

For example: Am I actually attached to a certain image? I can feel it's soul-making for me, it's beautiful, it's fertile, all of that's meaningful. I sense the divinity. I even sense the middle way with respect to it, and the theatre quality with respect to it, but is there some still kind of level of entrenchment or identification?

So I'm going to share something from my own history. Something I realize in sharing this is that I'm perhaps making myself vulnerable to accusations from certain people who have certain perspectives—that really all this that I'm sharing is just a sure indication of some kinds, probably plural, of various kinds of psychological pathology on my part. So I want to take that risk in the hope that this is helpful, partly because you might see in my sharing the detail here, you might see not exactly the same images operating, but maybe you can translate the kind of general framework of what I'm talking about into some of what you see in the way you relate to the images that are really meaningful and the fantasies that are really close to your soul that run through your life.

I also want to illustrate that for me, there's always a questioning. Here's this conceptual framework—I still want to be open to questioning it. Here's this image or the manner of my relationship to a certain image or fantasy, and I still want to be open to questioning that. Questioning: How is my relationship with that? What do I think about that? Is there another view possible? Is there another conceptual framework possible?

So in the spirit of that openness to questioning, and with the hope that it's all helpful, let me try and take my time and unfold it. It's a little bit involved.

Some time ago, quite a little while ago, I was talking with Catherine one night, and we were inquiring into—I can't remember what it was that brought this out, that made it sort of present for me—we were inquiring into a certain kind of pain that arises for me, for my soul, that's related to, very much entwined with, we could say, the pain of certain kinds of loneliness that come up often for me, or have come up in

the past often for me over my life, around much of what we might call the creative work that I have done or that I do.

So that might be in music when I was a composer, or writing poetry, or also in teaching Dharma—especially the pain around where things are a little bit unusual in terms of what's being composed or the teachings that are being constructed or expressed, and may stretch sort of boundaries that are then current, or limits of the ways people tend to conceive this or that.

The image that had been alive for me for many years and through many of these different phases of sort of creative or artistic work—whatever you want to call it—was very powerful. It's not something that sounds particularly dramatic, perhaps, but it's powerful. It's powerful for my soul. A lot of inspiration, a lot of beauty, and also this kind of poignancy. It wasn't free of suffering in the usual sense. And it's what we might call an image of creative aloneness or—creative loneliness, actually, more usually, rather than just creative aloneness. Creative loneliness.

So the dukkha of loneliness wrapped up in an image that was also very powerful, deep, meaningful, fertile.

So the image of essentially working alone, often working very hard, and then in the perception that tended to come out of that image, the perception of not being understood as fully as I would like, and in that also occupying a somewhat—being a somewhat far-out figure, somewhat sort of liminal, at the edge, if you like, of any community, whether it's a musical community, artistic community, social community, dharma community, as well as in the larger culture, the larger culture of our society.

So that was an element of this, not just of the image, but also of the particular kind of pain that was kind of wrapped up in, woven into the image.

Also, the sense in the image of having to sort of do battle, in a sense—this echoing and being echoed of the warrior image that I've shared, the lone soldier image that I shared many times in the past—so battling sometimes with the very people that are listening to whatever it is or reading or whatever, battling in some sense certain views about what art is or dharma is or this or that, or battling with authority figures, sometimes battling with both, and so having to battle to kind of express, manifest, bring into being what wants to come through me creatively.

Again, I'm sharing this. These are images that are very powerful, very close to my soul, close in to me, and I'm aware of how they could be perceived from certain psychological paradigms.

So Catherine and I were talking about this and kind of inquiring around this whole constellation of images or pattern with regard to certain images. And I realized as we were doing it, I realized a couple of things. One was that as we were inquiring, I was sort of assuming a little bit, or fearing in fact, that this inquiry had a kind of agenda and adopted a perspective which was presuming that it would be better if the loneliness weren't there. In other words, the loneliness is a signal that something is wrong. Something is

being wrongly related to or over-identified with or whatever.

There was also a presumption that these images of creative aloneness needed transforming or healing, that they needed to be held differently so that my feelings and choices in behavior toward others in the larger community could be different and more as they ought to be.

In other words, there was this unspoken pressure in the inquiry—or my fear that there might be such pressure—coming from the culture, from myself, from whoever, that was pushing the idea that something was wrong here, that this needed to be different. The approach to the image seemed to want to transform it or relate to it differently.

The second thing I realized was that there was a subtle concern or fear of losing two aspects of this whole constellation of images, of this entire imaginal network that had become very precious to me and to my soul.

Somewhere in my being, there was a slight fear that if the lonely aspect of the image goes—or actually if any aspect of the image goes—then something of an integrated whole would be destroyed. Because the image is actually of lonely creative expression: lonely creative work, struggle, toil. The image is not of creativity with an optional extra of loneliness or aloneness that could be added or not. The concern was that I might lose the entire image.

And in losing the image, I would lose everything that goes with it—all those aspects and elements of image we've talked about. Beauty and love are inevitably woven into and with any imaginal figure. Beauty is there, even if it's very unconventional. It's the beauty of the soldier solitarily fighting day after day through exhaustion. It had a kind of unconventional beauty to me, a surprising beauty—beauty in the large sense that is bigger than a narrow understanding.

