Dukkha and Soulmaking (Part 7)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:34:46

We've been talking in the last few parts of this talk about the ways and some of what's involved in how the imaginal sensing with soul frees us from dukkha, relieves dukkha, dissolves dukkha, drains the dukkha out of a certain situation or thing that's happening. And I hope, again, that you have felt and experienced that for yourself in your practices with the imaginal.

One begins to get a sense, a palpable felt sense and conviction of not just the fact that sensing with soul can relieve dukkha—that's often one of the results that issues from it—but we begin to get a sense and a conviction of the necessity of the imaginal dimension, the necessity of sensing the soul, the necessity for the soul, of sensing the soul, but also necessity for our well-being, and necessity in terms of a relief from suffering. Or rather, just the prevention of suffering by ensuring that the imaginal realm is open to us and accessible by practicing sensing the soul, by having that facility and that access.

Sometimes we see that some dukkha is locked into place when there is not the access to the imaginal dimension, when there isn't that facility and flexibility. And sometimes we even sense that dukkha arises when there is the absence of the imaginal dimension, when that door is shut—that very shutting of that door, the absence, allows a certain dukkha to arise.

This happens in relationships as well. Sometimes we're with someone in some kind of relationship, it could be any kind of relationship, and in that moment perhaps, or perhaps longer in the stretch of the relationship, we sense that they are seeing us, but they're seeing us in a kind of flatly human way. They're not seeing more than our flatly human dimension. And in that, we can feel like this person has missed us. They've missed actually our personhood, the fullness of our personhood, because they've not seen the soul dimension. They've not acknowledged that. They're not sensing us with soul. They've missed us, missed our personhood, missed the fullness of it and the fullness of our humanity.

So it's not that soul is one thing and human is something else. The fully human, I would say, embraces or includes the soul dimension. Of course it does. They're not really different at all. But we can feel the pain and the dukkha of not being seen, of being missed when the soul dimension is missed in the way that we are being looked at, perceived.

And conversely, sometimes it's exactly being seen imaginally by another, being sensed with soul—it's that that heals, or begins healing, or contributes to healing, as much as, and sometimes more than, another level of being seen.

Sometimes someone sees us through a way of looking that, though it's trying to give love and compassion

or encouragement or protection to some aspect or feeling or character within us, mixed up with that is a reification. And it's reifying that very part that it wants to give compassion to or love, encouragement, protection, whatever. It's reifying that and perhaps it's shrinking us to that. There is then the absence of the imaginal. There is not the middle way. Something is being reified. And if it's shrinking us, then there is not the concertina. And there's certainly not the imaginal concertina, the sense of I have, you have a whole concertina, as we described and went through the list of the elements, the aspects of the imaginal. You are a whole concertina of available images that is infinite. One senses that, so that one isn't selecting just one or two and reifying them. They're all available, they're all theatre, and they're all available.

So sometimes we're looked at in this way—there's all the good intention of love and compassion and wanting to protect us or encourage something, but something there is not imaginal. It's reifying, perhaps it's shrinking us to that. And even—so it's gone out of fashion now, but that kind of inner child work that was quite popular in psychotherapeutic circles, probably still is in some streams of psychotherapy. And even when someone recognizes or is talking to that child part with a lot of love and compassion and recognizes that this is a child part or this is a young part or this is a vulnerable part, and even they might think and communicate "I know you're also an adult and you're also strong and you're also capable," even then when they still have that "this is only part of you" perspective—and despite the intention of the healing, there's something that doesn't quite do the trick there sometimes because the soul is not seen.

There's reification and this kind of reification, and oftentimes a kind of narrowing. At least there's not the imaginal concertina. And in that, we feel unseen. Or if we're looking that way at someone else, they feel unseen. Certainly some aspect feels seen. They feel that some part is being seen and acknowledged and perhaps they're appreciative of that. But the person also can feel like something is not seen in them. It's frustrating.

And what is seen is seen in a way that actually lacks the full power of the healing potential, the full power of that kind of magic that can be communicated and the healing that can come with that, and the freeing and the kind of liberation that can come with that when the imaginal is opened, when there's sensing with soul. It lacks power because it's reified, because it's flat. It's a flatland view, flat person view, flat human view.

We sense when sometimes—I don't know if you recognize what I'm talking about here in your experience, or you might feel in the way that you have sometimes looked on another friend or whoever—we are being, in these times, if we feel we're on the receiving end, we're being somehow approached through too narrow and too rigidly held a paradigm, a psychological paradigm, psychological conceptual framework, one that doesn't recognize the daemon, doesn't see the daemon there. So there's some compassion, but it's not actually as full and multidimensional and rich and powerful as it could be.

multifaceted as it could be, and it's somehow too solid sometimes.

Sometimes we feel, or the other person feels if we're looking at them this way—from a soul perspective,

but in a kind of incomplete way, in a truncated way—that we've cut off certain dimensions. Sometimes the person says, "I want that holiness in my suffering. I want the holiness in my weirdness, in my pathology to be seen, to be even celebrated, to be revered."

Yes, I know there's dukkha in that. Yes, I know I'm not completely clear about that, and I know there are other parts too. But there's something I want you to see. I want to be seen here. I want the soul to be seen—even that aspect, that daimon that has with it its arrogance or whatever. I want you to see the soul of that, the soulfulness of that. Yes, I know it's problematic. Yes, I know it has its problems socially or whatever. But I want you to see the daimon's struggle as well—the daimon's brilliance, the daimon's beauty, whatever it is—to be seen, celebrated, even revered.

Remember, reverence is part of the imaginal perception, the constellation of imaginal perceiving. But this seeing, celebrating, this reverence, this revering, is not reified. It's not a reification, because it's imaginal. It's the imaginal middle way. It's got that theatre aspect to it.

