Until All is Liquid: Emptiness and Sensing with Soul

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:41:45

Over the last few years, when talking about imaginal practice and introducing sensing with soul, I've quoted an alchemical maxim or guideline from the Middle Ages that says something like: "Don't proceed with any operation, with any alchemical operation, until all has become water, until all has become liquid." Don't proceed until all has become liquid, until all is liquid.

We've adopted this maxim and interpreted it in line with our teaching around the kind of loosening or liquefying that happens when there's less fabrication, and the necessity of that in sensing with soul and imaginal practice. This is what I want to explore tonight—this aspect of slightly less fabrication, this loosening or liquefying or degree of unfabricating of perception, self, other, world, and the elements or aspects of our existence and being.

Notice that the maxim doesn't say, "Don't proceed until everything has disappeared." Things are liquefied, but not completely faded. It's not possible to practice imaginal practice in the depths of fading, in the proximity of the unfabricated. That whole meditative journey and exploration into the deep end of fading towards the unfabricated, opening to the unfabricated—I think that's absolutely lovely and priceless for a human being, something amazing. If anything deserves to be called amazing, it's potentially liberating. It should be liberating if one approaches it the right way, understands it, and contextualizes it properly. Sometimes it's liberating for people even if they don't fully understand it or haven't arrived at it with proper context. So beautiful, lovely, amazing, potentially utterly transformative and liberating.

In the depths of fading, all perception disappears—self, others, world, subject, object, time, present moment, space. The whole show fades through less clinging, through the withdrawal of clinging. This whole experience and its beauty are really important. When we come to practicing with sensing with soul, though, we can't operate in those depths of fading and unfabricating. There is no sensing there, certainly not in any usual sense.

Sensing with soul needs this wide middle ground, this middle territory, middle region where selves, objects, things, materials, world appear and still retain form. Form is part of the perception of this or that, or this or that imaginal object sensed with soul. Some form is there. We're not going toward a dissolution of form through fading. There's a range where form is retained, but there's a kind of looseness to that form, a less reification. The territory for sensing with soul practice—a wide territory—operates where there's form, but it's loose and somewhat less fabricated. It's liquefied. It's malleable rather than rigid and

reified, entrenched and solidified.

There's a kind of dance around reifying and non-reifying, but probably more important for now is this region of form but liquid form, form but malleable form, form but unreified form.

We've been talking about emotions and self-view and self-sense, and we'll return to self-sense as these talks continue. In order for powerful soul-making to happen with respect to emotion, image, dukkha, self-sense, eros and the sense of eros, these need to retain some form—emotion, image, self, eros, dukkha, whatever it is. We're not completely dissolving those. In that retaining of form, but liquid, malleable, unreified form, that's the region we're interested in—the region of quicksilver in alchemy, like mercury.

Tonight I want to talk about the place of that unfabricating and loosening and liquefying, and also the practices of emptiness with regard to that. If we talk about practicing with emptiness or emptiness practices and understanding emptiness, fathoming what that really means and the fullness and radicality and comprehensiveness and depth of what that means—I think it's a journey. It's something very profound, subtle, complex, really at the edge of what conception can articulate and then going beyond that edge.

That journey of exploration in practice and understanding takes time. Like any journey, it takes time. Generally speaking, maybe there are some people who just get the whole thing in one go. I've never met anyone like that. I've met people who think they have, but when I hear them speak or read what they've written about emptiness, it seems to me to be missing either some depth or some comprehensiveness or both.

For me, it's something—I'm saying this as a reminder to those of you interested in that journey into the depths of emptiness and the fullness and radicality of what that means—it's really a journey that takes time and work and play and willingness to experiment.

It's interesting that we're back to individuals and the variance between individuals with regard to so many different facets of what we're laying out and explaining, and with regard to emptiness too. Some people don't seem to have a need for any deep emptiness practice.

They can work well with images, they have a sense of the imaginal middleware, the theatre-like quality of them being neither real nor not real, and for sensing the soul in imaginal practice, they don't seem to need emptiness.

I would definitely acknowledge that possibility. Not everyone needs emptiness. I think I haven't put the full stop on that conclusion yet, but I think that may be a possibility. I haven't reached a final conclusion for myself on that possibility.

Some people, either because they have an artistic temperament, or because they've read deeply in modern philosophy about ontology and epistemology and cultural contingency—and that philosophy has not just

been a superficial mouthing in academic circles but has actually gone deep, permeated their being—or because they have this kind of artistic, poetic sensibility that's accessible to them as part of the way they naturally see things, or for whatever other reason, seem able to engage the imaginal without needing emptiness practices.

Other people do, I think, need emptiness practice as part of what grounds sensing the soul and imaginal practice. Without it, there is too much tendency for reification. It takes practice out of the realm of what we would call imaginal practice. So emptiness practice grounds it or keeps one on the path, wide as it is.

In some respects, the emptiness practices help because there's a middle way there in terms of real and not real that comes from emptiness understanding and imbues one's sense of everything. As one goes deeper, one's perceptions, one's sense of life, one's sense of the world are all affected.

Some people approach emptiness with a kind of "should"—"I really should practice emptiness because Rob and all these other Buddhist teachers go on about how central and important it is." But there's no real eros for emptiness, no real attraction to the unfabricated, not really for the teachings of emptiness so much. The whole impetus to explore emptiness practice is coming from a should.

Generally speaking, my observation is that when any practice or aspect of practice comes from the motivation of some kind of should—because a person thinks they should—then there isn't the eros there, there isn't the juice, there isn't the libido and the lubrication and the aliveness and the fire. Practice explorations that are driven by some sense of should that's been imported from somewhere tend not to be very fruitful.