And then also the love. In relationship with an image, there's a love of that image and a being loved by it. Because the imaginal figure opens into dimensionality and divinity, it becomes divine to us when we let it fill out. So wrapped up in the very imaginal experience is this love of and being loved by the divine, and the gorgeousness and grace of that.

There was a fear that if I somehow surgically removed the dukkha part of the image—the loneliness—I might actually lose it all because it's an integrated whole, and it's not possible to lose just a part of it.

The second concern was that I might lose the actual creative capacity and inspiration that I love, that is like lifeblood to me, that is a joy of my being, a thrill with which I have a profound sense of duty and beauty. I think it was Rilke who said he didn't want to be psychoanalyzed because he was afraid of losing the divine creative outpouring through that process.

Both of these gifts—the beauty and love, the divine beauty and divine loving and being loved, and also the capacity and inspiration for the kinds of creativity that I love—I've gotten used to them. They're deep

treasures for my soul.

As we talked around and in and about this, something in the way we were talking didn't really shift much. The way I was approaching it didn't enable a release regarding this image of creative loneliness.

Then at some point—I don't know if it was later or during the discussion—something occurred to me. Over some years, there have been changes, transformations, evolutions in certain images that have been woven close into my soul and my soul movement and journey and expression.

That solitary soldier or warrior image doesn't arise so much these days. Sometimes that solitary wanderer image has been added to or has an extension where the wanderer, often walking alone through deserts in endless traveling, sometimes gets to rest. Sometimes he's taken into a tent in the desert and receives healing. His feet are massaged by angelic figures. There's a kind of divine or angelic succor given to him through another that addresses the wounds and marks of his solitary wandering, his bruised body.

It's not that the image has disappeared, but it's gotten a whole other part to it.

Images of a tramp or destitute figure, really at the edges of society, having nothing, sometimes receive nourishment and nectar from a goddess. These are very touching, very beautiful to my soul.

There's also a figure with considerably more weight and fleshiness than I have in this life, resting in a pool or jacuzzi, very at ease and relaxed, into resting and really not doing much, not going anywhere or getting anywhere or being in a supercharged, turned-on state. This figure emerges at times as an alternative to another archetypal image I think I shared some years ago, borrowed from the myth of Horus, the Egyptian falcon god.

This falcon god is born and immediately flies swifter and further out than all other gods before him. There's something in that image of quickness and fastness and brilliance, the far outness of it—he goes really far out. But then that far outness is both at times...

delicious, exhilarating, enjoyable, and at times exactly that far outness brings a kind of vulnerability of aloneness. So he has all this particular power of his kind of divinity that he manifests and expresses and enjoys and revels in, and it comes at cost. There's much more to the myth, and I think it's very beautiful—it touches me a lot. But the point is exactly that it touches me a lot. It's an archetype, an archetypal image that I can really resonate with and that moves me.

This stands in quite a contrast to this imaginal figure of this person just resting easily in a pool, without any sense of duty of having to fly far and fast. He has a very different kind of work—his work is to rest in this jacuzzi and to enjoy it and to luxuriate in it.

So in addition to the typical images that had persisted over really quite a long period of time, there arose gradually and slowly certain modifications or additions or extensions or alternatives to these images. The question I had originally was: was there an attachment to or an entrenchment in a particular image, like

the image of the solitary wanderer, or Horus, or the solitary soldier warrior?

But in all these instances where the image, the original image, was broadened or supplemented with another related or complementary image—in all these instances, the extension, supplementation, complementation came through imaginal work. It wasn't through challenging the apparent attachment to the image intellectually, or questioning either explicitly or implicitly its health from the perspectives and standards of some other predetermined conceptual framework—for example, conventional Buddhist teachings or the assumptions of contemporary psychodynamic or cognitive behavioral psychotherapies, all of which presume health looks like this and have both a logos and fantasies that run through them for what health looks like.

So it wasn't the kind of questioning coming from those perspectives. It wasn't a kind of intellectual challenging. It wasn't logical deconstruction of the image or some kind of reductionist approach. None of that—which I was happy to play with, and I think that's also an important point I want to stress—none of that made any real shift in, certainly in the depth of power of the original images, or in the kind of allegiance to them, the way something in my soul would keep coming back saying, "No, there's something about that, there's something about that that just feels more essential or more close to me." None of that had any effect really.

It was only through working actually over and over again, repeatedly, with the original image itself as it arose, without any agenda of changing or improving it. So to go back to that original fear I had about whether that was kind of sneaking into this inquiry—whether I actually had an agenda of changing or, quote, improving this image—the transformation, the opening up of this image, the broadening of these related images, happened through imaginal work, and not through imaginal work that was trying to change or improve the original image. Or it happened through imaginal work with other images which arose organically, or in imaginal work sensing with soul in the sense of experiences of life and relationship as imaginal perceptions when they naturally became images for the soul.

It was only in all of that imaginal work that the original image, whatever it was, was significantly modified, expanded, or made more flexible.

So that's one point there. Is it possible I'm attached to this image or too entrenched in a certain image or a certain way of seeing things? It may be through imaginal work, going deeper into that whole imaginal constellation or expanding the imaginal work without an agenda, that it's actually opened up, rather than necessarily just cutting off the image—although that is a possibility in some cases too.