So we're going a stage further and actually pointing out the suffering of the neglect of the imaginal dimension—the suffering, the dukkha that ensues and is kind of locked into place perhaps when we don't sense with soul, or when we are not sensed with soul in relationship, when a relationship isn't that full.

I realize that depression is a complicated business and there's not one kind of depression for human beings. But I would say that some kinds of depression or some periods of depression actually are instances of, or we could say are caused by—and then of course like all these things they kind of loop around, they get into a kind of stuck place—but they're actually caused by a lack of eros, a cutting off of eros, an inhibition, a disconnection from eros and from soul-making.

Nothing is alive as imaginal, as fantasy in the good sense. Everything is flat, and the soul is deprived of its fire—if we want to use a fire image—or it's deprived of its juice, its juiciness, its moisture, its water. Flatness leads to depression. The soul-making dynamic is arrested, is ground to a halt, is inhibited, is restricted. Eros is not opening and penetrating. There's not the dynamic there and there's a depression.

So again, I hope you can recognize what I'm pointing to here in your life and in your practice. And if not, this is one of those aspects I feel would be really worth considering, reflecting with this idea on your experience, on your past, on your history, and very lightly, perhaps even on the history and the past or the situation of a friend or someone you know.

Because it's through reflection, actually making, bringing alive these ideas in your own consciousness, in your own reflection, in your mind, that they kind of go deeper and things start to connect in your understanding in the logos. I really want you to get the taste of all this, the taste of soul-making, which means experiencing it for yourself. And I also want you to get the idea of it. Do you get the idea?

And getting the idea means also really digesting and utilizing and making active and making your own the conceptual framework. Then you can actually build it or build onto it or whatever. But that together, the

logos is part of the whole soul-making dynamic. It's getting the taste and getting the idea.

But I'm pointing to right now the necessity for us of sensing the soul, of soul-making, of imaginatively perceiving, perceiving imaginatively, in order to decrease suffering at times, relieve suffering at times, or certain kinds of suffering certainly, and in order that certain kinds of suffering don't arise. We need that kind of mode of being, or those kinds of modes of being that we call soul-making, a sensing of soul.

And to add to that, I want to touch on again something I have mentioned before: you will notice, as your soul-making progresses, or as you get more into this, there will arise—when the soul-making starts to go deep and starts to really get rich and in the nooks and crannies and in the soil of our being, and that soil is turned and tilled and worked and made moist and planted with seeds in the soul-making process, and the soul-making increases and expands and deepens and enriches—there is, in that process, the re-enchantment of our dukkha.

And so important—so very important. We've touched on it already in this series. As that builds, the re-enchantment of the dukkha, there is, with the soul-making dynamic, a taking up of the dukkha itself as an erotic object, re-enchanting it. Then there emerges both the perception and the idea—both the image and the logos, if you like—of my dukkha, this dukkha right now, being somehow necessary to God.

Somehow this suffering, in some kind of not fully explicable way, is necessary to God, necessary to the Buddha nature, necessary to a divinity. It's a perception and a conception that arises organically, I would say. Something like this perception or conception arises organically with, and inevitably with, the deepening of the soul-making process and the soul-making dynamic.

I think I spoke in one retreat about the Kabbalistic notion of the need on high—in other words, God's need, the divine's need, however you want to put it, the need of the Buddha nature. But that need is in and through the particular: the particular events, currents, elements of my existence, your existence, of one's life and one's unique personhood.

So the divine need is not just some abstract universal thing, nor is the divine just this—as we've mentioned many times—just this universal essence of some kind by virtue of which there is a kind of equality of what looks ostensibly different. This particular and that particular are all one because they're all of the same essence or divine essence or substance. There is that view and the importance of that view. We've touched on this before.

But this need on high that we're talking about now, this perception of a need on high, and the sensing of the divine and the divine's need in and through the particular—my particulars, the particulars of my personhood, my journey, my life, my story, my dukkha, the elements of my existence—that means my thinking, my intelligence, my emotion, my sensitivity, my body, this sense door, that sense door, all of that, my perceiving. That's only possible when the particular is sensed in an imaginal way.

This dukkha or that, when sensed imaginally, can actually rise to another level where it's not just sensed

as image. As the sensing as image expands, as sensing it with the soul expands and reaches even deeper, then it senses part of the need on high. Then it's necessary to God in some strange way, this very difficulty. This is a kind of amplification, a deepening of the re-enchantment of the dukkha.

But the suffering or the element that I'm talking about has to be alive as an image for us—that is soul-making—in order for that to take place. It's as if that being alive as image is a first step that allows the perception of a particular as necessary to God.

And it's not even only dukkhas. My particular way of thinking or perceiving, someone's very particular kind of sensibility or aesthetic or way of feeling beauty, particular relationship with one of the elements or particular sense door or whatever—it's unique to me somehow, part of my personality. The dukkha and whatever it is becomes image first and then can become—the sense of it can become—necessary to God.

Sometimes this idea of the necessity to God of our particular difficulty, or some particular element of my psyche, or the way my mind works, or something in my body—this idea that you're hearing now, and maybe you've heard before, might then function as a kind of seed or spark to trigger image. We've talked about this before, so it's almost like a poetic idea or a kind of logos that goes into the mix, is taken up by soul-making, then sparks a kind of imaginal seeing of that very element, or of a particular element. So it can also work the other way around, or it can even work that the two happen together.

The re-enchanting of the dukkha, or the seeing a particular as image—any particular—and the seeing it, the sensing it, the knowing it as necessary to God, the entertaining of the conception that this particular, or this particular dukkha of mine, is necessary to God—sometimes they can even occur simultaneously. So really, any order, actually.

