What is Awakening? (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 59:23

So let's stay a little bit with these questions that I've just thrown out there. Rather than arguing about which definition or setting of the bar captures the "real" stream entry according to the historical Buddha, we could ask: why does one want the bar for stream entry lower or higher? And actually wrapped up in that, a corollary might be: what is going on for you psychologically in this kind of emphasizing of the historical Buddha's take? What assumptions are operating when we do that? When we go to the books and look there and engage in this arguing and nitpicking about the text, why prioritize that? And what are the consequences of prioritizing that?

I realize for some that's going to sound like a very odd and dangerous and radical questioning. But if you can actually open it up as a question, without any implication of "it should be this way" or "it should be that way," it's more like: Really, why? What's actually going on for you in the psyche with all that?

And then, as I threw out as well, one of the questions: what kind of a person is made in attaining a stream entry that, say, is going with the flow? What kind of person is made in attaining a much higher bar—say, this thing about recognizing everything, absolutely everything, including the elements, including time, including the now, including awareness, all of it, all phenomena empty?

I don't know, actually. But it's more like turning the question around and looking at the result of decisions rather than looking backwards for why we would choose this or that.

I suppose that if the bar was set higher—this kind of radical emptiness of everything—that person, in their journey to that, would have almost inevitably had lots of quite interesting and unusual experiences and insights, and a pretty large range of experiences, insights, and perspectives. Perhaps they'd be shaped by the really complex and challenging journey to that kind of level of realization, and also shaped by the kind of dedication, focus, and choices it took to get there.

I don't know if you've ever met anyone who declares themselves an arahant or finally fully enlightened: "It's finished for me, I've done it all." They're often not that attractive as human beings and not that impressive when one hangs around them a little bit. Actually, there's quite a lot missing there. As one of my teachers in the States said—I don't know if she had anyone particular in mind when she said it, it was just mid-flow in a dharma talk—"If that's awakening, you can keep it."

Now, this business about "I've finished," someone saying "I've finished, I've reached full arahantship, there's nothing further," or "I am an arahant, I'm fully enlightened"—I'm interested in that, or the problems with such a claim, not so much because of the kind of view like, "Oh, someone who's fully

enlightened wouldn't be arrogant like that, or they'd be humble or something." That doesn't quite square with the Pali canon either, actually, if you know the lion's roar of the arahant. But actually, for another reason: this kind of "I've done it, it's finished" view does not allow the kind of open-endedness that to me is much more interesting and much more soulful and much more fruitful, really.

Another aspect of this—I haven't mentioned it so far—is one could look, in all this questioning of what is stream entry, at the ethics of a so-called stream enterer, as an indicator or a necessary and basic qualification for any kind of awakening. Somewhere in the Pali canon—I can't remember where—the Buddha actually points to that: the ethics, as a stream enterer can't go against sila, ethics.

But that, too, is a problem, or in that area. We also tend to be, in the area of ethics, blinkered by whatever is the normal ethical view of our time, of our society, or of the subcultures we move in.

You know, some of you will know my concern with climate change and flying. But it's tricky. I sometimes wonder—it's like, you know, a stance of thinking about the ethics of climate change and thinking about the ethics of carbon use, individual carbon use. Scientists calculate how much individual carbon can each—if we shared it out equally among the human beings of the Earth—how much carbon is each person sort of, what's their individual carbon allowance if it was just equally shared? And that's even disregarding the past and history and cultures and whatnot, and the kind of excessive use of modern Western cultures and people in modern Western cultures. Just from now on: what would you each be entitled to?

And just a couple of transatlantic flights a year would easily exceed my quota as a human being entitled to what anyone else is entitled to. So how am I going to square that? If I'm sitting across from someone, how am I going to persuade them that I'm entitled to more carbon and so it's okay for me to do this flying, and sorry that you can't, or it's better for me to have it than you to have it? How do I justify that exceeding of my fair share of personal carbon dioxide emissions?

Something like that, as an ethical consideration, is strange and uncomfortable to a lot of people. In a few years, it might be widely regarded as just a basic, adequate ethical consideration. It's like that just maybe becomes just how human beings think. It's like, you know, if you go to a party and you eat all the cake, or you're living on a desert island and you get to shit everywhere—how do you justify that?