In our inquiry, there was conceptual questioning and the possibility of looking at other different supportive conceptual frameworks. That's always going to be a fruitful and indispensable element of inquiry, and even soul-making inquiry. We did kind of turn the soil there. It helped. But to quote Russell Lockhart and Thomas Moore, two psychotherapists who work a lot with images and the imaginal: images ask for other images. This image, whatever it is that I'm entertaining, that I'm relating to, that I'm

struggling with, or that I'm questioning whether I'm entrenched in—images ask for other images rather than only conceptual responses or only heart and emotional responses. The image asks for other images. It asks for an opening up of more imaginal work.

And only those images that were discovered by the soul—or you could say given by the soul—were effective here in opening things up. It wasn't like the ego's idea: "I think we should throw in another image of a guy in a jacuzzi because that's really different from the falcon god guy." It arose organically. It was given by the soul to the consciousness. It was discovered by the soul rather than contrived, placed there in a contrived way by the ego's idea of what was right or wrong, or grasping too quickly at something that might be an opposite of that other image that I thought maybe I was entrenched in or attached to.

Not for the purpose of self-improvement or healing or whatever—that was not even in the thinking, in the paradigm, in working with the images. And I would doubt whether any of that—placing an image there in a contrived way or grasping at something to try and improve the self or heal—whether that would really be soul-making.

There's a lot more I'm saying here, and it brings us back to that question or that pondering when I talked about different fantasies of the past. Soul-making may well overlap with what we might call healing and liberating, but those aims and directions are not necessarily equivalent and interchangeable. It depends how we define things. So soul-making, yes—connection, overlap with healing—

healing and liberating, but not necessarily exactly the same thing, or we can simply substitute one word for another.

To open that up just a little bit now—I'll hopefully return to this in later talks—people often these days speak of healing, but what is meant when a person talks of healing? Who or what exactly is healed? Is it the self of modern ego psychology? Is it the self that is made to adapt or pretend or simulate, or to hide certain aspects while revealing others according to what the dominant culture deems acceptable? Until this self can be functional within the assumptions of our modernist Western capitalist society?

Is it the Self with a capital S that Jung speaks of? Is that what is healed? Is it the self as the process of the five psychophysical aggregates and their conditioning mechanisms in a temporally unfolding process? Is it the soul? And if so, what does that mean?

Similarly with the notion of liberation. What is liberation? Is it the liberation of Buddhism? Or if we say yes, which Buddhism? Whose Buddhism? Even if you listen to teachers just at Gaia House, you can see there's a pretty vast range in the conception of what liberation is, where the path goes, what's possible, what we're even fundamentally addressing when we say dukkha. I'll come back to this. Even just among the teachers at Gaia House, let alone if we venture outside.

We tend to believe, partly conditioned by past teachings, that any apparent attachment to an image needs liberating. We need to liberate that attachment, undo it, find space, somehow make a movement toward

non-attachment—something called non-attachment, space, liberation from any apparent attachment to an image. That would be the traditional view of healing and liberation.

So this idea instead—that perhaps we have, or might have, a duty of some kind to an image, to an imaginal figure, to a soul-making perception; that it somehow has a hold on us, places demands on us; that our soul somehow must answer, is called to answer (we're never made to answer—we're called, that's a better way of putting it); called to answer to this duty even if a certain amount of pain and suffering remain wrapped up in that image, without dissolving, wrapped up in the image and our relation to it—that's quite a different idea. Not, on the face of it, compatible with the usual contemporary notions of freedom and non-attachment.

James Hillman is quite extreme in this. He insists that pathologizing is central to soul-making. In stark contrast to traditional Eastern spiritual views of liberation and the whole path toward it—where it's simply about more and more space and more and more freedom—Hillman was quite insistent in his view that soul-making needs pathologizing. There's something about pathologizing, of making problems, of making dukkha, of being ensnared in dukkha that's essential to soul-making. You have two quite disparate views there.

I wonder about all this, and I wonder about the possibility of really daring to explore it while being aware of what teachings we're conditioned by, what authorities we defer to. Can we be bold and creative with the conceptual frameworks and ideas regarding all this? Is there a way of embracing all of that into one larger conceptual framework that's perhaps more subtle?

These questions around soul-making, around the path of soul-making, are really interesting questions for me. Part of why they're so interesting, rich, and exciting is that we can ask these questions in a way that also questions whether there is a truth to be discovered in the answers we may arrive at, or that we may create in asking the questions.

We can ask a question without believing or going into an idea that the answers to these questions are therefore going to be truths. We can—and it's my preferred mode, approach, attitude—realize, or let's say entertain the idea, that just as much as we can conceive of our questions potentially uncovering truths, we can view them also as creations. The questions lead to creations. They even lead to what we might call soul-making fictions. Any answers we arrive at or entertain, we can regard as creations and soul-making fictions. It's a very different idea from the answer being the truth.

With all that, we realize also—which makes the questions so exciting and rich to me—that the path that then unfolds for us, or that we create, if you like, discover and create, depends on the way we answer these kinds of questions about suffering, about attachment, about what healing means, about what liberation is, about duty or no duty, about pathology. The path that unfolds for us is dependent, as always, on the conceptual frameworks we form and adopt.