In a way, you could say there's a kind of mutual dependent arising there: the sensing imaginally of a particular event, a trajectory of one's life, an element of one's existence, a particular dukkha that's there, on the one hand, and the sensing of its necessity to God. We could say those two are co-dependently arising facets of a single kind of complex shift or quantum leap of perception, of relationship and way of looking, rather than two shifts where one causes the other. I mean, it can occur that way, or they can just be regarded as mutually dependent horizons.

Let me say that a little more clearly. The sense, the perception, the conception of any particular event or element of one's being or narrative in one's life or one's particular unique personhood—the sense of any of that as necessary to God—that sense, that perception, that conception will usually arise on the basis of already perceiving that particular and imaginatively sensing it with soul. So with that as a basis, then as it fertilizes more, there's this kind of fuller level of perception of its necessity to God. So usually the causality is that way around: imaginal perception first, and then of this particular, and then that particular being sensed as necessary to God.

Sometimes the causality works the other way around, of course. So we have this idea of something being

necessary to God, and that idea—we might hear or read it or something—functions as a seed, a stimulus to open up the perception so that we can perceive something or other, some particular, as perceiving imaginally, sensing with soul. And then the third possibility is that both of them arise together. They occur simultaneously. We're really talking about one organic movement of soul-making that affects the perception and the conception.

But the usual direction of causality is the imaginal perception first: sensing with soul of this particular dukkha, this difficulty, this story, this current of being, this element of my existence, of my mind, of my body, of my psyche—perceiving that imaginally first. And then through that imaginal perception, fertilizing and enriching more, comes the sensing of it as necessary to God, the conceiving of it as necessary to God.

That's the probably most common order of causality.

I've also talked in the past, in several retreats, about the Kabbalistic notion of Tikkun Olam—the healing or restoration of the world. In that Kabbalistic conception, functioning as a kind of archetypal, cosmic, psychological, and philosophical metaphor, Tikkun Olam encompasses an entire movement. It includes the very alienation, destruction, chaos, or fragmentation that calls forth a redeeming, a tikkun, a restoration.

In the bigger picture, the whole process unfolds: the very difficulty itself, then the soul-making with respect to that dukkha or difficulty, and then what emerges—whether through what comes forth in action or voice, or simply as a shift of perception, a way of looking, a re-enchanting, a healing of the world through our existence and being, through life and death, through the ways we can now perceive and conceive of it.

This entire movement—the alienation, the destruction, the fragmentation, the difficulty, the soul-making process in regard to that, and what emerges as the fruit or outcome of that soul-making process, whether it manifests in concretized action and voice or simply in the modes of being, conceiving, and perceiving—all of this is the Tikkun Olam. All of this is the mystical movement that we find ourselves going through and engaging in, being inevitably drawn into in our life and having to deal with, or called to deal with. It's also the movement of the divine—a cosmic archetype.

Now, I really want to repeat: you cannot, I cannot, and you should not foist this kind of idea on anyone or try to convince anyone of this. This notion of necessity to God—of this whole movement of dukkha, soul-making in relation to the dukkha, and then what comes out of that—emerges as an idea, or as a perception, or both, through a degree of soul-making.

When we can relate to our dukkha in the right way—through connecting with it, through honesty, through humility, and then beginning to sense it with soul—it becomes image. Our dukkha becomes imaginal, or is imaginatively perceived. We imaginatively perceive our dukkha. We see it, we sense it with

soul. The dukkha is re-enchanted.

The same transformation occurs with our eros. As we've discussed many times, the eros becomes an erotic, imaginal object to ourselves. So our very eros is re-enchanted, given dimensionality. Our very process of soul-making undergoes this same transformation. All these—our dukkha, our eros, our soul-making—they all become re-enchanted. They're all sensed with soul.

In this dynamic, over time, at some point they too are perceived as somehow divine, somehow rooted in the divine, somehow not separate from divinity. We sense, perceive, and conceive that through our dukkha, through our eros, and through our soul-making, we are participating—in and through the particulars of our life, including the particular difficulties and struggles and challenges—in the divine, in and through those particulars.

At the same time, the divine is participating in and through those particulars in us. The divine is participating in us. Divinity is participating in us. Divinity is being made and created in us. This is necessary to God, necessary to the Buddha nature.

For some, these may sound like strange ideas, but as I've said, I think there's a kind of inevitability to these kinds of perceptions. They're not rigid, ultimate truths. They're perspectives. They're soul-making perceptions. They're conceptions that one can eventually move in and out of, or finds oneself moving in and out of.

Some of you will recognize something in all this that parallels or has analogies to the philosophy of Hegel. I only recognized this recently, as I wasn't familiar with his ideas before. There's a kind of parallel in what he was trying to get at and what's emerged in the soul-making dharma. There are many differences, but listen to this quote from his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

For Hegel, the central principle or goal or movement of evolution of the whole of existence was toward what he called spirit, or rational being, or spiritual rational being. I can't and don't want to explain fully what he meant by that right now, but he said: "Spiritual, rational being demands the seriousness, the anguish, the patience, and the labor of the negative."

If we substitute "soul" for what he means by spiritual rational being—which is more than it probably sounds at first—we get: Soul, soul-making, demands the seriousness, the anguish, the patience, and the labor of the negative.

Again, there's a necessity to soul of our dukkha. I want to be absolutely clear that I'm not communicating a dogma or religious belief.

It's rather, as I said, I just want to point out the probable inevitability of such a view emerging, such a sense, perception and conception. And also, turning it around a little bit, we could say alternatively that this view or concept supports soul-making.

So that the way we are perceiving—if we have that conception of the possibility of the re-enchantment of dukkha and the possibility of sensing it with soul and the possibility of it being somehow necessary to the divine in ways that we can't even quite fathom or completely neatly articulate. So there's a conceptual seed there, if you like, that just functions as a possibility, and that shifts or introduces, as a concept, it introduces, or it's supportive of soul-making, and it introduces the possibility of seeing and sensing in certain ways.

