Towards the Imaginal

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:02:09

Okay, so, yes, just to pick up on and add a bit to something Catherine said in the opening talk. There's a lot of material here, and of necessity, some of what we present we will just touch on and mention, while others we will elaborate more fully. That's simply the nature of the limits of time, and not wanting to talk at you all day long.

This connects to what Catherine said in the opening talk about listening in a proactive way. There's a way of listening which is to simply sit back and let things come in or drift through—which can be a lovely style sometimes. But for many different reasons, it would be good to listen more actively: "That piece there, I don't understand it, but I'll bookmark it for later and then I'll chase it up after the retreat or I'll ask questions." So you're listening with a kind of self-reflective, critical attitude—what are the pieces that I personally am needing or missing or not quite getting, or that I can shelve for later?

I want to pick up where I finished the other morning and go through that material with you, then add a bit more. In terms of meditation instructions, at this point they're fairly open. We've touched on several approaches. We spent the first day emphasizing the intention for samadhi—for gathering a sense of harmonization and well-being, just leaning towards that. So that's always an option, always a gear you can go into.

We also talked about the energy body as a way of working or opening various ways to work skillfully and carefully and with compassion with what's going on emotionally, whether it's lovely or difficult. So that too is a gear, an option when it feels time to do that.

Then we started to introduce the idea of images—intra-psychic for now, more inside, so to speak. So there are those three options, plus going into basic mindfulness or metta practice, if you see fit.

It's quite open—there's no prescribed order here. It's not like first I do this, then that, then this other thing. You can be very flexible with all of this. Consider it like an open buffet: if you want your dessert before your mains, it's completely fine. You can't be practicing with an image or images all day long and not doing anything else—it's not in balance and won't be helpful. So you want to be gliding in and out in response to what's going on between these different kinds of practices: being with the emotions and caring for them in the energy body, cultivating samadhi, working with images, maybe some other practice that you already know that seems helpful right now.

Just to reiterate, we're introducing the possibility of moving—not just walking up and down, but actually moving the body in here or outside. So the walking period is now called a moving period. You can move in

relation to an image or to energies, primarily an image, if that feels helpful for you.

Now, a little bit about some practice things. Doubt—this is really, really common. It's common anyway on the path, as you know; it's one of the hindrances. But in relation to this kind of practice, it's extremely common. There are different kinds of doubt and different aspects we can be doubting. Very often, a couple of moments after an image might arise, the first thing that arises afterwards is doubt. It's often something like: "That's probably not significant," or "It's not very interesting," or "It's not as bizarre and weird as I hear other people say," or actually "It's a bit too weird," or very commonly, "I made that up—that's just my ego, I made that happen," or "It's just a random daydream."

These couple of moments of doubt are really, really common. Expect them. They're just part of the process. But so often, despite that mental reaction of doubt, it's still worth gently persevering with a kind of gentle attention to what's just arisen. You can be aware of the doubt without having to buy into it.

If you stick with it, what you will often notice is that what seemed insignificant or just a kind of ego projection—if I tune to it, if I work with the energy body—actually does start to gain imaginal flesh and richness and depth and beauty, and becomes soul-making. What seemed insignificant is actually potentially fertile and important.

So let the judge be not that moment of mental doubt, but let it be the sense of soul-making. Stay with something, play with the different approaches we'll describe for relating to images, and let the sense of soul-making be your judge of whether something is worth sticking with or not. Judge by the fruit, not by the initial idea of how the image arose.

Whether an image is fruitful depends on the relationship with it. In some of the examples I gave, mine started as daydreaming—I was daydreaming some music or whatever. It wasn't particularly amazing in the first instance, didn't seem that significant. But in developing a relationship with it, it became much more fertile and meaningful.

But just nuancing the relationship with it, something becomes more imaginable. It's in the relationship.

Related to that, I think we don't want any kind of dogma or rules necessarily, but to prioritize a kind of sensitivity to the sense of soul-making, to trust that in the moment with an image. It may be that it comes through one very specific aspect of the image, or it may be in the whole gestalt of it. But this will be the most fruitful thing. This is what my nose is following. This is the thread, the sense of soul-making that will bring things alive and be most fruitful.

