Between Ikon and Eidos: Image & Hermeneutics in Meditation (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:30:06

I hardly need to point out that much—perhaps most—of what we are referring to as sensing with soul, most of the range of sensing and perceiving and sensibility that's involved in sensing with soul, is really not very usual in our culture, in our time. These kinds of perceptions, these kinds of openings and sensibilities, and also the ideas that undergird them and support them, are not conventional ones. They're not commonly found in our culture or commonly sanctioned.

For that reason and for others, this sensing with soul—that whole opening of that possibility—needs perhaps for many of us, not for all of us, but for many of us, a bit more grounding. We will need to feel that it makes sense, that it's grounded, that it's legitimized. Even if one is very attracted to these practices, and even if one has been practicing them already, there will very often be a nagging doubt creeping in for people, or a tendency to want to dismiss at times the perceptions, the sensibilities, the senses that have opened up and the experiences there and the whole approach.

So I feel it may be valuable, perhaps for many and perhaps at different times—not necessarily just at the beginning of one's explorations—to see if we can give a bit more ground, theoretical ground if you like, to what we're doing.

Another way of understanding or conceiving of what's needed here is, as I've said before, to elbow a bit more room, to create a bit more space, to be free to practice in this way without being hemmed in, crowded in, imprisoned by the conventional view and the dominant paradigms. To create a bit more space, to find a bit more ground, to give the whole thing more legitimization in one's mind.

Partly our freedom to practice this way is impinged on, or we feel a little bit reluctant. Sometimes that's because sensing with soul opens us, and that can be tricky. It's tricky to be open, and opened in different ways. The heart is opened, or sensing with soul involves an open heart, and it may open the heart further. The soul is opened. There are demands on us in terms of attention, attunement, humility. The sense of self and the sense of world is opened. And there may be a sense of responsibilities that come with all that.

So all this sometimes makes us a little bit ambivalent about treading this path, or even in any instance about entering into sensing with soul or opening a certain sensing with soul. Partly the demands are, if you like, on the emotions and the responsibility in the heart and the soul in that sense. But partly, the ambivalence that we have is also partly as a result of ideas—ideas that we have, that we have usually absorbed from somewhere or other: a teacher or teachers or teaching or tradition or the wider culture or

this or that subculture.

Those ideas that we have shape our worldview, our *Weltanschauung*, and our sense of what we are, what life is, existence and all that. And those ideas can either give us confidence and a sense of legitimacy to this kind of practice, to sensing with soul, and support our freedom to practice that way, to sense with soul—or they can undermine our confidence, undermine our sense that this is a legitimate way of engaging with the world and with ourselves and with experience, a legitimate way of experiencing, and cramp our freedom, the freedom we feel to do so.

In this talk—or group of talks, depending on how you count it, I'm not sure how many parts there will be—I want to weave a few things together if I can. One is to open up some very specific practice possibilities that we'll get to, that may then suggest avenues for you or things you can experiment with or kinds of directions. That's one thread of what I want to do in this talk.

A second is actually to look at the place of ideas in those practices that I want to talk about, but also in the larger opening, and as I said, the legitimation, the ground, and the creating space for sensing with soul—so the place of ideas, and weave that together.

I will say something right at the beginning and say it again. I've said many times and I've written about it: that ideas or concepts are present in all and any perception, all and any experience, all and any experience of appearances. Ideas and conceptions are present in that. Moreover, they shape our perception, our experience. They shape appearances. They limit also what an experience is, how it is formed. And they're part of the fabrication of all and any perception, experience and appearance.

The only experience—in inverted commas—where that is not the case is the opening to the unfabricated. And that's an experience that I'm not even sure we can actually call an experience or a perception. But all and any other perception, experience, appearances involve intimately and fundamentally all kinds of ideas and conceptions.

Now, I can just say that and say it emphatically—and I'm aware that's how I'm saying it—but if you're not sure about that, then investigate. Find out. How are you going to find out if that's true or not? One way of finding out is by exploring this double intertwined path of exploration that explores fabrication of perception and ways of looking together. In the course of doing so, as things begin to unravel, so to speak, or fabricate less, one will see that this is the case: no conception, no perception. No conception, no fabrication of perception.

What we perceive, what the experience is, and what the appearance is at any time is, as I said, shaped, fabricated, limited, constructed by the idea or ideas, concepts present in consciousness at that time. One can also experiment with entertaining different ideas and concepts and seeing—letting them, entertaining them in a way that they're actually translated practically into ways of looking—and then seeing how the ideas are formed, shaped, limited, fabricated, dependent on that conception, in line with that conception,

determined by that conception.

So any and all experience, any and all appearance, perception, ideas, concepts are present in a fundamentally formative way. When we come to sensing the soul and imaginal perception, those kinds of sensing, those kinds of experiences and perceptions also include ideas. And as a subset of the kind of ideas, they also include values. And I'll come back to that, the idea of this or that value.