As we've pointed out before, it therefore becomes valuable and valid. It's valid, not so much as a scientifically provable truth or some kind of religious dogma or credo. It's valid because it's valuable. In other words, because the idea supports soul-making or can support soul-making. So we can choose to entertain such a view without necessarily believing it as true. This again to me is one of the great gifts of this approach.

Actually, just lingering with Hegel again—he wrote a lot about Christianity as well. In the time he was living in, that was the paradigm everyone was in. And for him, God didn't choose to create the world and create something that wasn't God, so to speak. Nor was it simply that everything was of the substance of God. It was more that in Hegel's thinking and his philosophy, God needed to, God had to create the world and create what looked or what might have seemed as not divine in order for God's own fulfillment.

So God needed, for God's own soul-making, to create the world—what seemed to be outside the divine—and create it with difficulty, with resistance, with finitude, in order to realize his, her, its own personhood, to become what it, in essence, really could be. In other words, the model there was the Bildungsroman, the romantic novel of someone who encounters a lot of struggles and antagonisms, and that builds their personhood. It makes them who they are. They're shaped by their struggles and by encountering adversity.

So the self at the beginning is not a full and rich personhood until it goes through that encounter and all those difficulties and works those difficulties in the ways that it can. It's an encounter with the world and the antagonism of the world and the difficulty of the world. So that personhood, whether it's humanly conceived or the personhood of the divine or angel, only emerges or is created or discovered in and through the struggle with and the ultimate victory over and appropriation of the initially alien.

I'm paraphrasing a writer called Cyril O'Regan who wrote a very interesting book about Hegel and his religious thought. He goes on to say: for Hegel, personhood, even divine personhood, is only narratively possible. And that narrative has to include suffering and the encounter with suffering and the working through of alienation and difficulty and fragmentation and destruction.

So the idea of a divine that doesn't suffer was really not attractive to Hegel. The apathetic divine, the non-suffering divine, wasn't something that, for him, qualified as divine. A divine that doesn't suffer is not worthy of the name divine in this whole understanding of things.

If I borrow this and adapt it: our suffering in and through my journey, your journey, my particulars, the particular elements both of my joys and my particular ways and styles of existence, and my dukkha and the way that becomes soul—this is part of the narrative of God, and it's necessary to God, to the divine, to the Buddha-nature, for its own fulfillment, its own coming into full being.

So this is a teleological process, as we've talked about before. The causality is kind of in the future; there's something being pulled towards this fullness of soul-making. But in our paradigm, unlike Hegel's, soul-making has no end. It potentially has no end. So the point of all this is soul-making. And that can be regarded as the soul-making of the divine. The soul-making that my soul goes through, creates, discovers, is a part of the soul-making of the divine.

And again, it's a perception or a conception or conceptual frame that arises out of experience, or that can arise out of experience. I don't mean to insist on it as a belief. I think I've traced the phenomenology of soul-making, how divinity and this whole perception and conception can arise, inevitably even, as one just works with the soul-making.

So in this path of soul-making, the logos that we have in relation to dukkha, in relation to suffering, is not primarily to explain why we suffer, or furnish reasons for our dukkha. Sometimes that's the way, as human beings, we wonder why. But sometimes explaining suffering or giving reasons for it doesn't do much for us. What would an answer for why give me? I mean, it may be that if I am blaming myself for suffering and there's some other reason given that doesn't point the blame or the causality to myself, then perhaps I can blame myself less.

So there's a point to asking that question, why? It serves a purpose. But if an answer is just an answer, and it gives you no meaningful task, gives me no orientation that is meaningful, hands me no struggle, then perhaps that's a kind of soul death. You understand?

So in creating or discovering or establishing or thinking about a logos, a conceptual framework around suffering or with regard to suffering, when we begin to think about what place suffering has or why suffering arises or these kinds of questions, we have to be careful what we're looking for and what we get with certain kinds of answers.

I remember some time ago—I can't remember when it was, a few years ago—I was invited to participate in a dialogue with a rabbi in London, a sort of Buddhist-Jewish dialogue. Several people were involved and they were suggesting themes for the dialogue that he and I could explore together from Buddhist and Jewish perspectives. It seemed that many people were suggesting this question of theodicy—the concept or explanation of why bad things happen or why suffering arises, or what is the point, what is the place of suffering? Or if God is good, how come there is suffering? That sort of thing.

When I got there, with the audience, if I remember, there were also several questions along that theme. For instance, why do bad things happen to good people? That kind of question. And if I remember, I think

it was even suggested as the main theme of the evening.

Having grown up in a Jewish religious environment, I recognized there's something—particularly, I think, for some reason, it's quite a common question in Jewish circles. And I think someone asked in the audience, and I responded that we have to be careful with questions, because sometimes we can ask questions like, "Why is this happening to me? Why am I suffering?" And it sounds like a question, because it's got the word "why" in it, but actually we're not really asking a question. We're just kind of complaining out loud or to ourselves. In Yiddish, they say kvetching—it's not a question. Kvetching means to complain.

In a Buddhist paradigm, one would explain suffering as the karma from kilesas, as the outflow from greed, hatred, and delusions. That viewpoint or that answer may give us some way of going forward in the present. In other words, it may give us a task if we pick it up in the right way. As I said, it gives us then a struggle. My struggle, my task then is in relation to these kilesas and what can I do then to purify, and so on. So it gives us that kind of framework around which to structure our practice and our intention, our aspiration—to purify and eventually not make karma, in a sort of Buddhist vision.