It may, as I said, as we both said now, include and even come through, arise from dukkha. So that's also part of just being aware of that.

And again, I've probably said this, but not to prioritize, and the implications are not to prioritize how clear is this image, the form. So we're not doing visualization meditation or exercises. Not the clarity of form so

much is important. Occasionally it might be, because that clarity of form might actually help soul-making. But the sense of soul-making - which is often a more nebulous, hard-to-pin-down kind of quality, but you can recognize, you get better and better at recognizing when that whole soul-making dynamic is going on, when there's soulfulness.

Implicit in this, and I'll come back to this hopefully this morning, very easily we can relate to an image and say, "What is the guidance for me in my life here? What's it telling me to do? Maybe I have a job choice or a path. Should I go to India? Should I..." whatever it is. And we want the image to come as a guide: "You should do this," so clear. Sometimes that happens, or sometimes we get encouragement or whatever from an image.

But again, it's about intention. If I prioritize this, something closes down. It's not that it doesn't happen sometimes. So can I not have my primary intention in relation to this image be "Guide me" or "What is the guidance for me?" Rather, tuning into and staying with what gives the most soul-making sense, what gives the most soulfulness.

And in a way, that's a kind of experiment. So I see - well, we'll elaborate on it starting this morning, in fact. But see, find out for yourself what kinds of attitudes, relationships, concepts, stances support the soul-making to open and what tend to close them down. Be your own researcher. We will certainly put some teachings out about that. But this is a much more interesting question.

And all meditation is like this. Right now, what's helpful? The question is, for each practice, what does helpful mean? So in this practice it means what's most soul-making. There's just a gentle sort of responsive, artful responsiveness to what's going on. I'm sailing this boat in response to the different currents and winds that are around.

And it can all be very beautiful, very subtle in the relational field between, let's say, self and image. Let's say that. So that it's better to focus on qualities of the beauty, the kind of beauty that an image seems to have for you in the moment. And it may be very vague - and Catherine talked about it last night - the sense of divinity that seems to inhere in this image, or the sense of grace, or mystery, or my sense of humility in relationship to it. All this can be very, very subtle, but these are all part of what it means for something to be soul-making, all these qualities. Focusing on that will be much more helpful for the whole process as we are outlining it and what it opens up to than looking for guidance or trying to get visually clear or whatever. Okay?

All right. Now, in a way, I've said a little bit already but started to say the other morning and implied a little bit in what I've already said is this question: we use this word "imagine" a lot. A lot of people use it - not a lot, but quite a few people and different schools and things use it this way - and what does it mean, or what does it mean as we are using it here? And we want to kind of convey and open up - there's quite a lot involved in it. It's a rich concept. It's not like a simple thing. It's rich and it's almost paradoxical and nebulous in some areas by necessity. It's a necessarily partly nebulous concept. Usually we like things to

be really clear.

On, off, black, white, is it this or is it that? And this whole, the art of this is not—we have to be okay with the kind of nebulousness and elasticity of definitions and descriptions and concepts and all that.

So, having said that, we could—we have in other situations asked: What does it mean for something to be imaginal? What does that mean? What is an image? And actually delineate or point to a whole cluster of qualities or characteristics or attitudes or perceptions that are there that kind of constitute what it means for something to be imaginal.

And so we can call that the constellation of the imaginal or the lattice of the imaginal or something—all these qualities. Some of them, we're just mentioning this, some of them we're just going to kind of throw them out and list them, and some on this retreat we will go into a little bit more detail. But the idea is that, again, this is not such a black and white thing. It's more like a spectrum.

So if we go back to me asking you to imagine the toilet that you're most familiar with, and there's imagination involved in whatever way, maybe visual or some sense of that toilet. But it is possible that that could be imaginal with all the beauty and divinity and everything, if you spend a lot of time like I do. But probably not. It's a use of the imagination. It's an image in a certain sense of the word. But it's probably not in this fully fleshed out, soulful, multidimensional way. It's probably not imaginal.

