What is Awakening? (Part 4)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:37:46

Somewhere in the last couple of parts of this talk, and certainly in much more detail elsewhere in other talks and writings and courses, we've explained how a practitioner might at some point cotton on to this idea of fabrication—fabrication of dukkha, fabrication of the self-sense, or of some perception of issue or whatever. Having seen that things are fabricated through the way of relating, through the way of looking, they might get interested in these two related concepts: fabrication and ways of looking.

They might decide to keep open that question: "Well, I can see this is fabricated—the self-sense, for instance. What else is fabricated? What is not fabricated?" And they might pursue that question with the tool of ways of looking, developing the skills and arts involved in different ways of looking with different degrees, depths, subtleties, and kinds of clinging involved. They pursue this double question of fabrication and ways of looking in practice—not just as some abstract intellectual idea, but actually getting hold of this and running with it in practice.

This is what I've referred to elsewhere as the phenomenological approach: dealing with and meeting one's experience, bringing these concepts to bear—fabrication and ways of looking—and seeing what we can learn about experience, about fabrication of experience and ways of looking, through exploring them, through playing and experimenting with that.

As I've explained elsewhere in quite a lot of detail, and briefly in the last couple of parts of this talk, if a practitioner does this in practice—explores fabrication and ways of looking, probes fabrication with ways of looking—then a possible trajectory will almost inevitably arise out of that. A trajectory of developing insights that we could conceive of as forming a central strand for a notion of awakening, or one of the notions of awakening, or part of the notion of awakening I'm offering as a possibility.

This direction unfolds as a deepening, a developing of insights, including insights into the fabrication of the personality and the perspective of not identifying with one's personality at times. So, for example, one would experience and understand the perspective that the self is just a process of the psychophysical aggregates. One would move beyond that in time, eventually, with the ripening of things, into views and experiences of universal oneness—the self being part of that oneness, all things being part of different onenesses at different levels: of love, of awareness, of nothingness, of all kinds of things.

Pursuing this non-fabricating direction even more, one will eventually open to the unfabricated, the deathless, and understand with that the thorough, complete, and radical emptiness of all dharmas, all phenomena without exception. Then, realizing based on that understanding that any and all self-views should not be clung to, cannot really be clung to as any kind of final position, at least, because one knows

the emptiness of all phenomena, all the elements that might possibly make up or be a foundation for any self.

Eventually one sees that fabrication itself is empty, and that relativizes the whole sense of the unfabricated so that there's a non-duality and a non-elevation of the unfabricated over the fabricated, the beyond over this world, so to speak. The holiness is then everywhere.

Pursuing it even more, one begins to open up to the realization that all conceptual frameworks, conceptions and conceptual frameworks, are in a sense empty. They're not finally true. They don't reflect or summarize or articulate a final truth, an ultimate viewpoint on how things are. Through that realization comes an even deeper sense of participation in the cosmos, participation in perception, participation also in truth, and even in the notion of what awakening is.

This possible trajectory perhaps makes a pretty good solution to the pieces of the jigsaw that we find in the Pali Canon—fitting together the Buddha saying this and the Buddha saying that—together with some Mahayana elaborations of what the Buddha said that are found in Mahayana texts. These elaborations go back to the Pali Canon, but the Buddha didn't really pick up on and elaborate there—for instance, in the Kaccāyanagotta Sutta and similar texts.

Now, I've outlined this trajectory. It may or may not be attractive to you. I try to present it quite neutrally, but is that attractive—that sort of journey, that sort of unfolding, all that's involved in that? Again, this question: if it's not attractive, why? What's going on for you? And if it is attractive, what's going on for you? What is it that you want? What do you want?

All those questions I threw out in the first part of this talk are very much connected. They interweave all the way through this question of what is awakening and this discussion of awakening.

Actually, trajectory is the word I've been using, but it's not quite the right word because it implies a kind of linearity, a movement from here to there along a certain line. My experience as a teacher is that things are not always linear. Even with that group of insights that I just enumerated very briefly, the movement of realization, the movement of opening up of experience and understanding, is not always linear.

Yes, those are deeper insights. Generally speaking, they're harder to understand, to open to, to realize, to experience. They're more comprehensive, they take in more, they're more inclusive. For example, the experience of the unfabricated in a way that's dualistic with the fabricated—not yet moved to a level of non-duality—doesn't take in the holiness of the fabricated, doesn't include that. So the latter end of that list is more inclusive, more comprehensive, more fundamental in some sense.

Yet my experience, both for myself and working as a teacher, is that intuitive wisdom can make all kinds of leaps at any point in practice, or in one's life of practice, that make a bit of a mockery out of any linear map. So trajectory isn't quite the right word.

At some point—whether right near the beginning of someone's practice along this trajectory of exploring fabrication and ways of looking, or whether they've gone through that whole trajectory and then start hearing about soul-making and the erotic imagination—one might add in, or perhaps better, weave in to that...

trajectory or set of insights that I described there—weave in, add in the whole paradigm and whole exploration of what we call the soul-making paradigm or the erotic imaginal exploration. The erotic imaginal, in itself, is not linear at all. There's no real linearity—well, perhaps there's a little bit of linearity, but generally speaking, it moves in many different possible directions, not really so much as a linear movement, as I've alluded to earlier.

But start to weave that in with the other trajectory regarding fabrication and ways of looking and emptiness and all that. The whole thing becomes really not so linear. So the trajectory is not necessarily—or at least as a universally common trajectory—perhaps not really adequate as a label.