There's something here in this whole meta-paradigm, if you like, that's so rich, so exciting to me because of that liberation from a rigid notion of truth and discovery of truth.

It's more, if you like, in tune with the sort of potentially liberating issues of post-modern or even pre-modern ways of conceiving, rather than the typically modern approach. I've talked about some of that before, I think. But to me it makes it kind of fun and more exploratory, and the very questioning is participatory. It's open. It's an open field rather than a narrowing down. It's creative rather than limited, as it would be in a kind of realist or truth-assuming approach.

So I hope all that makes sense, and I hope it's helpful. There's quite a lot in there. But again, if we continue, there are subtle and complex and deep questions regarding the way the universe is, regarding ontology and epistemology that are kind of open. So as well as questions of identification and attachment, there are these bigger questions around ontology and epistemology.

Again, if we trace what we're doing here, as I said at the start of the talk, we're looking partly at ways in which realism can lead to identification, reification, attachment in ways that are not helpful and how that can be liberated. But there are also, as we get into this whole question of realism and dukkha more, we also realize that as well as potential over-identification, or the question of whether it's okay and fruitful to be identified and have that image closely woven into one's life—as well as the nuances and more subtle questions around those issues—there are also questions regarding ontology, epistemology, cosmology, which are more subtle.

So for example, I shared—I don't remember when, maybe in the Re-enchanting the Cosmos retreat—a sensing with soul of the bird song outside the window and how the song of the birds was kind of weaving my energy body, weaving my body and healing me. A very beautiful image, full of grace and loveliness. But I think I also shared, I hope I shared when I shared that image, that the meaning of healing was not closed down or limited or too narrow or put into a box.

Similarly, sometimes there are angels of light that come as if they're caring for me, breathtakingly beautiful, and also part of a healing. But with those images for me, there's a kind of openness to what healing means. In other words, I may well die soon. I know that. I know that I may well not survive this cancer. But it doesn't take away the sense of healing and the kind of sense of the possible reality of that healing. It's just that what healing might mean, including on a physical level of healing, might not mean surviving this cancer or this illness.

So if these angels of light—beautiful, radiant in terms of luminosity, radiant in terms of love—if these angels of light are caring for me, watching over me, if they are touching me, if they are interacting with me, if they are guiding things a little bit, if that's the sense, the imaginal sense, if that's the sensing with soul, it still does not mean, to my conception—and I don't have to work at this, it's just natural with that imaginal sense, with that sensing with soul—I'm still not guaranteed a certain outcome. There are no guarantees that just because angelic figures of light tend to me and minister to me and feel like they're

interacting with matter, or the birdsong or whatever, it doesn't mean that there's necessarily this or that outcome.

So sometimes, several people say similarly, and I could say the same for myself, sometimes it feels like the trees care for me or the birds care for me, but that doesn't necessarily imply an outcome that suits my ego or just what I want. I might die. And yet that takes away nothing from the beauty or the reality or the healing of the sensing with soul, in my case, or in the case of others who've shared similar things with me.

Certainly, this to me is—again, I'm just opening doors for discussion and questioning. I don't want to close a door on the possibility of the material efficacy of prayer, of what we might call magic, or of the kind of intuition that a person might have of something that's happening in what we might say are the unseen realms. I don't want to close the door on that possibility.

But for me, one, it doesn't narrow down to a sort of tight meaning of what healing means. And it doesn't necessarily at all imply an outcome that my ego would be pleased with or would want. We're not really talking about that here. And that to me is part of the whole sense of sensing with soul. It's part of all those elements of the imaginal perception.

So with these kinds of senses—the trees and birds care for me, these angels, the bird song—there's a sort of aura or cloud or space around and imbuing the perception that's one of just more space. It's not so tight, it's not so narrowly grasped in terms of what it means and what it implies and what will happen and what I want. There is some kind of spaciousness of the Middle Way. The spaciousness of the razor's edge of the Middle Way. Some kind of questioning, some kind of acknowledgment of "I don't actually know what this means fully."

Sometimes—and it's actually relatively common if a person dares to let themselves sense something and sense in these ways—sometimes a person senses, and they might have different ways they articulate it to themselves or to others: "The universe wants something from me. I sense the universe wants something."

It might be more specific than that. I sense the universe wants something—not just something vague, but actually in this particular direction, this kind of thing or that kind of work.

I remember reading or hearing something about Princess Diana. I really don't know much about her or that whole situation—I was in the States for most of that time—but I remember she had said something to her father when she was young, in her teens and early twenties. She had been very strict with herself about maintaining her purity, and she told her father, "I have a sense I'm going to be in the public eye. I just have this sense, and somehow that's important."

I also remember hearing an audio snippet of an interview with John Coltrane. He was talking about a dream he'd had of a band, just before he left Miles Davis' group as a sideman to form his own band for the first time in a sustained way. He said he'd had this dream of a certain sound—this quartet with a particular quality. He was very careful in the interview, very humble. "I don't want to insinuate that I can

see the future or anything like that, but I had heard this sound, this band, this quartet."

If you know what they call the classic John Coltrane quartet of his middle period, it really was a revolutionary sound in jazz—so groundbreaking, such an unbelievably rich and deep gift to the world. What came through him in his whole life, but especially that band in particular.