So again, rather than saying on, off, have I got it, have I not? Do I understand what they're talking about, do I not? I think everyone else has, but I haven't, I'm not getting—my experience can't be. Let's just think of it more as a spectrum, as a direction. And as more of these qualities that we'll list, as more of them get lit up, the whole thing we could say becomes more imaginal, more fully imaginal.

So there's no point in this kind of spectrum that we can say, you got it, you haven't got it. You can say to yourself, but we're thinking about the kind of possible fullness and richness of it. Does this make sense as an idea? Yeah. So just watch the mind that gets into black and white thinking. And then particularly, you know, the ego and the self puts itself in relation to that black and white thinking, usually in the negative light. I'm really not getting it.

Okay, so it's a direction. It's an aspiration. It's a possibility of fullness, of further riches, of further beauties. We can talk about what it means to be more fully imaginal in the way that we are using it in these teachings.

So why talk about this constellation or lattice or these elements? Two reasons. One is in order to get clearer, because I said it's a subtle, rich, complex concept in our teaching, what it means for something to be imaginal. It's not like you can just go boom, it means that. And people often ask me, can you just—some, well, maybe. So, but partly we want, we would like you to get clearer, to form a bit of a, to kind of get more and more internalized, this almost intuitive gut sense of, oh yeah, that—now something illuminates and you get a sense of the richness.

So partly just for the sake of clarity. What are we talking about? What kind of possibilities of soul and psyche and consciousness? What kind of experiences are we talking about? What direction? What realm? So that's one reason, for the sake of increasing clarity and understanding.

And the second reason is that it turns out that this kind of knowing about this constellation of different elements of the imaginal, it turns out that that's actually really helpful in practice. So sometimes, for instance, something arises—that toilet or whatever, or just a daydream or something—and it's an image and it's there, but it's not particularly imaginal, it's not particularly rich and unfathomable or inexhaustible or mysterious or all these other qualities.

And one of the things that's possible is there are elements actually—let's say, not immediately sensible in the imaginal experience, in the image experience, in that moment—that my noticing of them illuminates them, it draws them out. So for instance, and I didn't plan to talk about this one, it's the one that's coming to my head right now. There's often love between—love is one of these elements, it's characteristic of what we call the constellation of the imaginal. Love both ways. I somehow love that image. I might be a little suspicious of it. I might be scared of it in some way. I might be questioning, what does this mean?

But there's somehow some love there. And there's somehow some love of the image for me. This image loves me. And again, a lot of this work is about expanding ranges. So very often I say love, and we tend to have quite a narrow idea of what that looks like or what constitutes love. Sometimes with an image, the kind of love is not the kind of love that we're used to. So something is happening here also to open up our sense of what love can mean and can look like.

But the noticing of the love—I haven't noticed it at first, and so I just look and I begin to see, oh yeah, there's a kind of love here. I can feel that. Wow. It might be subtle at first. My noticing of it draws it out. In the attention, it illuminates that star in the galaxy or that star in the constellation of what imaginal means. And the illumination of that quality starts to illuminate other things. So the whole thing starts to come alive, get illuminated.

So not just saying all this for the sake of clarity, we're saying all this as part of the art and the subtlety of being able to support something to open up in soulfulness and soul-making. Sometimes also, you can deliberately introduce one of these elements. I'll come back to that. So not just noticing it will amplify it and draw it out and illuminate it, but actually I'll say, oh, let me deliberately introduce one of these things. And that, again, ignites the whole, or potentially ignites the whole lattice.

There's not an order through these. So we could list them. A few things about this whole concept of this constellation, or lattice, or whatever we want to call it, is that it's not an exhaustive list. If I go through it, you could say, well, what about such and such? It's not intended to be exhaustive. It's just to begin to open something up. We could have sliced up the elements slightly differently. So in other words, some of them overlap with each other, some of them kind of pull in different directions. They seem a bit in a kind of tension of some contradiction between each other. And there's not an order here. So it's not like first this

one, and then number two ignites, and then number three ignites. It's all a web of mutually dependent potential illuminations.

So I said some we're just going to list and mention and some others we'll elaborate on just because of time on this retreat. And again, if this sounds interesting to you or if some of you either have already or will fall in love with this whole thing—you'll fall in love with this soul-making business—and if that's the case, then chase it up. This material is already out there on the web. Ask one of us, talk with each other. Learn from each other. But again, going back to that proactive listening possibility. And some of you won't, and that's fine. It's not quite for me. But if you want more, then take that into your own hands a little bit. Ask. Seek out.