If that's the case, somehow, at some point—and it might be later on in one's practice—if one needs emptiness, that should needs to be converted to a real curiosity and aliveness of desire to explore, to understand, to play.

Of course, some people have a real eros—something lights up in their soul when they hear about emptiness or when they hear about the unfabricated or taste it, wherever they are on that journey. I alluded to this whole journey of unfabricating, but even more the journey into understanding emptiness, which is a bigger journey than just unfabricating. Wherever they are in that process, they love it, they enjoy it. There's just a desire, an eros, to want more. That's an ideal relationship with emptiness exploration.

Some people, it seems to me over the last years, especially when I've been teaching imaginal practice and contextualizing it with emptiness teachings, or letting the emptiness teachings inform and form a basis for the whole soul-making paradigm—some people take the emptiness on faith. They don't have a deep personal realization of emptiness through practice, through meditation. They don't fully understand it, but they understand a little bit. They understand, for instance, that there's no ultimate reality and therefore there are just ways of looking, and that legitimizes the flexibility of ways of looking. In a way, they're

taking that understanding on faith from me or another teacher, but it's enough. Or it's enough for a certain range and depth and fertility of exploration of the imaginal. That's quite interesting to me as well.

The full shebang with emptiness and the unfabricated and all that, and out the other side of the unfabricated, is really quite rare. I'd say unfortunately, but whatever—it's just how things are for different reasons at this time. But wherever one is, and this is one of the points I want to make, wherever one is in one's understanding or practice of emptiness, it can be really fruitful. That's one of the main points I want to make tonight.

It's interesting that sometimes a person hasn't got that personal understanding—meditatively based, experientially based conviction, understanding, realization of emptiness—but they've taken some understanding on board through faith in a teacher or teaching, or just a resonance with a teacher, just like "I know that's right."

I think back to myself years ago. I think I mentioned this in some talk—I had this intuitive trust in emptiness teachings, which I didn't understand and had limited sense of experientially. But something in me kind of banked on it, and then later explored practices and understandings more deeply to fill out and add to that intuitive faith. This is interesting to me: there can be something—an understanding absorbed on faith—that forms some degree of a basis, a platform to engage soul-making practices.

I will mention one thing here just about the strand of emptiness practices per se. It's not exactly what I want to talk about, but I'll say it anyway, because part of that journey—at least the way I would outline it—and certainly there's no way around this if you're wanting to experience and understand deep emptiness, involves the movement towards the unfabricated, the movement of unfabricating at different degrees and ranges and depths, the movement towards more fading. A person engaged in that direction of exploration and all the...

subtlety and beauty and rigor and enchantment of such a journey, that thread there of unfabricating.

It's almost... Everyone, in fact, I don't know that I've encountered anyone who's taken that journey who doesn't at some point get tight or pushy trying to achieve more fading. So there's a certain degree of fading of perception—of body sense, self sense, world sense, this or that vedanā, whatever it is—and one feels like, "Oh, this is going great. Now I've seen this much fading before. Let's just push for some more." And so it becomes a kind of task to achieve more fading, and one can get quite tight around that, and one can actually feel that tightness and that pushiness in the practice.

This is very, very common—this trying to achieve more fading, more fading than however much one has, unless it's a totally unfabricated experience. And then getting tight around that, stressed around that.

So a couple of possibilities here, just to put them out. One is that one can check one's intention. Notice that that's happening right in the thick of practice, in the subtle, delicate surgery of that movement. Recognize it's going on.

And actually just two things, two possibilities. One is just slightly shift the intention. Not so much to achieve this or that amount of fading, but the intention is a curiosity around dependent arising. I'm really interested in, I'm really curious about why there is this kind of appearance now, or this degree of fading, or this degree of solidity, substantiality, now. What is it dependent on? Clinging. What does that mean? Clinging, in the way I use the term, is a very big word. It involves a lot, at lots of different levels. But shifting the intention to curiosity about dependent arising takes some of the pressure of trying to achieve more fading. They're obviously connected as intentions, but an intention of curiosity is a lot less pushy and it's less driven toward the goal of achieving more fading. So that's one possibility.

A second possibility is actually to remember that insight, in the way that I commonly use the word, actually is what brings letting go. And in bringing letting go—so where there's insight, where there's an insight way of looking, where I'm looking at something with insight, sensing something with insight, with a degree of insight, understanding—then it brings letting go. It should bring letting go. Often it will bring letting go right there and then as I'm sensing this thing with that insight way of looking. And because there's letting go, there's ease now.

So that, again, the motivation, for example, for doing a practice like a welcoming practice or relaxing clinging or anattā or regarding objects of perception as empty or whatever—the second intention, apart from curiosity, can be actually ease. It should bring ease now. And so I'm practicing this with an intention for ease. So again, that shifts the intention out of the tightness or crampness of clinging to the possibility of achieving more fading.

So in that second one, even then, even the striving to achieve more fading is let go of as it's perceived as dukkha. It's a kind of clinging, right?

Another point in relation to this journey into the depths of unfabricating is not to worry if not everything fades. So yes, there's that possibility that all perception, every element of perception disappears, fades, gets unfabricated, is not fabricated at that time. But in a way, it's okay if, and it's quite common for, say, most of the body is gone, but everything is gone except my teeth, or... And then what can happen is that we say, "Oh, that's not faded yet." And then one gets pulled to focus on trying to get that thing—my teeth or whatever it is, sounds or a certain realm of sense perception or a certain object that doesn't fade. One gets pulled into an intention of focus on trying to get that to fade. And that actually becomes a kind of obsession. Again, it's a clinging and aversion.

