Dukkha and Soulmaking (Part 6)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:33:13

Generally speaking, we can observe that when there is dukkha of any kind in any situation or dimension of our life, we can allow ourselves to find skillful ways of being intimate with that dukkha—opening to it, connecting with it, contacting it, holding it, and responding to it in different skillful ways. Sometimes out of that crucible, the heat of the dukkha, if you like, in relationship to the dukkha, an image might be born.

That image might be born just within ourselves, in our own solitary practice. It might be born through a field in which the imaginal spark jumps, so to speak, from one person in the field to another, or the image is communicated from someone else to ourselves. And that opening of the imaginal perception, or the arising of the imaginal in relationship to the dukkha, to the difficult situation, the sensing with soul there, we could say, is a kind of way of looking, or rather sensing with soul embraces a whole world of ways of looking, of perspectives that will bring, in some way or other, some healing, some liberation, some relief and release from the dukkha.

This is just a general observation that I hope you've seen many times already, if you've been practicing, and you can trace it through many of the examples that I've given in talks, or Catherine has given, or perhaps other teachers too.

I want to point out a few things about all this. As we said, often there's some situation that feels oppressive, where there's dukkha, and we see that very situation imaginatively, or we find an image there of that very situation, or of ourselves in that situation, or of the other—perhaps the other with whom we are in difficulty. Seeing them as image, or the seeing of them, or ourselves, or the situation as image, arises for us out of that crucible. And that seeing, that kind of way of looking, sensing with soul, brings with it a lessening of the oppression, a lessening of the contraction, a greater degree of spaciousness and ease.

It's not because we've gone away from or avoided the situation or the pain in it. It's not that at all. But it's because we've allowed it to have or to give birth to or reveal—or we've created or discovered—the imaginal dimensions of it, other or more dimensions of that very dukkha, of that very situation. In that, that creates more space. And there is, as we pointed out, an aspect of the imaginal constellation that is inevitably the sense of what we call the imaginal Middle Way or the theatros. And that's there too. And that, in a way that parallels quite closely the Middle Way of emptiness, also releases some suffering out of the situation, some of the grip or the craving and the contraction in relation to the difficulty that causes extra suffering.

So there's, generally speaking, because of these factors, more space, less concretization, less of just one flat view of what's going on—and all of that makes the whole thing feel less oppressive. And it's as if the image

or the imaginal figure or the perspective of the imaginal perception, perspective of sensing with soul, has a kind of wisdom in it, a soul wisdom, that comes, is given to us, is transmitted to us through the imaginal, through the sensing with soul, regarding action, speech, bearing, poise, attitude, intention in that situation. In other words, something is communicated to us of a kind of practical wisdom or that has implications for how we might then be differently in that situation.

Sometimes it's a matter of then consciously trying to implement it. Sometimes the very opening to the imaginal by itself affects that shift in our action, speech, bearing, courage, poise, intention, what we're trying to do in the situation, what we can stand behind and commit to doing.

So this way of sensing with soul, this way of imaginal perceiving, stands as I said alongside and together with, or in, our larger repertoire of tools, arts, as practitioners, that we can have in regard and in relationship to suffering. So it's not always, "here's some suffering, oh, can I see it's impermanent? Can I see it's empty? Can I bring more metta? Can I just let go?" These are all very, very important, valid, indispensable tools, arts, if you like, skills that we develop in Dharma practice, but there's also the way of the imaginal. There's also the way of sensing with soul.

Now, if someone's very new to this, and they hear something about "find the image here with the suffering, in a suffering situation," that's probably very liable to be misunderstood without much previous experience in imaginal practice. "See it as image, or find the image here" may seem to be suggesting some kind of disconnection from the reality of the situation, some kind of going into an extreme of anti-realism or avoiding it with a sort of pleasant construct of wishful thinking or daydreaming. But by this point, you've been listening and practicing and you know we mean something much more sophisticated and artful than that, that involves and demands our integrity and our sensitivity and our presence and connection and openness and humility and all of that.

But with all this and this possibility of sensing with soul as one of the modes, one of the ways in which dukkha is eased and relieved, we might also ask, again, regarding this question or this factor element of the imaginal of intention—and what are called the fullness of intention in that list of elements of the imaginal, aspects of the imaginal—and we might ask: does the intention in sort of endeavoring to see this difficulty or this difficult situation as image or to find the image there, does it have to be, my intention there have to be more than just for the sake of trying to find some ease?

In other words, does my intention have to be for the love of soulmaking and the fullness of soulmaking? When, as we pointed out before, that very fullness of intention is part of what makes it imaginal, what qualifies it to have that adjective or label "fully imaginal, authentically imaginal." But it's also, fullness of intention is also what opens up and delivers to us the authentically imaginal sensing with soul, soulmaking.

Here we're asking, does the fullness of intention... If—or rather, let's put it the other way around—if I'm only trying to find a way to relieve my dukkha, I say, "oh, okay, let me try an image, maybe that will get

rid of the dukkha," and that's the kind of extent of my intention, I'm only trying to relieve dukkha, will that be enough to relieve the dukkha? Or does my intention have to be even bigger? It's not that I don't acknowledge and I'm not aware that dukkha may well be relieved in the sensing with soul, but the fullness of intention—that it's for the love of soulmaking, the whole of soulmaking, and that that soulmaking is more than just my personal psycho-spiritual process. It's for the sake of the divine.