So, I don't know whether to go through the list now. Just the whole thing? You want to hear the list? All right. I'll just name them, and some of them won't mean anything to you at all at this point, and that's fine. I'm probably going to go through it too fast to write it down at this point. Well, you can try. It depends how fast you write. We can have a race.

Okay, so, not in any order. This is the important thing. This is, again, mutually... this is the thing about dependent arising. There's not like cause and effect. There's a mutual arising and the mutual fading of things.

So we have 28 elements, and as I said, it's not exhaustive. Some of these elements imply each other or overlap, while others might even seem opposite. This reflects the nature of the imaginal—it's not a neat, linear system but a living constellation.

The first element is the lattice or constellation itself. The recognition that we are working with a constellation is fundamental, because it tells us that nothing is imaginal by itself. An image isn't imaginal simply because it appears mythic or fantastical. You might see a griffin or some other mythical creature, but that alone doesn't make it imaginal. What makes something imaginal is the relationship, the whole constellation of which it's part.

An image exists as much in my way of looking, my way of conceiving and relating, as it does in what appears before me. Some elements of this constellation are more subjective—they characterize the practitioner, the one relating to the image. Others are more objective—they characterize what appears. Together they form the imaginal constellation.

The second element is the energy body—the involvement of and sensitivity to the entire energy body. This is clearly a subjective element, something happening here in the practitioner.

The third element, which I've already mentioned, is love and being loved. The two-way flow of love is inherent in the imaginal.

Fourth is eros, which includes love but extends beyond it, as Catherine pointed out earlier.

Fifth is beauty. Something in the image touches us with a sense of beauty, though this may not be conventional beauty. The soul finds its own sense of the beautiful in whatever arises.

The sixth element is trust. This operates in multiple directions—I trust this image, even if it appears violent, disturbed, or utterly strange. I also trust the process itself, the whole practice we're engaged in. Without this trust, the imaginal cannot open fully.

This trust is essential because, as we discussed with doubt, when trust is absent, the imaginal closes down. Each of these elements works this way—their absence contracts the imaginal, while their presence allows it to flower.

It will just stay as an image, a bit more flat. But if I can introduce some trust, just a grain of trust—this thing is not what I'm used to, this thing looks like it's defilement, this thing, whatever it is—if I can introduce that, then that trust, again, in the dependent arising of things, it's like I put a grain of some kind of alchemical elixir in. Just some trust. And that does something, as it always does. It opens things out. Without the trust, it won't open out.

And of course, human relationships are like that as well, aren't they? But basically, dealing with images is a lot like being in relationship. One way of saying what we're saying this morning is that the whole thing is relational. We're talking about relationship in lots of different ways.

So sometimes this is hard, the trust thing. It's not like, "Oh, this is really easy," for lots of different reasons. But I think I said it in the Q&A yesterday afternoon—you can sometimes just put a ring fence around it. Five minutes, I'm going to play with some trust. I sprinkle that—you don't really sprinkle, Alexia, do you? Poor Alexia—a grain of sand of trust, whatever it is. Five minutes, I ring fence it, and afterwards, thank you very much, that was my little experiment in trust, and I can go back to holding it at arm's length or being slightly suspicious. So don't push yourself. But you'll probably notice something, as I said, that in that five minutes, the trust has a certain effect. It has to have an effect, because the whole thing is dependently arising, relational.

So seven is that an imaginal image in our sense is soul-making. In other words, there is a sense of soulfulness. It's partly circular, implied in all this—all the beauty and the love and the depth. And soul-making means that the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, what Catherine referred to the other night, is active. It's kicking in. All these things are opening each other and creating more complexity and beauty and all that. And soulfulness is more than heartfulness. It includes heartfulness, but it's more than heartfulness.

Number eight is a sense of dimensionality. This is not easy to put into words or even sometimes pinpoint. But that dimensionality—it's as if this thing is not flat. It has the vague sense of other dimensions to it. And these dimensions kind of move forward into divinity. Or rather, they recede into divinity. The divinity is implicit in this direction of dimensionality.

