Between Icon and Eidos: Image & Hermeneutics in Meditation (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:38:22

We started this talk by pointing out that for many people, even when there's considerable interest and attraction to practicing this way and exploring this whole realm and the possibilities of sensing the soul imagining and perceiving, there can still be a kind of force or pull from the culturally dominant view that is entrenched in our psyche and exerts its influence—its stern judgment on what we might be thinking or how we might be practicing, sometimes in very quiet and subtle ways.

It may be that for many people, the practice of sensing the soul and that whole orientation needs some support through intellectual exploration of ideas and concepts that might be inhibiting it, preventing it, judging it, dismissing it. By being aware of these ideas, looking at them, questioning them, and seeing if there are other possible ideas that can give this opening legitimacy and support, we can feel space in which to explore. Can we pry open this space by considering the influence of ideas, questioning them, and finding ideas that will open up space and provide ground and legitimization for sensing the soul and all the possibilities that brings?

As part of this work, we are heirs to a complex and confusing legacy of ideas coming to us through culture and history, forming something of a bedrock in the psyche. In recognizing this fact and being aware of what exactly these ideas are, where they come from, what influence they have, we can begin to question and poke at that bedrock and the rocks that make it up, so that imprisonment doesn't happen automatically and unconsciously. Perhaps we can then turn the soil, to use a different metaphor, of the ground made up of these clumps of ideas and rocks. In looking at and working that soil, we can turn it so it becomes a different ground—soil that now supports fertility and fecundity for imagining, perceiving, and sensing the soul.

At some point, for some of you, this very questioning and consideration of ideas and playing in the realm of ideas as they relate to, inhibit, support, or open this whole direction of practice may itself become soul-making. One's sense of being at a certain place in a certain culture with certain needs, perspectives, and dominant trends, and one's whole participation in the culture and the evolution, contest, or conversation of worldviews within a culture as it moves forward in time—that whole vision and sense of engagement with different ideas can become soul-making.

In the first part of yesterday's talk, we looked at some threads we can identify within the legacy from the scientific revolution and the classical scientific worldview overstepping its boundary into scientism,

including what William James called "vicious abstractionism." We explored how this comes into our life and gives rise to doubt, inhibition, hesitation, or downright forbidding of certain orientations in practice, certain directions, devaluing certain perceptions, experiences, openings, and aspects of our being.

Alongside the scientific legacy, we can consider the Western philosophical legacy—a complex and rich interweaving of different philosophical traditions in dialogue with science. I'd also like to weave in some attempts within Western philosophy to open up and question the established epistemologies, ontologies, and worldviews that became entrenched with the Western Enlightenment and shaped what some call the modernist worldview. These were attempts to challenge the domination of scientific thinking.

As we examine some of these attempts, we should also notice how they often fall short of what we might need to support our work, how some fall short because they remain influenced, often unwittingly, by some of the limited thinking they sought to break free of. Hopefully we can consider where they might be expanded, added to, or themselves challenged and opened up in different ways.

I'd like to pick up this story in the early 20th century. There was the evolution of science I talked about, the First and Second World Wars, and obvious concern about values, morals, and where humanity was heading. Several people pointed out the divorce or disconnection between scientific exploration on one hand and the human context in which it happens on the other, including consideration of moral values and other values. Science tells us nothing about value, certainly not moral values.

Edmund Husserl, the German philosopher, wrote a book called *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. He was living in Germany after the Nazis rose to power, and part of his concern was pointing to science and what he called "the positivistic reduction of the idea of science to mere factual science." Positivism basically holds that if something isn't material and measurable, it's nonsense.

This idea of positivism started to take over in certain philosophical lineages and more widely in sociology and as a life view. Husserl points out that the positivistic reduction of science to mere factual science means that science has nothing to do with human values or questions of human freedom. It "excludes in principle precisely the questions which humanity, given over in our unhappy times to the most portentous upheavals, finds the most burning"—questions of the meaning or meaninglessness of the whole of human existence.

Can we not say something similar in our time?

This way of thinking had forgotten about or devalued the human context, treating it as something material and measurable, applying classical scientific methodology to human sciences and the study of humanity, leaving very little to say about values and human life.

One of Husserl's responses was to focus on what he called the "life-world." This concept...

If you're somewhat interested in these ideas but don't want to dive deeply into reading volumes of philosophy, there's an excellent introduction to many of these philosophical concepts in David West's book *Continental Philosophy*. I think it's really accessible—not too long, and you can dip in and out of it. If you find yourself drawn to these kinds of ideas, it might be an interesting book for some of you. I'm paraphrasing a bit from what he said there.

Husserl responds to this kind of crisis, partly, with his idea of the life world. He wants to explore this life world, which is basically our sense of life as we live it. It's the ordinary context—the conventional presumption that I exist and you exist separate from me, that I'm in my house right now, that the table is in front of me—just the conventional view of the world. This life world forms the context and the basic presupposition of all thought and action.

It's almost like giving a context to science and philosophy, understanding them as practices that take place within the life world and derive their power through the life world, through our culture, through social networks, but also through what Husserl called "an unquestioned ground of presuppositions." This is really important—an unquestioned ground of presuppositions, a background of unreflective assumptions, values, and practices that make up the life world.

Husserl says that in all scientific inquiry, philosophical inquiry, and so forth, "the everyday surrounding world of life is presupposed as existing. The surrounding world in which all of us, even I who am now philosophizing, consciously have our existence... here also the sciences as cultural facts in this world with their scientists and theories. In this world we are objects among objects in the sense of the life world, namely as being here and there in the plain certainty of experience before anything that is established scientifically, whether in physiology, psychology or sociology. On the other hand, we are subjects for this world, namely as the ego subjects, experiencing it, contemplating it, valuing it, related to it purposefully."