In a few years, or some years, it may be that that's just adequate, basic, normal ethical behavior to not take more than your fair share of carbon, not to exceed that, rather than what it might sound right now—a way of thinking that's really kind of strange, especially if one tries to convince other people that they should think that way and they think you're just obnoxious: "Back off."

Actually, I read the other day that in the new set of interview questions that they ask candidates for undergraduate admission to Oxford and Cambridge universities in England, that's actually one of the questions.

Something like, "Well, we know that flying produces excessive carbon emissions and causes dangerous climate change that will affect people. How can you justify flying? If you know the plane will fly anyway," as people say, "I know it's going to fly whether I get on it or not, so it doesn't really matter"—is that a valid ethical argument? The candidate has a few minutes to present some kind of intelligent moral reasoning.

This is interesting because Oxford and Cambridge are rather traditional, mainstream universities. So this kind of ethical questioning may be finding its way into what becomes normal discourse. You know, ending slavery was once an outrageous proposition, but eventually it became simply basic ethics—of course you don't own slaves, you don't treat human beings that way. But at the time, during the abolition movement, it was hotly debated. If you freed a slave in some places, you were breaking the law. Campaigning to abolish slavery, or working against Nazism, or fighting to establish female suffrage—retrospectively, all these actions are regarded as brave and ethically correct, as basic responsibilities. But at the time, it wasn't obvious to most people, and some actually regarded such actions as unethical.

People are going to prison now, being sent to prison for civil disobedience of different kinds in relation to climate, environment, all kinds of issues. They are viewed by various states as engaging in unethical behavior. So our views of what's ethical and what's not are really influenced by the contemporary culture we live in and move within.

So ethics has something to do with awakening, but what exactly?

A person may simply be an ethical conformist, rather than someone who considers their ethical choices deeply, who questions deeply, who wrestles with these difficult questions. These questions are especially difficult now in the time of globalization, where we actually know and can see and measure our effects. We're aware of our individual impacts on all parts of the globe—on people, animals, and plant life everywhere. This makes ethical questions much more complex.

So what should the requirement be regarding ethical conformism for a stream-enterer? Is stream entry just adopting the Buddhist precepts? And is that adoption merely another form of ethical conformism—just accepting what's given by the tradition without questioning?

There are aspects of the Buddhist tradition that many people these days are questioning ethically. For example, the ordination of women. I've stayed at monasteries where they weren't recycling. When I asked about it—how come you don't recycle this plastic and paper?—the answer I got was, "This is just samsara. Who cares? Who cares what happens in samsara? We're on our way out." This was a Theravada monastery.

Is that ethical? It's not breaking the Buddha's five precepts, or at least not in a certain interpretation of them. There's strict conformity to the monastic rules there, but the rules don't say anything about recycling.

And when you get into the five precepts themselves, as I'm sure you're aware—what exactly does the third

precept mean? What exactly does the fifth precept mean around sexual behavior, around alcohol, drugs, and so forth? The range of interpretations, just within the insight meditation world, is actually quite large.

So if we're saying that ethics must have something to do with awakening—and somewhere in the Pali Canon that connection is made with stream entry and keeping ethics—what exactly is this relationship? What ethics are we talking about, and what kind of relationship is it?

When we consider awakening, much of what I've been saying relates to this: awakening, liberation, enlightenment—whatever we want to call it—is a concept and a vision set within the context of a dharma. In our case, Buddha dharma, but it could be Hindu dharma or another tradition. Awakening is a concept and vision set within the context of a dharma, a tradition. It exists within a particular vision and understanding of what that tradition offers.

When I consider awakening in this light, I realize that awakening—liberation, enlightenment, whatever we choose to call it—is fundamentally a concept and vision set within the context of dharma. In our case, Buddha dharma, though it could just as easily be Hindu dharma or another tradition. Awakening exists as a concept within the framework of a particular spiritual tradition.

If I were to ask my mother what awakening means to her, what liberation signifies—well, these words would mean nothing at all to her. She's not involved in any tradition that employs such terminology, so these concepts remain completely foreign. This illustrates how awakening is inherently a concept embedded within tradition.