Connected with that is number nine. Images have a sense of something beyond, beyond just the surface. There's a beyond that I don't quite understand yet. In fact, they have a sense of unfathomability to them. I can't quite get to the bottom of them, just as actually a human being does, just as you do. When I don't feel my own unfathomability, I don't feel very well. There's something that's not right. Maybe some people are kind of stuck in that—you know, it would be difficult. You think, contemplate another human being, there's a sense of their unfathomability. An image is like this, unfathomable in lots of ways.

Number ten is related to this—the boundaries are elastic. This is actually soft and elastic. This is really important, because oftentimes what happens with perceptions, or we relate to an image with a certain idea, like it's this, and it just has kind of rigid edges. And again, like a human being, you think about your sense of self, or you bring to mind someone you love. Where are their edges?

Their edges are soft. You can't quite find where they are. And they're elastic. They move. They expand. I'm talking about the edges of being—the edges of who a person is, what an image is. It's soft and elastic.

And also, the concepts that we use in this whole paradigm are soft and elastic. They're precise, but they're also soft and elastic. And that's very important.

Number eleven: an image has a quality of eternality to it, of timelessness. Catherine used the phrase, "It's always already happening." So it's not so much a narrative, like I go on a journey and first this, and then I slay the dragon, and then I rescue the princess, and then we get married. This is not so characteristic of the imaginal. It's something—or if there is that narrative, that whole narrative is somehow always happening at the same time. So there's some sense of timelessness, eternality to the imaginal.

Number twelve—and again you can see how all these implicate each other or invite each other—is reverence. In the face of eternality, of timelessness, a natural response of the soul, if we allow it, if we don't get in the way, is reverence.

Number thirteen, which I've already touched on, is a sense of grace. There's a sense in which, with all the art that I can muster, and finesse and subtlety of altering my responses or changing my attitudes or the emphasis of energy and body and all this, and the art of how I can be active in relation to an image—there's also a very real fact or necessity to realize that an image is a grace. It's somehow given to us inexplicably from beyond. We don't control this thing.

Number fourteen—again you can see how connected these are—is humility. This is really important. In relation to this image, somehow I'm not regarding it as just mine, like a little puppet I can do what I want with, or that I can control, or that it's part of me. It's somehow bigger, and I am in the presence of something beyond, bigger than me, something I don't understand in some way. In some way divine, and therefore humility is again a very natural response if it's not blocked in us for some different reason.

Number fifteen: we're not reducing. This image doesn't mean just this. This image is not referring only to this thing that happened in my childhood, or this image means exactly and only this for my guidance. It

doesn't only mean anything. You cannot fully capture an image or the implications of it or reduce it to something. It's not reducible to anything at all. It has this beyondness to it.

Sixteen is autonomy. The image is—again, it's not part of me. I don't own this image. It's like a person. It has, oftentimes, a personhood, and they have their autonomy. They do things. Images do things or say things that will surprise you. They're not in your control.

Now, in a way, they are in your control and you're creating them and it's a dependent arising, etc. So this is part of the art. I realize that, in a way, I grant an image its autonomy or the idea of its autonomy through my concept, my implicit concept at that time. You understand? So there's a dance here of—yes, it's autonomous and it's dependent arising. There's a very sophisticated sort of balance there in the art.

Seventeen—and with the autonomy, I'm explaining them all now—you don't ever lose your autonomy. This is another part of it. You don't lose your self-will. You're not going to be taken over and possessed by something so that you lose the ability to make heartful, rational, sensible choices. You have your autonomy. You need to assent. You need to participate.

So there's autonomy on both sides. And I think Catherine already alluded to this—there's two-ness. So it's not so much about dissolving in oneness. For soul-making, we retain a two-ness. Eros wants to retain two-ness. It wants to retain two. It needs that polarity between maybe me and the image—that two-ness is necessary. Well, let's say differentiations and particularities don't all dissolve. Maybe that's another way of saying it.