The Greek word eidos is where we get our English word idea. And actually, eidos in Greek has a kind of double meaning. It means shape or form or vision or image. And it also means idea. The verb form reflects this kind of double meaning. So the verb form in Greek from eidos means I see or I know. As we say in English, I see, meaning I understand, not just I see visually. I understand. I grasp the idea or what.

So there's a way in particular ideas are central aspects that we can kind of tease out or focus in on within sensing the soul, and I hope to come back to that.

But really what I want to do in this talk or group of talks is weave together a few things. I want to talk partly about the ideas that influence us and influence our perceptions, then our experience and what appears to us in our contemporary culture. The ideas in our contemporary culture, you and I are influenced by certain ideas and that influences our very experience. So that's one theme.

And woven in as well, secondly, about ideas specifically in or involved with sensing the soul or images or imaginal perception. And that latter thread I want to use to open up some meditative possibilities of things that it is possible to explore, to experiment, perhaps that will suggest certain experiments or explorations or practices for you.

Among those, some of what I want to at least touch on or draw out the possibility is that it's actually possible to meditate on an idea, not in an intellectual sort of thinking way, that's possible at all, but what I really mean is, if you like, the essence of an idea. And it's a kind of very beautiful and soulful meditation on ideas that I hope to outline as a possibility in several different ways.

But more generally I want to also talk about some possibilities in practice, possibilities for imaginal perception, sensing the soul, specific possibilities that might easily be dismissed or closed off to us as possibilities because of the ideas that influence us in our contemporary culture, or in some subculture that we move in.

So, partly, as I said, what I want to do is, as I mentioned at the start, is to help legitimize those kinds of sensings with soul, those kinds of practices and directions. And part of that, it will be important to talk about ideas. And ideas includes ideas of ontology, that is, what we believe is real and what we believe is not real, ideas about epistemology, what we consider a valid way of knowing things or knowing what is real, cosmology and anthropology, what is the nature of this universe that we find ourselves in, and what is the nature of a human being.

And all of that, interrelated with all of that, is hermeneutics, which is really the philosophy of interpretation, if you like, originally applied to sacred text, the interpretation of the Bible or the interpretation of some other spiritual text and some other tradition. But more widely in philosophy, it's come to the interpretation of existence as well.

So existence, this world, ourselves, if you like, is a kind of text, albeit not necessarily primarily linguistic, and we are involved in interpreting that, whether we realize it or want to admit it or not. We are involved in an interpretation of existence or interpretations of existence. So all this sensing with soul has also interwoven with all that and interwoven with all this business about ideas is just generally hermeneutics and what are the possibilities or the limitations on our kind of lived hermeneutics. So of tradition and what comes to us through tradition and texts and teachings, but also of existence itself.

So I want to try and weave those themes together in this talk or this group of talks.

To start, I want to try a little bit of a historical perspective. I'm talking about the ideas that influence us. Why? Because those ideas have a huge effect on what we consider real, on what we consider knowledge, on our sense of existence, of ourselves and of the world, and therefore what's legitimate or not in practice.

So a very brief, necessarily oversimplified historical perspective. You could say that medieval culture was actually very, in Europe, was actually very sophisticated, in many ways, and particularly around religious thought and theology. And somehow coming out of the intense and brilliant religious and theological kinds of debates and writings and thoughts and ponderings, coming out of that, in a kind of strange way, emerged the scientific revolution and the Renaissance and the Western Enlightenment.

Actually, it wasn't at a certain point. It was a graded transition, a scientific revolution, and the Renaissance. Well, this didn't happen just one day. It's now the Renaissance, or it's now the Scientific Revolution. Even the ideas that were at the fundament of the Scientific Revolution took several hundred years for the culture to really digest them fully, so that it became everyone's basic point of view, or at least it heavily influenced everyone's basic point of view.

So I want to draw out three strands or elements of the classical scientific view—in other words, of the view that emerged with the scientific revolution in Europe after the Middle Ages. I want to draw out three strands, not that these are the only elements, but just for our purposes.

The first aspect that gradually came to dominance was a belief in a singular and objective reality. Objective meaning it's real—things are this way whether or not I choose to believe them. This reality exists independent of how I tend to look at things, what I'm feeling at any time, or what my imagination is doing. So with classical science, in time, with the scientific revolution, emerged this worldview that held there is one reality. That reality is independent of the way of looking, independent of mood, independent of my emotions, independent of my point of view, independent of the observer—basically, independent of the subject. It's singular and objective and real.

The second element that emerged was what we can call Cartesian dualism. René Descartes divided the world basically into res cogitans and res extensa—mind and matter. They're just very different, two different things or realities in the world. There was that division, a dualism between mind and matter. You can see how this objectivism, the subject-object distinction of that first element—the singular objective reality—has a link with the distinction between mind and matter, subject and object.

The third element grew somewhat more than was originally intended. Originally, with the scientific revolution, the intention was to disregard anything that wasn't empirical—anything that couldn't be sensed with the senses or verified in experiment. There was a kind of anti-metaphysical trend there, starting with attention to what was visible or sensible, what was empirical.