In the soul-making paradigm, or logos, the answer is for the service of soul-making. An answer to the place of suffering or the purpose of suffering or the why of suffering or explaining it or a reason for suffering—we want the answer to be in the service of soul-making. It should support and stimulate soul-making. In other words, we want to adopt, entertain, engage conceptual frameworks, ways of looking, ideas that open, support, nourish, deepen soul-making, increase soul-making with respect to and in relation to our dukkha. You understand? This is a different paradigm than just ending dukkha and just finding some explanations—"Oh, okay, that's why I'm suffering."

Those kinds of conceptual frameworks that might support soul-making, those kinds of ideas, will involve the dukkha itself becoming image, being sensed with soul. And conversely, sensing our dukkha with soul, sensing it imaginatively, will tend to expand and stretch and impregnate our concepts and conceptual frameworks, our logos. So if we open up the logos and the conceptual framework with certain ideas, then it's easier to sense the dukkha with soul, sense it imaginatively. And sensing the dukkha, imagining, re-enchanting the dukkha, being able to sense it with soul—our dukkha, this dukkha—will, because of the soul-making dynamic that we explained with the eros-psyche-logos stretching, open up our ideas and eventually make available to us accessible concepts and ideas, conceptual frameworks, whole kinds of views or ideas about what the cosmos is and what existence is, that we can then move in and out of, that we're called in and out of.

So that's one point for right now. And the second is this: if we are thinking in terms of reasons and explanations around suffering, if the mind tends to go that way, why do we tend to think causally and in terms of temporal origins of beginnings? We tend to place the cause in the past—and I've talked about this before, but I really think it's important.

We're really not used to thinking in terms of telos. I am suffering right now because I'm called to

something at which I have not yet arrived. I'm called to something I can only dimly work out. I'm called to something that's going to take some work and some reworking and reframing and turning upside down, inside out, and breaking and stretching. There is suffering because of that. The suffering is in the service of this telos rather than the suffering being a result of a cause in the past.

It's such an unfashionable and rare way of conceiving now.

As pointed out, Hegel was fond of that kind of teleological causality, that teleological way of thinking. It's a very different way of looking at this dukkha going on now. We immediately go back to the past. I'll come back to this. We immediately go back—it's caused by what happened to me when I was a child, it's caused by my family situation, it's caused by something intrauterine, it's caused by a past life. It's always past. Maybe there's a whole other way, or a whole other conception that we can entertain at times.

Again, this really isn't dogmatic. I'm not suggesting replacing one so-called truth with another claimed truth. But it might be interesting to be able to switch between, to move in and out of these very different conceptions—almost polarly opposite conceptions of causality. Cause in the past leading to the present, or cause somehow strangely teleologically in the future, so to speak, explaining, if you like, my suffering now, this dukkha now.

Again, it might arise through the practice, through soul-making practice, or it may be something—what would it be to just play with this? Not as a replacement forever, but as a very different view. What unfolds in the present moment becomes very different, because we're bringing a different way of looking. Part of the way of looking is the concept, and part of conceptuality is causality. So if the conception of causality is different, then the conceptual way of looking is different, the way of looking is different, and because of dependent arising, what unfolds is different. What is sensed in the moment is also different.

So then, practically, the question becomes: what can be created and discovered through this dukkha when the logos gives it place and relationship to soul? Now it can still do that in the conception of causes in the past, temporal priority. But what if it was the other way around? What can be created, discovered through this dukkha when the logos gives it place and relationship to soul? The logos gives this dukkha a place, and gives it a place also, potentially teleologically, when we may not exactly see clearly at all where it's headed.

And what limits do we place on what can be created, discovered through that? In other words, do we only discover that clinging and craving bring suffering? Hugely important to see. Or do we create and discover more than just that insight as well? Really important insight—fabrication, clinging and craving bring suffering. Or is there more too? We create and discover more than that. Are we placing limits on what can be created and discovered through this dukkha? The telos is open. It's not so much an arrival point as a movement, an open-ended movement. And the creation-discovery that's possible through this very dukkha is potentially open-ended, if we don't limit it.

So all this brings up questions regarding the contextualization of soul-making, logos if you like, with respect to the Four Noble Truths. And wrapped up in that, it also brings up questions of the interpretation of the Four Noble Truths. I've talked about this before, especially in those talks "Questioning Awakening" and "Buddhism Beyond Modernism" and "In Praise of Restlessness."

So Four Noble Truths—everyone agrees on the Four Noble Truths. But what is dukkha? How are we regarding that? What is it exactly that we're addressing that's dukkha? And what does the third noble truth, freedom from dukkha, look like? And what exactly is involved in the second noble truth, the arising and the causing of dukkha?

Just listening to the range of Gaia House teachers, what a range there is. Everyone uses the language of Four Noble Truths, and yet they're kind of just empty words that get filled with really very different meanings and ranges and directions and concerns and developments.

Compare, if we're talking about Four Noble Truths, a vision where the Third Noble Truth, freedom from dukkha, really means ending rebirth once and for all. Dukkha really means this whole being caught up in this endless cycle of samsara, of being reborn in different realms and worlds and circumstances and all that pain, and ending all that with the ending of rebirth. Arahantship is the priority, is really the priority of the path. That's the whole gearing and conception—everything in the path is aimed at heading towards that.

And compare that with a probably more common version in our times, where the path is primarily concerned with erasing and doing away with unnecessary suffering, primarily by simplifying the way the mind gets entangled in things and makes things complex with all its ideas and relationships and selfing and business like that, just really draining out all that unnecessary suffering through simplification and letting go. And then that becomes the vision of the third noble truth, the vision of what we're addressing as the first noble truth, and the vision of the freedom from it. The entanglement and complication, papañca, in that meaning of just the mind's complicating things, is viewed as the second noble truth.