There's a lot in that dense quote, but one piece I'd like to highlight is the emphasis on the life world. His philosophy then emphasized and limited itself to the investigation of the appearances of the life world—this idea of staying with appearances, the appearances of life as we experience it in everyday existence that we take for granted, containing all these unreflective presuppositions and assumptions.

This wasn't a completely new word or philosophical direction, but in a way he gave birth to or started the phenomenological movement, although Hegel and Kant had used this term before. But phenomenology as the study of—the limiting of philosophical investigation to—the appearances that are part of our everyday life, inner and outer. And so this phenomenological movement was born in philosophy: staying with the appearances of the life world.

You can hear, if not the exact language then at least some of the tenor of this in many of our current explorations of Buddhist practice, insight meditation, or mindfulness. People use slightly different emphases, but there is also in contemporary dharma this emphasis on attention to and investigation of the appearances of everyday life—the experiences and appearances of our lives. Can we bring attention to

that with mindfulness? Can we bring bare attention to that? These are common themes in contemporary dharma teaching.

But again, even though science started with "let's give attention to the appearances," both the presuppositions that exist there and the ways these practices develop bring new appearances as I'm investigating appearances. It moves out of the life world. In other words, we start with appearances, but either we're approaching with a certain network of ideas that become concepts that influence the way of looking and thus what is experienced—as I'll return to shortly—or we're simply saying, "Give really close, bare attention to my experience of the world and my inner experience right now, the life world."

What happens is that the attention starts to deconstruct one's everyday life world experience. Then, as I mentioned before, there's a kind of reductionist paradigm or deconstructionist and then reductionist paradigm operating. "Ah, you see, when I look closely, this is what I find—that must be reality: these atomic units of perception, sensation, vedanā, consciousness, and so forth."

Sometimes this kind of phenomenological intention in mindfulness and bare attention actually pushes and opens up this sense of the range of what the life world is, and sometimes it declares what it experiences through a certain lens as reality.

But let's stay with Western philosophy a little longer. We'll return to dharma shortly.

Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo makes a point that I really want to highlight. Husserl, with his idea of bringing it back to this basic sense of existence and the basic experience we have of life—world, inner, outer, and all that we take for granted wrapped up in that experience—had a really good idea. But there are problems with it, quite a few problems.

One is, as Vattimo points out, there is no "phenomenological analysis of experience."

So this is what Husserl wanted to do—a phenomenological analysis and description and investigation of experience. But Vattimo points out (he's a much more recent philosopher) that there is no "phenomenological analysis of experience," and he places "phenomenological" in quotation marks deliberately. The quotation marks cannot be avoided here. There is no phenomenological analysis of experiences that is not conditioned—that is, made possible and qualified by the fact of belonging to a tradition.

In other words, everything that Husserl wanted to see as a kind of universal of human existence was actually how everyone in his society at his time, within a certain tradition, sensed existence. How different it would be if we talked about a phenomenological investigation of, say, a tribe in Papua New Guinea or the Amazon that had never had contact with Westerners. Their experience, their—phenomena means "appearance" in Greek, by the way, so it's the investigation, the logos of phenomena, of appearance—their world, their life world, would be completely different.

So Vattimo is pointing out that we're always belonging to a tradition. It's not as though there is an experience, and then after that, we add intellectual abstractions to it. Vattimo goes on to write: Is not this fact of belonging to a tradition—which colors, shapes, limits our phenomenological analysis as well as actually being part of the fabrication of our life world—is this not a situation familiar to hermeneutics, familiar to this whole branch of philosophy that deals with the interpretation of texts and of existence? That one who is dominated by prejudices cannot recognize and thematize them as such. Something Nietzsche pointed out even before Husserl was writing.

So the life world is something that exists for a certain history, for a certain historical cultural context. And then the analysis of that life world is also an analysis dependent on a historical cultural tradition, philosophical tradition, and context.

One of the things Husserl was famous for saying was "to the things themselves." In other words, let's put aside metaphysics, let's put aside this kind of positivism of science, and go directly to the things that present themselves to us. But when we consider the historical cultural context and what we bring to that investigation—and also to our experience itself—that rallying cry for phenomenology "to the things themselves" seems rather naive. This becomes clear once we've seen the dependence of any perceptions of things on the way of looking in the moment (which I'll return to) and on the concepts entertained within the way of looking at any point (which I've mentioned and will come back to).

Those concepts that operate in us will include scientific and other ideas for us now—different from what they would be for someone living in exactly this spot where I am now in England, say, hundreds of years ago in medieval times, before the scientific revolution. The very way we perceive "the things themselves," so-called, would be colored by—or rather, implicitly, almost tacitly colored, infected, shaped, and limited by—a scientific worldview that we've all been educated in, along with other ideas.

So actually it becomes hard to separate phenomenology from science, or rather it becomes hard to separate a phenomenological investigation from being infected with ideas from science.

More generally, we see that a person's experience of phenomena is hugely conditioned, shaped, determined, allowed or disallowed—this or that sense of things, this or that experience—by the current worldview, the *Weltanschauung*, in the culture in which they live.

But even this is not quite right; it's a little too simple. Heidegger, or some interpretations of Heidegger, stressed what's called a kind of historical "thrownness" into a zeitgeist. In other words, I am born at a certain time in a certain place in history; I'm thrown into a cultural worldview. And that's part of the problem that needs to be realized. This changes over time.