And clinging and aversion, if we understand dependent arising deeply, are exactly what will fabricate an object. So if I'm aversive to this object, essentially, because I want it to fade, because I want complete fading, I want to get rid of that remaining thing, it's a kind of aversion, and that keeps fabricating the object, so actually it won't fade.

Some partial fading, some only partial fading, can often be enough for a practitioner to intuit the universal truth of the insight regarding clinging and dependent arising and fabrication. In other words,

yes, not everything fades or the experiences in that sense door or this object or whatever it is doesn't fade. But there's enough moving up and down of this spectrum of fabrication and experience and understanding the relationship with clinging—clinging again in the broader sense—that at some point, up and down, up and down, I see it: let go, let go, let go, everything fades more and more, even if it doesn't completely fade into a total experience of the unfabricated. At some point, the sort of intuitive wisdom grasps something, it gets something, and it gets the truth of that insight regarding clinging and dependent arising.

Conversely, some people actually have a total experience of the unfabricated, as I mentioned earlier, but they're not understanding it at all in terms of clinging and dependent arising. They may not gain any liberating insight, or they may certainly not receive the full possibility of liberating insight there. What's more important is the insight and the understanding. This can be grasped by the intuitive wisdom faculty even when there isn't complete fading.

I put this out for those of you who are perhaps exploring this movement into unfabricating as part of the larger weave of soul-making dharma practices, or who are taking time out from soul-making to go deeper into emptiness. And what do we mean when we say emptiness? I hope to return to this in another talk, but if you've been around the dharma for a while and are listening and reading carefully, you'll see there are many different interpretations of what that means. So I hope to explore that variety and the implications of those choices of interpretation.

What do we mean when we use this term? Well, in answer to the question "What is the basic reality?" we could say emptiness is the basic reality. Then a follow-up question: What is emptiness? Emptiness is no basic reality. Emptiness is the reality of no basic reality. So in a Zen-like nutshell, that is what we mean when we use the word emptiness. Emptiness means there's no basic reality. Emptiness is the basic reality, and that basic reality is that there is no basic reality.

Wrapped up in how we talk about emptiness are two central concepts you'll hear me use often: fabrication and ways of looking. We've already touched on fabrication—this meditative, experimental exploration and curiosity about the fabrication of perception, not just of the self-sense and personality, but of self at every level, all objects, all phenomena, the whole world, time, space, and so forth. As I said earlier, this involves developing skill in certain practices that fabricate less, understanding how the mind fabricates more at times, and then understanding that the mind itself is fabricated, awareness is fabricated—so really there is no basic reality there. Time, space, the whole show.

This notion of fabrication is central to how I would teach emptiness, explain emptiness, and encourage someone to explore it. There are other ways too, but they all come back to fabrication.

Implicit in this is the second idea: ways of looking. This means that consciousness, when perceiving anything, is always engaged in some kind of way of looking, way of sensing, way of relating. I use "ways of looking" as an umbrella term for all that—way of sensing, way of relating to whatever it's perceiving.

Through playing with different ways of looking, we discover that some ways of looking are more fabricating than others. They fabricate more dukkha, more self, more solidity, more subject, more object, more sense of time, and so forth. So we play with different ways of looking, seeing their effects on fabrication and dukkha and all kinds of other things. There's the possibility of taking this all the way into the depths of unfabricating, opening to the unfabricated, and then realizing that in a way there's nothing but ways of looking. They're empty too, but we're just left with ways of looking.

And the possibility of looking, of sensing in this way at times, in that way at times, in this other way. This is happening automatically anyway, and we have certain default habits of looking, of sensing in this way or that way. But through practice, we begin to loosen the rigidity of entrenched pathways of ways of looking that tend always to solidify this or that, or reify the self, or reify time. All that gets loosened up, and we can begin to explore: here's a kind of way of looking that loosens things in this way, loosens dukkha, loosens self; here are these kinds of ways of looking that loosen self to a certain extent but allow some skillful fabrication—the whole range there.

So emptiness, fabrication, and ways of looking are completely tied together. That there are only ways of looking, and that no way of looking reveals an ultimate truth to how a thing is—this is an understanding of emptiness. That's what emptiness means. It's only ways of looking. No way of looking is the ultimate truth of this thing or that thing.

Now again, regarding the eros that might be involved in such exploration, I think it's important that this whole idea of ways of looking—this logos of ways of looking, the possibilities of ways of looking, this conceptual framework—really comes alive. The logos itself, the idea of ways of looking as I've briefly outlined and much more elsewhere, needs to become imaginal. It needs to become poetic, beautiful, powerful.

In other words, that creative-discovery possibility that's implicit in the whole idea of ways of looking—that the way of looking creates the appearance, shapes, informs, fabricates whatever appearance—this...

The magic of things, the groundlessness, the sense of possibility of viewing oneself as an artist of perception, as a magician, as a sorcerer—all this may be woven into falling in love with the whole idea of ways of looking. As opposed to it sounding like some abstract concept—yes, sure, ways of looking, you can look at things different ways—or just some intellectual philosophy. So we end up bowing to all that in some way.

This whole idea of ways of looking and everything involved in it becomes imaginal in the sense that it becomes dimensionalized. The self, other, world, the idea of ways of looking, the self that relates to ways of looking, and the world that it opens up—all of that becomes taken up by the soul-making dynamic, all the elements, the *eros-psyche-logos*. So the whole relationship or conception to that idea is not a kind of anti-libidinal or deflationary idea. It's not "oh, it doesn't matter" or "it's just a way of looking" or whatever, as if we don't care. There's something very beautiful.