So I don't want to close the door on these kinds of possibilities—intuitions, prayer, what we might call magic. But there's something that makes me nervous when someone gets too tight with this, too reified, too identified, too believing. Alarm bells go off for me.

If we linger on this a little, someone might have—perhaps I may have had—an image of performing something in front of large crowds, music or whatever, and there's this sense, this gripping image that feels beautiful. But it's still worth asking with these kinds of things: what is essential to the image? If it's performing music in front of large crowds, is it the size of the crowd, the numbers, the amount of people in the audience that's actually essential?

It might be. As Diana said, "I feel like I'm going to be in the public eye"—a lot of people looking at me, under scrutiny. So the numbers might be essential to the image, but it's worth questioning because they might have nothing to do with it. Actually, it might be something quite else that's more essential and meaningful—more the core of the divinity and beauty and duty in that image.

Again, I'm opening up the conversation, hopefully the discourse, the questioning, the allowing of pondering and reflecting on certain possibilities, while expressing what I think is a healthy caution with all this.

To me, signals that one is on the right track are humility, reverence, duty—but a duty to whom and to what? To that toward which we are reverent and before which we are humble. That's what we have duty toward. It's not separate from ourself, but it's larger. It goes in those dimensionalities of divinity.

The image, the imaginal figure—it's me and it's not me. In that kind of middle way, me and not me, some of the graciousness with all this is able to come in—the fluidity, flexibility, non-rigidity. That's a signal too, that it's not so rigid in terms of what actually transpires. There's a sense in the reverence, in the humility, in the duty of unfathomability that's part of it. It's not so narrowed laterally, but also vertically.

Another thing I'd like to throw in—it's quite unusual, I'm not sure how to say it—but there's something in imaginal perception that carries with it a kind of impossibility: the impossibility of complete material manifestation, the impossibility of perfect replication of that image in one's life. Oftentimes imaginal things carry this impossibility with them.

In regard to that, there's going to be dukkha in the manifestation of whatever it is in my life that echoes or mirrors that image. Why? Because it's impossible to completely manifest that image. This has echoes of, or analogies to, what Hillman's getting at. There's some dukkha related to soul-making work, some dukkha

related to imaginal work. Part of it lies in the impossibility—on some level, it's impossible to completely manifest or perfectly replicate the image in one's life.

So what manifests is always less than, always an imperfect replication or imperfect refraction of the image.

There's also another kind of impossibility with regard to imaginal figures—the impossibility of manifesting everything that all the many angels and demons require of you, of me. In other words, we are complex. The psyche is complex. We don't have just one imaginal figure calling us. We have many, and they move in different directions. Often they have quite opposing styles, wishes, desires, movements, expressions, and systems.

When one begins to realize this—to borrow from Hillman—one recognizes a kind of polytheism within. Many angels, many daemons come to me, ask of me. I have a duty to many of them. And I cannot possibly do it all, and I certainly cannot possibly do it all at the same time.

To share from my own experience: there is a monk and there's a musician, to name just two. I certainly can't be a monk and a musician at the same time, certainly not in the Theravadan tradition. The degree of intensity and passion and devotion which each one asks for in their purity of their archetypal styles—for me, you can't do both. Either you're going to devote yourself to one or the other.

Many people have shared similar experiences: "I feel drawn to be a nun, but I'm an artist." There's the tendency to want to lock into a kind of reified view, a realist view: either I'm going to be a nun, or I'm going to be an artist, or I'm going to live on retreat, or I'm going to devote my time to making art and being busy in the world of art, trying to make a living that way.

But once we realize that this is our situation—this polytheism of angels and demons for many of us, for most of us, I think—we see that we can't possibly fulfill their conflicting demands and directions. We can't possibly manifest or express or commit to all of them at once in our life. So there's a kind of dukkha in that—the sadness, the grief even. I wish I could fulfill these callings that I have, these passions, these images that speak to me so beautifully. I wish I was able to fulfill them both in manifestation, expression, dedication, material manifestation. I wish I was able to do them both at once. Maybe one has periods in one's life, as I have, but still there's this dukkha.

This is related to something I want to return to regarding values and the way that values important to us also often conflict, are impossible to manifest and bring into being or pursue simultaneously. That's what's called antinomous—I'll come back to that in another talk.

But what this means is when I realize the polytheism there and the conflicting duties, the pulls and beauties there in my pantheon of imaginal figures of daemons and angels, then I realize I can't possibly reify too much. I can't possibly over-identify too much with "I am this and I am that," when this and that don't really go together, can't possibly be manifested together.

Seeing this, acknowledging it, opening out to that view of the wider complexity and polytheistic landscape of our psyche also helps—allows us to reify less, identify less with regard to imaginal figures, and so experience less dukkha.

Wrapped up in these points is another element I've touched on before: where there's eros, it will create and discover—or create/discover—more beyond. It will always create, discover more beyond what I already know, already have manifested, already am inhabiting, already am familiar with. Something transcendent—not beyond perception or sensing as far as the soul is concerned, but transcendent in and through. Eros always will create and find a way to create and/or discover more, more beyond.