In a way, sometimes I've alluded to this before, sometimes that kind of emphasis on simplifying is exactly, at times, in opposition to soul-making, which enriches, gives more dimension, gives complexity, invites the complexity and fluidity of logos, and also invites image and the imaginal imagination, all that.

So in those two views or paradigms of the Four Noble Truths—ending rebirth as a priority, or this erasing unnecessary suffering, obliterating unnecessary suffering by simplifying one's mind and one's relationship with the world—in a way there's no...

Looking at these paradigms more deeply, I observe that there's no conscious place—and I want to emphasize the word "conscious"—given for soul-making in the obvious articulation of either of these frameworks. I'll return to why this distinction matters.

But there's another paradigm, quite popular these days, which we might call existentialist. It's similar to

the second one, except it focuses even more intensely on dukkha—clinging to the dukkha of existence and the tragic impermanence of our existential situation. Here in this world, everyone and everything, ourselves included, remains impermanent. This view seeks to alleviate some of the extra suffering of that condition, but wants to hang onto what it sees as the undoubted, basic, real fact—the facticity of existence's dukkha, the tragic impermanence of this world. There is nothing else but that.

Our task in the Third Noble Truth becomes reconciling ourselves to this tragedy, this tragic impermanence, this existential predicament. Sometimes there's an almost clinging quality to this vision, an insistence on this reality being the only reality. The existential predicament becomes paramount. One emphasizes the tragic impermanence more than the particular personhood or the particulars that are lost through impermanence. It's almost as if the impermanence itself becomes more important, more interesting, more clung to than the actual particular—the wonder that is lost, the beauty and depths of that beauty of this person, that personhood, this element of being.

In this clinging, a kind of rigidity sometimes emerges, a dogmatic assertion: no divinity allowed. Even if you experience a sense of divinity in meditation or in nature, it's dismissed as illusion. It's regarded a priori as something to dismiss. Even the idea that such experiences might be worthy—not discoveries, but creations—is seen as taking you away from the primacy and dominant, hard reality of our existential facticity, the tragic impermanence of ourselves and everything we encounter.

So a kind of clinging can creep in. For some people holding such a view, when this paradigm frames and fills out the meaning of the Four Noble Truths, there's a rigidity and a disallowing of what might actually emerge organically in perception and experience—dimensionality, divinity, soul.

But in all three views—ending rebirth as priority, erasing unnecessary suffering by simplifying the mind's relationship with things, and this modernist existentialist focus on the existential predicament and hard reality of tragic impermanence—I would say something crucial: don't believe the official versions of whatever doctrine is spelled out.

Look through the understanding of soul-making logos at what's actually happening. Soul-making and fantasy always creep in—they're always already there wherever there is love, wherever something is truly alive for us, wherever we're committed. Any of these paradigms, when a person is actually committed, when they're on fire with their practice—even if they insist they only teach the ending of rebirth and everything is geared toward that—soul-making and fantasy have crept into the whole thing, pervading it around the edges.

The same holds for someone emphasizing simplicity and letting go, erasing unnecessary suffering. There's still talk that creeps in about beauty, about something that inspires not just the heart but the soul. In the existentialist paradigm, one may be enamored of a certain fantasy of self and world, situated in a fantastical narrative that gives something to the soul—which is, to a certain extent, soul-making.

Wherever something's really alive, wherever we love something, wherever we're truly committed, soul-making fantasy is already there, already pervading, already in the cracks.

This recognition is crucial because if we don't acknowledge and identify this reality, we're not seeing what Derrida would call what's at the margins of our philosophy. We have this neat arrangement of ideas that all fits together, perhaps aligning with what the Buddha said, with terms we can translate and interpret in familiar ways. But actually, there's all this activity at the margins—where much of our juice comes from, our fire, our sense of beauty, and actually much of whatever soul-making is happening.

A fuller path, a fuller logos, a fuller conceptual framework needs to acknowledge this thing called soul-making and this thing called eros for which we don't really have adequate words, which don't usually get included in the paradigm but are there, functioning, operating, vital and vitalizing. A more adequate conception of the path, including its relation to the Four Noble Truths, is made richer by including these elements.

This is what we outlined earlier through Hegel's understanding of suffering and its direction. But more importantly, there's this vision of a path that gives soul-making priority, that re-enchants dukkha and eventually recognizes the necessity of this dukkha—this particular narrative I'm in—for the divine, or to the divine. These are quite different ways of situating or conceiving what suffering is, how it arises, what we're doing with it, where we're trying to go with it.

I believe I mentioned in the Path of the Imaginal retreat, perhaps in the Soul-making talks, that how we conceive of soul-making in relation to ending suffering—in relation to the Four Noble Truths framework—how we contextualize or inter-contextualize the two depends on our individual soul styles, our individual soul moods at any time, and our individual fantasies. This includes where we are in our own movement with all this material.

One could conceive of the whole soul-making paradigm as a movement beyond the boundaries of the Four Noble Truths and classical Buddhadharma. One could conceive of it as gently pushing at the edges and stretching them, essentially expanding what Buddhadharma is for contemporary times. Or one could conceive and articulate it as being within Buddhadharma—just highlighting certain aspects that perhaps don't usually get emphasized, but remaining within the paradigm of the Four Noble Truths.

Where we stand among these positions, which of these conceptual structures we inhabit, seems to me itself a soul question. One person tends toward a radical, wall-breaking, barrier-breaking identity. Another wants to identify with tradition, with what's more conservative, feeling themselves within that continuity. Still another wants to see their soul as on the edge of what's being developed and stretched.

We can go to a whole meta-level here and recognize that even our philosophical positioning becomes part of the soul's movement, part of how the imaginal is working through our understanding of the path itself.

In a way pointing out that the very way one might want to conceive of this whole logos that we're

unfolding itself depends on individual soul styles, individual soul journeys, individual soul moods. In other words, it might even change from day to day for a person.