But this question, "What do you want?" With the soul-making side of things and the erotic-imaginal side of things, perhaps what you want or the desire operating must be authentic, because the eros and the desire is integral to the movement of soul-making. It's indispensable, it's fundamentally wrapped up in the movement of soul-making in the erotic imaginal. No eros or desire—very little eros and desire—means very little soul-making. So the question of what do you really want, the authenticity there, is oftentimes in the soul. When we can speak kind of more purely of soul-making, it's kind of inevitable there.

Remember too, just as a sort of footnote here, that the paradigm of soul-making includes eros with images or in relation to images, and also eros without images, without the imaginal. I've elaborated this in the Eros Unfettered talks. Eros without the imaginal or without images means that eros for the unfabricated, or for the realization and the opening to those realms that are less fabricated—that have less to do with image and perception in general on that whole spectrum.

But eventually, that movement, that eros for the unfabricated or eros in the direction of unfabricating along all that spectrum of onenesses and jhānas and all that—eventually, with its maturity, as we mentioned, there's the realization of the emptiness of all things and the non-duality there between what is fabricated and what isn't and different degrees of fabrication. And then this opens up the legitimization, the possibility to fabricate skillfully and fabricate in a way that includes images.

So even the eros—there is eros that doesn't include images, but if I go deeply enough into that, it kind of delivers me a legitimization and a platform from which to explore fabrication with images, and then the eros with that. And then there's also eros with images, the erotic imaginal, and that directly involves itself in the participation of fabricating images. It participates in the fabrication of images with the erotic imaginal, with eros that is in relation to images.

But when we include the soul-making, when we include the erotic imaginal—I should say, when we

include sensing with soul—this will open up the whole sense of awakening and the whole sense of the path much wider than that trajectory that I outlined in the last couple of parts of the talk. Sensing with soul opens out the whole sense of what awakening is and can be, and the whole sense of the path opens much wider.

And in so doing, in this opening, it will push on the influences of however we have conceived of or imagined the tradition, what the tradition says about awakening or what we have conceived of or imagined the tradition says about awakening. It will push on this soul-making movement. This expansion of the soul-making dynamic will push on the unquestioned images that we have of awakening—the fixated images, the rigid images. Sensing with soul, the erotic imaginal, that aspect of the soul-making dynamic will really push on that.

Some of the ways this happens—in small ways and in large ways—for example, we might have, and it would be very understandable (I think a lot of people do have), a kind of fixated fantasy or idea. By fixated fantasy, I mean not one that's rich in soulfulness and eros, but one that's got that kind of rigidity to it and clinging to it. But fixated fantasy or image or idea regarding awakening that it kind of happens in a sudden moment.

One of the places we get that is from the myth of the Buddha, who sat up all night, made a strong vow, sat up all night in meditation, and just as the morning star was appearing, that was the moment. And everything permanently changed in that moment, at that moment. "Done is what had to be done." And there was, in this assumption, this idea, this image—it happens very suddenly, all done, everything is permanently changed. And there is also the freedom and the liberation that ensue, that open up, are pervasive. They're total and they reach to every part of the practitioner's life.

Now, that makes a good story, doesn't it? The suddenness of it and the kind of black and whiteness of it. It's sudden, it's very dramatic. But again, I'd just like to question that. Is it a true fact, or is it a kind of myth in the poor sense of the word?

Oftentimes there are many people you can meet who will share similar accounts, not necessarily with that degree of effort involved, and oftentimes they emphasize the exact absence of effort. But for myself—and you'll have to find out for yourself—but sometimes I meet these people, listen or read their accounts, and sometimes look at, hang out with, hear about the resultant awakenings. And sometimes it's really not that impressive. Oftentimes it's not that impressive what happens when there's that kind of story of sudden and then assumed pervasive liberation and deep awakening.

The awakening often doesn't seem that deep. It's not also that pervasive. The insights are not so deep, nor are they pervasive, nor the freedom. So there's a kind of—I would call that a small way, it's a small point.

But there are bigger and I think more important ways in which the opening up to sensing with soul, the imaginal perception, will push on the whole notion and the whole image and fantasy of awakening and

what's involved in it. This is very interesting to me, but I have observed that certain areas or kinds of freedom—areas or kinds of liberation—may open at different times for a practitioner, and not by, for example, realization of the unfabricated or emptiness, or the so-called eradication of greed, hatred, and delusion. Certain areas, certain kinds, are not going to be opened by those traditional means, those traditional ideas.

So for example, can we even talk about sexual freedom? What is that?

What does that mean? What even happens when you notice inside, when you just hear that? What does it mean? What is that?

So I want to say very clearly right now that I do not mean by the notion of sexual freedom acting in any way that is not respectful of another human being, or in any way that is unkind. So that's not sexual freedom. Whatever sexual freedom or freeing might be—and freeing might be a better way of putting it—it doesn't mean that lack of kindness, lack of respect in sexual relations, lack of attunement, grossly misattuned to what's going on there, what the other person wants or needs, or what you want or need.

For both oneself and whoever one is being sexual with, there needs to be kindness, respect, attunement. It needs to be consensual. There's no question about this. Whatever sexual freedom or freeing means, it doesn't go against that. It doesn't cross those lines. And whatever you hear me say or have heard me say, or perhaps another teacher around exploring eros and sexual images and sexual eros, it never contravenes that in practice.

And also sexual freedom, again, whatever it might mean, to me doesn't mean that we necessarily have to open to what someone else or some subgroup considers more free or better, or what we are feeling pressured by some should or some fashion around sexuality or orientation or self-identification or morality. You decide if something's not okay for you. You decide if it's okay and if it's interesting. Not pushed around by subcultures and the kind of rhetoric that can happen there. So that's just an aside, but I consider it so important, just in case there's even the slightest misunderstanding in what we're saying here.