And if one goes deeply enough into it—I think this is important—if one goes deeply enough into it, that the whole idea and practice, when we've absorbed it in the heart of ways of looking, that whole conceptual framework and the exploration of it, reveals and opens us to a really profound mystery and sacredness about consciousness and the cosmos.

So at one level it might seem, yes, we can have a way of looking that sees sacredness, or we can have a way of looking at another time that decides not to see sacredness or doesn't see sacredness or whatever. And that's true at a certain level. But as one goes deeper into this whole exploration of ways of looking and that whole *logos* there, in practice, it reveals the mystery and the sacredness of the indissoluble entwinement of consciousness and cosmos, the poetry of that, the beauty of that.

So in that sense, emptiness and ways of looking has everything to do with participation as well, which again is one of the elements. So there's a relationship there between the whole idea of participation, the mystery and depth of that concept, and also the whole teaching of ways of looking.

So when we can fabricate a little less through whatever means—there's all kinds of ways of doing that—when we can allow things to become liquid, when we can liquefy and loosen things, then that allows image to arise. There is the possibility in the loosening and unbinding to some degree of perception of this or that. There is an increased possibility of image arising in practice, of sensing the soul.

Actually, I should throw in one more discrimination there, or a related point, slightly different. Liquefying things, loosening things with a taste of deep emptiness, unfabricating, not only allows the possibility of image, opens up the possibility for the birth, the reception of an image. It also may empower, give power and depth to an image that is already accessible.

So I think on the recent retreat we did, Roots into the Ground of Soul, I shared at some point that sometimes before, for instance, giving a talk on the imaginal soul-making, especially when it felt like there was a chance of a difficult audience and hostility—but actually any time, really, in the past, and I still do it—calling on the imaginal soul-making lineage, beings, historical and angelic, if you like, of the past, of the present, of the future, imaginal beings and calling on them for help, for support, recognizing myself as wanting to serve that lineage and support it and move it on and be part of it and conceiving of myself imaginatively as part of that tradition, that lineage.

So yes, before any time, really, often I talk about soul-making, certainly before a difficult talk, or when I'm very tired, sometimes from illness, and I think I mentioned our podcast was scheduled and I was really struggling with health and fatigue, and didn't want to let the side down, so to speak, didn't want to let this lineage down, this tradition down for whom I'm one of the temporary spokespersons, perhaps, imaginatively.

So then, imaginatively, prayerfully, aligning myself in the imaginal realm with that imaginal lineage and devoting myself to that, putting my intention in alignment and devotion to that, and calling for help. What

I failed to mention on that Roots into the Ground of Soul, just in the moment of it, was that what I often do with that is have a few moments of really deep emptiness perception beforehand. So I go, just based on past practice and all the work I've done, very deep into some unfabricating of all things, and then coming out of that, dipping into that, coming out of it with that powerful liquefying and unfabricating, then engaging in this prayerful, devotional, dedicated relationship with the lineage and asking for help.

And that dip into deep emptiness and that deep unfabricating, even just for a few moments, lends that whole imaginal sense of the lineage of myself and what I'm serving and what I want to serve—gives it much greater power. It's already accessible as an image, it's something I can generate and call on and call back, but the power and the soul-making power of that is amplified, I think, significantly, through that dip into emptiness, deep emptiness.

So yes, deep emptiness can empower images that are already there, already accessible, and it can also, the unfabricating, the loosening can support and open the possibility of an image appearing, coming, visiting, being received.

And in regard to that latter possibility, we have to point something else out. As always, there's a mutual dependent origination. So yes, dependent on fabricating less and liquefying is the arising of image, but as always, the dependency runs both ways. There's a mutual dependent origination, which means that when we sense with soul, when there's an imaginal perception, there is some degree of loosening. There is some degree of less fabrication.

So I sometimes give the example of, especially recently, you know, challenged with health stuff and sensing that, sometimes I describe going into a mode of sensing my life and death from the perspective of eternity, *spesiae eternatus* in Latin, the sort of bird's eye view from beyond death or beyond time. And in a way, what that's doing is stimulating or igniting the node of the element of eternality, of the 28 elements. Seeing my life, my death, my narrative from that perspective ignites, turns on the eternality node. And then myself and my life and my death and my journey through life to death, from birth to death, becomes image. And in that, there's a certain loosening, unbinding, fading of perception to some degree. To some degree. Which is exactly what we're talking about.

This alignment brings energy and integration, harmonizing all the elements together.

Returning to the alchemical maxim: "Do not perform any operation—do not perform any alchemical operation, do not begin the work—until all is liquid." Yes, this principle holds true. But it also works in reverse. The arising of an image, to the degree that it's truly imaginal, will also liquefy things. It will certainly liquefy the sense of that image, but also the sense of self, the sense of world, the sense of time—all of that dissolves and softens.

I want to stress this non-linearity of all the elements that comprise the imaginal. Yes, this liquefaction—this unfabricating to some degree, this loosening and unbinding—is an integral part, a

necessary component of what happens in imaginal practice. But it might not always proceed step by step. It's not necessarily: first you do the unfabricating a little bit, then you can have an image. The elements might arise in any order.

There's something important to be aware of here, because I know some people might hear teachings on emptiness—whether independently, in the context of an emptiness course, a book, or within imaginal practice—and feel somewhat daunted. They might think, "I'm so far from those kinds of experiences you're describing. There are so many different practices, and they all seem quite advanced." I want to address this concern directly.