That realization itself is radical because it gives a kind of primacy to soul, to the imaginal, to fantasy. So not to be too bothered—do you understand? To not be too bothered whether I conceive it this way or that way. We could do it this way, we could do it that way, we could do it another way. It depends on soul. It depends on soul style, on soul mood. That itself is quite a radical position, if you like, that gives primacy to soul.

I've said this before, I'm pretty sure. Let's stay with this a little bit, because again, I'm pretty sure I've said this, but I've pointed out when I talked about the different kinds of fantasies we have of our path and goal, that what I call the medical model—the model that really conceives of what we're doing and the direction of what we're doing as the alleviation of suffering, either the ending of suffering or the alleviation of suffering—what I call the medical model, which is actually a model that the Buddha himself used, deliberately framing his teachings in an analogous way to the way a doctor would frame things in his time in India.

And I pointed out, and I still hold with it, that it may be that if we're too wedded to a medical model of the path and our path, if we emphasize that medical model too much and there's not much else going on in our fantasy and conception of the path, that restriction of the fantasy and the conception of the path may itself limit the soul-making. We're emphasizing too much a certain model that concerns itself primarily with alleviating suffering. And there may be something in that—limitations in that intention—that limit the soul-making that's then available to us.

Because an alternative would be—and I know some of you feel this way, at least at times—the sense or the feeling that something is more important to me than ending dukkha, than this Third Noble Truth of ending dukkha. Actually, to be honest, I care more about something else. Something else is more important than ending dukkha, whatever that would even look like to end dukkha. So we could frame things that way. We could arrange things that way so that the soul-making paradigm, that being more important than ending dukkha, as one point of view.

Or we could also do something else, or frame things in a different way, and suggest that much of the dukkha in modern times that you and I experience—I mean, there's a lot of horrific suffering in the world—but much of the dukkha of modern times comes from the loss of or the absence of meaningfulness in our lives, or any sense that any meaningfulness that we can feel in our life has any kind of deep roots ontologically that we can relate to. It's only a construct. A loss or an absence of the sense of dimensionality of existence, of the depths of divinity, a loss of enchantment, a loss of a sense of duty that again is given to us in a way that's more than just my personal decision or invention.

And it may be—or one could say and suggest—that these losses, these absences of soul permeating much of modern life in our culture, then exacerbate, give rise to a lot of the ecological crises we face. Because we

look at nature as something completely flat and lacking in sacredness, and we can't galvanize a care for it, or a depth of care, a depth of reverence that would come from sensing it with soul.

So if we view things that way, if we frame things that way and make that suggestion that, hey, look where a lot of the dukkha is coming from in our modern affluent Western existence, and what ensues from that lack, from that loss, from that absence of soul, then we could say that the movement of soul-making, the engagement of the soul-making dynamic and that whole direction is actually reducing suffering because it heals, it addresses that lack, that absence of soul. Therefore, because it's just a part or a dimension or a level of the suffering that gets healed, we can place the whole thing, the whole paradigm of soul-making, squarely and easily in the Four Noble Truths. Again, with our particular interpretation of what exactly is involved in dukkha, the First Noble Truth, and what exactly is entailed by the freedom from dukkha, and how exactly dukkha arises. But the whole thing is then framed within the Four Noble Truths.

If I share just personally... The hardest thing for me—and again, this is just personal—but the hardest thing for me in being ill the last two and a half years was not the original diagnosis and realizing what that meant, to have pancreatic cancer. It was not the operation and the kind of severe incapacity and weakness that I had for about a year afterwards and still carry, really. It was not the prognosis when they found where the cancer was at and all that. The hardest thing for me, and the most dukkha for me, was not the idea of dying. It was going for the weekly chemotherapy infusions at the oncology department in a hospital nearby, which is about an hour away. That was the hardest thing for me.

And it was something very particular that was the hardest thing. It really was, I have to say, at the edge of my practice, at the edge of what I could embrace with my practice in a way that actually significantly reduced the difficulty of it. So it wasn't the unpleasantness and the pain of feeling sick and toxic from the chemotherapy. That was all there, and it was definitely difficult. Nor was it being hooked up to this infusion thing and this drip computer machine going in your veins—and I had chronic urgent diarrhea from the chemotherapy and post-operation, so you're in this ward with this, hooked up to all this considerable encumbrance of contraption, and knowing I'm sitting there and I might suddenly and urgently have to get up and run to the toilet to move my bowels, with all that chemotherapy paraphernalia attached to me and infusing and whatnot.

Nor was it—the most difficult thing was not like being really cogently reminded of my own mortality and the possibility of my dying very soon just by virtue of being in that situation, feeling the way I was feeling and having all this kind of heavy-duty chemotherapy and all that. And nor was it actually the fact of just seeing so much suffering. I mean, sometimes it's pretty grim in the chemotherapy ward in terms of what people are going through and what kind of state they're in. Sometimes young people, and the other patients. And nor was it the fact that the staff and the doctors or nurses were unkind. For the most part, actually, they were very kind and caring and helpful and sort of pleasant.

The most difficult thing for me—I can only speak for myself—the most difficult thing for me to handle and

to practice skillfully and adequately with was the soullessness of the place.

That was the hardest thing.

It's been the hardest thing so far with the osteoporosis, with the chemotherapy, post-operation, with the diagnosis, with the prognosis, with the possibility of dying, with the sleepless nights, with the lack of energy, with the restriction on what I can do and where I can go and hardly going out of the house. The hardest thing was the soullessness of that oncology department for me. The absence there of any beauty or any consideration of beauty or any consideration of what we would call soulfulness in the way it was designed and how it worked. It's that plastic and stale, actually diesel-filled toxic air being recycled and death everywhere, the possibility of death all around vividly there and yet not being engaged or talked about or met soulfully, it seemed to me.