But the main point here that I was trying to convey is that certain areas and kinds of freedom may not be opened up through realizing the unfabricated, realizing emptiness, eradicating greed, aversion, delusion. What's that going to do in regard to my sexual freedom? I mean, do you really think, is there any evidence, does it seem that the spiritual teachers who claim awakening—that their liberation really extends fully to their sexuality? Fully? I mean, they might just choose celibacy and keep to that. That's not quite the same thing as sexual freedom in the sense of the more open possibility of what that might mean.

Or not just sexuality—what about the area of intellect and ideas? You think that's going to open just because one has realized the unfabricated or the so-called eradication of greed, aversion, delusion? What does it mean to be free? What is a freeing in relationship to the intellect and ideas? What is a freeing in

relationship to creative expression? What is the liberation of personae as masks of God?

So what kinds and what areas and directions of liberation, of opening, of freeing are possible to us, and how do they arise? If I'm locked into too narrow a view of what liberation delivers and also what is the path to liberation—I expect this kind of path to bring that kind of liberation—is that realistic?

But it may be that imaginal practice and practice with particular images leads to all kinds of very specific liberations with regard to whatever that image or imaginal figure embodies in a certain area. Sometimes I meet people who are practicing fairly diligently and steadily over some years. Maybe they've done some therapy and found that useful and it's an important part of their process, and they're practicing, trying to deepen their emptiness inquiry and their inquiry into fabrication. But there are areas that none of that has reached—not the psychotherapy in whatever traditional forms and attitudes, and not the emptiness practice.

This person is a very balanced, sane person, but the courage to stand up publicly and stand behind one's deepest convictions and passions has not been liberated—the courage to do so even at the risk of upsetting someone, of being disadvantaged perhaps in terms of one's career, or maybe people won't see me as a nice guy, or I'll piss someone off, or I won't be a good boy, or whatever it is. More than the emptiness, more than even many kinds of therapy, it might be that working imaginally, in the full way that we've talked about, with images that involve such courage, such expressions—areas that are really not being opened up after years of steady practice in certain directions.

It may be that images involving those kinds of things—and they have to be arrived at in all the ways we talked about and emerge in all the ways we talked about—but it may be that might open up areas and directions of freedom, prisons that don't even really feel like a prison. One is not even really realizing the lack of liberation there. But the imaginal practice may open up those areas where the other practices won't.

So it's easy to find a spiritual, or certainly a Buddhist basis, to simply ignore those areas that I alluded to and those kinds of freedoms—not to be free in those areas with ideas, with sexuality, with creative expression, with the liberation of personae, but to be free rather from sexuality, from desire, from active engagement, from intellectual questioning and expansion. Because we can always find a teaching that says sexuality is just greed, activism is not equanimous and peaceful.

It doesn't fit the image, the archetype. I've explored this in different talks previously.

And with intellectuality, we can always find rationale that says intellectuality is just conceptualizing. "That's just conceptualizing, and we want non-conceptuality, or we want something called just being, or being simple," or whatever it is.

So there's the possibility, through the erotic imaginal, of opening up wider areas and different kinds of liberation, awakening, freedom—awakening and liberating a whole other range, or greater range of

images and archetypes, breaking the lock of certain fixated images or a narrow range of archetypes that we might be operating unwittingly under.

So that's part of what's involved in this larger and, I think, richer and more multi-dimensional possibility of path and vision of awakening. The very images of awakening and the areas of awakening open up.

Now, again, we've explored this in detail in other retreats, but we said when the soul-making process gets going—the soul-making dynamic—it involves the mutual feeding, inseminating, widening, deepening, complicating, enriching, stretching of eros, psyche, and logos. They feed into each other and create and discover more of each other. The whole thing expands. We've explained that many times over the last few years.

The soul-making dynamic is liberated. In other words, rather than being stuck in one particular circumference or range or way of relating, the soul-making dynamic—the eros, psyche, logos dynamic—is liberated. Eros, psyche and logos are liberated to some extent in that soul-making dynamic. That's another way of saying what's going on in soul-making.

And as well as images getting pushed forward, as we talked about just now, the logos—ideas—will also get pushed forward. And more than just get pushed forward: ideas, logos, as one of the elements of soul-making, is exactly that. It's an element of soul-making. It's involved. It's worked. It's stretched. It's relied on. So that's part of soul-making, what a vision of soul-making awakening and path must involve.

Logos must involve concept, must involve idea as something creative, fertile, active, experimental, so that the exploration of and the experimenting with ideas and with conceptual frameworks—different ideas, different conceptual frameworks—exploring and experimenting with them in practice so that they inform ways of looking and thus open up different perceptions and experiences, and that feeds the whole process.

But that whole involvement and inclusion of ideas deliberately, and conceptual exploration, conceptual flexibility is, in our definition, part of the very soul-making dynamic, part of what is liberated and part of what moves in the direction of awakening.

So we borrow, discover, create ideas and conceptual frameworks. And then in the practice, in the soul-making that happens in practice, those ideas get stretched or they break. And then we forge, discover, borrow, create new ideas and conceptual frameworks—perhaps built on those old ones, perhaps different, whatever. And all of that, and that whole process, is included in awakening.

And awakening—notice—is a verb form. Well, it can be used as a verbal noun, but it's actually also present participle. Awakening: it's something that is happening, ongoing awakening, this open-endedness that I referred to.

So sometimes, for different reasons—and I've talked about this before—there's a real shunning of the conceptual, not really an inclusion or an embracing or a willingness to play with and experiment with

ideas and conceptual frameworks. And that hesitation or suspicion or refusal comes from many different directions.