What I really want to convey is that any degree or depth of loosening, unbinding, unfabricating—any bringing in of emptiness, however slight—is generally going to be helpful with imaginal practice, with sensing the soul. The exception would be if one has the foot rammed on the accelerator with emptiness contemplation, really leaning into and emphasizing that understanding of emptiness as a way of looking at all perception. In that case, everything will simply fade. As I mentioned before, during such intense emptiness practice, there won't be any image, there won't be any perception. You can dip into that state and emerge from it, and things will be loosened afterward. But not during the time of full-throttle emptiness contemplation.

Most importantly, whatever little bit of emptiness or liquefying or unfabricating we can bring to bear can be tremendously helpful.

Let me share something from a few months ago. I was struggling with aftereffects of treatments, quite tired and physically uncomfortable, with different bodily systems taxed by medication. I sat to meditate and almost immediately, a soulmaking constellation came together. I use that word deliberately: constellation.

I can't remember the exact order of appearance of the various elements, but one was the idea—really just a word initially—of stamina, forbearance, patience with suffering and difficulty. But that word was lit up in a certain way. It had a sense of significance, of depth. It was woven into the imaginal tapestry.

Another element was both an idea and then the experiential sense, the meditative sense, that all experience—including and especially the dukkha of the pain I was feeling, the discomfort, the inconvenience, the frustration with medical matters and doctors, the whole situation of being very ill and the likely movement toward dying—all of this is just appearances.

Some of you familiar with emptiness practices will recognize this as a certain level of emptiness perception. Whatever I regard as "my body"—it's just an appearance. This thought—just an appearance. Even the perception of this desk—just an appearance. Time itself—just an appearance.

One can choose to employ this as a way of looking: just appearance, just appearance, just appearances. These can be very beautiful and very liberating practices. It's not the deepest level of emptiness

perception—it's one of a whole range of practices, a certain level among many. But in this case, it arose almost by itself, something I had practiced extensively in the past.

Though not the deepest level, it was enough to completely transform the relationship at that moment with the whole health predicament, with dying itself.

And like all emptiness practices do, as I said earlier, it should release aversion. It should be a letting go. It should release clinging and aversion. And in so doing, it releases dukkha. And also then allowed a sense of stamina and the kind of ability to persevere with strength, with steadiness, with a sense of uprightness.

So there was this idea of stamina that came, alive with imaginal import and portent. Then there was this certain emptiness perception at a certain level—not the deepest—which from past practice I'm quite used to. It just kind of came by itself.

There was a third element to this imaginal constellation, which was a kind of Middle Eastern man in a black robe. His features were not visually clear, but his energy was quite stern, and he was encouraging me to stamina. He was standing and sort of dancing opposite me, quite fierce, with a tremendous amount of energy—as a kind of tough love, I suppose, he was teaching or communicating to me. He somehow communicated, not necessarily in words, that my illness and possible dying may be for the sake of more than me. I had certain associations with that regarding the Sangha and things like that.

That piece I checked out. I'm always a little bit cautious when something in the imaginal practice has to do with self, and I check it out. And it's like, yes, it had the imaginal middle way. I wasn't reifying that as some kind of self-glorification or something like that. So that put me at ease with that aspect of it.

So these three aspects came together: the word stamina, the idea of stamina; then the sense of all experiences as just appearances; and then this Middle Eastern, stern, fierce teacher who was communicating to me as he danced. And I felt better immediately, just very, very quickly. The body softened, the energy body opened, the energies opened and were enveloped in a warm light, I felt. I could feel that as potentially healing if I wanted to, so I lingered there a little bit.

So several points here. One is, by way of illustration, notice the complexity of some images—that they actually involve several elements in combination. I identified three in this case.

Second, as I said, and this was the main point that I wanted to communicate right now: the use of emptiness perceptions and practices to loosen things, liquefy things, and to aid in that way the imaginal possibilities is really important. So this "just appearances"—this attitude, way of looking, of regarding all experiences, especially the difficult ones, as just appearances—was really an integral part of what opened up here and of supporting that possibility of opening.

But, and this is the point, they don't always have to be the deepest emptiness practices or perceptions one knows. In this case, I've spent a lot of time exploring emptiness, and there are much deeper emptiness

practices than this "just appearances" view. But it didn't have to be the deepest one. So really, wherever you are in your exploration of emptiness and loosening and liquefying and unbinding, unfabricating things, that's going to be helpful. And if you've gone quite deep with these things, then anywhere along the range of what you've explored up to that point will be helpful. You don't always have to go to the deepest level of emptiness. I mean, that can be great and helpful too, but it's not always necessary.

So that was the main point, but let's just say a couple of other things. The facets of the imaginal constellation there, those three facets, affected and transformed each other. They were mixed up, involved in each other, affecting each other.

What happened as the thing became more imaginal was that the emptiness perception—that emptiness way of looking of phenomena and experience as just appearances—also became more soul-making than it would be in a purely emptiness practice that wasn't imaginal soul-making, because it was affected by, wrapped up in, in dialogue with and informed by the other more imaginal elements that were going on: this idea of stamina and this stern, fierce teacher in a black robe.

So "appearances"—the word "appearances"—came to me and also gained range and dimensionality and depth and fullness and richness. It meant, it included certainly my illness, the dukkha, dying early. That was appearance, with all the freeing ramifications of that. But it included more also—the narratives of my life, again. And even more than that: these appearances, the narrative and the experience and the illness and the dying and all that—they are me and they are not me, of course. But they are me and not me. They are my soul.