When we examine traditions and our relationship to them, certain modern philosophical perspectives offer valuable insights. Thinkers like Nietzsche and Michel Foucault explored what they called genealogy—not quite history, but rather an investigation of the diverse elements, fracturings, strange combinations, and external influences that converge to form entire streams of thought and practice through historical time.

This genealogical approach critiques what Nietzsche identified as the fantasy of origins—the belief that something existed in a pure, superior form at the beginning. It also challenges the fantasy of a single, unbroken trajectory, the notion that we can somehow locate and follow a purely authentic tradition. These fantasies, these unfounded beliefs, often accompany discussions of Buddhadharma.

Sometimes people, wrapped up in this fantasy of origins, argue that the Buddha existed in radical independence from his historical context, that everything he taught was boldly new and original—a completely unprecedented appearance of spiritual wisdom in human civilization.

But consider Einstein's theory of general relativity and its revolutionary understanding of gravity. While dramatically different from Newton's gravitational theory, it simultaneously borrowed from, built upon, and retained much of Newton's scientific framework. Scientific revolutions, like spiritual or philosophical ones, change certain elements while continuing others uninterrupted, using previous foundations and

retaining aspects of earlier worldviews.

The Buddha operated in precisely this way. He found himself within a particular culture, country, and historical context rich with diverse spiritual, philosophical, and cosmological perspectives. He adopted much of this existing framework, modified certain aspects, and preserved others. The Buddhist tradition didn't begin with the Buddha—this is my central point here.

When we speak of tradition, we easily slip into idealistic thinking, imagining some pure tradition we can somehow locate, something that started with the Buddha in pristine form and perhaps suffered contamination later. But the tradition already existed before the Buddha encountered it. There were multiple traditions that the Buddha engaged with and incorporated. What we call the Buddhist tradition already represented an confluence of ideas from that time, place, and culture—those ways of thinking, worldviews, and conceptual frameworks.

This reality becomes even more pronounced in the modern West. Dharma teachings arrived here during the twentieth century in various waves, and as modern Westerners, we inevitably bring our complete set of assumptions, interpretations, needs, dispositions, and what might honestly be called errors or directional changes to what we ostensibly receive from the dharma. And remember, what we're receiving was already a multiplicity of different traditions.

Our contemporary engagement represents a genuine mishmash—Theravadan traditions mixed with elements of Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, Advaita, and substantial Western worldview. We cannot avoid this synthesis. Even if we could somehow separate what we receive from what we bring to our receiving—which is impossible—what we receive was already plural, the result of 2,500 years of genealogical development, misinterpretations, contradictions, and cultural influxes.

The historical transmission of Buddhism to China illustrates this process perfectly. Initially, Chinese culture rejected Buddhism outright—it made no impact whatsoever. Later, when Buddhism gained acceptance, the Chinese culture accepted only certain elements, creating a form of Chinese Buddhism dramatically different from Pali Canon Buddhism. The Chinese mixed Buddhist concepts with Taoism and Confucianism, filtering everything through distinctly Chinese cultural dispositions and sensibilities.

Chinese culture harbored a particular abhorrence of anything transcendent, emphasizing instead this-world tangible experience—a perspective radically different from the transcendent thrust popular in Indian spiritual circles and evident throughout the Pali Canon. The Chinese essentially rejected this transcendent dimension entirely, excising it from their Buddhist practice.

They similarly rejected or significantly downplayed rebirth teachings, partly because Chinese culture placed enormous importance on honoring personal family ancestors through prayer and respect. The logic of infinite rebirths, as Tibetan teachings explain, means that everyone eventually becomes your ancestor, dissolving the significance of one's particular lineage in an infinite sea of ancestral connections.

This pattern repeats whenever dharma encounters new cultural contexts. There are inevitable tearings away, influxes, reinterpretations—people bringing their needs, dispositions, and assumptions to whatever they receive, transforming it in the process. The same dynamic unfolds in the West. This cultural transformation is not an aberration but an integral aspect of how spiritual wisdom travels and takes root.

It's part of what must go on. It's unavoidable. You and I cannot step out of our own cultural Weltanschauung—our worldview, self-sense, the way we feel existence, our sensibilities. We cannot step outside; you can't step outside of your time in history and receive the Buddhism in some pure way.