But as science developed and discoveries were made and theories formulated, there was a growing structure of what was in essence behind appearances. The empirical inclination was to pay attention to appearances, to what can be sensed, and not speak of anything that can't be sensed. But as science probed deeper, it went behind appearances more and more.

For example, an electron—I mean, atoms were once an idea behind appearances, but electrons, even today, are still behind appearances in the sense that no one has ever witnessed an electron. An electron is a theory. It works very well. Actually, there are different theories of the electron, quite different theories. But as physics in particular developed, there was more behind the appearances.

Another dimension behind the appearances were physical laws. Again, no one has actually directly witnessed Newton's law of gravity or Maxwell's electromagnetic laws. They are, so to speak, behind appearances. No one sees F equals GM_1M_2 over R squared. And quite different laws, like Einstein's law of gravity, can be applied behind the appearances to explain them.

So in the movement of science, with its progress, the initial anti-metaphysical emphasis and attention to appearances and the empirical actually opened up more and more behind the appearances. This behind-the-appearances was partly what some people at the beginning of the scientific revolution—for instance, Francis Bacon and Locke—actually wanted to do away with.

So these three elements I want to draw out: the belief or assumption of a singular objective reality; Cartesian dualism of mind and matter; and the inclusion of what is actually behind appearances in the form of subatomic particles, which are not directly sensible, and physical laws themselves.

There was a wonderful and just staggeringly breathtaking expansion of scientific knowledge, with all its brilliance and creativity, until early in the twentieth century, when some discoveries were made, some experimental results came out that called everything into question—the very basic fundaments of that classical scientific worldview. What emerged was relativity and quantum mechanics, and they were an absolute revolution.

Those three principles were affected. Those three elements of the classical scientific view were affected.

There was a huge shaking up—in fact, complete fracturing or dissolution of the unanimous belief in a singular objective reality. It was found that many of the properties of subatomic particles and fields and waves were indeterminate—they weren't this way or that until the observer came into the picture.

It was no longer objective or singular. Things themselves—until an observer actually conducted a specific experiment in a particular way—existed in an indeterminate state. We couldn't definitively say whether what was happening was a wave or a particle, where it was located, how fast it was moving, what its mass was, or what size it possessed. All these fundamental constituents or aspects of reality that were previously conceived as objective and singular were now severely called into question, thoroughly undermined.

Before observation, a thing exists in what's called a state of superposition. It is simultaneously both particle and wave—neither here nor there, neither this fast nor that fast, neither this mass nor that mass, neither this size nor that. Some physicists are even beginning to question whether temporal sequence itself—the notion that things happen before or after one another—actually applies at this quantum level. Everything gets called into question.

What exists is this state of superposition—wave and particle somehow coexisting at the same time in a completely illogical manner. Statements about where a thing is, how fast it's moving, how heavy it is, or what energy it possesses become meaningless. What actually takes the place of any singular, objective reality is a waveform.

Before we make a specific measurement, we can think of a subatomic particle as existing like a probability smudge—quite probable that it's here, somewhat less probable that it's over there, even less probable that it's somewhere else entirely. This probability is smudged across an area rather than existing in one discrete location. What we have is an equation that describes this probability distribution for various fundamental aspects of reality.

Heisenberg, one of the founders of quantum physics, initially tried to explain this through his uncertainty principle by suggesting that observation itself disturbs reality. He theorized that when we look to see where an electron is, we need a photon to bounce off the electron back to our eye—and in this process, the photon moves the electron. But he later admitted this was an oversimplification, even a mistake.

The more accurate explanation has nothing to do with measurement disturbing an otherwise determinate reality. In itself, the electron or subatomic particle simply does not have any particular velocity or position. It exists more as what's called a wave function—an expression that describes a probability smudge distributed across space and time.

This collapse of belief in a singular objective reality was one revolutionary aspect of quantum physics. The second was a shaking—though less complete—of Cartesian dualism, the separation between mind and matter. Some physicists desperately wanted to preserve this division. Others moved toward materialism,

insisting that everything, including mind, is ultimately just matter. Still others—perhaps a minority, though I'm not certain—suggest abandoning the mind-matter duality altogether and developing a physics that genuinely includes consciousness.

What emerged was a thorough questioning of the mind-matter divide, without any definitive conclusions. But certainly the observer appears to be involved, and the act of measurement seems integral to reality in ways that cannot be radically separated from what we then perceive as real.

The third classical principle—that behind appearances lay discoverable, concrete realities—also underwent profound transformation with quantum physics and relativity. The laws governing reality, and even our concepts of subatomic particles, became extraordinarily abstract. These governing principles became so removed from direct experience that they're utterly dependent on appearances for their meaning. An electron is not an electron without the laws that explain it, yet I cannot see those laws directly.

This entire dimension of what lies "behind appearances" became so abstract that the human mind cannot conceive of it except through highly sophisticated mathematics. That probability smudge I mentioned is actually an equation existing in multiple dimensions—potentially fourteen dimensions or more, depending on how many particles are involved. When you square the solution of that equation, you get the probability density of this probability smudge at any given location and time.