It's really good to know that. Because of this quality—related to the pothos in the eros and the longing—there is this tonality, this flavor of some degree of dukkha, or at least potential for dukkha, in the beyondness, in the not-yet-ness, in the wanting more, not quite satisfied.

Rather than saying that's all just tanha and useless and craving that brings samsara, we're saying: ah, no, with the eros, there's the possibility of beauty and discovery and creation of divinity and all the soul-making. But because it has this beyond, this not-yet-ness to it, there can be the slight flavor of dukkha wrapped up in the eros, in the movement of eros.

But again, as we've emphasized in this series of talks, recognizing or noticing or paying attention to this aspect—the beyondness aspect of the imaginal—knowing that it will be there because of the eros, noticing it, tuning into it, will allow the whole thing to become more imaginative. This attention, noticing this node in the imaginal constellation, illumines that node, and then that illumines, ignites the whole constellation of the imaginal.

And then that brings with it what's obviously not real, because one of the other nodes that is ignited is the sense of theater or middle way. And rather, it's divine. The divinity also shows itself.

So it's not necessarily easy when we feel the dukkha of wanting more, or we feel we're a bit stuck on wanting something. But if we can notice that beyond aspect, recognize that it's part of what happens with eros, let that ignite within more and let that ignite the whole imaginal constellation, the whole imaginal perception, then there's more ease because we realize it's not real, we cling less, and there's more beauty and divinity. Not necessarily easy, but definitely possible.

And so there's a loosening of any tight craving or the grip of too much grasping, and so less dukkha.

Another way of approaching what we've just said is to say that in the experience of the imaginal, in the experience of sensing with soul, we can investigate both the object and the subject. Who am I now? Who is this now? What am I now? What is this now that is in relationship in the sensing with soul?

And that investigation is with eros, with the sensing with soul, with soul-making, with the imaginal. It's not a deconstructive or reductionist investigation, which would just inhibit or drain the life out of the

whole sensing with soul. But in investigating who or what, again, we expand into the beyond, both of the object and also of the self, of the subject.

More imaginal, the imaginal middle way opens up. It's obvious that this what—that I perhaps am feeling dukkha with because I'm grasping too much and wanting it or something or other, some kind of grasping, there's some kind of dukkha there—it becomes clear in the imaginal way. What it is and what I am is neither real nor not real. It's got that theater element, it's got the dimensionality to it, and it's got the divinity, so that what this is that I may be stuck on is the divine, and has the unfathomability of the divine.

It's more than what I took it to be at first blush, or from the perspective of the view of craving, the view that I was in when there was a lot of craving. So with the opening up of the middle way, with the dimensionality and divinity that comes, there is again a lessening of identification and reification and a lessening of dukkha.

Again, all these pieces that I'm talking about, or angles that I'm talking about, are related, and with a little pondering you can see that.

But another really important piece to bear in mind here is that element that we talked about in the first talk—the fullness of intention, that helps make something fully imaginal, authentically imaginal. This fullness of intention will help with the equanimity. And where there's equanimity, there's a decrease of dukkha.

So where the intention is fuller, in other words, where we're not shrinking what the object is or what we're after in our connection with the object, where we're not shrinking it or getting caught up in craving for this object. When the intention is actually fuller and we realize, oh, my deeper, fuller intention is for soul-making, for the whole of soul-making. It's not for this object as I immediately perceive it. It's not for any smaller element.

So again, this can happen. We might start off with a sensing with soul and then eros actually, if we're not careful, can shrink to craving and then that shrinks the perception and the intention shrinks and all of these factors. So we're in a dynamic situation whenever we're sensing with soul. And it's possible that we start with the erotic imaginal and there's all this beauty and loveliness and if we're not careful, it shrinks to craving with a shrinking of intention and shrinking of perception, all kinds of things.

But having or opening up to that, reminding ourselves of a fullness of intention, it's like planting deep roots. And like a tree that has deep roots, it will be stable in the winds. So there's something really, really important about reminding ourselves or aligning or dwelling with the intention or opening up the intention when we're engaged in this work. And that's one way of relieving some dukkha that might have crept in through some kind of cramping or grasping or shrinking of either intention or of craving or reification or something or other.

So we remind ourselves or we realize, in fact, that what we really love, what we're really wishing for,

yearning for, and intending for is the whole of soul-making. So it's not just the excitement of imaginal perception or eros that I'm after or the sense of aliveness or the sense of juiciness or delight or some kind of pleasure or thrill. It's not, as I said, just the object in its kind of very tightly circumscribed, delimited form without those soft boundaries, soft edges and unfathomability that we talked about. The intention's bigger than just for that. Nor is it just for eros. Nor is it just for images. Images. Psyche, if you like, in the small sense of psyche.

But the intention can be, and I would say it is, in the soul's deeper intention anyway. So it's something we realize or we connect with—an intention that's already existing in the soul. Might be dormant, might be hidden. We might not consciously realize, but we connect with that. The intention is for the whole of soul-making.

That means for the sense of dimensionality, for the sense of divinity, the opening up of sacredness, for the sense of meaningfulness—all the aspects and elements we've outlined. And included in the whole of soul-making, our intention, our direction, our longing and yearning is also for logos. Remember, if we speak of the soul-making dynamic, the three principal elements are eros, psyche, and logos—which means also conceptual framework. So I'm hungry for this. My intention extends to logos and conceptual framework.