So this was an intuitive, imaginal soul-making understanding: these appearances are my soul. Now, of course, other times I can have a completely different way of looking—appearances, experiences, my narrative, none of that is me. In this case, because of the flexibility of ways of looking, there's a possibility, and this just happened organically in the imaginal mix of things in the constellation there. There was the opposite view: they are my soul. And that...

That sense of that narrative and the early death and the illness and all these experiences, and even the things that I was looking at in the room—the sofa, whatever was there, the table—they are my soul. And all of that—the narrative, death, illness—formed an image. And there was awareness that this image is not just for me, but it's also for others.

There was awareness of self being an image for another, of course, which we can be, and I think we should be in the fullest and deepest and most beautiful human relationships. We become image for each other. We become imaginal image for each other.

The emptiness perception itself, the emptiness way of looking of just appearances, as I said, also took on this quality—became dimensionalized in becoming imaginal itself.

There's a way of using emptiness practices—I'll come back to this in another talk—but there's a way of

using emptiness practices at times that kind of denigrates experience and the phenomena of our experience, internal and external. Because it's in the service of letting go, it's like, "Oh, that doesn't matter, that doesn't matter, it's empty, it's empty." And there's a kind of letting go, a holy disinterest, I've called it sometimes. It's almost like saying, "It's nothing, it's empty." And that's very valid at one point, but it leads beyond the world, so to speak. If I just keep regarding things that way, it will take me to the unfabricated. Of course, it could get hijacked with aversion and, as I said, with anti-libidinal tendencies and deflation and all that.

But in this case, the notion of appearances that got opened up and filled out in both a liberating way and an imaginal way was not a kind of denigration or degradation of appearances.

I was reminded of a passage from Henri Corbin, where he in his lifetime was accused of being a docetist. Docetism was regarded at some point by the church authorities as a particular kind of heresy. What it means—D-O-C-E-T-I-S-M—is the view or philosophy that Christ was not truly human, but was an appearance. And some of you will know parallels of that with certain teachings about Buddha nature, that actually the Buddhas that appear in the world are appearances. They're kind of appearances projected forth from another level—the Dharmakaya and Sambhogakaya.

Corbin, in his teaching about the Abrahamic traditions and his interpretation of those stories and teachings—that they would be more helpfully regarded as appearance—was accused of heresy. And he replied, "Yes, I am, but it's a docetism that is far from degrading reality by making it appearance. On the contrary, by transforming it into appearance, by transforming seeming reality into appearance, it makes this reality transparent to the transcendent meaning manifested in it."

Do you understand? It's not just appearance as a way of just letting go—"Ah, it doesn't matter." And then usually there's something that's real, and this is just appearance, and I want that real thing. But he's saying no: in making it appearance, by transforming it into appearance, it makes this reality transparent to the transcendent meaning manifested in it. In other words, when we sense it that way, what it means to be appearance is that it's illuminated, it's translucent, it's transubstantiated into the theophany or angelic manifestation or radiation of divinity—it's perceived that way.

Similarly, what happened here in the weaving together of these different imaginal elements—a certain emptiness mode of looking, way of looking that could be denigrating of appearances—was actually then woven into something that was much more sacred and beautiful and soulful.

There's a relationship—you can recognize some of what we're talking about in this—a relationship between unfabricating and sensing the soul and the opening up of the imaginal. You can recognize some of that in other traditions.

Certainly in tantric teachings, as I've pointed out many times, they're actually premised on understanding of emptiness. One is usually instructed to meditate on emptiness for a certain amount of time and then

engage in deity visualization.

I'm going to quote something from the Jewish mystical tradition. This is from Shneur Zalman, in a book called Likutey Amarim, sometimes called Tanya, and he said: "Love derived from the understanding and knowledge of the greatness of the blessed Ein Sof..." Ein Sof means literally "without limit," but when you read the explanations of how that's used in the Jewish mystical traditions, the Kabbalistic traditions, it really means a kind of nothingness. So it's something akin to the unfabricated.

"Love derived from the understanding and knowledge of the greatness of the blessed Ein Sof, of the unfabricated, let's say, is called *cheshek*"—which means heart's desire. So in other words, when we love that experience and the understanding we get from it, we love the unfabricated. There's that movement. That love is called the heart's desire.

"And from this heart's desire is produced a garment for the soul in the world of Beriah." There's a lot of Hebrew technical terms here, but that world of Beriah is one of the strata of many worlds. This world of physical manifestation is just one world. There are other planes of existence. Beriah also means the world of creation.

So this love and desire, this heart's desire for the unfabricated—from that heart's desire, from that love, is produced a garment for the soul in the world of creation, which constitutes the higher Garden of Eden.

Here's a love derived from knowing the unfabricated, a heart's desire for the unfabricated and for all that that implies. And from that heart's desire is produced a garment for the soul in the world of creation.

And that world of creation constitutes the higher garden of Eden.

In our language, we can understand this more directly. The heart's desire based on knowing itself means the eros based on knowing emptiness and the unfabricated. When we translate these terms, we find that the eros based on knowing emptiness and the unfabricated—that eros, as being eros—if it's allowed to do what it does, will impregnate and deepen, richen, complexify, expand the psyche and the logos and the whole sense of things, so that the energy body and the imaginal body and the whole world open up and become imaginal and become dimensionalized and become divinized.

This garment for the soul is in the higher garden of Eden, in the garden of Eden. You understand? So this love of emptiness, this knowing of emptiness and the unfabricated, that eros does something, based also on the experience of emptiness. It opens up the energy body. That energy body becomes a garment for the soul. The energy body experiences a garment for the soul in the garden—in a world transformed, dimensionalized, divinized, eternalized, given meaningfulness, beauty, resplendent with all the elements of the imaginal.