Really abstract. Or consider Einstein's general theory of relativity about the curvature of space and time. This too exists behind appearances, so to speak. But particularly with quantum physics, the dimension of reality that lay behind appearances grew larger and larger, becoming increasingly abstract.

Wolfgang Pauli, a Nobel Prize winner in physics, wrote in a letter to a friend—this was from 1948, though he could have written it earlier—"When the layman says 'reality,' he usually thinks that he is talking about something evident and well-known. By contrast, it seems to me that it is the most important and exceedingly difficult task of our time to work out a new idea of reality." He goes on to say something we may return to at the end of this talk: "What I have in mind concerning such a new idea of reality is, in provisional terms, the idea of the reality of the symbol. The reality of the symbol."

This Nobel Prize-winning physicist later in his life became a patient of Carl Jung, the analytical psychologist. Only for a short time—Jung actually passed him over to someone else because Jung was deeply interested in Pauli's ideas regarding the cosmos, mind and matter. Jung and Pauli developed a long and fruitful correspondence and friendship over many years, developing what some people call dual-aspect monism.

What this really involves is, again, a singular view of reality—but reality as something that's neither mind nor matter, neither psyche nor physis, from the Greek word from which we get "physics." Rather, both mind and matter are different aspects of an underlying reality that coordinates with itself in various

ways. That reality is, so to speak, beyond mind or matter. It's neither mind nor matter, but something from which mind and matter emerge epistemically—meaning in our consciousness when we experience, in our knowing, this singular, transcendent reality. This monistic structure, this one kind of thing, splits into subject-object, mind and matter.

So again here, in what Pauli hints at and worked out, there's something behind appearances—a singular idea. It's not entirely objective because he's tying together mind and matter in terms of what gets experienced. He had to do this because he was at the forefront of the quantum physics revolution and could not completely believe in purely objective perception of reality.

Notice he also spoke of "the reality of the symbol." For him, symbols were archetypal—this is where his interest with Jung and the unconscious and psyche emerged. But also mathematical symbols. He did fascinating work tracing archetypal ideas in the evolution of scientific ideas, particularly with Kepler, the beautiful astronomer who developed mathematical theories of astronomy. Pauli showed how driven Kepler was by certain religious and archetypal ideas—that Kepler actually discovered his theories based on archetypal images and symbols that shaped those theories.

One of Pauli's key points concerns "our time." He was writing in 1948, and now, seventy years later, it's still our time. These conundrums, this situation of what influences us, what has evolved in science—no one has really gotten their head around it. Quantum physics has made tremendous inroads into technology and culture, but not into how people actually conceive existence and sense experience.

So it's still our time. The sense of reality remains—what were his words?—"the most important and exceedingly difficult task of our time to work out a new idea of reality." We haven't worked that out in a way that really shapes our perceptions.

I want to highlight and draw attention to some of our legacies—the legacies we inherit that influence our thinking, our beliefs, our assumptions, and our experiences, and then what we dare to do in life and how we relate to life, but also as practitioners.

Now, this is an oversimplified story, but one important thing to acknowledge is that the legacies we have are complex and contradictory. Let me pull out a few threads here.

I was reading Christian Fuchs, another physicist—a contemporary quantum physicist interested in quantum Bayesianism. He was discussing Richard Feynman, whom I mentioned the other day, another Nobel Prize winner in physics. Feynman was quite a character, and some of his interviews are famous. He once said something like: if there was a massive catastrophe—he was probably thinking of atomic bombs or atomic warfare—and everything of culture was destroyed...

little snippet of wisdom that I would hope survives and that would be the basis to then build everything worldwide—I'm paraphrasing him—would be the statement that, the nugget of knowledge that everything is made of atoms. That is the key hypothesis. So this is what Feynman said. Once you just pick up that

hypothesis, everything else follows. He was more interested in science than anything else.

Christian Fuchs wrote, "The problem is the imagery that usually lies behind the phrase 'everything is made of.'" I'm going into all this because I'm really interested in the ideas that influence and limit us and direct and shape our experience, both meditatively but also just our life experience.

So Fuchs writes, "The problem is the imagery that usually lies behind the phrase, 'everything is made of.'" And he cites William James, the philosopher and psychologist, who called this problem "the great original sin of the rationalistic mind."

Then Fuchs quotes William James from his book *The Meaning of Truth*. This is William James now: "Let me give the name of vicious abstractionism to a way of using concepts which may be thus described. We conceive a concrete situation by singling out some salient or important feature in it and classing it under that. Then, instead of adding to its previous characters all the positive consequences which the new way of conceiving it may bring, we proceed to use our concept privately"—I think what he really means is singularly. "Reducing the originally rich phenomenon to the naked suggestion of that name abstractly taken, treating it as a case of nothing but that concept"—that's the key point, nothing but that concept—"and acting as if all the other characters from out of which the concept is abstracted were expunged."