So we bring to it all kinds of things, some of which we're conscious of, and much of it we're not even conscious of—exactly what we're bringing in terms of need, belief, disposition, assumption, interpretation, emphasis.

The modern West, to my view, is characterized by complexity and plurality, but perhaps the most dominant worldview is a very non-transcendent view. We believe much of the time that this is it. Any kind of talk of something transcendent is not popular in the dominant culture. This shapes the flavor of the Dharma that takes root in the West—what we keep and what we reject, what we emphasize.

This is it. This is it. This sense is quite dominant in Western culture—there's nothing more than this, no other dimensions. Anything transcendent or unfabricated would be baffling. This "this is it" tends to find its way into the colors, emphases, and teachings of the kinds of Buddhism that proliferate and become popular.

I'm saying this not just for abstract historical reasons, but to make these points about tradition. Awakening is rooted in tradition. What is a tradition? What's involved in our sense of tradition? Can we be more realistic, or at least more wise, about what actually is involved in a tradition?

When we see all this about the dependence on culture and the breadth and complexity and plurality of what a tradition encompasses—any tradition is a multi-tradition full of tangents and contradictions and borrowings and influxes and often shavings off—then awakening is rooted in tradition. What does awakening mean?

When you actually realize what's involved in tradition, the question "What does awakening mean?" might actually become "What can awakening mean?"—as if there isn't one singular version of it. Because we're actually in a moment of creation in the modern West, as the Dharma comes into the West, and there's this mixing of everything that we as modern Westerners bring to it—intellectually, aesthetically, in all kinds of ways—"What does awakening mean?" might become "What can awakening mean?"

Even more than that, modern Western culture, perhaps even modern global culture, could be characterized as postmodern—not even having one dominant view of this non-transcendent view, but characterized by plurality and utter diversity of views and worldviews and senses of reality. So the whole question around awakening might move from "What is awakening?" or "What does awakening mean?" to

the much more open question: "What can awakening mean?"

Beyond that, we might look into what I said earlier about approaching the question from what it results in. Rather than "awakening means X," we ask: What does such a view or opinion or way of conceiving of it result in? What does this view of awakening result in? What does that view of awakening result in? What does a third view result in? It's approaching the question from the other end—what does it result in? Again, what do I want? Where do I want to go?

Having said all this, and not arguing on grounds of historical accuracy—though I could—but for the reasons I think you can probably grasp by now, such arguments don't seem that interesting or fruitful. It seems a little silly to me.

So not arguing on the ground of historical accuracy, though we could, and not trying to persuade you, I could outline a trajectory—let's call it a trajectory—that is or might be a central strand in one notion of awakening. Or it might be, if you like, a direction of development, or better yet, exploration or discovery that leads to what? Freedom? Freedoms?

Plural?

That's certainly interesting in terms of what senses of self and world it allows—the senses of self and world that open up, beauty. So I could outline a trajectory that is a central strand, might be a central strand in a notion of awakening as a kind of direction of exploration, discovery that opens up freedoms, interesting senses of things, beauties and more.

One strand—this trajectory—among others which would include psychological and emotional awareness and skill, relational awareness and skill, development of the heart with kindness and compassion and generosity, some of which will emerge from this more central strand.

But again, not claiming historical accuracy, though that would be possible, not trying to persuade you, but just putting out something—a possibility of conceiving, taking as fundamental, as central to this exploration—the exploration of fabrication, the fabrication of perception, of all perception of any phenomena. So that means not just the self-sense, but also any object sense, inner and outer, time and space—all of it. Exploring fabrication through playing with different ways of looking, and that whole direction and thrust of investigation, of meditative exploration.

In so doing, if one stayed with it and learned to play with the richness and depth and beauty and subtlety of it all, and the joy of that play and exploration, one would come to a level—one kind of simple level—of seeing: "Oh, I get this experience of the self as just a process of the psychophysical aggregates, the skandhas in time." There would be a certain seeing, a certain level of relative lessening of fabrication.