Some of it comes from teachings of non-conceptuality, as we mentioned just a few moments ago, as being somehow more spiritual, the direction of spirituality or whatever. Other hesitations come more from modernist Western philosophy, which is really suspicious of any kind of metaphysical systems, metaphysics in general, or conceptual frameworks in particular. Even just building an edifice of concepts or a system—quite popular in the last, I don't know, let's say 100 years—is this suspicion of systems and conceptual frameworks.

And it goes with postmodernism, I think, at its less well-considered depth, because oftentimes people think that if you have a conceptual framework, if you have a system, you must be claiming that as an ultimate truth. You must be claiming that as a kind of all-encompassing final take on what reality is. And that's not the way we're using concepts. That's not the way that this soul-making dynamic engages with ideas. It's not the relationship it has with concepts, conceptual frameworks, and ideas.

So a philosopher called Richard Bernstein was writing, and he talked about several other philosophers—one guy called Jürgen Habermas, a 20th century philosopher, I think he's still alive—and he's talking about some other figures like Heidegger and Adorno and Derrida, and pointing at these thinkers and saying all these people defend themselves as if they were living in the shadow of the last philosopher.

They are still... This is Habermas talking about Derrida and Heidegger and Adorno. They are still—these figures who are quite adopted by postmodern thinkers—Habermas continues, they are still battling against the strong concepts of theory, truth, and system. By this he means what I just described: to say X or Y, this is my theory, or this is the conceptual framework, or this is the system. A strong concept of that means one pushes it forward as all-encompassing, ultimate reflection of reality. They are still battling against the strong concepts of theory, truth, and system that have actually belonged to the past for over a century and a half. They believe that they have to tear philosophy away from the madness of expounding a theory that has the last word.

And this philosopher Bernstein continues, "Their failure, according to Habermas, is not to realize and fully appreciate that the fallibilist consciousness of the sciences caught up with philosophy too a long time ago." By fallibilist consciousness, he means fallible—able to make mistakes. According to Habermas, science has this idea that you tentatively put forward a theory, and if it matches the experimental results, great. But you never claim it as a final truth in that philosophy of science, and you realize that it's fallible. Someone might do an experiment, or some experimental result might show up at any point that proves your theory is not quite right.

So that's the fallibilist consciousness of the sciences, and according to Habermas, this caught up with philosophy a long time ago. What you get in some strands of philosophy is this idea where all they want to

do is tear things down—tear down systems, tear down ideas, tear down truth claims, tear down theories, tear down conceptual frameworks. Deconstruct, deconstruct, deconstruct.

Bernstein is making the point—and this is where I would really agree—that deconstruction is not sufficient. It must be complemented by reconstruction.

Just a word more about this business of fallibilist consciousness of the sciences. That reflects another philosopher called Karl Popper, whose theory of philosophy of science was that it tentatively puts forward theories which approach the truth. Theories approach the truth incrementally, and they get proven wrong, and then another theory replaces that, but you're approaching something called "the truth." So it's quite a realist philosophy. It says we may not know whether this theory that we have now is completely true, because it can always be proven wrong by some as yet undiscovered experimental result. But there is something called truth, and we can approach it. There's a kind of realism there, and Habermas is a kind of realist. That's a different idea, a different notion than, say, a participatory notion of truth based on the deep notion of emptiness and ways of looking, as I've talked about. But that's just a side point.

Let's come back to this: deconstruction is not sufficient. Any deconstruction we do must eventually be followed by reconstruction—reconstructions.

That's what's happening both in the trajectory of emptiness exploration, of exploration of fabrication and ways of looking that I outlined. One deconstructs—less and less fabrication, one learns how to do that. And eventually, having reached the unfabricated, then seeing the emptiness of fabrication, because time is empty, and what is fabricated is empty, and the elements of fabrication are empty—then that opens up this non-duality, as I mentioned, between the unfabricated and the fabricated, and it legitimizes and sacralizes fabrication itself. There's no duality. The unfabricated is not better than the fabricated in any way. It's not more holy. It's not even more real. And so that legitimizes, opens the door to, opens the gate to the possibility of skillful fabrication—and part of that can be soul-making fabrication.

So on the trajectory of deepening exploration of emptiness, fabrication, ways of looking, and also in the practices of sensing with soul, which include the flexible, temporary adoption, entertainment, trying out, playing with, experimenting with, constructing, and then brushing aside or adopting conceptual frameworks and brushing them aside, adopting another one, deconstructing them, reconstructing something different—logoi, ideas, conceptual frameworks. Both in the emptiness trajectory and in the sensing with soul practices, there's this indispensable element that involves deconstruction and reconstruction many times, with endlessly variable possibilities.

Sometimes what happens—I want to linger with this business about conceptuality because I think it's so important and so subtle—occasionally, I've encountered a student who is practicing with emptiness and practicing quite creatively with emptiness, deeply, and sees, glimpses the non-truth of all concepts, as I said earlier, in different ways. But then after that, picks up on teachers—for instance, ancient or translations of ancient Zen teachers from centuries ago—who seem to be saying, "Drop concepts," or "Just

sit quietly and do nothing," or "Just be simple," or that kind of thing. And this person who has actually glimpsed the non-truth of concepts through practicing with fabrication and ways of looking and really contemplating conceptuality and perceptuality tries to adopt this kind of teaching, or believes that their realization of the non-truth of all concepts issues in this teaching of "drop concepts, just be simple, just sit quietly," and doesn't realize that this is a concept.

It's not just a concept, it's also a psychological style. It's one style of soul, one kind of archetype. It's the archetype of the simple man, if you like, or the natural man, or whatever. So to settle or fall back into that without realizing that conceptuality is actually operating and supporting such a stance, and without recognizing the pull of an archetypal image or fantasy, that's not liberation.