But even that is not universal. Not everyone thrown into—let's say, like I was born in England in the 1960s and then lived through that, spending some time in the States and coming back—is going to have the same worldview, or even the same set of influences, strands of influences. The currents in history now are

broad, so it's not universal. Even the influences operating for someone in a certain location in time and space, thrown by their birth into that location, vary considerably.

For Westerners living today, there is no longer just one common worldview or way of experiencing the life world. So this historical thrownness, or what's called the zeitgeist (the spirit of the times), is not an objective fact, a reality, what some philosophers like to call a "facticity"—something that's just there and you can't do anything about it.

There are lots of different influences of ideas, and it varies from individual to individual and subculture to subculture—which influences are dominant, how they are valued, and so forth. Even the whole movement of history is shaped by perspective: the victors of a war, even if it's only a cultural war, write the histories. Some of you might know Howard Zinn's book *A People's History of the United States*—a history of the United States that doesn't get taught in high school. It's history from the perspective of Native Americans or African American slaves. Who writes the history books?

So there are many histories and many influences of ideas, given different weights and different influences in shaping, limiting, and fabricating the worldview—and then the analysis in what we might call attempted phenomenological analysis of that worldview. All this needs to be taken into account.

Sometimes with insight meditation, we might be tempted to assume that we are employing an attention or mindfulness that reveals what things are, the way things are. If we employ an attention that "reveals"—and I'll put that in quotation marks—an atomistic world of sensation and experience, we might be tempted to think: "Oh, that's a phenomenological approach because I'm just looking at my experience, looking at the appearances, taking them as I find them, investigating them carefully. I don't have any presuppositions."

Then what we see reveals—depending on how you're applying mindfulness, and that's the key point—perhaps an atomistic view. And we think: "Oh, so this is the phenomenological approach. When I employ the phenomenological approach, this is what I see."

And then I'm corroborated by certain texts. I say, yes, there are just... The self is the five aggregates. There is just this... and so forth—atoms of vedanā and sensation, moments of consciousness, and so on. So there's that approach in philosophy and there's sometimes that approach within Dharma where we think, oh, that's something like the phenomenological approach.

There was another German philosopher, Wilhelm Dilthey, and in some ways he could be regarded even more than Husserl as the grandfather of the phenomenological movement in the twentieth century. He really didn't like this kind of reductionism in psychology or philosophy, and so he was rather scornful and pointed out that—I'm quoting now—we live and move not in a sphere of sensations, but of objects presenting themselves to us. Not in a sphere of feelings—sensations and feelings are in inverted commas here—but of value, meaning, and so on. In other words, we can deconstruct appearances, but in

deconstructing we also miss something. It's like not seeing the forest for the trees.

To me, neither perspective realizes fully enough the dependence of experiences on ways of looking, nor how broad and diverse is the range of ways of looking, and therefore of experiences. In other words, when I look in a certain way, I get this experience—and it might be an atomistic sense of appearances, appearances as atoms. When I look another way, I get very different experiences of objects and values and meanings, and so forth. And the range extends way beyond all that.

So insisting that one or the other is the real way we experience things just misses the whole dependence on ways of looking.

I want to challenge the typical conception of phenomenology as a kind of investigation and uncovering of the universal human experience of a life world or *the* life world. There are lots of problems with that approach. What I would like to stress and open is a conception of what I call the phenomenological approach—as far as we're concerned, what I have been calling the phenomenological approach in previous talks over the last few years—as an investigation of how experience of the life world, or how appearances, vary. They vary in a historically contingent way, as Heidegger emphasized, and also depending on mood, or what we could call mind state in Dharma language. But far more widely than any of that, and subtly—the gradations are extremely subtle—they vary depending on what I've been calling the way of looking in the moment.

There's another philosopher, Richard Palmer, who wrote a book on hermeneutics in philosophy. He writes about Wilhelm Dilthey's thought: "Experience is precisely the reality of what is there for me before experience becomes objective and therefore admits of a separation from the subjective." Palmer is emphasizing that idea of Dilthey's, that his fruitful insight—again I'm quoting—is "in seeing experience as a realm before subject and object."

This is quite a common theme or emphasis of some phenomenologists: saying that actually, experience is—when we really look at our experience—there is no subject and object. That comes later. That's some kind of intellectual superposition or superimposition. When you investigate experience, experience is just before subject and object division.

Continuing with Palmer writing about Dilthey: Dilthey's "fruitful insight lay in seeing experience as a realm before subject and object, a realm in which the world and our experience of it are given together. He saw with clarity the poverty of the subject-object model of human encounter with the world."

I personally have problems with this, and if you've done enough practice in some of the ways that I've suggested, you would have problems with it as well—you should have problems with it. Because the sense of subject-object split that I or you experience—the sense of them being split, that there is a subject and there is an object, they're somehow loosely connected but they're really split, or them as being kind of poles of a polarity, or the dissolution of that polarity in some kind of oneness or unity or whatever—varies

in experience dependent on the way of looking. The very sense and experience of subject and object and their relationship, or what they are in relationship to each other, varies dependent on the way of looking.

So yes, there is a poverty, as Palmer points out, to the subject-object model of human encounter with the world. But it's not because the reality of our basic experience is devoid of the subject-object split. A model that insists that experience is always pre-reflectively devoid of, or that pre-reflective experience is always devoid of or before subject and object, is equally poor. The idea that this is how it is, and then we add something—the idea of subject and object based on intellectual ideas or whatever—that's equally poor.