But one could go beyond that. One will go beyond that if one kept up this exploration, didn't stop there and kept exploring this direction of fabrication and unfabrication, playing with different ways of looking,

seeing how much they fabricate and in what ways, what they fabricate and how they unfabricate. One would open up to all kinds of perceptions of oneness—different kinds of oneness—and the self being one with that: I am love, I am awareness, and all these.

One would eventually, in this direction, open to the unfabricated, and one would also realize that all dharmas are empty. Selves, any constituent of the self, any element of existence, any object, any subject, time—past, present, future—awareness, consciousness, space. All dharmas are empty. One would realize that in this ongoing deepening of exploration.

And then one would realize, as I said making the connection earlier, that all self-views are not to be clung to. Any self-view. Because you realize the radical, thorough emptiness of absolutely everything, all self-views collapse as objects of clinging to, of believing in, of being real. This is what the self is.

One can go even deeper—and I've outlined this in quite a lot of detail elsewhere—to see that even this notion of fabrication, which was the very notion that we started with, you start to see: oh, that's empty too. Because if time is empty and the things that are fabricated and fabricating—the elements that are fabricated and the elements that are fabricating—they're also empty, and the time in which fabrication happens is empty, the whole notion of fabrication starts to crumble as a real notion.

And then, because fabrication is empty, the whole notion of the unfabricated is recognized to be empty in a whole other way, a whole other level. The whole duality between the unfabricated as something holy and the fabricated as something unholy—that collapses. Radical non-duality between the unfabricated and the fabricated.

As one goes even further, one sees there's no—because of the radical emptiness of all things—there's no singular way things are. There's no way of looking that one can snuggle into and adopt and hold and say, "This way of looking reveals how things are, the real way things are, what is." There's no way of looking that reveals a final truth of how things are.

With that, one begins slowly to realize it's almost like that also relativizes all conceptual frameworks. It doesn't mean that any conceptual framework is as good as any other and I can believe we're all bananas—I mean actual bananas like fruits, I don't mean that we're all crazy—that's as good as believing the more conventional view of reality. But it's a more subtle point that no conceptual framework will reveal the ultimate truth of things, and no way of looking will reveal "this is how things are, this is finally, this is the take on things."

Then on this trajectory, one begins to open up to that really radical sense of possibility. One sees even deeper—not just the participation in perception, which was clearer before with this business about fabrication and ways of looking—but actually participation in the whole notions of truth and also in the notions of what awakening is. We participate, or we can participate, we do participate. There's a whole participatory view that becomes viable as a conceptual framework.

So I could have outlined very briefly a trajectory that might be a central strand, as I said, of one possible notion of what awakening might be, among other strands involved in it that seem very important to me—psychological, emotional, relational awareness and skill, development of the heart, generosity and love. Generosity and love I would expect to come out of the metta as well, by the way.

Now, we could say, okay, so where do we place the stages in that? But again, I would just say: why is that important? What's behind the question? What's driving the necessity to place stages there or map it onto this or that?

In that conceptual framework—in my conceptual framework, which is maybe how I tend to think at the moment—awakening includes ending the inner critic, certainly, freeing oneself from that. It includes, more broadly, healing our psychological wounds to a significant extent. It includes being able to flow with the stream of life. It includes the direction of eradicating the kilesas and moving in that direction.

Some of these conceptions, as I've pointed out before, might be quite popular, but when you probe them a little bit or explore them in actual life, you begin to ask the question: what does it actually mean to go with the flow? What does it actually mean to really eradicate those kilesas of greed, aversion and delusion, as I've talked about?

And something in those notions begins to lack a little coherence. Nevertheless, they can be helpful as elements to include in this larger direction, this larger conceptual framework.

It includes the transformative experiences and perceptions and understandings of oneness of different kinds, of anatta, no-self, not-self, all that. But for me, I want to say something further. It also includes this radical emptiness of all phenomena and this non-duality that I was talking about earlier.

But for me, awakening, though it includes all these experiences, insights and directions—as much as they are not ultimately incoherent—is beyond all that too. It includes and involves something more. It includes even the seeing that awakening too is empty. Awakening too is empty. Many Mahayana texts point to the emptiness of awakening, the non-duality of nirvana and samsara.