That's all in the meaning of what we mean by fullness of intention, as we said in the first talk. So the soul is more than my personal being—I'm conceiving soul-making as more than my psycho-spiritual process. And I'm also conceiving the locus or location of soul as more than just here. In soul-making, it's not just my soul which is here that gets made into soul or whose soul is increased and magnified. It's also, so to speak, the soul out there as other—nature, the trees. What is perceived and discovered in the object is also soul.

So soul-making means soul-making everywhere, in all the aspects—Psyche, Logos, all of that. What we find is when there's that kind of fullness of intention, or to the degree that there's that fullness of intention, to that degree is the imaginal opened up, is the sensing with soul opened up and supported and galvanized and deepened and enriched. And to that degree is the soul-making, and also to that degree is the release of dukkha.

In other words, if the intention is only for the release of dukkha—I'm just trying to find an image so that I might have some relief from dukkha, perhaps approaching it in quite a contrived way even—there are two points there. One is about the limitations or range of the intention, the fullness of the intention. The other is about how I go about it, whether it's contrived or I let it emerge. Of those two, the first is perhaps most important: if my intention is only the release of dukkha, it may be that less dukkha is released.

The contrived thing is a little more open as a question, because sometimes we do act deliberately. Here is this difficulty, and I'm curious what happens when I bring this imaginal figure that has been so meaningful to me in the past into dialogue, into relationship, into connection with this dukkha, or with myself experiencing this dukkha. Now that might be contrived in the sense that it's not just emerging organically by itself from our connection with the dukkha. So that may or may not be useful.

The dukkha that is released—or rather, the release, the decrease of dukkha that is enabled through imaginal perception, through sensing with soul—is very interesting in what it delivers, in how that release is experienced, as I've touched on already. There's something akin here to the two arrows metaphor that the Buddha used, the second arrow being the kind of secondary contraction or reaction to suffering. So it might be physical suffering, and perhaps the mind is getting embroiled in that, and the body also has a secondary level of contraction. The energy body contracts around pain, around emotional pain, around physical pain.

This release of dukkha that comes through sensing with soul releases what we might call the cloud of second arrows. But it might leave, of course, what is inevitably difficult, inevitably unpleasant, inevitably painful physically at some point, or even tragic. And what it does with that in leaving it is it doesn't leave it

in just a flat way. It leaves it in a way that is impregnated and shot through and rich with soul.

So there's this definite sense of release of dukkha, this cloud of second arrows, and you can feel that in the clarifying opening, harmonizing of the energy body and the easing of the mind and the nervous system. And the rest of the dukkha—the unavoidable tragedy of what we might be facing, the unavoidable difficulty—is rendered with soul. And sometimes, in fact very often, what happens if this process goes deep is that this is then perceived as perfect.

There's something perfect about this very difficulty that I actually wouldn't wish on anyone. I certainly didn't wish it on myself—no, I'd rather it really not be here. And somehow, in the sensing of the whole difficulty with soul, in the sensing with soul of the whole difficulty, there's one great level of reducing of the suffering, and the remaining dukkha is regarded as perfect. And again, not in a contrived way, not as a shallow sort of spiritual posture or intellectual posture.

Someone on a retreat since I've been ill—I can't remember exactly what it was in response to, perhaps something I'd written or shared in a talk—wrote me a note. I can't remember exactly what it said, but it asked, "How can you talk of your cancer and your situation as perfect?" And "I have a really hard time with this," and I think the note mentioned terrorism or something like that. So it's a really, really good question. I don't think I had time on that retreat—I think I squeezed a little bit into a Q&A reading from the note, but I didn't really have time to amplify it. So I'd like to say just a little bit about that now.

Because one can, and people do, adopt a sort of concept that everything is perfect. And it's a kind of spiritualized attitude. So everything is perfect, including the tragic, including all dukkha. But that posture or concept or idea is sometimes—we can hear it—just way too facile. It's lacking in integrity and in sensitivity. There's something disconnected in it. It's not really letting the heart and the soul be impacted, engaged with, meet, be worked on by the dukkha, by the tragedy there.

There's something disconnected and unattuned, something indifferent sometimes to the point of a kind of callousness in relation to one's own suffering or in relation to someone else's suffering or the suffering in the world. And actually, therefore, for all the ultimate sounding, spiritual sounding wisdom in that "everything is perfect" sort of idea, there is actually a lack of wisdom and intelligence as well as those other factors—sensitivity, connection, attunement, integrity.

But somehow, because of the prevalence of those kinds of teachings, which when they come from the right place do have wisdom in them, but sometimes they don't come from the right place—a person is just picking it up, and it's not wise, it's not sensitive, it's not intelligent.

Other times, students pick up teachings about emptiness—hearing a teacher say "everything is empty, so everything's okay"—and try to apply this perspective to great personal tragedies or social and environmental catastrophes. But that student might not yet have developed the visceral understanding, the practiced, worked, integrated, digested comprehension of emptiness. That level of depth and

comprehensive realization might not yet be available to them naturally—not at the level that would be commensurate with genuinely seeing something as perfect.

And by seeing it as perfect, I don't mean seeing it as perfect in a way that leads us to simply not give a damn—to just disconnect, go watch TV, watch a film, tune out completely.

I've stressed many times that emptiness is a tool—a very, very powerful tool. To the degree that we realize emptiness, it becomes a tool of that degree of power. But like all tools, it has a certain range. We apply it where it works for us, where it's appropriate. Trying to apply emptiness when we haven't developed the capacity to really pick up that tool at the necessary level, or where it's simply not the appropriate tool for some other reason—this isn't wise practice. It's not skillful practice.