"Abstraction, functioning in this way, becomes a means of arrest far more than a means of advance in thought." It's stopping something. It's limiting something. "It mutilates things," he continues. "It creates difficulties and finds impossibilities. And more than half the trouble that metaphysicians and logicians"—but I would say human beings, scientists, Buddhists, whatever—"give themselves over the paradoxes and dialectical puzzles of the universe may, I am convinced, be traced to this relatively simple source. The viciously private"—again, maybe it's a historical thing, but I think the word singular would be better—"the viciously singular employment of abstract characters and class names is, I am persuaded, one of the great original sins of the rationalistic mind."

So, in other words, and this is really key: Feynman says the key thing is everything is made of atoms. And then what creeps in for us as that view—and that view that emerged with the scientific revolution—really gained hold as the fundamental view, the fundamental take on what is real. What's real? An atom is real. Or he could have said a subatomic particle is real, getting more, quote, fundamental. I think what he means is if you think everything is made of atoms, then you ask, well, what is an atom? And you'll get beyond what we nowadays call an atom to the fundamental particles. Everything is made of fundamental particles, is probably what he wants to say.

And then what creeps in as a kind of axiomatic dogma of our present culture is that this becomes a dominant view: Everything is really only made of the meaningless movement and combination of material particles.

So, we have here an instance of what Jung described—how the victor of the scientific worldview over the kind of medieval religious worldview actually becomes a prisoner because, and this is quite subtle, it's subtly present in the background of our thinking about the world and of our opening or closing possibilities for perception and interaction and relationship with the world. Undermining subtly—subtly present and subtly undermining a kind of ground for meaningfulness, for soul and sensing with soul—is this kind of dogma of what William James called the vicious abstractionism of "everything is made of."

In other words, it's really, A, the realism, and B, the "only." It's really only, and only what? Particles. What Feynman really meant to say: Everything is really only meaningless movements and combinations and interactions of atomic particles.

So whatever we engage in as human beings, and even if it's spiritual work or soul work or psychological work or whatever, there's somehow pervading in the kind of groundwater of our mind this: "Oh, but it's really only..."

Now, sometimes that comes to the forefront, and for some people it's really at the forefront all the time, and for others, it's just there in, as I say, the groundwater. It's in the bedrock, and it exerts its influence. This vicious abstractionism, which is one of the problems that grew out of the success of the scientific revolution, became scientism. It's "nothing but." That's the only thing that's real. Everything is that.

So hooray for William James to point out this vicious abstractionism. He was actually a scientist himself, which makes his critique all the more valuable.

Let me share an example that illustrates how this epistemological narrowness affects our capacity for soulful perception. Someone told me recently of a beautiful soul-sensing experience with the moon. She was sitting outside on her back step some months ago when the full moon suddenly began talking to her—speaking in a very personal way, with tremendous love and tenderness. She opened to that communion and entered into a whole series of meditations, sensing soul and relationship with the moon. This profoundly changed and opened up her perspectives on matter, soul, life—all kinds of fundamental questions. It was very moving and deeply soulful, genuinely important for her spiritual development.

This is not someone ungrounded or disconnected from ordinary life. She pays her bills, maintains functional relationships as well as anyone I know—in all practical ways, she's thoroughly integrated into daily existence.

Recently, near another full moon, she found herself again within sight of that luminous presence. Similar experiences began opening up for her—that same personal love and intimate relationship, the moon speaking to her personally with great tenderness. There was quite a richness to these encounters that I cannot fully convey here.

What I want to emphasize is that while the first experience flowed quite naturally, the second time she noticed some hesitation—the kind of ambivalence and reluctance to open to soul-sensing that I mentioned

at the beginning. She experienced doubt.

Part of this reluctance arose from very practical considerations. She recognized that sensing with soul demands a high quality of attentiveness—a refinement of sensitivity and openness that can be quite demanding to sustain. It requires being truly present and available in ways that ask a lot of us. We have to be genuinely prepared for such encounters.

This mode of perception also demands sometimes inhabiting a certain vulnerability. As I've mentioned regarding the necessity of open heart and humility, we sometimes need to really connect with what's emotionally difficult and remain present with that discomfort. In this case, there was a particular vulnerability she had to actually inhabit—and that's genuinely challenging. We must be willing to do this inner work, and soul-sensing might open us even further into tender places.

When we're truly open as human beings, we often equate openness with vulnerability because we're not protected, not walled off, not defended. So there was understandable ambivalence arising from these factors.

She also experienced hesitation because of what she called "the current drama"—the immediate life situation requiring attention. This wasn't papañca, mere mental proliferation, but genuine relational and work issues that needed addressing. The soul-sensing with the moon relativized this current drama, placing her immediate concerns within a much larger context.

But this relativizing doesn't happen through transcendence or dismissal, not through aloof disinterest or detached equanimity. Rather, the view opens and the whole sense of existence expands, contextualizing whatever is occurring in one's immediate experience. This opening of perspective can feel threatening because we become accustomed to certain views of existence. When we suddenly see that our current situation is only part of a much vaster landscape—a soulscape with tremendous panoramic depth—that expansion can be unsettling.