But this emptiness of awakening doesn't mean that we throw away—for me, doesn't mean that we should throw away—the concept of awakening, the notion, the goal, the vision. It doesn't devalue it. It doesn't say it's empty, therefore it's a lie, therefore it's just a con, or it's rubbish. As someone once said to me, "We're all stuck anyway, we're all schmucks," or something like that. They were talking about a certain spiritual teacher that they felt disillusioned about, and then they'd just gone to this: "Oh, we're all the same, there's nothing possible."

To me, the emptiness of awakening is not saying that. That's not what it opens, that realization. But awakening is empty, in several different ways. And one of the ways it's empty is that if it involves what I was tracing in that outline of a trajectory, awakening will also open all kinds of doors, all kinds of possibilities in many different directions.

That whole movement of awakening will open all kinds of doors, gates, possibilities, and many different directions—manifold and perhaps even infinite possibilities for ways of looking and ways of conceiving. And it will open them for actual use in life, to be engaged, to be lived, to be practiced, knowing they are all empty and at the same time viable, workable, practicable. This is part of what awakening does in this vision of awakening.

And because there's infinite possibility there, there's not an end to this opening. There's not an end to this movement of opening. It's open-ended.

So that's a possible trajectory. I offer it as a possibility, again, without trying to persuade anyone or play other games. I just offer it as a possibility. To me, it's a very beautiful possibility—a possibility of doors and gates being opened by this journey of exploration, in this journey of exploration, through this journey of exploration. And that process itself becoming open-ended in terms of the ways of looking and the conceptual frameworks that open. The whole thing just opens up realms and worlds of possibility of experience and conception.

Let me share something personal about freedom from suffering and equanimity. All this trajectory I've outlined—what does that have to do with freedom from suffering? There are all these different possibilities of views and maturings of view opening up further to another level.

If I just share for me—and it's only for me, personally—it's not the emptiness of self, the insight or view encapsulated in the question "Who dies?" I'm talking about my relationship with the possibility of dying, and dying an early death, or dying soon. It's not so much that question, "Who dies?" that kind of question, the emptiness of self that seems to capture... Or the view that at death there is just the disbanding of this process of the aggregates. It kind of falls apart as a process. This process of the aggregates in time that stuck together makes the self. Or the view that the process was all there was, or is, or was the self.

For me, those kinds of views don't really make a difference and bring deep freedom and deep equanimity with respect to the possibility of dying soon, dying a relatively early death. Even less is it a reflection on impermanence—just the fact that we all die and that everything is impermanent, is born and dies. Nor is it, or was it particularly, the perception—the available perception for me—of oneness with nature and oneness with the elements.

I remember being struck immediately after I got the prognosis. I had a CT scan and the doctor said to me, "You've got a tumor in your pancreas." And I had heard enough about pancreatic cancer to know what that implied. I remember coming back to Gaia House—it was summer—and sitting in the walled garden, reflecting on it, taking in and digesting that news.

Looking around at the beauty around me, I had a possible perception, a possible experience. I was able to enter into that way of looking that just saw myself as one with nature, the body at death dissolving back into nature like that, becoming earth, becoming air, becoming water, and energy. It was available and it

was helpful to a certain extent, but it wasn't really a view that brought a lot of deep freedom or equanimity or transformative power.

Rather—and again I'm just sharing for me—I suppose I could list four insights that really were helpful instead, that over the last few years in relation to this possibility of dying, this news, this very real possibility that I am confronted by and live with. Four insights, four ways of looking, four perceptions.

One is the insight into the unfabricated world.

The sense, the perception of that unfabricated realm. But in a way that includes—and this to me is important—in a way that includes a sense, a palpable sense of the mystery there. The mystical beauty and sacredness of it.

In other words, it's something that's functioning in a way that's saying something more than "everything's empty," or something more than "there's just this beyond." It has a soul element in the mystery that I perceive and sense there—the deep, unfathomable mystery, and the beauty, the mystical beauty and sacredness of it. That perception, for me, makes a huge difference.

Secondly, the related insight or view that knows and perceives the emptiness of everything—of all phenomena, of space, of time, past, future, and present, of the now, of consciousness, awareness, and so forth. And again, it's not that I see the emptiness and realize nothing matters because it's all empty. It's not that view or that sense of "nothing matters" that I feel is making the difference for me, the liberating difference.