One has seen something deeply, yet remains caught in subtle conceptuality that's operating there, and in a kind of predilection for a particular archetypal image. It's like walking into a prison cell that happens to have a sign hung over the door by some long-dead inmate from centuries ago reading "Liberation, Nirvana and Freedom." You walk into that cell, sit there, shut the door, and just because of the sign, believe yourself free. Yet actually, one is imprisoned both in terms of soul—because of the limited archetype—and in terms of not realizing the subtle conceptuality that's involved.

When we talk about the sense of what awakening might be in a soul-making paradigm, it includes this deconstruction, reconstruction, involvement, experimentation, fracturing, breaking open, stretching, forging ideas and conceptual frameworks. So there isn't this stasis to it. It doesn't get stuck with a certain conceptual range or conceptual idea. Or if it does, that's only temporary, because soul-making will keep pushing and breaking whatever vessels at some point. Pushing on and breaking whatever vessels.

Do you remember Carl Jung's observation about the scientific revolution around the time of the Renaissance and the Western Enlightenment? He pointed out that it was this newly won rational intellectual stability of the human mind that came with the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution. It managed to hold on against the older ways of thinking of the Middle Ages and medieval thought. It managed to hold on and penetrate further into the depths of nature, further even than earlier ages had considered possible.

Then he writes: "The more successful the penetration and advance of the new scientific spirit proved to be, the more the latter, as is usually the case with the victor, became the prisoner of the world it had conquered." In other words, that whole brilliant opening that happened around the time of the Scientific Revolution and the Western Enlightenment in Europe—that whole brilliant opening, the conceptual framework that crystallized with that—over time, over some hundreds of years, developed and also became a prison, became hardened. As Jung put it, the victor—that conceptual framework won out over the medieval ways of thinking. It was a victor, but then it became the prisoner of its own system.

The soul-making paradigm of awakening would, in a way, if it's working, not allow that. Inevitably, in the vortex and the movement and the expansion, the widening and deepening of the eros-psyche-logos

dynamic that soul-making involves, that cannot happen. As I said, we will break out of any conceptual framework, break out of any kind of rigidified structure of conceptuality and spirituality.

Very easily for us, awakening, liberation, nirvana, enlightenment can become what Ari Kobach calls an idol in distinction to an icon. An idol is something taken to be real and has a kind of limit to it. Sometimes people have said, "You're such an iconoclast, Rob." I'm not sure that I am, but I think what I'm interested in here is more smashing idols or exposing what we might call idols and idolatry. And along with that deconstruction, creating icons.

The difference between icon and idol—I'm borrowing this distinction from Henri Corbin and also from another French theologian-philosopher called Jean-Luc Marion. The icon possesses infinite depth because it's imaginal. So it might be a form there, but remember the elastic soft edges being one aspect of the imaginal? The imaginal form might be really vivid as a sensible form, as an aesthetic form, really vivid and sharply defined, but the being of it has soft and elastic edges. It has this capacity through soul-making, through the erotic relationship with it, to be perceived with more and more depth, more and more dimensionality will be perceived as part of it, as an aspect of it. It will open up a sense of itself having more dimensionality, more depth, more possibility, more divinity.

Soul-making is possible in relation to an icon. But when soul-making gets hold of an idol—something rigidly, solidly defined and believed in as real, with tight, rigid boundaries, not soft, not elastic—then soul-making will make those boundaries of an idol elastic and soft or smash it and expand it or replace it until we have an icon. Soul-making needs icon, not idol. And there won't be an end to that.

So an icon is something with this potentially endless possibility of dimensionality and divinity and depth, soul-making potential. In questioning typical ideas of awakening that have actually become what we could call idols—solid, unmoving, rigidly and tightly boundaried, fixed and limited forms and depths—in questioning in that way, and opening up instead new possible visions or ideas of awakening, where awakening is not limited either by an end point or in terms of direction, that converts the whole process, converts idol into icon.

Soul-making has gotten hold of the notion of awakening and creates, discovers its own meanings of what awakening is and involves. It stretches whatever original concept, image, idol we might have started with. With an icon, as I said, it's not limited, its being isn't limited in that way, because of these soft elastic edges.

We will, Eros, in relation, soul, in relation to an icon, discovers, creates more and more dimensions and depths. And in that way, eros doesn't collapse then. It doesn't run out of space, of beyond, to long for, to move into, to create, discover. It has—eros in relationship to awakening doesn't collapse, because it has an infinity of possibility in which to move. Infinity of possibility for the expansion of psyche and logos. Understand?

So the title of the talk is, What is Awakening? What is Awakening? And we could hear that in: what is

awakening? What is awakening, as in what awakens or who awakens.

If we answer it's what awakens, what is awakening, who awakens—if we answer it's soul, it's soul-making that awakens. That is what is awakening. That is, if you like, the subject of awakening. That is who is awakening. It's the soul and soul-making.

Then that implies in our definition that there's this infinite possibilities that come with the soul-making dynamic, with the involvement, fertilization, insemination, widening, deepening, expansion of the eros, psyche, logos. And that means, that implies this open-endedness, same thing.

Important note in relation to that: when we say infinite, there can be an infinity of possibilities, an infinity of potential, and even infinity of actualizations, but infinite doesn't mean all possibilities or every possibility. So this doesn't mean that awakening means everything. It means every possibility gets actualized or is even a potential direction.