To insist on the reality of subject-object split, either implicitly or explicitly, is as poor a model as it is to insist that always there is no subject-object split, that it's only added later by the intellect or whatever.

The sense of subject and object—and I mean the pre-reflective sense, not the intellectual—depends on the way of looking in the moment for its intensity, its vividness, and the degree of its separation. Where and how much of a duality or polarity or oneness or total alienation exists between subject and object depends entirely on the way of looking in the moment. A meditator will see this very clearly.

What's more, the state or perception of the subject-object polarity in our experience is affected by the very investigation of it. In investigating, in giving it careful attention, in paying attention to it with curiosity—"Let's see, where's that subject-object split now?"—that paying attention itself is a way of looking, and it changes everything. The attentive curiosity toward the state of the subject-object nexus or gestalt affects the state of it, and therefore the perception of it, just as Heisenberg pointed out with the observation of matter. His uncertainty principle became a fundamental tenet of quantum mechanics: the observation itself depends on the way of looking.

What's common to many of these endeavors is perhaps just a human tendency—maybe part of what the Buddha called basic avijjā—this need or want to say, "This is how it is." So Dilthey says this about subject and object, someone else says that. "This is how it is." And "this is how it is" means this is how it is independent of the way of looking.

Historical context serves as a conditioning factor in what appears to us in our sense of the life world. That historical context isn't even universal for everyone alive today. And even more than all that: dependence on ways of looking.

Ways of looking can be deliberate, consciously played with, manipulated, experimented with. But they operate anyway—there's always a way of looking when there's any experience, any appearance, any life world at all, any perception. That way of looking includes concepts, even if we're not conscious of them at the time. They're implicit, tacit, very subtle.

When I refer to the phenomenological approach in our work, it's really the investigation of how different ways of looking affect or fabricate appearances differently. How does the world, inner and outer—how does experience, appearance, perception—get constructed, built, experienced differently, dependent on

the way of looking in the moment? What's involved in that? What's the possibility there? Is there some stance or perception or appearance that we can say is not dependent on the way of looking? Find out.

The phenomenological approach, when I borrow that word from philosophy, really means the investigation of how different ways of looking fabricate differently.

In that context, bare attention or mindfulness are ways of looking. They're not revealing any kind of objective reality. They're ways of looking. What we see with any kind of mindfulness, bare attention, or this or that is what we experience and sense through that particular lens at that time. Involved in that are concepts, and involved in that is metaphysics.

I really want to insist on this. What do I mean by metaphysics? It's actually a big, problematic, and contentious word. I'm going to say that it includes ontological beliefs and assumptions, epistemological beliefs and assumptions—in other words, beliefs and assumptions about what's real and about how we know or what constitutes valid knowledge concerning what is real or not real. It also includes a whole cosmology: what is the nature of this world, and of a human being.

Metaphysics exists anytime there's any belief or assumption—conscious or unconscious, implicit or explicit—around ontology, epistemology, or cosmology. These aren't just abstract concepts; they're commitments we have. They shape what we value, how we practice, what we intend, how we invest our energy, what we devote ourselves to. They also shape how we move in the world and how we talk to each other. Ontological, epistemological, and cosmological commitments, beliefs, and assumptions are wrapped up in perception—any and all perception.

But metaphysics has also come to be very contentious as speculation about anything that's behind appearances.

So if you talk about gods or souls or any kind of mysterious energy or something like that, this is regarded and dismissed because it's metaphysics. And modern people are not interested in metaphysics, so the sort of thrust goes.

But as we pointed out when we talked about science, even fundamental particles are something behind appearances. They're not immediately discernible to the senses. And they're not even discernible with high-powered instruments. An electron microscope still can't see an electron, let alone a quark or whatever. So assuming that there is a reality behind our everyday appearances—the atomistic reality or atoms of matter or atoms of sensation and consciousness—assuming that's the reality behind appearances, that too is a metaphysics. And as I said, even physical laws are something, so to speak, behind appearances. It can be extremely abstract.

We might say, "Ah yes, but scientific laws are at least amenable to empirical checking through experiment and whatever, and we can kind of hone in on the truth there." Not so simple, that distinction. Spiritual laws, if we can even use such a term, psychological laws, soul laws—if we can use those kinds of

ideas—are also testable and can predict what happens.

But anyway, there's metaphysics as ontology, epistemology, cosmology. There's metaphysics as the postulation of what is behind appearances as a reality. And then there's also a very important aspect I want to draw out. It's kind of wrapped up in those other two definitions or aspects of metaphysics. But there's also what I would call the metaphysics of objectivity. And that is the assumption of a singular objective reality that it's possible for us to know. "This is how things are."

So that metaphysics of objectivity, it's all over the place. Even when people say, "I don't believe in truth" or "the Buddha wasn't interested in truth" or this or that, it's hiding in one's approach to existence. This metaphysics of objectivity—an assumption of a singular objective reality that's possible for us to know—actually is an ontological, epistemological belief, assumption, or commitment, as I said in the first aspect.

But these metaphysical concepts and ideas are wrapped up in perception. They walk around with us and they shape things for us. So sometimes it's possible to just get rid of metaphysics, dispense with it, put it aside, cut it out. And that's often the rallying cry of people who have a more existentialist bent.

But I'd say we can truly avoid or dispense with metaphysics about as successfully or to the extent that we can truly avoid or dispense with experiences in the six sense spheres. In other words, where there is sensing, where there is sensation, there is metaphysics. There are ontological beliefs, assumptions about what's real, about what experiences we can trust, about what constitutes knowing something—all of this and more. And also the sense of something being, so to speak, behind that we don't have direct experience of, but we can trust and it's part of reality.