This sense of the perfection or the rightness—the mysterious perfection and rightness even of some dukkha or tragedy—is available as a genuine and profound realization that is soul-making and fruitful when that tragic situation or event is seen as image. When the imaginal perception is there, when the sensing with soul is present, then emerges this mysterious, almost ineffable, almost unarticulatable sense of the perfection and rightness, and even the grace of what is most difficult and most tragic. This emerges when we see it as image, when we sense it with soul.

For example, the cancer that I have, the prognosis I was given, and the real possibility of facing an early death—finding ways, or having ways emerge, for this to become image, to be sensed with soul, transforms and transfigures the whole sense of the entire situation.

This sensing as image, this sensing with soul, is a sensibility. It involves receptivity, tuning, humility. It's not a technique, as we've pointed out before—or it's certainly not only a technique. In situations like these, it's probably even less in the realm of mastery or technique. There's grace involved, receptivity to what soul is giving us through the very dukkha itself.

Sometimes a situation, an event, a feeling—some kind of dukkha, some kind of tragedy—needs to become image first. Using my cancer as an example, it needs to become imaginal image first. We're present with it, and through our connection with it, through our openness and sensing into the whole situation, it becomes imaginal. We sense it with soul first, and then arises this recognition: "This is perfect. This is somehow perfect in ways I can't even get my head around, ways I don't fully understand." The whole thing becomes imaginal.

But I'm not approaching it first with this conceptual idea of the perfection of all things, the perfection even of dukkha. If I do try to approach deep difficulties and suffering with this kind of attitude—"this is perfect"—as a spiritual position without being truly attuned, it can be really silly, really a kind of platitude, and actually offensive.

Someone might be taken with certain non-dual teachings and hear this sort of thing: "everything's perfect." Or they might embrace a different kind of truth: "everything is God's will." But it all depends on

the integrity, the sensitivity, the openness, the humility, the inner work, the receptivity, the attunement—the quality of the crucible in which the sensing with soul, the imaginal perception, can emerge.

All of this is to offer the imaginal and sensing with soul as one option—either in addition to or mixed with other approaches available to us as Dharma practitioners when faced with suffering, when faced with dukkha.

In this regard, there's something more I want to address. I've touched on it many times, and briefly in this talk as well. I've stressed the importance of contacting, connecting with the difficulty, opening to it, and then allowing the image to emerge from that connection, allowing the sensing of soul to emerge with it. We can hear this teaching and lodge within our understanding a belief that there's something objectively real in the suffering that we can contact—that we can see it "just as it is." Maybe that's a better way of putting it. The assumption becomes: when we connect with it just as it is, then out of that an image can come.

That's fine, and that's sometimes the best way of working—to approach the dukkha so that the soulmaking can emerge from it.

But as I've said so many times, the contact with dukkha or with anything is never direct, bare, simple, unmediated truth or fact revealing. There's always a way of looking, and wrapped up in the way of looking, there are always ideas, concepts, and conceptual frameworks with any contact or connection with anything. Anytime there's any perception, wrapped up in that is some kind of way of looking, and wrapped up in that are all kinds of concepts and ideas and conceptual frameworks.

So the dukkha that we connect with when in our practice we're trying to first connect with dukkha—the way we might sense it or perceive it or contact it—is not actually the bare actuality, is not the fundamental thing, the real thing. Nor even is the story we give to ourselves of its origin, of its cause. That's something I'll come back to.

Sometimes, and I hope in all this talking, you can get the sense of an alternative possibility, either of actually sensing or conceiving, that the image is primary. That the way we sense with soul is primary, is first. I don't mean temporally first—as first in a temporal sense, then a nanosecond later some interpretation or something like that. I mean in the sense of conceptual frameworks often placing something as more fundamental, as more the primary driving force of the psyche.

And you can get a sense, sometimes I hope, at least in your experience or in your conceiving about experience, that there's a possibility of actually conceiving and sensing, feeling that the image is primary. The imaginal is primary, is so to speak, first.

And it may be that one also gets the sense or the sense in hindsight, or entertains the concept that, as I mentioned earlier just briefly, the image is primary somehow. And out of that, situations arise with that as

the sort of seed or kernel. Out of that, our life situations arise, mirroring the image or some kind of... dukkha arises, which we quickly get into a kind of unhelpful and non-soulmaking relationship with. So then we're just left with the dukkha, and the image might become papañca, the eros that might be there might become craving, and everything's gotten flattened.

Maybe sometimes even a step further—we can sometimes even come to be able to regard at times, or move in and out of the conceptual framework that might even regard our very process of learning as somehow given to us by soul or in the process of soulmaking, so that this image and then everything we went through with that, it's given to us as part of the soulmaking, for the sake of and as part of the soulmaking. So our history, even the painful aspects of our history, and our learning and our development psychologically, in soul and in relationship, all of that is somehow part of the soulmaking process and given to us as potential by soul, a seed by soul.

And I certainly don't mean to foist these ideas, and one shouldn't really enforce it on oneself or on another ever. It's more just—these are possible ways of looking, ways of framing, ways of conceiving we can entertain. As I said, move in and out of entertaining certain concepts, certain conceptual frameworks, if they prove helpful, if they prove soulmaking, or when they prove soulmaking. Rather than a fixed dogma: this is how things are, this is the truth of things, this is how one should always respond, this is how one should always think and regard, this is the truth.