So I could say I was not able to perceive the soul in that place. I could say it like that. And all of this, all this soullessness, when in the face of death, in the face of the proximity of death, the possible soonness of death, one needs soulfulness the most. That was the most difficult thing for me.

Someone said, I don't know if it's true, I think it must be true, there's some anecdote about Oscar Wilde's dying words in bed and dying. And his final dying words, looking at the wallpaper in his room and saying out loud to the wallpaper, so to speak, "One of us has to go."

You know, he's a funny guy, Oscar Wilde, but he was also, I think, very soulful and concerned with soul. And it may be that those dying words were not so much, or not just a kind of comically out-of-place flippancy and superficiality next to death, just a concern with the decor, but actually a concern with beauty and a statement of the fundamental and absolute importance of beauty as a necessity for soul. I mean, I don't know. But I think about those words again, which I used to find just witty—it's good to go out with a witty aphorism. Maybe there's a whole other level there.

We could say beauty, soul-making, soulfulness, they're useless values. Beauty is certainly regarded as a luxury and soulfulness as a kind of luxury, and it doesn't really achieve much materially. In a way they're useless. But maybe the useless values are the most important and the most worthwhile. We can feel that they are—not instead of having our basic prerequisites met of food and shelter and clothing and warmth or healthy life for the body, safe society. Maybe when the basic prerequisites are met, when the sort of gross neuroticism is at least placated or healed, when the most difficult psychological patterns are healed, when there's a basic kindness pervading, then what? Then what? End suffering? End all suffering?

Somewhere in the Pali Canon, the Buddha says, maybe several times or implies, that basic prerequisites—food, shelter, medicine, clothing—need to be there to allow or need to be there as a basis for practice and the path for the quest for what is most important and most worthwhile, which was nibbāna. So he pointed out, this needs to be there. Without that, you can't really give your attention and give your energy and give your commitment to trying to reach nibbāna, which is actually the most

important thing.

But in the paradigm of endless cycles and possibly infinite cycles of death and rebirth, that perilous process, sort of adrift on a vast cosmic ocean of enormous, infinite spans of time and infinite worlds perhaps, and just being reborn dependent on karma one didn't even know what that was—all the vicissitudes and ups and downs and kind of wild circumstances that one found oneself in. So much suffering is at stake in whether that just goes on and on and on with all that suffering or whether one can find a way out of that endless, endless suffering.

So for him, reading him as actually that vision of nibbāna, that vision of the Third Noble Truth was actually what he was orienting towards. So much suffering at stake. That was the most important thing.

But if our version of awakening or version of the Third Noble Truth doesn't involve or assume all those infinite cycles of rebirth and that degree of dukkha... And again, he was in a world where there wasn't modern medicine and painkillers and antibiotics. There's not even the possibility that people would have that. Now at least we have the possibility—it's not an actuality in our world, but the possibility that everyone in the world has access to modern medicine and painkillers, which is not the case right now. Antibiotics, etc.

But for him, looking around, just what horrendous suffering, and you're on this roulette wheel of where you end up, life after life after life, and if you have a good one, you probably have a bad one, because you've probably got some bad karma waiting to ripen that you don't even know about.

So in the absence, or when our vision or conception of awakening doesn't involve or assume all those infinite cycles of rebirth and all the horrendous pitfalls of that perilous rollercoaster, what then is the most important and worthwhile thing to practice for, to practice towards, after basic prerequisites are met? Again, the Buddha said, after basic prerequisites are met, this ending of the cycle of rebirth, ending of this again and again and again, in ad infinitum of the pain of birth, being separated from what we love, and death. What's the most important thing? For him it was ending rebirth after the basic prerequisites are met.

If we don't have that paradigm anymore, and many of you don't, what then becomes the most important thing? And could, in a way, the most important thing be something that is in some way useless? Soul-making, beauty becomes the most worthwhile.

So there's a suffering that I think probably you wouldn't be listening at this point if this wasn't the case for you, but there's the suffering of the absence of soul, the absence of soulfulness. We're missing something. There's the suffering of the failure to honour what seems or is, from a certain perspective, useless.

It's useless, but I miss it. And when we miss it, when there is that absence, when it's not addressed, when it's not included, when it's not allowed, when it's inhibited, there is a suffering—the suffering of the absence of soul.

This recognition points to something profound about the human condition. We can have all our basic needs met, live in relative comfort and security, yet still feel that something essential is missing. That something is often precisely what conventional wisdom would label as impractical or unnecessary—beauty, meaning, depth, the sacred dimension of existence.

The Buddha's teaching of the Four Noble Truths remains eternally relevant, but perhaps we need to expand our understanding of what constitutes suffering in our contemporary context. Beyond the obvious forms of dukkha—pain, loss, impermanence—there exists this subtler but equally real suffering that arises when we neglect the soul's deeper yearnings.

When we fail to honor what appears useless but feeds something essential within us, we create a particular kind of emptiness. This isn't the beneficial emptiness that the Dharma points toward—śūnyatā or suññatā—but rather a hollow absence where richness and meaning should flourish.

The path forward may require us to hold both truths simultaneously: the classical understanding that attachment to the beautiful and meaningful can indeed cause suffering, and the recognition that complete dismissal of these dimensions of human experience creates its own form of dukkha. Perhaps wisdom lies not in choosing between utility and beauty, between the practical and the soulful, but in finding ways to engage with both that honor our full humanity while remaining aware of the potential for attachment.

In this light, the cultivation of soul—through art, beauty, contemplation, and meaning-making—becomes not a distraction from the spiritual path but an integral part of it. The challenge is to engage with these dimensions of existence in ways that nourish rather than bind us, that open the heart without creating new forms of clinging.

Thank you for listening.

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