Rather, it's this realization, this insight-view of the emptiness of all things in a way that makes felt some unspeakable mystery, beauty and sacredness again. It's in the emptiness that there is this sense of this indescribable mystery of everything—everything, everything—and the whole of existence. And that's palpable in that insight or way of looking or sense of the emptiness of all things. It's not that everything is empty, therefore everything is worthless or it doesn't matter. There's some soul element, some element of mystical appreciation, resonance, beauty. That makes the difference for me. That's what I find when I connect to it—that's what cuts through everything. That's what opens it out.

Third, the insight or way of looking that I've described earlier—the sense, the perception of myself and my life and the things and events in my life and in the world as image, the imaginal perception of all that, the sensing with soul of myself, my life, and the things and events in it.

This isn't a constant perception; it's something I move in and out of. This sensing with soul, this imagining, perceiving with all that is involved in that—as we described in the first talk of this series, all those elements and aspects of the imaginal—including, as I described in the last talk on dukkha and soul-making, the sense that when I sense my soul with soul, there is the sense of the non-separateness from the divine of my personality.

And the sense of in and through and as my personality, my individuation, my uniqueness and even my weirdness and my particularities as necessary expressions and fabrications of the divine's unfolding—the soul-making of the Buddha nature, of the cosmic Buddha nature, of whatever you want to call it, of God.

There's this perception of that, as I described in one of those dukkha and soul-making talks. And there's also, as I described there, a sense then that the time span of my life, whatever that turns out to be, the duration of my life, is itself an aspect of my soul. The time and soul are somehow not separate. And the time given to me or allotted to me, whatever that ends up being, is somehow an aspect of my soul. And my soul is not separate from the divine. And in that way, the soul and what is happening and these events and the time and all of it is perfect in that strangely indescribable way that I alluded to in that talk.

That kind of perception, that kind of way of looking, that kind of opening up of the sensing with soul of myself, of my existence, of my life and the events and the story and the personalities—that makes a big difference, huge difference in terms of the relationship with death and the equanimity that comes with that. The sense of grace, gratitude, blessing, ease, peace.

And lastly, again related to imaginal perceiving or sensing with soul, is when I feel myself on track or devoted to my soul duty or duties, which, as we've pointed out, are imaginal perceptions. The perception of duty is part of the imaginal constellation. It's an imaginal perception, which means it's neither real nor unreal. My sense of what my soul duty is in life, or soul duties are in life—it has that theatrical element. It's neither real nor unreal. It has that imaginal middle way. And yet when I feel myself on track and devoted and plugged in to that constellation of duties, that makes a big difference in relation to death.

So I'm just sharing that. We could ask: what insights, what ways of looking make a really radical difference with respect to what matters most? What insights, what ways of looking? If we're opening up this question of awakening—what does it involve? What does it mean? What is achieved there?—what insights, what ways of looking make a really radical difference with respect to what matters most?

Life, death, personhood—what matters most? You tell me, what matters most to you? And what insights and ways of looking make a radical difference and give deep freedom, deep equanimity?

That's the question for you. But still, even that, in relation to freedom and equanimity, I would still place that in the even larger vision that I outlined—that trajectory and that whole strand and the other strands that were involved. I would place even that in that larger context.

in a larger vision.

And that's the vision of this possibility of a movement of awakening, opening doors for us, opening gates of possibility—of perception, of the sense of being, the sense of existence, possibility of action as well. And that opening of doors, opening of gates is potentially infinite and open-ended. Open-ended.

This vision encompasses not just our individual liberation, but a continuous unfolding of what's possible.

Each insight, each moment of freedom, each deepening of equanimity opens onto further possibilities we couldn't have imagined before. The path doesn't end with some final attainment, but keeps revealing new dimensions of awakening, new ways of understanding, new capacities for compassion and wisdom.

So when we ask what matters most, when we seek those radical insights that transform our relationship to life and death and personhood, we're participating in something far greater than personal salvation. We're contributing to an endless flowering of human potential, an ever-expanding recognition of what consciousness can become when freed from its habitual limitations.

This is the magnificent scope within which all our practice unfolds—not just individual peace, but the infinite opening of possibility itself.

Thank you for listening.

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