Sometimes it's very understandable, given our culture and the excitement that can arise around some of this material, that we find ourselves wanting simply to extend or intensify the eros or the images we're having without recognizing the larger soul-making movement that is happening or could potentially happen. We want to extend or intensify the eros and the psyche and the feeling of that, but we're less interested in the logos, less interested in the conceptual frameworks or ideas operating or the possibilities there.

But what happens if we align with, remind ourselves of, or connect with the recognition that our deepest passion and commitment—or the deepest passion and commitment of the soul—is for the whole of soul-making? The deepest commitment of the soul is to soul. That's the fullness of intention, and we can reconnect with that.

If we emphasize this logos—because for many people, that may be the missing piece—what would it look like to consciously include it? Of course, it could be the overly focused piece at the expense of others, body or whatever, but oftentimes it's the logos. If we recognize that it's the whole of soul-making, that includes curiosity—curiosity about what is happening in my experience and why it's happening, the dependent arising of all that, the factors that feed or starve or squash or ignite. Curiosity regarding conceptual frameworks and their effects.

Going back to those talks where I discussed different fantasies of the path, one I called the researcher fantasy—that fantasy of experimenting in practice and being interested in the results of trying this and that. What happens if I do that? What happens if I lean this way? What happens if I emphasize that? What

happens if I bring this into awareness?

Inhabiting that fantasy brings with it, I believe, a certain amount of equanimity in regard to the actual experiences happening, because I'm less taken with the experience and more interested in why this is happening, how it all fits together, what there is to understand, what conceptual framework might be emerging.

Some people familiar with Enneagram personality types might say the researcher fantasy is like a type five, tending toward aloofness or distance. I'm not sure it necessarily implies that—I have reservations about personality typology anyway. In this case, I don't think the researcher fantasy brings equanimity through standing back, crossing one's arms in more aloof, uninvolved noticing. Rather, it could bring more equanimity because it provides more roots through an enlarging of one's commitments. Now I have the root of logos as well—the root of intention for investigating logos and conceptual framework as an additional root, making me more stable.

Also, I have an additional thread or strand of intimacy with whatever is going on. The intimacy between me and whatever or whoever I'm sensing with soul now has that extra facet, that extra strand of intimacy in and through the logos, in and through conception.

This applies to human beings as well—some of the intimacy, certainly the soul-making intimacy that can flow between human beings, is dependent on or supported or enlarged through the logos that might be shared. We can be intimate through logos, as well as through body, energy, psychically, heartfully. There's a kind of being intimate through and in logos.

In terms of what happens when one's sensing with soul, the researcher fantasy offers one way where, if there's dukkha and instability, bringing in more of that researcher quality can, for some people, bring more equanimity and thus less dukkha into the whole process.

But the larger point concerns the fullness of intention—reminding ourselves, refinding that, reopening to it, realizing that's actually what we really want when we're wanting. It's not this or that person, not this or that thing manifesting. What the soul most deeply wants is soul-making and the fullness of soul-making, everything that entails.

Connected with all this, dukkha decreases when—or rather, dukkha increases if eros becomes craving or shrinks to craving. Craving goes with dukkha, dukkha goes with craving. But if the eros can be maintained as eros and not shrink into craving, then there won't be dukkha coming into the experience. There will definitely be a significant reduction in dukkha coming into sensing with soul, into imaginal experience.

If any craving present can be alchemically transformed into eros—which is very possible, as we've discussed before—then that conversion of craving to eros alleviates dukkha, draining quite a lot of dukkha out of the experience. One way we've talked about is including more energy body awareness—the whole energy body allows craving to manifest more as eros. Shrinking bodily awareness to one part tends

to go with craving.

Eros, unlike craving, opens—it opens the sense of dimensionality, opens the sense of divinity, and divinity in potentially infinite forms or faces, infinite possibilities of particular theophanies rather than just universal abstractions.

When we consider what we might call, somewhat humorously, run-of-the-mill versions of divinity—those universal conceptions of the divine—eros operates in a fundamentally different way. Eros opens, creates and discovers richnesses and facets of what we're sensing in the soul. It opens up the sense of beauty, the possibility of expression and individual expression, the creation and discovery of all these qualities. Essentially, eros goes with and opens up and leads to and stimulates and supports soul-making and sensing the soul. Craving does not. I won't elaborate extensively on this since we've explored it thoroughly in past retreats.

We've put forth quite a few teachings acknowledging that eros can be very subtle, and can also be very strong at times. Part of the possible maturing involves learning how gradually to ride that eros, handle it, or respond to it—to modulate it sometimes. Different approaches are possible, and they're really useful as part of the developing art. Yet we should never forget there's always the possibility—and we should never lose sight of this—of simply letting go, cutting something, dropping it for now and simplifying. We can let the image go, let the eros go. This possibility exists too when there's dukkha present because the eros feels too strong.