So cut out the metaphysics, throw it away? Great. You can do that about as easily as you can get rid of all of your sense experiences in the five sense spheres and the mind of thought and imagining. I think it's important to point out: we can't just pretend that we don't have ontological, epistemological, cosmological commitments. That's actually where we invest our energy, our time, our dedication. And also what we trust, what we rely on, and what we value.

One of the even more interesting things about all this is that epistemology is the kind of ideas about or beliefs about or exploration about what knowledge can we trust concerning what is real. But when you really probe and ask questions epistemologically, you will inevitably come to some kind of answer that you realize rests on some kind of other assumption, and that assumption, whatever it is, is actually ultimately unprovable.

In other words, if you really probe: "Well, how do I—okay, I think this is real, how do I know?" "Well, because I value this kind of way of gaining knowledge and that kind of way of gaining knowledge. I don't value that one and that one." "And so why do you value that?" And then you keep asking, "Why? Why? Why?" You'll come down to some kind of assumption that you then can't prove.

This is a really important thing to acknowledge. So as I said, a lot of this ontology and epistemology operates wordlessly and unconsciously as logoi in the perceiving consciousness, so to speak. Any moment of mindfulness has some metaphysics with it. And you can see, again, if you've done a lot of more intense mindfulness practice, you will see how, for instance, the sense of materiality varies. Once there's a lot of momentum to the mindfulness and close mindfulness, the solidity of things, of materiality, actually starts to unsolidify. And so the separation between mind and matter begins to—the subject-object separation between mind and matter also begins to kind of loosen or melt a little bit.

Depending on how much and what kind of mindfulness one is applying. When that dichotomy between mind and matter begins to melt a little bit, when the split between subject and object eases and the polarity softens, something profound happens. The two poles—mind and matter, subject and object—begin to melt together. At that point, the mindfulness carries with it a different ontology and epistemology than it did when it started, if one really goes with it and into it.

Even with just the instructions of mindfulness in the Satipatthana Sutta, the experiences that open up when applying different mindfulness practices bring with them, or carry with them, different ontologies and epistemologies that then unfold. Mindfulness is actually not one way of looking—it's many ways of looking.

Consider the instruction to imagine your corpse disintegrating and falling apart in a charnel ground—this is one of the contemplations in the Satipatthana Sutta, in the Buddha's discourse on mindfulness. That's a certain way of looking. The experience of sitting in a very calm state and contemplating mind states, or contemplating the presence and absence of the seven factors of awakening—this is a very different way of looking.

Any moment of mindfulness carries with it a certain set of metaphysical assumptions, a certain metaphysics. Our lives are lived and experienced with, or from, whatever constitutes our habitual set of metaphysical ideas, beliefs, and concepts.

Heidegger wrote: "Metaphysics is not something which can be put aside like an opinion, nor can it be left behind us like a doctrine in which we no longer believe." So this whole idea of putting aside metaphysics, cutting it out, just not engaging in it—when you actually understand what's involved there, you realize we can't do that. We carry it with us. What we can do is explore different metaphysics and see how different metaphysical concepts affect our experience.

There was a phenomenological current in Western philosophy, and from a whole other direction, we have someone like Richard Rorty, an American philosopher who died not too long ago. He was quite influential and wrote about two other philosophers: Wilfrid Sellars and W.V.O. Quine. They were what are called analytical philosophers—very different from the philosophy we discussed earlier with Rousseau and Dilthey. This analytical tradition focuses on analyzing human thought, theory, and the elements of reality, examining how we can form scientific opinions about things.

Rorty investigated all this and came largely from that tradition. He said: "I interpret Sellars' attack on givenness..." Sellars had addressed our idea of what is given to us by experience—this notion of basic givenness, that life simply gives us this or that appearance, and then we do something with it. But Sellars demolished that idea.

Quine, another analytical philosopher, became famous for concluding after his investigations that "all so-called raw data are already theory-laden." This echoes Sellars' attack on givenness and resonates with what we've been exploring about emptiness and ways of looking. The very attractive idea of getting to basic facts without adding anything more to them doesn't hold up under scrutiny. After all his scrupulous logical and philosophical investigations, Quine concluded that all so-called raw data are already theory-laden. We're already bringing concepts into the ways we look at experience. There is no raw data that we can have. There is no pure givenness.

Rorty explains: "I interpret Sellars' attack on givenness and Quine's attack on necessity as the crucial steps in undermining the possibility of a theory of knowledge"—in other words, epistemology. "The holism and pragmatism common to both philosophers are the lines of thought that, when extended in a certain way, let us see truth as, in William James' phrase, 'what is better for us to believe' rather than as the accurate representation of reality."

What is better for us to believe? This is profoundly dharmic, at least as I would present the emptiness teachings. What is better for us to believe—or perhaps more precisely, how is it better for us to look?—rather than seeking what we usually think of as truth: the accurate representation of reality. We often approach meditation with the assumption that we can look in a certain way and see "how it is"—the accurate representation—especially when we're super equanimous, very calm, unruffled, unemotional, or deeply mindful.

Or to put the point less provocatively—though I think this is more provocative anyway—they show us that the notion of accurate representation is simply an automatic or empty compliment which we pay to those beliefs which are successful in helping us do what we want to do.

In other words, we call real just what we want to call real. It's convenient to call something real depending on what we want to do with a certain point of view or a certain assumption about reality. It's a little unclear from that quote what he means by what we want to do. He might mean whether we want to apply technology or whether we want to build up a relationship with someone.