So that whole indispensable place for emptiness, unfabricating, and the love of that too, the eros for that too, and what it can open up—it has parallels in Buddhist tantric teachings and also, as we just quoted, in

certain Kabbalistic teachings from the Jewish tradition. And we can understand that with our words.

So I hope that makes sense. Emptiness is powerful, you know. Going back to what I said earlier, people have different relationships within, different degrees of desire and curiosity, but it's powerful in terms of what it can deliver for our dharma practice, for our lives, and definitely for imaginal practice.

Lingering on tantric parallels, some of you will have heard of tummo, the practice of inner fire, the inner heat, that famous practice among Tibetan yogis. Lama Yeshe has written about it, and Geshe Kelsang and others—you can find books about it.

What it involves is visualizing the channels of the energy body and visualizing certain things happening in those channels and in the central channel, the vertical channel of the body, of the energy body. In a way, a byproduct of that practice is the generation of internal heat. The purpose of the practice is not so much to keep you warm in the snow, but rather that in working with the channels of energy in this way, a very deep perception of emptiness comes about. So rather than through some kind of analytic meditation or other playing with fabrication, one actually works with the energy body and that delivers a deep understanding of emptiness.

Again, mutual dependent arising—things work both ways.

You will notice when you're contemplating emptiness, when you're engaging in emptiness practice and it's working well, there is an alignment, harmonization of the energy body, just as there is when we do imaginal practice and an image is becoming imaginal. But this can go very deep.

When we have a deep moment of realizing emptiness—and it could just be a moment—you will feel something quite dramatic. That's not really the right word, but there's a real sense of the energy body and the whole bodily experience being cleared out and purified, as well as being aligned and harmonized.

So the work with the channels and visualizing can lead to a sense, an experience of emptiness in the Tibetan teachings, but also the other way around. Emptiness practice, emptiness experience will purify the energy body and the channels there, and you can actually feel that. And it will liquefy and unfabricate to some degree all perception.

I want to say something else about that. At a deep level, that's quite a dramatic, palpable experience, but even a little bit, you'll notice that. Something happens in the energy body because it's untangling the knots and the contractions that clinging causes.

As I said earlier, with regard to its place and its use in imaginal practice or alongside or supporting or opening imaginal practice, there are all kinds of ranges of the kind of depth and power of different emptiness practices. And they're all going to be useful and helpful. So don't get hung up that it has to be this really deep thing. Sometimes it can be really deep. And these things can, with practice, become very quick. That usually takes quite a bit of time of developing emptiness practices, but there's always

individual variation.

Sometimes what's very powerful, for example, in opening up, sensing the soul, is just a few moments even of contemplating the emptiness of time. Now, for those few moments to be powerful, they will depend on probably quite a lot of practice and familiarity, developing familiarity with contemplating the emptiness of time or ways of looking that unfabricate time or realize its emptiness.

But if that's the sort of thing you're interested in, or if it's the sort of thing that's available to you, or if this is relevant later on, sometimes this can be very powerful—few moments perhaps only of some way of seeing the emptiness of time, and then turning the attention to anything. It could be the body or something else. Anything that appears in time and changes in time, which is all things that we know in the world of conventional experience.

So some contemplation of emptiness of time meditatively, and then turning the attention that's imbued with that understanding of the emptiness of time, just turning attention to something which appears and changes in time, and the sense of a timeless dimension will be allowed, will be supported and made manifest there. And again, that being one of the...

nodes of eternality, timelessness, there can be then the perception of that thing, whatever thing it was—the body or whatever else, the body, the world, whatever—that can be sensed with soul, because we've ignited one of the elements of the imaginal, one of the nodes.

But as I say, things can... any kind of emptiness practice or any level, don't get—please don't get—daunted or self-critical or despairing if you hear about practices that you haven't approached yet or that seem a long way off for you. I mentioned, I think, in one of the talks already on the retreat, how just a little bit of anattā practice of regarding something that we would usually identify with or take as me or mine, and engaging a way of looking that regards it as not me, not mine, very lightly. A degree of that anattā practice can allow the self to become imaginal. The sense of self becomes an imaginal sense of self.

Why? Because anattā practice is one of those unfabricating practices. When we regard things as not me, not mine, it's actually very, very powerful, potentially. If we can, it's really worth developing as a practice, if you can, if you're interested. So some—not the whole, again, not the accelerator, the gas pedal rammed down full throttle, because that will just fade everything, and then you'd have to come out of that, and that still might be helpful. But just a degree of anattā, a sort of light touch, liquefies things. It liquefies, in this case, the sense of self.

And in a way, anattā practice is also stepping out of the normal self-sense. So the normal, habitual, mostly unconscious kind of program for consciousness is to appropriate this or that as me or mine—body, feelings, perceptions, thoughts, intentions, consciousness itself, etc. And so by engaging the anattā way of looking, with respect to some of that or all of that, you're actually stepping out of the normal self-sense enough. And in stepping out of that normal kind of entrenched self-sense, then there's actually room,

space for the self to be viewed in other ways. So a degree of anattā practice doesn't have to be—like I said, the whole hog—can be really helpful in liberating the possibility of sensing an imaginal self, rather than just the locked-in, conventional, reified, solidified sense of self.

I want to mention another possibility here, that again, I feel very strongly that emptiness can and should be in the service of love, certainly, and the brahmavihāras, and not just liberation, not just personal liberation—emptiness in the service of the brahmavihāras, but also in the service of a sense of sacredness and senses of sacredness.