So this seeing or sensing my dukkha or what difficulties and challenges are given to me, this seeing and sensing of all that as perfect in this kind of mysterious way—and that itself is kind of unfathomable. That's what I mean by I couldn't quite get my head around it or articulate it. This seeing and sensing of it as perfect, which implies that it has become image first, seeing it as a gift from the soul, as a gift from some god, or however we want to put this.

This doesn't imply just a passivity of receiving: it's perfect, it's all gift, so I just kind of—all I have to do is receive something. Again, there's a kind of, to me, a little more sophistication in how the conceptual framework is working.

So as I pointed out—I can't remember when in this series of talks—but we can regard it as given. The soul gives us these things, if you like. That's a certain conceptual framework, a certain way of conceiving, a certain sensibility also.

And at the same time, in order for it to be soulmaking, it's not enough that I am given something. I need to assent to what I am given, and assent to endeavoring and working to make soul there, to see it in a way that makes soul, to relate to it in a way that makes soul.

So yes, we can say that something is given, these things are given to me. Soul gives us the beautiful and the difficult. And at the same time, the soulmaking needs my assent. The soul gives us what it wants for our soulmaking, and at the same time it needs my assent, my will, my soulmaking orientation, my soulmaking

intention, my soulmaking tuning, my participation is required.

So as I pointed out, in the twoness of Eros, the twoness that's part of soulmaking perception, imaginal perception, sensing the soul, not just the autonomy of the other, but also my autonomy is necessary, is preserved in that twoness, and also has its due emphasis in the twoness that is part of the imaginal constellation. My autonomy is necessary because I need, or the soulmaking needs, my autonomy. I need to harness my will, orient in a certain way, adopt a certain attitude, work towards the soulmaking, and there's the grace of what is given to me. And somehow, again, that curious polarity is embraced—mixture of opposites or paradox or whatever there.

So my choosing, my will, as well as my listening, my deliberation—which may well include doubt and uncertainty regarding what is happening and what the right approach is—all this is necessary as part of soul-making. Perhaps without them, without my choosing, without my will, without my listening, without also my deliberation, my doubt and my uncertainty, soul-making is not possible, or it's limited. The extent and depth and range of it is limited. Perhaps.

And maybe that's exactly because of the stretching that's part of the soul-making dynamic—the Eros, Psyche, Logos getting stretched as part of their mutual fertilization and expansion. So if we don't feel stretched, then soul-making is not happening. Sometimes being stretched is difficult. It feels difficult. And there's doubt and uncertainty, and work involved.

So connecting with dukkha through that connection and the kind of poise of that connection—the sensitivity and receptivity and attitude and intention there and the listening, in the attuning—something in or around, in relation to the dukkha, or from the dukkha, emerges as image. The gates to the mundus imaginalis are opened. We sense what is happening, ourselves included, the dukkha included, with soul. And out of that can come, as part of that soul-making unfolding, a sense of perfection—the almost mystical, unfathomable, baffling perfection of the very dukkha itself, of the tragic.

Some of you will know that recently I received a diagnosis of very extreme osteoporosis. Really extreme. Apparently I had no idea until I started breaking bones without any impact, or with very, very little impact, or just nothing at all. Bones started breaking. I had a scan and the doctor said, "You know, it's really, really severe." I had no idea, so that was quite a shock. And I didn't get to find out what it means long-term. It sounded like they can't really make it much better, so what does that imply if I survive the cancer? So it was somewhat of a shock, and there's a lot of unknown in terms of what will actually happen, what will be possible for my life and my range of activities.

There's a sense with that, obviously, of vulnerability in the body—that one might very easily break bones with the slightest of impacts, break one's back, or even, as I said, without even an impact, just moving in a certain way, not even particularly hard or strange movements. So there's a sense of vulnerability with that. There's the vulnerability of not knowing, the sense of physical vulnerability on top of the cancer and the chemotherapy.

I found myself with that and was just sitting with it, sitting with the whole sense of the whole thing—the unknown, the physical, the sense of the frailty of my body. Opening to the whole of it, connecting with the whole of it, with the whole of the energy body, and the vulnerability being a difficult emotion, but one that lends itself or has a door that opens into the possibility of humility.

So right there with the whole energy body and then the humility easily accessible—the humility of the not knowing, the humility that came via the vulnerability and the frailty, the sense of frailty of the body, both as an idea and as a sort of physical sense. And then opening to or finding within that the sense of eternality as another aspect of the imagination. I didn't approach this in a contrived way—this was just organic. This is more in retrospect; I'm reporting and articulating what stages enabled something to open up here, and these are the elements involved. As it happened, it wasn't contrived or planned. But there was a sense with the whole energy body, with that connection with the dukkha, with the humility that opened and was a lovely kind of softening there. Then the sense of eternality.

I think I touched on this earlier, just very briefly—many kinds of eternality as an aspect of sensing the soul. In this case, it was a sense of the whole life, my whole life, with its narrative and its difficulties, and particularly the physical difficulties and the sort of narrative of illnesses and physical challenges. The story including the conditions of body, of soul, of relationship with humans, with ideas, with friends, with foes, with societies, with cultures—all that was kind of sensed or moved into a mode where it was sensed or seen, so to speak, from after death.

As if the whole life, that whole narrative and everything involved in it, all the dukkha involved in it, these particular dukkhas and that whole stream was seen from a perspective out of time, from after death. Like the whole thing was just there, sort of there. As I mentioned when I touched briefly on this before, the whole theme, the whole narrative and story and all the conditions and all the difficulties seen sub specie æternitatis—in Latin, from the perspective, if you like, of eternity.