But there's a quote from Nietzsche—and Nietzsche is so much the forerunner of this kind of thinking in philosophy—though I can't find the exact reference. He said something like, people select their philosophy about reality based on what kind of freedom their soul wants. In other words, if they want to set something free in themselves that they really care about, set their soul free in relation to that, then they adopt a philosophy and therefore a whole worldview and sense of existence and real and unreal, dependent on just what the soul wants.

What do we want to do?

When we're practicing mindfulness, mindfulness is also wanting something. It's set in and determined by a context of desiring that is shaped by the Four Noble Truths. What do I want when I'm mindful? I want liberation. I want ease of dukkha. I want to move towards the Third Noble Truth. What's that? Well, I have to understand the First Noble Truth. Mindfulness is also set in the context of the Fourth Noble Truth—the Eightfold Path—and a certain understanding of what gives rise to dukkha in the Second Noble Truth.

So it's set in a conceptual context, but it's also wanting something. There's a desire there. What we want to do, says Rorty. What do we want to do? Letting that question actually shape our ideas of what truth is and reality—what we might loosely now term truth or reality.

Collectively, this is interesting because of our global crisis now—the crisis of the species and the earth and the climate. What do we want to do? We want to solve those crises, I hope. If we want to solve the crisis by purely technological thought, technological thinking, technological perceptions—purely an issue about carbon dioxide levels, and if we can get some technology to remove the carbon dioxide—great, really important. But is that the limit of what we want to do? Solve our crises by those kinds of ways of looking, those kinds of value systems, ontologies? Nature as machine and commodity might have been part of how we got into this mess in the first place.

What do we want to do?

And in caring for people, what does that mean to care for people? What do we want to do? What is a human being? What is a person? Are we caring by giving so much attention to the GDP and relentlessly being entrenched in the view of growth economics? What do we want to do, and what's the relationship between what we want to do and our views of what's real and what is the case—what a human being is, what nature is, what the world is? And what do we want to do together as a society? What do we want to do as individuals? Because individuals have very different directions of their desire, of their longing, of their aspirations.

One of Richard Rorty's main concerns was actually social. He was famous for saying—I can't remember the exact quote—but his basic intention or the point of all his philosophy was just to keep the conversation going. In other words, he wanted this idea of non-truth, his statement about why it was important, so that we can keep talking to each other, so that there is this kind of conversation that's possible between different points of view.

I don't know all his writings, but I read some. What seems strange to me is that he kept saying this thing about the basic point of all this is to keep the conversation going. There's a social concern there. But I'm not aware of him actually engaging in much conversation about different points of view in a way that was really productive or changed anyone's mind, or brought anyone into at least being able to experience someone else's worldview and what opened from that. Is the conversation ongoing? I'm not sure, in our

wider culture. Did he take part in that? I'm not sure.

And if so, how much power and significance? Because if it's just an intellectual conversation, it actually doesn't enable one, as I said, to really open up the sense of existence and the worldview. The playing with ways of looking, the flexibility with ways of looking—that's what I call meditation. And that actually allows an altering of view, meaning experience, meaning appearance.

This idea that Rorty actually at least said that he felt was important—to keep the conversation going—as a model of that or an example of that kind of social opening up and social cohesion and openness of conversation and openness of relationship with truth, as a model there is the Midrashic tradition in the Jewish tradition. Midrash is a kind of commentary or interpretation of the whole set of sacred scriptures.

Now I'm paraphrasing another philosopher called Gerald Bruns, who writes about hermeneutics, but in this chapter, he's writing about the Midrash. He's talking about people going to study in the Beit Midrash—the house where this kind of hermeneutics of the Bible is studied—and there are these fierce debates going on. But fierce as they are and polarized as they are in terms of the difference of opinions, they don't split the community.

So there are polarly opposite opinions on the interpretation of this passage or that passage. This rabbi says this, the other rabbi says completely the opposite. A student asks, "How can I study in such an environment? What is this? It's chaos—this chaos of opinions and contradictory viewpoints. One guy says this, the other guy says the opposite, a third guy says a third thing. What am I supposed to do with that?"

And the idea is that this is exactly the perfect environment for studying, for relating to, for opening up and being opened up by the sacred text. As I said right at the beginning of this talk, let me remind us that hermeneutics means the interpretation not just of texts, but also of existence.

Here's a social situation that took place—ongoing for hundreds of years in Judaism, I'm not sure if it's still going—of this kind of openness to different points of view. Multiple interpretations were viable. An infinity of interpretations was conceivable, and there was this great fecundity of different viewpoints, different chewings over, different reworkings, different connections made regarding any passage from any sacred text, and regarding the whole thing as well.

In this social context, those engaged in relating to—in this case, the Torah or other texts—this way, we see that they imagine themselves as part of the whole, participating in Torah. Torah is the Old Testament in Hebrew. Participating in Torah rather than operating on it at an analytical distance. Participating in it.

So it's not something that I look at from a cold distance. I'm actually somehow part of it in my engagement with it, in this whole tussle and multiplicity of opinions and interpretations and slants and elaborations and connections. That actually is part of it. I'm participating in it. We are participating in it. This conversation is participating in it. This social scene is part of it.

From that idea of participation, it follows that the words of interpretation cannot be isolated in any rigorously analytical way from the words of Torah itself. In other words, where does the Old Testament end and the interpretation of it begin? It's all Torah—all of it is this whole. The subject and the object, the way of looking and what appears, the concept brought to bear and the world that opens up there—it's all Torah. You cannot separate the text. You cannot separate existence. If we elaborate what's said here in terms of text and extend it to include existence, you get this understanding.