But beyond these understandable sources of ambivalence, there were also intellectual doubts—and this is what I particularly want to emphasize. These doubts were partly epistemological in nature. How can I trust this experience? What gives it any sense of reality or validity? Can I call it genuine knowing, or is it merely a strange delusion?

She was also dealing with flu at the time, which created additional doubt. Flu brings an extreme assault on the physical system and a corresponding emotional vulnerability that accompanies bodily weakness. Understanding how body and mind affect each other, she wondered if her vulnerability was creating this experience—fabricating it in the problematic sense of fabrication because she was ill and needing comfort.

Drawing on psychological knowledge, she thought this might be a kind of regression to early narcissism, when the vulnerable infant believes everything speaks personally to them. Perhaps her perception of the

moon as personally concerned with her could be explained away as emotional and physical vulnerability creating need, which activated strategies from infantile narcissism.

This brings me to what I've discussed in the Eros Unfettered talks—the epistemicide that has occurred in the name of the scientific method. With the global dominance of modern Western culture, there has been both a tremendous liberation from superstition and dogma, and simultaneously a devastating narrowing of what we consider valid ways of knowing.

in our place geographically and also in other places geographically in the world, there is the insistence, or at the very least the sort of strong insinuation and superciliousness regarding the classical scientific method and its assumptions as the only valid way of knowing. It's the only valid epistemology. That combination of rationality and empiricism, that particular combination of rationality and empiricism, with all the reality assumptions woven in there.

As I pointed out earlier, what happens then is there is an invalidation in this epistemicide—in this killing off of other kinds of epistemology, of other possibly valid ways of knowing, other ideas about ways of knowing reality and realities. In this killing off, in this epistemicide, only the scientific method remains valid, which means disregarding, preferably getting rid of one's emotions and one's imagination. The invalidation of the emotions and also the imagination in epistemology—in what we regard as knowing.

So you don't want to be swayed by your emotion. It's better that knowledge is what happens when you have put emotions completely aside, when there is no emotion, or when you kind of discount what emotions are present.

Contrast that with a possible epistemology which actually includes the emotions as a range of different perspectives or doors, if you like, to reality. So including difficult emotions of vulnerability and grief—these emotions become valid, valuable, valid different lenses or perspectives on reality. An emotion like the kind of vulnerability my friend was feeling, or like someone else wrote me an email describing very deep grief at the death of her mother and another death of someone close. And that grief opening up a whole perspective, a whole soul, sensing the soul.

Could we have an epistemology that actually includes emotions, including emotions that are vulnerable and grief and whatever, as valid different lenses or perspectives or ways of knowing? In other words, including the emotions in possibilities for ways of knowing. They open up our sense of things, our senses, in ways that might not otherwise be possible.

Again, talking about the kinds of ideas that have just kind of got into the bedrock of our psyche, conscious and unconscious minds. And they really have an influence and an impact—in this case, doubt or that kind of ambivalence or hesitation or reluctance, or in some cases just actually cutting off a certain door or gate or avenue of sensing, of experience, of validation of experience and perception.

But it is complex, I think. As I said, we receive multiple legacies from our cultural past, and it's complex. So

despite this kind of vicious abstractionism lurking in the bedrock of our psyche, especially regarding matter, it's also true in the complexity of things that we don't, generally speaking, most of us don't completely believe that kind of what's called scientific materialism or reductionist materialism, or physicalism is probably a good word—that kind of physicalism. Everything is really only this meaningless movement, interaction of material particles.

Some people want to kind of go that route. You know, Descartes, at the beginning of the scientific revolution, started, you could say, with a three-part division, not just a two-part, a dualism of mind and matter, but also there was God. And so you had God, mind, and matter. It didn't take very long for God to—actually, it was Descartes who partly was responsible for sort of demoting God as a sort of... He did the creative work and then he just sort of steps back and sort of looks on at the machinery of the universe and the machinations of mind and matter.

So God was kind of demoted right at the beginning and then just gradually more so and more so until there was no real need for a view of God. It was thought and so what we just had was left with just mind and matter. And then within that, there's even a strong movement, and some people are loudly insistent that actually it's all just matter. So mind is just what's called an epiphenomenon. It's just a kind of emergence out of matter. It's just one of the clever things that matter can do is be conscious, be cognizant, be aware of other matter, if you like.

I don't think we live that way. Even the people who really try and push that quite loudly in our culture, that kind of radical physicalism, that particular vicious abstractionism of physicalism, of scientific materialism—I don't think even they really live that way.

If it were the case, this kind of fundamental materialism, scientific materialism or physicalism, then it would mean that our mind contents are essentially matter, they're material. Your happiness or your suffering or your perception of beauty or whatever, or your meaningfulness, or your being in love, or whatever—really, they're just certain neurons firing, or certain chemicals, chemical molecules or atoms reacting in the brain, or electrical impulses just matter. Essentially, that's what they really are.

So your falling in love is just the movement of certain particles, material particles, and their interaction, usually considered in the brain, sometimes considered in the whole body. And then your falling out of love and your suffering there is also just matter doing different things, being in different places or moving in different places or different interactions between matter particles in the brain.