And that combination of the whole energy, the openness to the dukkha, connecting—not hiding from it, not running away, but connecting in good, healthy ways with the situation, with my feelings, with the fact of it—with the whole energy body awareness, with the humility opened via the vulnerability, and with this particular kind, in this case, of sense of eternality, then the whole imaginal sense of the whole situation opened up. Again, we could say the doors, the gates of the mundus imaginalis, the realm of the imaginal, open up.

But it's not something other than—not something other than cancer and possible early death, or possibly a longer period of time with a very frail and incapable body and severely restricted activities. It's not something other. It's this body, this dukkha, this moment, this life, this death, this story, all of that sensed with soul.

Yeah. Again, it's not necessarily that there's going to be, because of that, because that perception then feels so healing, so beautiful, so tender in the presence of the divine, so blessed in and with all the difficulties,

all the vulnerability, all the unknown, all the frailty—it's not necessarily because of that level of healing that then the situation is without difficulty or without, from a certain perspective, a certain tragic element, or that my bones then miraculously go back to normal. I mean, maybe something like that happens—I don't know—but that's not the level that felt even the most important at that point.

There was such blessing, reverence, tenderness, grace, mystery of dimensionality, divinity, an attenuation of the dukkha through relating to all of it, and the opening up of the soul-making there.

To draw one element out of what I just shared: when we can sense this or that dukkha, or our life, or ourselves with soul, sometimes when that deepens or unfolds to a certain extent, we can perceive all of it as gift—all of it as grace. So that even this difficulty, even this cancer, even this possible early death, even this possible... I don't know what a life with severe osteoporosis looks like, extreme osteoporosis. I don't know, in that restriction and whatever it is, that vulnerability—all of that is felt as gift, and the gift of life, and the gift of my life, with its particulars.

Again, I'm really not wanting to force this on anyone as dogma: "You should see things this way. This is how it is." I'm talking about ways of looking, talking about possibilities, and there's always a sense of both sensing, discerning what is appropriate to us right now in our situation. What helps? Is it soul-making? Does it heal and liberate and relieve dukkha? And in what ways? Or what might be given to me—my antennae are alert for what soul might be prompting me, or handing me as clues for where the soul-making is.

But one possibility, one possible way of looking, is that in the soul-making, in the sensing the soul of all of that—dukkha, life, self, etc.—with soul, there is a sense of all of it as gift, all of it as gift.

Now when we talk about the gift of life, or sensing life as a gift, that idea has many possible different levels. We can understand it, we can have a sense of it, or it might mean something at many different levels.

For example, a more conventional way of seeing it, even for someone who has a religious orientation or attitude: sensing myself as something separate from the divine, and sensing time more conventionally, sensing life and death more conventionally. There is something or somewhere or some level that we might call divine, and we receive this gift of life from that divine—the miracle of it, the beauty of it, the dukkha in it that we can't quite fathom. But the sense of the gift of life, then, is very beautiful still. But because of the more conventional view of time, of life and death, and the more normal view of oneself being something separate from God, the beauty there and the sense of gift is only at a certain level.

There's a whole other level possible in the sense of grace and gift when we begin to sense that this self and my soul is not separate somehow from the divine, from the Buddha nature, whatever we want to call it. We participate in God and God participates in us—not separate, in the most profound way. And when life and death, my life and my death, become imaginal image for us, when they are seen and sensed with soul,

seen and sensed as imaged—which doesn't mean there is no death or I'm going to live forever in some kind of afterlife or there's a heaven or whatever it is, or I'll be reborn or whatever. It doesn't mean necessarily believing any of that. It's more that life and death, as they appear to us, become image, become imaginal.

There's a whole other level here of sense of the gift of life when the self and the soul and the divine or the Buddha nature are not seen as separate. They're interpenetrating and interparticipating. Life and death become image. They are perceived imaginally, and time is recognized as empty—thoroughly, deeply empty. Then there's a whole other level of gift that opens up.

Part of that gift is exactly the sense of the depths and the mystery of participation—of our participation, my participation, your participation in existence and in the divine. And also our participation in sacralizing existence and the cosmos. This is part of the work of the soul, I would say. And what to me is so important, or perhaps the most important thing in soul-making, is the sacralizing, the making sacred, the rendering sacred, the perceiving as sacred, and then relating to as sacred of the whole of existence and the whole of the cosmos—and that in an infinitely expanding possibility of ways.

It's that sense of the depth of participation and the mystery of that which is so much a part, or which comes with a whole other dimension of the sense of gift, of the soul-making perception of gift of life.

I shared—I think perhaps on my website, I can't remember—a practice that arose organically one night. It wasn't too long after the operation, after they'd analyzed the cancer tissue that they took out and gave me a prognosis, which was not very good at all, with the stage 4 cancer and all that business.

I remember not being able... At that point, my tummy was still very unsettled, so it was difficult to sleep at night. One night I gave up on trying to sleep and sat up in bed, practicing in the dark. I'd just been given this prognosis and the news about what stage the cancer was at and all that.

I practiced in different ways with the emptiness—really seeing everything as empty: self, world, time, everything. That rendered things liquid, malleable, as we said. And in that liquidity, it was possible to sense the moment and sense also more than the moment—the whole larger situation of my illness and the prognosis that I'd been given and everything. It was possible to sense that with soul.