So, for example—if that's a hard concept—imagine, let's say, a circle, which is like the face of a clock or a watch. And you could say, these directions—the 12 o'clock, the 3 o'clock, the 6 o'clock and the 9 o'clock, directions on the face of the clock—they are not directions that soul-making awakening will pursue. It just won't pursue those directions. That won't happen in the possibility of soul-making. That still leaves an infinity of other directions just on that circle, because you can divide up the areas that remain—say between the 12 o'clock and the 3 o'clock, or the 3 and the 6, and the 6 and the 9, the 9 and the 12—you can divide up those areas infinitely. So infinite possibilities of direction doesn't mean all and every direction will be viable or is open as a direction of soul-making.

Sometimes when this question is put, what is awakening? And one can hear that in two ways. So as I just alluded to, what is awakening? The question can be heard in two ways. What is awakening? What does that concept mean? And we've talked about that a lot and the possibilities there.

But as I said, it can be heard in a second way. What is awakening? Or what awakens? Or who awakens? Who is awakening?

Regarding the question when it's heard that way, one could give—or there are certain answers to the question that way that are quite popular in kind of Neo-Advaita circles or whatever. And the answer given is, who awakens or what awakens? No one. The answer is no one awakens. Or awakening is awakening. Or the universe is awakening.

So answering that question, what is awakening or what awakens, answering it in that kind of way helps take some of the restriction, imprisonment, weight or burden out of a desire for awakening when it's coming out of ego, when it's for the sake of ego or self-measurement or in reaction to the inner critic or it's trying to—this desire for awakening is trying to prove myself to myself or to the inner critic or to my parent or parents or my teacher or teachers or to the world. We've touched on this.

So this notion—no one awakens—it does have a certain unburdening effect, so it can be useful. But there's something about such an answer that in insisting on a kind of non-definition or nebulous, vague kind of openness, that kind of answer, those kind of attitudes or conceptions—and there is a conception involved there, or conceptions involved—those kind of stances, they might be forming their own strange kinds of prisms.

In that very non-definitional vagueness. Why? Because there's not much fertility or movement possible within that view. Something about the vagueness doesn't allow me to actually posit and work with different concepts within that, or answers to that question, and work with different conceptual delineations, perspectives, and ideas.

If you contrast this—"What awakens? Who awakens? No one. No one awakens"—with, for example, the conceptual frame we're trying to encourage, you'll notice something different. This is a conceptual frame that itself allows, encourages, and actually expects soul in the process to notice, to discover and create ever more delineations, concepts, and perspectives. Create and discover all that in time regarding what awakening is and regarding who or what is awakening.

Do you understand the difference? In this paradigm, none of those delineations, concepts, perspectives regarding what awakening is, or who or what is awakening—none of them are clung to as truths or reflections of reality. Nevertheless, they can be entertained and lived and practiced with, and they can bring all kinds of fruits and results and openings, none of them being regarded as final.

Like we said when we talked about what is soul—if I say "sensing with soul," that begs the question, what is soul? Remember that? We said we can say something about what soul is, but we want the concept of soul to have these soft, elastic edges. It's not a rigidly fixed and limited concept, so it can stretch.

What awakens? Soul awakens. Soul-making awakens. What does that mean? There's not the shunning of concepts—"No one awakens"—but rather the using of concepts. And then those concepts get enlarged, broken. New concepts get forged.

Sometimes the answers we give to these questions—what is awakening, what awakens, who awakens—they help in certain ways, but they also limit the possible fertility for the being, for consciousness, for the sense of existence, for soul. They don't stimulate and support the creation and discovery of further delineations, further discernment, more and more aspects, facets of self, soul, being, others, objects, world, awakening.

Again, in this soul-making paradigm, we're really not shunning or disregarding discriminations, discernments, delineations, and concepts. We're using them for the sake of soul-making. And the soul-making process will actually stimulate more of that as part of its endless possibility of riches.

So again, this question: What do you want? And is that what soul wants? Or is what comes through and seems to be my desire actually driven by something else—ego or measuring up? Or is it that what I want is

culturally influenced or indoctrinated, or I've taken a certain idea or fixated image of what the tradition is? Or is it that what I want—the "I" there—is actually quite a limited self-image? I'm not imaginably open. The self is not imaginably sensed in the "what I want."

What is the relationship of who desires or has eros for awakening to who awakens? Again, what is the relationship of who desires awakening to who awakens? You may have heard answers to that kind of question, for instance, in certain so-called non-dual teachings or according to classical Buddhist Abhidharma psychology. What would a soul-making answer say to that?

What is the relationship of that which, or the one who, desires awakening—the relationship of that to the one who awakens? The relationship of the desire for awakening to the awakened?

What awakens is what has wanted awakening. What awakens is what has the eros for awakening.

Fantasies, images, and ideas come in—all kinds of fantasies, images, and ideas—and influence the fantasies, images, and ideas we have of awakening. Some of those can be what we call fixations, or not, or more or less so. And some of them are fantasies and images and ideas of self and also of the world. The fantasies, images, and ideas of self and of the world condition the fantasies, images, and ideas we adopt of awakening.

I wonder if this has occurred to you—do you realize that when you or I choose or accept a notion or vision of awakening or enlightenment, in doing so you are essentially signing up for, plumping for, choosing a worldview, a cosmology? It's not just a view of awakening. In choosing a view of awakening, in adopting a certain view of awakening, I'm also choosing and adopting a certain cosmology at the same time. They go inevitably together.

So for example, if I have the cosmology of endless rebirth, then the vision of awakening as ending rebirth brings with it, goes with, a cosmology of rebirth. Or the vision of awakening as somehow bearing up to, putting up with our existential predicament as tragically impermanent and frail in a kind of essentially meaningless cosmos—the image of the liberated one, the awakened one, as one who is willing to confront that and be with the tragedy of that, open to it, and still lives their life creatively. This image of awakening, this idea of awakening, brings with it, goes together with, a certain cosmology.