So in that sense, the suffering of falling out of love or the suffering at the loss of some beauty—that too is just illusion. It's really just atoms or particles or molecules moving or combining. That's what the universe is: the movement and combination and interaction of particles.

Amazingly, leave this matter in the universe alone long enough with the physical laws, and you get life. Out of life emerges consciousness in some forms, and eventually the extraordinary consciousness of

human beings. But essentially, what's really happening is just particles moving.

Yet even those who push forward such a view don't actually live or think that way. We don't run our societies that way. We take human suffering very seriously. We try, for the most part—or at least some human suffering—to address it in law, in morality and ethics.

But this view of radical physicalism or vicious abstractionism that extends to scientific materialism and scientism—if we're going to say we do take suffering as real, that we consider it real as something meaningful, then we don't live in a way that regards suffering as merely the movement of atoms in the brain or electrical impulses.

So if suffering is real, though it's built or fabricated as a mental construct from matter, then so is happiness. And so is beauty. As we say, beauty is in the eye of the beholder—it's not in the thing itself. And so is love. And so is meaningfulness, and so is soulfulness, and so is the sense and perception and conception of divinity.

All these are as real or unreal as suffering or pain—even physical pain. Physical pain is, if you like, mental. Atoms or particles themselves don't experience hurt. Pain is a mental experience, not a physical one. Emotional pain, definitely; physical pain also. All are merely—can be regarded as—the movement and interaction of material particles, which are not immediately perceived or conceived as such.

When we move in the world, we don't live in a way that reduces something like suffering or pain to this view of radical physicalism and its vicious abstractionism. But actually, happiness, beauty, love, soulfulness, meaningfulness, and the sense of divinity are all just as much mental constructs as suffering.

So you could say: if you're going to respect suffering, all these others are equally worthy of respect. Or if you're going to disrespect suffering by holding to that radical physicalism, then you have to actually disrespect suffering—probably a lot of suffering—and make a case for respecting only certain kinds.

But if you reduce everything to this physicalism, you circle back again to a possibility—you open the door again for the respectability of soul, soul qualities, and soul experiences. All of these are equally worthy of respect or disrespect. All have equal value. So the perception of divinity, beauty, even the sense of the ideal—the idea of beauty and essence that we'll return to—soul, all of it, as much as pain, as suffering, even as physical pain.

Even in that radical view, it's complex. We don't actually live that way in this vicious abstractionism, but it nags at us. We're pulled in different directions.

There's a rabbi—I think he's still alive—called Adin Steinsaltz, somewhere in the States, in New Jersey. He points out another example of how we're influenced by contradictory ideas that shape our sense of existence, right and wrong, value, and meaning.

He observes that one of the most obvious things in the world is that all human beings are not equal. It's

obviously not true that human beings are equal. There are vast differences in all kinds of ways between this human being and that one—better at this, not so good at that, more developed here, stronger there.

But democracy—our institution that we respect so much, although I sometimes wonder myself—theoretically, at least, democracy and the humanism that underlies it enshrines as law the principle that everyone is equal.

That the opinion—everyone's opinion is somehow equal. And he said, because it's obvious that you just have to look at human beings or pay attention to what they do and what they say and how they think, their acts and what they're capable of, it's obvious that humans are not equal. So our institution of democracy is kind of assuming soul, he would say. We're assuming something that we can't directly see that has some kind of universal value in everyone. And it's somehow inviolable, no matter what the apparent differences in human beings, the apparent inequalities between human beings.

So again, you get a whole other kind of influx into our modern worldview than this vicious abstractionism of scientific materialism or reductionist materialism. It could be—I mean, I'm not sure about what Steinsaltz says there, because it could be that our enshrining of a kind of equality between human beings is just silently acknowledging our postmodern uncertainty or agnosticism regarding what is of value. We are so confused about values that we can't say or declare, and so we just say, "Everyone's equal." I don't know, and actually there are other ways to look at all that, but I think it's an interesting point that Steinsaltz makes, and possibly that really is coming in, that sense of soul that's sort of hiding behind. Again, it's somehow worked its way into the bedrock of our worldview.

But as I said, we are heirs to a complex legacy, a legacy that is a complex of contradictory influxes of ideas, and in a way it's confusing. We are confused. But still, there's a way in which, as I pointed out, I think what Jung said is true: the scientific revolution's way of thought was a victor at that time, but the victor slowly becomes the prisoner of the world that it conquered. And so, for example, we find ourselves not entirely free to pick up that exploration of the range of possibilities that we call sensing with soul, because we're a little bit imprisoned, or a lot imprisoned, by these influxes of ideas that become dominant ideas and become—they won in the cultural debate, but they become, we become their prisoner, or it becomes, that view becomes imprisoned itself, it can't move out of itself.

So ideas, as I said, shape and limit our experience. They shape and limit what we consider worthy of practice or legitimate practice. They shape and limit our perception of self, other, world. They shape how we sense existence in terms of life and death, and also they shape and limit what we do in the world, our acts and what we devote our energy to and our intention.