Eighteen—I will come back to this—it's theatre, or what I might call the middle way of the imaginal: neither real nor not real. It's really important. We get that sense. Oh yeah, someone asks you, "Would you say that's real?" Not quite. "Would you say it's not real?" Not quite. It's somewhere in between. I'll expand on that in a minute, hopefully.

Number nineteen, and related, is we realize that this image is created by us, we might say, but also discovered. To discover means it's already there. We create it and we discover it. And there's not really a word, in English at least, for getting that combination—that it's both created and discovered, or neither, or somewhere in between.

Number twenty is what we call the concertina, which means that when I'm relating to an image, I'm not shrinking it down. There's always a sense implicitly of other possible images. They might not be at all clear, but vaguely, it's like this is just one image of many possibilities. So it's not like this is the reality. This is one—there's a sense of there's more theatre possible. This is just what's happening in the play right now. But it could be different.

Twenty-one is in the imaginal sense is slightly less fabricated. I'm not even going to say anything about that right now.

Twenty-two is that concept is involved, even if it's implicit. A logos, some kind of idea—as Catherine was saying, some idea of what my suffering is, or something about suffering, some idea of anything at all. Ideas are actually implicit or explicit in the imaginal sense. We're not talking about a non-conceptual experience at all.

Number twenty-three is fullness of intention, which I've mentioned already and I'll come back to shortly. That's a very beautiful one—fullness of intention.

And twenty-four is duty, not beauty—duty. And that's, again, quite complicated. We'll come back to it. There's some sense of "I have a duty to this. I have a duty to this image." It's often not so literal. So it gets refracted into our life and into the way we live, or some attitude or something—what this duty is, or what's involved in that.

Twenty-five is an image is meaningful, which means it's full of meanings, and full of meanings that we can't even quite know what they are. So yes, they might have specific meanings. I can relate this to my—I mean, clearly that old king thing that I shared the other day is clearly very related to my situation, etc. But there's more. There's meaningfulness, which is different than meaning. "It means this," or even "it means these three things," or whatever it is. It's pregnant with a kind of infinity of meanings.

The twenty-sixth is—I just mentioned this now without even explaining—there's a kind of infinite echoing or mirroring between your life and an imaginal image.

They echo each other infinitely. They mirror each other infinitely.

The twenty-seventh element is that implicit in images are values, virtues, or ethical and moral dimensions. This is part of the meaningfulness. What's meaningful is wrapped up in an image—something of value that we find noble or beautiful, or important in life.

The twenty-eighth is participation. There's a sense of participating in something, and we may fill that out. That's quite a complex one, or quite a rich, profound one. We're participating in something much bigger than us. And yes, as was just mentioned, sacredness is absolutely implicit—divinity, holiness, something like that. Again, that has a very broad range of meaning, really broad. Some would be used to thinking of divinity this way or that way.

Alright, so that was the list. Let me reorganize here and say a few more things. I want to expand on one of them that I talked about—the middle way of the imaginal.

When I first thought about this phrase, there's a sense of theater. Like theater, you know, if you see really good theater—I have lots of friends who are very involved in theater, and I would go to performances where some theaters are really small. You're sitting right there with the actor and it's really intimate. You feel kind of naked there. And you know it's not real. But like all really good art, its power is potentially immense.

So there's something about this with image. It's not real. It's not not real. It's got this artistic or poetic truth to it and all the power that comes potentially with poetic or artistic truth.

But this is a tricky element, this neither real nor not real. I'm really not going to get into this now, but ontology is the fancy word for thinking about what is real and what isn't real. So the ontology, I think, is really interesting. And I would like to view it more as an open-ended exploration, a questioning of possible conceptions of reality and not reality, and that fine distinction of being right there in the middle. This relates to emptiness and all this, which also very much addresses the question of ontology.

So it's complex. It's infinitely rich. Humanity will never figure it out as a final answer. There's a whole history of it. It will continue as long as humanity is around, this whole philosophical endeavor. And it's variable—it's part of what can be variable in what we bring to the imagination, our whole concept of the reality status of things.

But what I would like to say is there's something about this paradigm that we're trying to unfold and open up: if we don't start with this imaginal middle way—neither real nor not real—as much as we can, just holding that in mind, if we can't quite get a sense of it, it's as if the whole thing gets off on the wrong foot a little bit.