And in the soul-making dharma, it's exactly the same. The soul-making awakening vision that we're perhaps opening up, or possibilities that we're opening up, goes with a certain cosmology, which includes possibilities of cosmopoiesis and participation and all that—divinities and dimensions.

So when we choose or adopt an idea or an image of awakening, we're actually also choosing and adopting ideas of world. Self and world. And the causality—who knows what's going on there?

So again, the question is why? Is it really the cosmology that I'm attracted to? Am I just set on that cosmology and insisting on that cosmology, and it's working that way around from the worldview to the

view of awakening? Or how much is self-view wrapped up in that?

The choice of cosmology may in fact be the primary reason for you or I choosing or accepting a certain notion or vision of awakening. You understand? That may be actually what I long for more—a certain cosmology, a certain worldview. It's all wrapped up together. And the self-view or the ego-view. If it's regarding measurement or proving myself or achieving or failing, that can come into it like we've talked about before. Or it might be that there's a certain soul-making or self-image in relation to the worldview cosmology that's coming in here, that's being chosen.

We're choosing a package. So for example, bravely and honestly facing up to the tragic existential predicament is one self-image, and it may be soul-making for some people to a certain extent. Or the self-image of what a human being is—a human being opens to all kinds of dimensions. Human beings participate in the cosmos, in the divine, in the creation and discovery of all this. It's a very different sense of self and image of self, an idea of self.

But again, back to this question—why am I choosing or adopting a certain idea or image of awakening? What's involved there? One of the things that's involved is cosmology and self-sense, or you could say anthropology.

I've pointed out in this connection several times before that the contemporary dukkha, the dukkha in contemporary times, may well involve kinds of dukkha that are prominent in what we deal with or have to face that weren't there at other times. So for example, our modernist notion of self brings with it, as much as a lot of possibility, a certain kind of dukkha. I'm not talking about how busy we all are and how we're harangued by mobile phones and emails and text messages and all that. I'm talking about just the modern notion of individuality and the culture of individuality and the pressures and expectations that brings alongside the possibilities. And I'm talking also about our very sense of our own psychological complexity and interiority and also responsibility.

Michel Foucault, one of the things he did was trace, in regard to sexuality, how through the tradition of the Catholic confessional, and then later through the very similar and connected tradition of the psychoanalytic confessional, which became the psychotherapeutic confessional, there was actually a broadening, a stretching of what the individual was then deemed responsible for. So at first, with regard to sexuality in the Catholic confession, it was just around the ethics of that and the way you're responsible for good or bad behavior sexually and thoughts and all that. But through that process and through the pressure and minutiae of that, this got expanded. And then through psychoanalysis and through the sexual revolution, the responsibility of sexuality was not just ethical, because now we're supposed to—there's a kind of responsibility to be interesting sexually or this or that around our sexuality. Sexuality has become, not for everyone but for a lot of people, in some ways part of identity and part of my responsibility for my individuality and what I am or have achieved or am okay with or have liberated or whatever.

Someone in the time of the Buddha in India didn't have this kind of complexity, didn't have that culture of individuality, didn't have that kind of responsibility in regard to their sexuality, of being interesting or this or that, or individual in that sense.

So there are certain dukkhas around self that go with contemporary cultures, contemporary society, and also certain dukkhas around the world. And again, I've mentioned this as well—the disenchantment of the cosmos, the meaninglessness of the cosmos, that is the kind of pervasive backdrop, if not foreground, of our worldview. And that is certainly characteristic of our modern culture in differentiation to earlier cultures in some ways.

But if you also think about the whole notion of rebirth that's in the Pali canon, in some ways it presents an enchanted cosmos with devas and celestial realms. Yet in other ways, it's a frightening cosmos—again, essentially meaningless. It depicts a meaningless predicament that one must find a way to escape. One is essentially just flotsam and jetsam on the ocean of endless cosmic rebirths and deaths, tossed this way and that by waves and tides. It's a rather terrifying cosmic picture.

Nevertheless, there are certain kinds of disenchantment and meaninglessness that plague and pervade contemporary society. Along with the problematic complexity and individuality of the modern self, this serves up a more difficult—or at least different—kind of dukkha in relation to both self and cosmos.

As I mentioned recently, we are becoming conscious, some people are beginning to be conscious, of the moral and environmental implications of perceiving and conceiving the cosmos in a disenchanted, flattened way—especially given the consequences in our globalized world. There is a sense, for some people now, that we need a different view, a different worldview. We need the different visions being offered to us—a different picture, a different concept of what existence is, both for the self and for the self in the cosmos, and what the cosmos itself truly is.

In this possible understanding of what awakening might be—in a way that includes the soul-making process and dynamic and movement—such a view will include more and more facets of our being. Simply because of the way the soul-making dynamic works, it will draw in, involve, and begin to relate to all these different aspects of our lives, dimensions, and facets of our being. It will create and discover such facets of our existence and make them objects of eros, imaginal objects. They get drawn into the whole soul-making process, and in so doing, they get drawn into the awakening process itself—the movement of awakening. They become included as directions and expansions and unfoldings of awakening.

This process will continue creating and discovering—not always at some uniform rate, of course. There will be stops and starts and stuck places. But potentially, at least, that is the movement. It's open-ended and multiple and multi-directional.

Some ideas we encounter of awakening, or even what's communicated to us sometimes by people who claim awakening in certain traditions or communities—certainly ones I've encountered—can be more

stagnant than the kind of dynamic, endlessly enriching, dividing, branching growth of a living organism that I've tried to describe.