Now, can you see that this will still apply in terms of practice, in terms of Dharma practice? So for example, and you've heard me allude to this several times over the years, we can get a kind of reductionist Dharma. So oftentimes Abhidhamma teachings are reductionist. They reduce things, again, to atomic units—both matter and mind, atomic units—and then these discrete atomic units working in a kind of

process. And the practice is shaped in accordance with that idea of what reality is, and so one goes for this kind of micro view that will expose this, that will actually experience this atomic reality or as close to it as possible. One works towards experiencing that.

And then that whole process, that whole approach reinforces itself. I believe this, I look for that, I believe this, I look in a certain way, I see that. My seeing that confirms my view of it as a reality, as a truth, rather than as a perspective. A microscopic view, a narrow focus of awareness, a very sharp attention or mindfulness is a perspective. And that view of atomism is a perspective. It's part of the idea that influences the perception. It's a perspective. It's one perspective among many.

Sometimes a person's Dharma practice and understanding and whole trajectory is imprisoned in a kind of reductionist view of different kinds within the Dharma. Perhaps also you can be aware of sometimes when I refer to the epistemology, the dominant epistemology or the epistemicide that does away with or disvalues emotions, devalues emotions as having a place within, as opening up ways of knowing, as opening up perspectives, and strives even for a kind of emotion-free state. You can also witness that in certain kinds of Dharma approaches very easily.

We conceive of an ideal state of certain emotions, particularly equanimity. And the common view of equanimity is that somehow in equanimity everything's calmed down and we're just really seeing clearly without any distortion of any emotion because we're just really steady. The lake is clear and we can see clearly. Or, as I said, certain emotions. Or, with mindfulness, the idea is that a certain emotion might be there, but if I keep practicing mindfulness, actually there's a quieting of the emotional state. But when I'm practicing mindfulness, when I'm mindful, even if an emotion's there, I've somehow got some distance on it so that I'm not so much seeing through the emotion as I'm devaluing what it tells me because there's an epistemic devaluing because of the kind of aloofness or distance we have, or perspective actually we have, on emotions. So that can creep in as well.

So this reductionist view and the atomism there was exactly one of the things that, if you like, Nāgārjuna as the father of the Mahāyāna, or one of the fathers of the Mahāyāna, was exactly what he took issue with. And you can read his whole body of work as really picking holes in that reductionist dharma, that kind of atomic realist view.

Or, again, so I'm talking again about ideas that limit our experience. In this case, what about Dharma ideas or the ways that this limitation that comes from certain ideas happens within a Dharma context? So another one, again, we've touched on it either directly or indirectly, is the absence of the concept of eros and soul-making, the concepts of eros and soul-making. If you just consider the concept of eros...

And the absence of that concept doesn't allow, for me, doesn't allow enough differentiations of desire. It will lead to certain blind spots. It will lead to certain gates closing, not even witnessing, oh, that's a possible gate. It will lead to a certain very tightly circumscribed notion of what awakening is or could be.

It will lead also to, because of the way eros will stimulate the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, the soul-making dynamic, and that stimulates and stretches and expands and deepens our ideas and perceptions of things in sensing with soul, the absence of eros will also lead to a kind of rigidification and a narrowing, a narrow rigidification of what, for example, matter is. Matter is this. It's the four elements or whatever. Mind is this, in some view of what mind is or what mental elements are. Awakening is this.

So there isn't, because of the absence of eros, there isn't the possibility for the eros-psyche-logos dynamic to really get going and stretch and expand and add dimensionality and open up the view and open up the ideation.

And then a further problem or limitation coming from the absence of the concept of eros comes from, for me, if we don't have the idea of eros, then we actually don't have an adequate understanding of our motivation or our desire in practice and how it works. Without the concept of eros and soul-making, we don't have an adequate or wide enough or rich enough complete enough understanding of what is motivating us, what are we actually desiring when we practice and when we practice consistently and with a lot of love and dedication.

There's not therefore an adequate understanding or model or theory of our motivations and desires as they already exist. It's already driving us. Someone who loves practice already has eros and soul-making involved in that love, in that dedication of practice. As I said, where we love, where we're dedicated, where we're devoted—I don't mean just devoted in a typically religious sense, I mean devoted, just devoted to something. You know, devoted to doing, devoted to practicing, for example, devoted to awareness, whatever it is. Where there is love, dedication, devotion, there is eros and a sense of soulfulness and soul-making in the ways that we would use them. It might be limited, but they're still operating there.

So with the absence of the concepts of eros, ideas of eros and soul, we don't actually have an adequate or rich enough, complete enough theory of what motivates us, what we desire, and how that actually works to propel and prolong a life of practice.

I'm going to stop here for today, but I want to continue just on this theme. I'm reluctant to rush through it because I think it's so important and it's also opening up things from a slightly different perspective than what I've done before. So I'm hoping that not rushing will be more helpful.

So let's do the second part of this business about ideas tomorrow.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.