If we can start there, it will be that the whole thing starts to, or can, draw in or expand the range of our notion of reality and bring in other things that we would have considered not real. It can expand the range there.

But there's something about starting with this middle way intention, as much as one is able. I know this is a really difficult one for people. But just as much as you can, it's almost like letting things unfold from there. If I start with some reality assumptions, it probably won't get so loosened, the whole thing. And again, actually, the range of experience and beauty and soulfulness that will open up will be less.

The middle way of the imaginal extends far beyond our initial understanding. While we typically encounter the middle way in dharma as the path between asceticism and sensual indulgence, there's another instance in the Pali Canon where the Buddha uses this term differently. In the Kacchayana Sutta, which Catherine referenced, the middle way becomes the middle way between reifying that something exists and asserting that it doesn't exist. This middle way refers to emptiness—neither existence nor non-existence.

Remarkably, about half of the entire Mahayana tradition bases itself on those two brief lines of dialogue between the Buddha and Kacchayana in the Pali Canon. The whole elaborate, beautiful, rich, deep, complex, and exquisite investigation of emptiness in Mahayana philosophy springs from that brief exchange.

Now we have a third meaning: the imaginal middle way of neither real nor not real, with all the theatrical quality and power that this encompasses. But I'd like to expand this understanding even further by adding

two dimensions we've already implicitly explored.

The middle way of the imaginal isn't so much about static points as it is about balances and ranges. The first is the balance of range in the energy body's sense of density or insubstantiality. Sometimes a person experiences only a very ethereal sense of the energy body. But perhaps the imaginal middle way means having access to the whole range—sometimes dense and solid, sometimes very ethereal. One becomes free to move within that entire spectrum.

The third aspect involves dukkha. Again, this isn't a static point but an openness to the full range of imaginal experience. Some images are luminously glorious and free, while others—as both Catherine and I have shared—actually involve dukkha and pathology. The lame man as divinity carries his pathology. Hillman emphasized that all images must have pathologies, though I would disagree with that absoluteness. Can we simply open to the full range?

The imaginal isn't always triumphant, radiant, or glorious. Sometimes images involve dukkha, but the dukkha carries its own divinity and beauty. I've shared many such images, as has Catherine—the lonely wanderer, the soldier, images of old lonely men. Even when something appears very angelic, like the angels who came to kiss my heart and minister to me while I was struggling upstairs writing a book on emptiness, the luminous and angelic quality existed in relationship with the dukkha. The angels didn't dissolve everything with a triumphant "yippee, all is fine now." The dukkha remained part of the image, part of its beauty, humanity, and divinity.

Given all this about range, it's worth examining our tendencies. Does my imaginal experience tend always toward the ethereal and free of dukkha? Or does it always involve dukkha and solidity? Simply checking our range reveals our patterns.

Yet we must also acknowledge individual soul styles. Some people's energy body experience tends more commonly toward the ethereal. Others have what I call a darkness to them—images that tend to involve more pathology or dukkha. We need to respect and account for these individual soul styles rather than expecting everyone to be perfectly balanced around some midpoint.

The images that arise in this infinite echoing naturally reflect our lives. When I was struggling with writing that book, of course some images reflected that challenge. If we're moving through something difficult, that difficulty becomes woven into the imaginal fabric, not as something to be transcended but as an integral part of the sacred drama unfolding.

Expanding the idea of the middle way of the imaginal, one other element I want to pick out for now is this fullness of intention. I've already touched on this in various ways. Even when we have an intention for healing—and many people come to Dharma for healing in the broader sense, psychological healing, healing of the past, healing of dukkha—even this intention for healing may be something less than the fullness of intention. While most people come to the Dharma seeking some kind of healing, we're

suggesting that even this doesn't quite reach the full scope of possibility here.

What fullness of intention means includes healing, yes, but extends to soul-making itself—the intention for soul, the intention for serving soul. We might not even fully understand what this means. This is a tricky territory, not perhaps very common to really explore, but I'm mentioning it as an important possibility.