In relation to eros, let me read you something by the poet W.H. Auden. Someone sent this to me, though I neglected to ask from which of his writings it comes:

"When someone begins to lose the glamour they had for us on our first meeting, we tell ourselves that we have been deceived, that our fantasy cast a halo over them which they are unworthy to bear. It is always possible, however, that the reverse is the case—that our disappointment is due to a failure of our own sensibility which lacks the strength to maintain itself at the acuteness with which it began. People may really be what we first thought them, and what we subsequently think of as the disappointing reality may be the person obscured by the staleness of our senses. The vision of eros is, in my opinion, a religious vision. It is an indirect manifestation of the glory of the personal creator through a personal creature."

You can see many similarities with the ways we're presenting things, and some differences too. But notice this crucial insight: "It is always possible, however, that our disappointment is due to a failure of our own sensibility which lacks the strength to maintain itself at the acuteness with which it began."

In terms of dukkha, if we frame this within our understanding of suffering, people often think: "I fell in love with this person when I first met them. They looked so wonderful, so angelic—that's how I sensed them. Then after a while, they're actually just a schmuck like everyone else." We typically conclude that eros was a projection when we fell in love, that it was a delusion, wishful thinking, grasping, or craving.

But Auden, in that brief quote, is asserting something quite different. He's saying no—eros helps us to see reality. It's only through eros that we perceive what is real about this person. Because eros and the kind of acuity and sensitivity of soul and sensing that it demands of us is somewhat too much for us to sustain—we're not practiced at it, we're not given encouragement, it's hard work—our initial sensing of this person, thing, or whatever, slips to something more ordinary, more commonly agreed upon, more flat, less holy.

He's suggesting that eros is actually the mode of being or the lens through which we perceive and sense what is real. There's a particular ontology wrapped up in what he's saying, and I really want to open this up as a possibility for our consideration.

So one position aligns with what we just heard Auden articulate. An alternative ontology suggests that eros, as we've discussed, stimulates and supports and opens and ignites soul-making in the ways we've been exploring. This is actually the intention—for soul-making. That's what the soul wants. It's not seeking this object alone, or the sense of excitement or aliveness or pleasure for their own sake. Rather, it's not for this object in itself, somehow separated from its whole involvement in soul-making, not separated from the whole vortex of soul-making and the entire imaginal constellation that opens up with sensing the soul.

In this process, there is this elasticity and softness of edges of the object. In that elasticity, in the softness of edges, is where we sense both the potential for soul-making and the actuality of soul-making—that expansion of the object. This is what the intention truly seeks.

But in terms of the alternative ontology, rather than eros showing us "the real"—this person, this object, this thing, this world, this "I" as they actually are—we have one viable ontology very much at odds with the dominant worldview at the moment. An alternative ontology suggests that eros brings soul-making. And in soul-making, there's this recognition—at least in the way we're discussing it—of the truth of participation in perception, the truth of the participatory nature of perception.

Rather than a simple reality one is inducted into, one recognizes in the process of soul-making a truth or reality of a more participatory nature—a participatory understanding of reality itself, of perception.

Regarding the perceptions and senses of things that arise in and through the erotic imaginal, we could actually delineate a rough spectrum of ontologies concerning the perceptions that arise through the erotic imaginal. This is something I want to offer to open up our discussion, to think out loud together.

Through eros and through sensing with soul, we encounter profound questions about the nature of reality itself. At one end of the spectrum of ontologies—perhaps representing the dominant modernist cultural view—lies the perspective that in this sensing with soul, I create something unreal. That image or sense of things has simply emerged from my mind, my neurology, my imagination. It remains unreal in the simplistic sense that most of modern culture conceives of reality and unreality.

At the other end of the spectrum stands a radically different view: in imaginal perception, in sensing the

soul through eros, I discover the real. This may be something more akin to what Auden was expressing—that through erotic engagement, we encounter genuine reality rather than mere fabrication.

Between these poles lie two positions that I find more interesting and philosophically viable. The second position along this spectrum suggests there is nothing real "out there"—only mental projections. Matter becomes merely a play of awareness; this is all mind only. In this view, there exists nothing substantial beyond consciousness and its projections. Therefore, in imaginal perception, I am simply creating freely, perhaps at the whim of soul or directed by my will in adopting this or that way of looking. Nothing truly real exists out there; all remains mental projection.

A third view presents what we might call the participatory perspective—more difficult to explain, more mysterious in its implications. In this ontology, the self who senses, the thing being sensed, the other, the object, the world, matter, mind, and divinity—all these elements participate in each other. The mind with its will, its perception and perceiving, its ways of looking and awareness—none of this exists separately. They all participate in each other.

Can you enter into contemplative pondering of what this might mean? What might this do to our entire sense of ontology and the possibilities it opens for an epistemology regarding sensing the soul? Self, other, world, matter, mind, divinity—none separate, yet not simply one thing either. They all participate in each other.

Rather than insisting on any particular way, what I truly want is to open possibilities for more creation and discovery, for pondering, for reflection, and for creating some conceptual space regarding the ontological and epistemological foundations for sensing the soul and these kinds of perceptions.

You might also ponder what kinds of suffering or possible ways of suffering, and what kinds of soul-making, are made possible or prevented through each of these different ontologies. If we consider what happens with eros in terms of its effects on perception and what conception of reality emerges through erotic imaginal perception, what does each possibility deliver for the soul and in terms of dukkha? After all, this remains our central subject.

I want to explore more about eros and fire in the next part, so we'll return to that. Let's pause here for now.

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