So here's an example of the emptiness practice opening or taking us to the threshold of imaginal potential at least. And there was a sense, through that, of sensing...

It's like my soul was sensed with soul. My soul became image for me in an emotional way, as I just described. And then with that, there was a sense of—the sense of my soul then was that the soul was somehow not separate from my life and my experiences and my death.

And it was also not separate from my time span or whatever time span has been given to me for this life, whether that's fifty-two years or a long life, or a relatively short life, or whatever—this duration of my life,

my temporal duration between life and death, what happens in it, my experience of it, and my death, my life and my death, and my time, if you like, my time span. All of that, from this perspective of sensing my soul with soul, that was my soul. It wasn't other than my soul. You understand?

So instead of the soul being something in here, or as I said, an organ that perceives in a certain way, or something ethereal, like some kind of energy body that goes away when I die, or something like that—all of which are good conceptions. We said at some point when we were talking about conceptions that we want to have the concept of soul be kind of, to a certain extent, not finally defined, so that it can sometimes be expanded. The very concept and sense of what soul is needs not to be limited, because if the very sense and concept of soul becomes itself caught up as an object in the soul-making dynamic, the meaning of it, the sense of it, the concept of it for us will expand. So we can't tie down too tightly the definition of what soul is.

And in this kind of experience that opened up in the middle of the night, sitting up in bed, meditating, my soul is not something other than what I experience. It's not something other than my life, its experiences, and my death. It's not something other than the temporal duration that is given to me between birth and death. That is my soul, and all of it is theophany, because that's what the soul is. And none of it is separate from the divine, because that's also what soul is when it's sensed with soul.

Whose soul? God's soul. My soul and God's soul. Buddha nature's soul. So not separate from the divine—not just both universally in those kinds of ways that we talk about with emptiness practices and non-fabricating practices, but also this is not separate. This life that I have and this temporal duration and these experiences I undergo, my stories and my narratives and my death, is not separate from the divinity, is the divine in some sense, or participates in the divine, in and through all the particulars of my personhood, of your personhood, my choices, your choices.

So there's that divinity of the universal, there's the divinity of the personal and the particular, and we dwelt a lot on that in some of the last retreats. As we said, the imaginal perception, the sensing the soul, preserves particulars and persons as soul and as rooted in the divine. And actually will create and discover more and more facets of persons and particulars and more and more particulars of persons and of beloved objects.

So being then that my soul and my whatever duration is given to me between birth and death is theophany—that is my soul and that is theophany, and that's not separate from the divine and that participates in the divine—with all of that, there's a kind of perfection implicit there, even if that time duration is short, even if there's all this difficulty there. Perfection is implicit in a sense of divinity. But perfection—and this or that perfect—may not look like what we typically think perfection looks like. And, of course, with all that, I don't know what's going to happen.

So we said earlier that there's something we could say that is given to us, but it still needs my assent, my will, my soul-making orientation, tuning and intention, my participation.

So this is a different approach to dukkha than just regarding things as impermanent. My life is impermanent, health is impermanent, whatever—valid as that can be at times as a way of looking at dukkha, as a way of bringing some relief from dukkha. Nor is it only saying it's just empty, and adopting that viewpoint as well. And nor is it saying it's just dukkha. What do you expect? Life is dukkha or life involves dukkha, however you want to interpret the first noble truth. And this is our existential situation and kind of—face it, there's going to be tragedy. Again, valid as that can be at times for some people.

And nor is this approach saying, "just accept." So because of this sense of perfection I'm talking about, this gift or grace, it doesn't mean just accept. I deliberately seek out all kinds of treatment and am willing to put up with a lot of unpleasantness that treatments cause as well. So it's not "just accept." And again, sometimes that's a perfectly appropriate and perfectly skillful response to some kinds of dukkha.

So this whole mode of practice is not just a matter of just accepting, nor is it a prioritizing of the attitude of accepting as some kind of finality. Acceptance has to be there at the beginning in terms of connecting with one's dukkha and opening to it and feeling it. If I'm in denial about it, or if I just refuse it, or if I'm fighting it, then I can't even connect with it enough for that crucible to be formed or heated up for the alchemy to happen.

But it's certainly not—I think what I'm trying to point out now is I'm certainly not trying to point to a path of, "Oh, just accept." And that's the final delivery of soul-making practice or sensing the soul of some dukkha—that it just enables us to accept things at a deeper level always. That's what it gives us. That's where it goes.

So I think it was on the Poetry of Perception retreat, the Re-enchanting the Cosmos, when someone asked in a Q&A, if I remember, about the perception of sacredness in plastic things, or in the unpleasant also. And I can't quite remember what I said there. And another person wrote me a note—again, which I only had time to write a note back to, but I thought the question was very important. Someone saying that they care very deeply about the earth, about the environment, and about society, and struggled living in a city and moving around all day and seeing so many cars and smelling the pollution and knowing, even when she can't smell it, that the cars are releasing carbon dioxide and other pollutants.

And the question was something like, well, I've tried to practice imaginal work with that. I tried to see the cars as kind of big, cute animals or something like that. And it was really an earnest question. She said, well, that didn't really work. And there's a real earnest questioning there.