Going back to what I said earlier, there are times in life when we need to seek guidance, listen for practical guidance about choices or difficulties. Sometimes, as I mentioned, an image will offer guidance: stay with what you're doing, you're doing good, this is beneficial, invest in that, do this. Sometimes this happens in different ways.

But more often, I think—and here's the crucial question—is it possible for the predominant intention to be for soul-making rather than for guidance? The fullness, the open-endedness, the sacredness, the partly incomprehensible nature of soul-making, of eros, of beauty. You can never fully understand beauty. Human beings will never get to the bottom of beauty, or eros, or many of these profound dimensions. They're fathomless.

Somehow, my assent and opening and intention for the fathomlessness of all this—this becomes more full as an intention. I think that relates to Lauren's question in the Q&A.

Sometimes, as I've mentioned this morning as well, you can simply play with a kind of inversion of concept. This image is bigger than me. It's greater than me. I am derivative of this image. Turn everything upside down.

You can hear, I think it's obvious, there's a kind of maturing that's possible over time with all this—with understanding what on earth this is all about, understanding in practice. It's definitely available, this possibility of maturing in understanding and in practice, understanding in relation to these elements and practicing with these different elements. That takes time. And that's really okay.

When I first started exploring some of this and trying to work with it in practice, figuring out how to approach it—if I think back to some of my old notebooks—the images there were much more narrative and complex, with casts of thousands, characters, all kinds of activity going on. Now, as I practice, there's something more distilled. An image emerges—not much happening, but possessing this eternal quality and something condensed within it. My sensitivity has grown much greater, my intuitive sense of attunement and skill.

Or when we introduced movement yesterday, there's a real possibility of gradual maturing and growing in the possibilities of movement in relation to soul. Or the logos Catherine was speaking about, the conceptual framework—this too takes time. Even just conceptually, what we're discussing is sophisticated. It's not simple. There are many shades to it.

At some point, as Catherine was sharing, something turns on and there's eros for logos. We become excited about it. This happened on the other retreat—someone was listening to an interaction in the Q&A and right then, something shifted in her relationship with concept. It became illuminated, and now there's added eros, there's soul in concept for her.

All this takes time. This business about the middle way, about not reifying, the fullness of intention—these dimensions are full and rich and subtle. They take time to grow and grow into. Know that.

Teaching for me is always contextual and always responsive. Especially in one-to-one work—I find teaching groups rather an impossibility, to be honest.

You're all so different and have different inclinations and histories and all the rest of it. If I'm one-on-one with a person, it's different.

So I might say to someone in regards to the neither real nor not real thing, "You're not really a dragon. Do you realize that?" Or to the same person at a different time, or another person: "Do you realize you're more really a dragon? You're more really that dragon with that dragon's mission than you are a human being in the way that you usually think of that and your story and all that."

So for me, this is part of the dance of the middle way.

What would be wonderful and what I would like to encourage and invite you to is: can you begin to explore and begin to feel, to notice, to live the effects of subtle shifts of emphasis or subtle shifts of view or the conceptual frame?

So, for example, what happens if I can shift with that real, not real thing, just micro-shift and actually see, "Wow, that's quite a different texture and flavor and sense of experience that opens up"? You have to feel this, notice it, live it, be impacted by it. We could talk all day long about real and not real and all that. There's something—if you're attracted to it and you begin to play with this, you will see: wow, it really does make a difference in the dependent arising of things.

Or with this fullness of intention—what happens when that opens up to another fullness? Oh, that also changes the whole image. All this is dependent arising.

So experiment, play, find out, know for yourself. Know it. You know it in the body. You know it in the kind of beauty and richness of the experience.

Oftentimes, without even really adopting a conscious position, we take one position. And we're kind of attached to it. And there isn't this kind of flexibility or skill or willingness to experiment and see what's the difference. We just decide—it's not even conscious usually—this is how I look at things. This is how I look at this. And we don't realize that actually it's a kind of attachment to one view or one emphasis.

So with all that, it's really okay. Wherever any of us are with all this, it's a journey. We're journeying in

this most wondrous, rich, truly amazing landscape. And it's okay, wherever we are in that journey. Gradually we can explore that territory, it can become more full, and we can understand it, make it our own.

Thank you for listening.

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