In some traditions and sanghas, it's relatively common for people to consider themselves awakened. But as I say, often there's a kind of stagnation with that awakening. We can look at that stagnation from the paradigm of the soul-making logos and recognize that either there is not enough eros—for instance, "I'm awakened, and yes, there's definitely a certain amount of happiness, a certain amount of freedom and ease of movement, liberation from the inner critic, a certain amount of peace, even-keeledness." But it's just kind of stagnated there. "I've been awakened for X years, and now what?" Until one begins to teach or write a blog or hold darshan or whatever it is. But something is actually just stagnant.

There's perhaps not enough eros to open up further territories and possibilities for consciousness, for questioning, further liberations, explorations. So either not enough eros to stimulate and push that whole soul-making dynamic in a way that opens up further territories, or the logos is blocked—stuck in some conception, for example, that awakening means this particular thing. "This is what awakening is, and I now seem to have achieved that," or "awakening means X," or "I am awakened."

Here it's not so much the "I" that is the problem. Some non-dual people will be quick to say that's the problem—"I am awakened," that's the problematic view. "There is no one, there is no I who awakens or is awakened, there is just awakening." But that's not the problem I want to pinpoint right now. The problem lies in the reification and limitation of the vision and idea of awakening—of what it is, what it involves, and where it goes.

So either there's not enough eros, or the logos is blocked and stuck in a conception of awakening—in some particular narrow conception of awakening, despite the relative ease and happiness and spacious existence. Or logos is stuck in the sense that we're trapped in a conception that conceiving itself is bad, not spiritual, and so forth.

Either way—whether it's that there simply isn't enough eros, no more fire, no more flow of eros to the extent that really pushes things and continues to expand, or the logos is blocked in some way regarding awakening—the soul-making dynamic, the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, is arrested or at least limited. And because of that, no further or greater or wider awakening can open.

Just to share one more thing to finish. In the book of Genesis, God said to Abraham: "Leave your country, your people, and your father's household, and go to the land I will show you. Leave your country, your people, and your father's household, and go to the land I will show you."

Actually, I prefer that old-fashioned translation—I don't know if this is King James or something similar: "And the Lord said unto Abraham, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee." This is a very crucial passage for those familiar with the Old Testament.

The Hebrew is *Lech Lecha*—leave, go from here. Actually, it can also mean "go to you"—*lecha*, go to you or go for you. But let's say "go from here."

We could hear this in a very historical, literal sense. But what's perhaps the more poetic meaning here? The soul meaning. Go from here—go from bondage to liberation, go from non-awakening to awakening.

Certain teachings, perhaps certain so-called non-dual teachings, might say: you're always here, or you're always there, you're always in perfection. There's nowhere to go, nothing to do. Awakening is just realizing that there's nowhere to go. But there in Genesis it says, *Lech Lecha*—go from here. Beautiful. I love that.

Let me read it again: "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee."

A soul-making Logos might interpret that passage differently. Go from what? Get thee out of thy country, away from here, away from thy kindred, away from thy father's house. Go from whatever is not soul-making anymore, into new, expanded, expanding, deepened, deepening soul lands. To the land that I will show you—the landscapes that open up with soul. The land that I will show thee—new pastures, new fields of Eros-Psyche-Logos for soul-making.

This is always a possibility—this leaving the stagnation of structures that we know, of beliefs, the limited fixated images, the rigid concepts, beliefs, assumptions. It's always a possibility, since the possibilities for soul-making are infinite. So wherever we are, there's the possibility of more at some point.

It's hearing that passage—God's commandment in Genesis, God's calling, the call to Abraham—as God's call to us. We can read it in this very historic, literal, flattened way, and then it becomes all about territory and land and literalized nationalism. Or you can hear it as something speaking to you—God's calling, and it's eternal, it's always now. Always now. *Lech Lecha*, go. Go from here. Be ready.

Or if you say not eternal, perennial—perennial is maybe a better word. Again and again. The soul-making dynamics, as I said, are not always on the move. There are times of consolidation, of getting used to new structures, new landscapes, new visions, new images, new sensings. But perennially, again and again, there's this movement, this expansion of the soul-making dynamic. And with that, the whole territory, the whole land that we perceive ourselves in expands.

So again and again, forever, whenever, God calls, the divine calls, the Buddha nature calls, soul issues a calling to soul: "Get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred and from thy father's house"—the father's house, the way tradition has rigidified—"unto the land that I will show thee." The land that soul opens up. The land that Eros-Psyche-Logos opens up as the soul-making dynamic calls.

I'll just finish now. I said that sometimes people ask me what my position is on what awakening is, what stream entry is, what I think about this or that idea of awakening. I've shared a good deal in this talk, but

actually, following from what I've said, my position is that I actually adopt and move between different conceptual frameworks.

And that feels to me right now as the most beautiful and viable and, if you like, true way of orienting and relating to this whole question, this whole notion of awakening. And it is possible to do that—to pick up and put down and move between different conceptual frames and do that relatively freely, dependent on who I'm actually talking to and what they want or need at a certain time.

You could say there's a kind of, or there's the possibility of a kind of—you could say freedom from awakening. But I think better: a freedom in relationship to the whole notion of awakening. Freedom in relationship to the whole notion of awakening. That's a freedom in relationship, not throwing it away—freedom in relationship to the whole notion of awakening. Freedom in relationship to the whole notion of freedom. Someone can actually know the emptiness of it all and know and play with the poetry and the possibility of it all.

The whole notion, idea, sense of awakening can be opened up.

Thank you for listening.

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