Again, in other words, the Torah is constituted as an open canon. To be sure, the letters of the original scriptures are fixed, but they are not dead. So there's something alive here. Openness here has to be construed as the openness of what is written—that is, its applicability to the time of its interpretation, its need for actualization. We'll come back to that point shortly.

Now you must picture the text not as a formal object—so many fixed letters—but as an open canon whose boundaries are shaped and reshaped by the give and take of midrashic argument. Here's this whole community of passionate debate and creativity and probing and wider study and elaboration and contextualization. And that is something that shapes and reshapes the boundaries of, in this case, the scripture, the text. And we can also, again, say this about existence.

Those who study in this way—with passion, knowledge, and deep elaboration—make the text what it is. Above all, they make it open. They open it to the present and the future. The Torah, the text, or existence itself emerges as what it is and comes into its own only in the dialogue it generates. Only by entering into this dialogue can one enter the Torah, enter the text.

Now this is a social situation, which I'll return to, but we can also translate this to our own individual experience—if we can even conceive of the individual as truly isolated. We're always influenced by ideas we receive from the past and our contemporaries, as much as by what emerges fresh for ourselves today. There's this dialogue, this flexibility of interpretations, elaborations, contextualizations—and multiplicity, a rich multiplicity of interpretations.

This would be an example, socially, of the kind of thing Rorty claimed to be interested in. But it's more than what Rorty was getting at. It's a different notion entirely. Because of this idea of participation—there are those who study, who passionately engage with the text, or reality, or the sense of existence itself. They're participating. They see themselves as not separate. This isn't the kind of objective stance we find in scientific epistemology. This is participation—participating in the text and participating in the holiness.

So this whole view, very different from Rorty's, presents a vision of a social situation, of a conversation that keeps going, of an openness regarding notions of truth. But it preserves holiness.

I think with Richard Rorty—quite an influential and popular philosopher in some circles—I really get the sense from reading him that he had a hidden agenda and a hidden dogmatism of physicalism. Despite all his talk about open truth, he often lets slip statements or passages that sound like his basic view is one of

atomic, meaningless movement of physicality—meaningless material particles in a meaningless universe. This was a kind of bedrock he couldn't shake, a hidden dogmatism that spread through his writings and created a hidden agenda that favored that particular metaphysics, that ontology and epistemology, over and against any kind of religious or spiritual view.

But again, this midrashic example—this passionate give and take, this complexity and variability and vastness and multiplicity—was actually creative. I'm not sure if it's still ongoing or came to a halt perhaps a few hundred years ago, but it was a creative, ongoing debate that worked its way into people's psyches and then into their actual views and how they lived their lives. In other words, it was an actual conversation that affected perception, senses of existence, commitments, practices, devotions, orientations—all of it.

Let me quote from Rabbi Efraim of Sudolkov, because he points out something crucial. We're talking about hermeneutics now—the interpretation of usually sacred texts. But as I said, I want to expand this to the interpretation of existence itself. The interpretation of texts and teachings, yes, but also of existence. Using this model that's quite alive and insisted upon in the Jewish tradition—this multiplicity, this non-singleness model, this non-objective status of truth. Truth as something multiple, amenable to multi-perspectives, infinitely variegated, infinitely mineable, infinitely fertile, and dependent on our participation—dependent on all kinds of things.

So Rabbi Efraim writes: "Until they had interpreted it"—and he means the people who are engaged wholeheartedly, passionately, with integrity and commitment in this interpretation of sacred text, of Torah—"the Torah was not considered complete, but only half finished."

Again, it's not a thing existing by itself. It depends on my participation. The wider point is the same with existence, the same with Dharma. "Until they had interpreted it, the sacred text was not considered complete, but only half finished. It was the rabbis, through their interpretation, who made the Torah whole."

He continues: "Such is the case for each generation"—and its leaders or explorers—"they complete the Torah, they complete the text. The Torah is interpreted in each generation according to that generation's needs."

Nowadays we say the needs are diverse. That's part of what some people call the postmodern condition. We have different perspectives and different needs. But the point here is, again, this non-fixity of truth, the amenability to different situations, different interpretations, which are also historically contextualized.

"The Torah is interpreted in each generation according to that generation's needs"—which we might add now today are multiple and varied—"and according to the soul root of those who live at that time." That may be an idea we return to. "God thus enlightens the sages of the generation in the interpretation of his

holy Torah."

He who denies this is as one who denies the Torah itself. God forbid.

You could read that as a kind of attempt at consolidating rabbinic authority, but actually it opened up. It was part of a movement that kept open and insisted on keeping open this multiplicity of interpretation. It kept open not just the possibility, but the fact of interpretation evolving and changing over time, dependent on the historical cultural context.

Isaiah Berlin, some of you will have heard of him, was another philosopher. He wrote extensively about Gian Battista Vico, an Italian philosopher who lived in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Vico wrote about history and had quite revolutionary ideas for his time on history, culture, and worldview.

This is a passage from Isaiah Berlin, writing about Vico: "Vico's importance in the history of the Western Enlightenment consists in his insistence on the plurality of cultures and on the consequently fallacious character—the mistaken character—of the idea that there is one and only one structure of reality which the enlightened philosopher can see as it truly is and which he can, at least in principle, describe in logically perfect language." He describes this as a vision that has obsessed all kinds of thinkers, then names various philosophers.