So this, again, in relation to this whole question about acceptance, and do soul-making practices, do imaginal practices, issue in a kind of depth of acceptance? Is that where it's always going? I mean, the short answer is no. But sometimes what can happen is this: if we talk about the unpleasant right now—which may be the physically unpleasant, the physically painful, actual painful situations or something else that's unpleasant, even the sight of plastic or whatever—sometimes with enough practice of emptiness, and it may be emptiness of the sensation of unpleasantness itself, or some kind of

perception in any of the sense doors, sometimes with enough realizational sense, practical sense, felt sense, perception of the emptiness of whatever is unpleasant in the moment, in practice, that can automatically—sometimes, if it goes really, really deep—there's a kind of sacredness that we perceive there.

Or what can happen is that the unpleasantness itself is actually malleable. In other words, what is unpleasant can be transformed. When we understand its emptiness enough, it can be—oftentimes, not always—oftentimes transformed into the pleasant. So this pain in my back, this pain in my knee, whatever it is, with skill in emptiness practice and also with jhana practice understood the right way—we understand jhanas are a training in perception. Because perceptions are empty, they're actually malleable, including the perception of pleasant and unpleasant and neutral. I'm pretty sure I've talked—I've certainly written about this elsewhere, but I think I've talked about it somewhere or other.

But they're also malleable in the sense I described earlier in this talk, that there's a kind of liquidity that comes in, and so the sensing the soul is possible because things have been made liquid, to borrow that alchemical metaphor. And in that, even the unpleasant, even if it stays unpleasant, can be sensed as sacred. And with that, we accept it, or it becomes easier to accept them, whatever the unpleasant is there.

But there's also, I feel, really a necessary place—important to point out—a place where there's also the requirement that we see, or ask at least, what these things, if we're talking about too much plastic, whatever it is—see and ask what these things are asking of us. What are we called to? In action, in voice, or whatever. What are we called to? To redeem them.

So again, I've shared in the past this Kabbalistic notion of tikkun olam, the healing of the world or the restoration of the world. And sometimes the level of healing is just the healing of the perception of the world. And so, again, in relation to my illness, like birds weaving their bird song, weaving a healing in my energy body, magically changing and transforming the flow of energy in the energy body, stitching my body together with their melodies. And not knowing, of course, does that have any physically measurable effect on my illness? But the healing there is a healing of perception—of self, of body, of world, of birdsong, of existence, of cosmos.

So there may be a tikkun olam, a healing of the world on that level of the healing of our perception of the world, out of the flatland of being sensed without soul, and its dimensionality opened up—its beauty, its mystery, and all that—in the ways that we're talking about in all these teachings. But it may also be that these things, these ugly things, these harmful things, or these unpleasant things, difficult things, also ask us—or we are being asked—to change them, or to work towards changing them, to work towards changing the world, transforming society in some way or other.

And that might mean, again, implicitly, that it's not just an acceptance. It might mean some kind of sacrifice in our life, some kind of hard work for the sake of beauty, for the sake of justice, for the sake of goodness. It might mean in that that we have to let go of a certain amount of comfort, a certain amount of

convenience, a certain amount of pleasure that we have access to in our lives, a certain amount of security that may be, again, part of what is being asked of us, part of what we might say is a calling for us.

So that in all that, in what is being asked of us, we might be stretched spiritually, or the soul might be stretched. And then, again, if that's seen also with soul, then our very stretching, our very being stretched, can be seen as part of—as I said—the soul-making of God, God's soul-making process, or the divine or a divinity's soul-making process, or the Buddha nature's soul-making.

So we always talk about a sense of the perfection of everything and the gift of things and grace, et cetera. It's not simply that all—and sensing the soul and how that opens those kinds of sensibilities and perceptions. It's not simply we're talking about moving towards a kind of blanket view of "all is perfect, all is divine, just as it is." So there are different possibilities here. Sometimes that's what happens. Other times we're actually asked for an engagement that comes at cost and risk—in our lives, in our material lives, in our relationships, in our status.

Sometimes what happens in relation to dukkha—what is unpleasant—is that a healing image constellates in relationship to that difficulty. The bird song I mentioned earlier serves as an example. Anyone would have heard the birds singing outside, but sensing them with soul, they became image—in this case, healing image—in relationship to this dukkha, this unpleasantness, this difficulty.

This could happen in various ways: Avalokiteshvara coming, or Jesus coming, or even bringing Jesus there consciously—whatever the healing image might be in relationship to the difficulty. Because of the imaginal and the way the imaginal fire catches, if it's Jesus or Avalokiteshvara, there's already a kind of divinity present. The sacredness is already there, and that sacredness begins to spread to the difficulty, so that in the pervasion and expansion of soul-making, the difficulty too is perceived as sacred.

Sometimes what needs to happen is that an image arises that's not so much an obvious healing image, but more something like the warrior image I spoke of—whether solitary or as part of a whole army or clan or group of warriors. Perhaps for the person who wrote me about the cars and pollution and her soul pain around that, rather than trying to see the cars as enchanted, beautiful images—attempting to take away the dukkha by seeing them as cute, big animals slouching along the street—it might be that the self-image is more appropriately transformed, expanded, deepened, perhaps into some kind of warrior image.

The question then becomes: how does that translate into life? What's the duty to that image? What's the echoing in the life of that image? What's the mirroring? The self, the other, the world, the eros itself—they can all become imaginatively infused in the constellation around the dukkha.

If this does move over into our life in terms of actually doing something—whether it might be standing up more strongly, civil disobedience, creating other kinds of structures, or offering a healing response—there are different kinds of tonality possible. Action, voice, commitment and image may all be involved, and they're all related.