There again, we see the singular objective—the notion of a singular objective reality that's universally true for all people, all times, all cultures, and all situations. How endemic that assumption is, whether or not you're a philosopher or consider yourself an intellectual. It creeps into our dharma practice, it creeps into our everyday discourse, it creeps into all kinds of things.

Berlin continues: "For Vico, humanity asks different questions of the universe and their answers are shaped accordingly. Such questions and the symbols or acts that express them alter or become obsolete in the course of cultural development, in the course of history. To understand the answers, one must understand the questions that preoccupy an age or a culture. They are not constant, nor necessarily more profound because they resemble our own more than others that are less familiar to us."

Different questions. Back to this question I posed earlier: What do we want? Rorty—we were left hanging with his quote about what we want. And Nietzsche's quote that I couldn't remember—we actually have different questions that we bring, and we want different answers, or we choose different answers depending on what we want, depending on the worldview that we want to support because it supports something in our soul.

Different questions. When we talk about all this in relation to practice, that's why I emphasize the passion and the involvement of the midrashic context—that kind of heated debate and the endless, soulful investigation and probing and teasing out of text. It matters.

For all this that I'm saying to make sense, it makes sense in the context of it being passionately important.

Something in us is important to us. If someone was just listening to this and they just weren't interested in opening up a sense of existence or what truth was or any of that, none of this would matter. It would be completely ridiculous to be hearing it and would just sound like a bunch of words that's perhaps mildly interesting.

Mattering matters. When we talk about hermeneutics, when we talk about the sense of existence, what we're bringing to it and how we can see or sense existence and how we can legitimate this or that—it matters that it matters to us. When we talk about the way we sense existence and when we want to open up those possibilities, we're talking about something that some level of our soul, its passion, is connected.

Again, Gerald Bruns points out that an interpretation, whether it's a sacred text or whatever, it has to matter. You can't have a good interpretation by anyone of anything when that thing—text or sense of existence—doesn't really matter to them.

Quoting Gerald Bruns: "Say that interpretation, hermeneutics, is an act performed by a person to whom things matter, not by a consciousness primed to produce pictures of how things are in the world, or in the text, or in whatever state of affairs is put before it in analysis." This is different than the picture of cold scientific epistemology that we talked about—the absence of emotion.

He continues: "The Torah is a text that makes things matter. It preserves the smallest details of life from inconsequence and triviality." If you know the Torah, there are hundreds of pages about every little minute detail of life, bringing all that into the realm of mattering passionately and bringing all that into the possibility of being made holy, being sacralized, being sanctified.

Again, Bruns: "Mattering at all events is what the Midrashic text I have been quoting from presupposes with respect to interpretation. Midrash is not a formal operation, but a form of life lived with a text that makes claims on people. A text that makes claims upon people turns them into respondents. They are answerable to the text in a way that is qualitatively different from the answerability of disengaged observers to the scenes they wish to depict."

Now we could substitute the word "existence" for "text" and talk about what we are exploring now—this whole investigation of ontology, epistemology, conceptuality, and opening up the sensing with soul. This whole probing of ideas and the possibilities in sensing with soul is not a formal operation, but a form of life lived with an existence or perceptions of existence that make claims on people.

That kind of sense of existence that makes claims on people turns them into respondents. They are answerable. We are answerable to existence in a way that's different from someone who's just coldly, aloofly, analytically describing it.

So we're talking, again, notice there: desire, eros, this longing to understand, this passion connected with what I want to open up and how I perceive existence and what is legitimized or not and what senses are valued or not. There's passion and there's desire and there's eros in that investigation, in that debate that

we're talking about. There's emotion there.

So desire, eros, and emotion—because they're necessary for the kind of hermeneutics that we're talking about and the kind of debate about hermeneutics that we're talking about—they are necessary, they are included in the epistemology. We're not talking about: "Now I'm in a neutral mind state, now I don't want anything, therefore I see clearly." Nor: "Now there's the quietening of emotion and a calm, equanimous mindfulness, therefore I trust what I see." Nor the kind of scientific epistemology that I pointed out devalues or tries to put aside emotion or any kind of wish. It theoretically pushes that aside, though it doesn't really.

Desire, eros, emotion—necessary and included in the kind of epistemology that we're involved with and trying to open up, and in the whole debate around that.

So it needs to matter. You wouldn't be listening, I presume, at this point, if none of this mattered to you. It needs to matter passionately. We need to be involved, engaged. Our lives are on the line. Our sense of existence is on the line. It needs to matter for us, and it matters also in what comes out of it.

It matters because, as Moscovici wrote and pointed out, questions of epistemology are also questions of social order. Questions of epistemology are also questions of social order. We might say pecking order.

So I've talked in the past about epistemicide, epistemic cleansing, epistemic colonialism. In other words, the dominant worldview of epistemology—secular modernism—taking over other cultures and disregarding, devaluing, dismissing, putting aside, sometimes even outlawing their worldview, their ontology, their cosmology, their epistemology.

Questions of epistemology are also questions of social order, questions of hierarchy and pecking order within a culture. Whose voices get ridiculed? Whose voices just become the entrenched, dominant, unquestioned, accepted view of what reality is? And therefore policy—political, economic, governmental, social, environmental policy—is based on certain worldviews which are based on certain epistemologies. Certain cosmologies are based on certain epistemologies.

So this needs to matter to us, and it matters in the world. And then, again, does the victor—the cultural victor, or the epistemology that is a cultural victor—become at some point a prisoner of that very epistemology, of the very rigidifications and entrenchments of whatever epistemology one is in? The victor then becomes the prisoner.

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