As a partial response to the question "What is this dukkha calling me to? What is this difficulty, this ugliness, this unpleasantness asking of me?"—sometimes a healing image in relationship to it might be a partial response. A warrior kind of image in relation to it may be another partial response.

Another way of expressing what we're exploring: soul-making in general, and soul-making with respect to or in relationship to dukkha, extends far beyond just intra-psychic images. Sometimes it is just an intra-psychic image in relation to some dukkha that arises, and all it needs is some kind of reverence and recognition of the holiness of that image. There's almost no visible or sensible echo in the life that anyone else might discern at all. Sometimes that's the case.

But oftentimes, soul-making and the soul-making response—or the soul's response to dukkha—goes way beyond just the intra-psychic, beyond the confines of the intra-psychic.

This is not simple, and we cannot approach it in a contrived way, with some kind of formulaic approach. We need discernment, and that requires a careful kind of listening, a careful kind of attunement, responsiveness, sensitivity. It involves both our receptivity and our activity, our proactiveness. All that discernment, listening, responsiveness, action, receptivity—all that is in the service of a kind of inquiry: Is it possible that there can be discovered or created, or created-slash-discovered here, an image, an imaginal image that is soul-making? Can this be sensed with soul?

Take the situation I shared of the person who felt dukkha around what she regarded as a lot of papañca stirred up by seeing particular artwork, then having this column to write and the social situation she was in. She regarded it as papañca and a kind of manic energy, but it may be that there's something buried in all that which is actually potentially imaginal. Connecting with that, and practicing with it in all the ways we've discussed—the sensitivity, the receptivity, the energy body, tuning to it—allows that imaginal to blossom and changes the whole relationship with that set of circumstances in life, or changes the inner movement, the inner relationship that was perceived as suffering.

As we've said, that discovery or creation of an image that is soul-making in relation to or in the dukkha may not be what a certain ego level of us wants. It may not be the outcome that would be most obviously what everyone might deem freedom from dukkha.

We could make some distinctions here. There's the image of a situation that we believe is "how things really are"—what we might call a fixation or papañca image, a fixated image. Here's this dukkha, or this situation, or social situation, or ourselves, and we're lost in an image that we're taking as real, as true, as "this is how things are." This is something every human being knows.

Then, as dharma practitioners, we also know the possibility of an image or story or fantasy whose presence in consciousness and whose believability we are mindful of. We realize that there is this fantasy going on, this image happening. That mindfulness of the image allows less identification with it. We are less lost in it, less believing it to be true. We see what's going on.

My mind has got this interpretation through this image, and I can really feel a tendency to believe that's true. But with enough mindfulness, we can just see that, and we're not so sucked into it. There's some distance to doubt its complete veracity. So we could call that mindful observation of image or of what the imagination is doing.

And then, of course, there's the third possibility, which is what all these teachings are emphasizing and drawing out and exploring and expanding: an image that has become imaginal in the sense that we have outlined, or that we have entered as an imaginal image. When that's the case, naturally, we don't sense it as either real or not real. There's the imaginal middle way as part of the imaginal constellation when it's imaginal. It's theatre. It's the kind of middle way that we talked about. So because of that, we're less lost in it, less believing it flatly, less identified, less reified.

All this should be obvious, but the point I want to make in this context is that both the second and the third of those options are freeing. A mindfulness of image or mindfulness of what imagination is doing and what the mind is doing in regard to its tendency to believe an image—that option, the second option, is freeing to a certain extent. But just as freeing is allowing something to become more imaginal.

The mindfulness kind of keeps it at bay. I see that image is there, but it's just kind of over there, and I see the tendency for me to get sucked into it, but I'm keeping it at arm's length a little bit, mindfully, so I'm not getting so sucked into it. The third option of actually entering more fully into the imaginal, letting it become more imaginal, is just as freeing with respect to whatever image is there.

The difference, though, of course, is that in entering more fully the imaginal and allowing something to become more imaginal, the image is empowered, whereas being mindful of what's in the imagination and the tendencies around it disempowers it. So there's also a dynamic quality—based on everything we're saying, a soul-making dynamic quality—that's possible in the last option. This still involves mindfulness, so it's a mindful entering in and all that receptivity and sensitivity. The second option of just a mindful observation and, if you like, resisting what's happening in the imagination—the image that's happening in the imagination—is a bit more static.

You don't really get what's helpful in the image. What was the gift that the image was pregnant with? We don't really get that until we enter into the imaginal, until we allow it to become fully imaginal. That's maybe a better way of saying it.

So it's calling us. If we enter into a wrong relationship with it, it will bring more papañca, more dukkha. But it's also pregnant with a treasure, with a gift. And if we can allow that relationship to become fully imaginal, fully soul-making in the way that we've been outlining, then there's a whole other dimension and range of gifts that we receive there.

So sometimes the question is: is there an image here that needs liberating? I don't have so much a question as more just a subtle background attitude and style of approaching. Oftentimes, within the

dukkha, there's an imaginal image that's buried there. And the liberation of it, the realization of it, the entering into and exploration of it, the filling out of it, the blossoming of it, the liberating of the image that's buried there liberates us, or liberates that dukkha. It liberates us from that.

Again, this sensing with soul doesn't mean seeing the situation differently or going away from the situation or turning away from it. Sometimes, as the Buddha pointed out, there is skillful avoidance. But this sensing with soul that we're talking about now has more to do with the situation not being different. It's the same situation, it's just sensed with soul. We're not running away; we're entering into and opening out.

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