So what you can notice sometimes is that opening to more emptiness or deeper emptiness at some time can actually open up and support a sense of prayerfulness. Or it might be that we feel moved to adopt a prayerful stance with respect to something or some situation, or just with respect to the cosmos, and not really prayer as supplication, as asking, but just a prayerfulness. But very easily for us as human beings, that prayerfulness can feel blocked at times, or limited, or stuck in some way.

Of course, when we're asking for things, when there's a supplication, oftentimes it's because there's something we want or feel we need and the self wanting that is reified. And that reification of the self actually limits the sense of the prayerfulness and the openness of the prayerfulness. It doesn't feel so alive or so rich or so deep or so beautiful when the self is reified.

So, seemingly paradoxically, when there's, so to speak, less self, when the emptiness of the self is seen, or we're engaging a way of looking that experiences the self more emptily, that actually opens up and fires and supports a deeper, wider, more beautiful and richer, more soulful quality of prayerful supplication. One still might be in the level of prayer of asking, of supplication—if that's the right word, I hope it is. But the whole thing has become looser, less solidified, less contracted. There's still a self that's praying in the asking sense. That's one level of prayer. But that self is kind of see-through. It's looser, just because it's seen as more empty.

So the emptiness, just as emptiness opens up and should open up the brahmavihāras, and support the brahmavihāras—I've talked about that in the past—so also the emptiness can open up the prayerfulness and enrich and deepen it and make it more beautiful. And it might be, unless you're used to this, that that seems paradoxical. The self is asking, if I see the emptiness of self, why would I ask for anything? Because self is empty, it doesn't need anything, there's nothing to need. But actually it's not—yes it can go to that level, but we're talking about sort of the more subtle play of the pedals here, some intermediate territory of emptiness that opens up the richness and the breadth and depth and beauty of soul-making perceptions, of sensing the soul.

We talk about the imaginal middle way, the theater-like quality, neither real nor not real, being one of the elements of the imaginal, of sensing the soul. But that doesn't really equate completely. So the imaginal middle way is not the middle way of emptiness that Nāgārjuna and others talked about. Not exactly.

So I want to come back to this later, but, you know, all things are empty—at least in my understanding of emptiness, and I think Nāgārjuna's and other people—all things are empty. So that means something that's, an imaginal perception is empty, but also a conventional perception is empty. And a deluded perception is empty. All of that is empty. All of those perceptions are empty. All things are empty. But still, although all things are empty, they're not...

Partly, things are empty in different ways. At the deepest level, they're all empty in the same way. For instance, everything is empty—all things are empty because time is empty, and anything that exists must exist in time. So everything is empty at that level. At other levels, there may be more: some things are empty in certain ways that others aren't. The stock market is empty because it's just a social convention that people get very het up about, but it's merely a social convention.

At a deep level, all things are empty. But still, as I've said before, there's an ontological difference in status between an imaginal object and a conventionally perceived physical object. To say that they're all the same because they're all just empty—there is a difference in ontological status there.

So when we talk about the imaginal middle way, we're not talking about exactly the same thing as emptiness. I want to come back to that in another talk, hopefully. But what I do want to say right now to finish is about the degree of latitude or flexibility or range with how much we reify at any time in imaginal practice.

We really emphasize this neither real nor not real, theater-like quality—imaginal in a way. But maybe there's a rightness to relating to certain images where we are reifying to certain images. And in that sense, those images are empty, but just empty in the way that a person is empty, or any conventionally agreed-upon physical entity is empty. So there's more reification going on than what we mean with the imaginal middle way. Or within that imaginal middle way there's a range, and we can reify a bit more or a bit less at different times, perhaps. Maybe there's a rightness in all that.

I've said before that I think it will be, in the long run, much more fertile to be quite diligent and curious about that sense of the imaginal middle way. It's really a certain flavor, this theater-like quality, and give that quite a lot of importance to begin with. "To begin with" might be for years in imaginal practice. And then, based on that experience and feel for that—it's really a certain feel, it feels very different than other experiences—based on the familiarity and experience with that, then we might start exploring more possibilities of more reification with certain experiences, certain images, certain senses. I feel that will be much more fruitful.

It will also preserve, as I said, the territory and the domain of imaginal practice from just getting mixed up with other stuff and its particular fruits being lost, its unique fruits being lost. So my request and encouragement is to lean on that for a while. I know it challenges people or even irks some people, but I do feel it's important.

Having said that, there might be at times and with certain experiences, certain images, the possibility of reifying a bit more and maybe even the necessity or the appropriateness of reifying a bit more. Some of that might be just to do with a person's own growth of their soul or psychology. So for someone it might be good for them to pray to a personal God, asking for help for themselves, humbly and reifying self, situation, and God. It might be that a person just jumps too easily to this non-reification and there's not with it enough of a certain kind of traction in the being, in the psychology, in the soul, in the heart. So it might be for personal reasons.

But it's a tricky one in teaching. Also emptiness, middle way. It's really tricky, and it's something that really, in the journey of understanding and practicing with emptiness, refines itself and gets more and more subtle and more and more precise—what it really means to say things neither exist nor not exist. Things neither do exist nor don't exist—this emptiness middle way. It's really a part of the journey, and one wobbles back and forth either side of that middle way as the understanding hones in on what it really means intellectually, but also really intuitively and experientially.

Similarly, with the imaginal middle way, it's a tricky teaching, it seems, for people. On the other hand, like I said, it has a certain flavor to me. And I can tell when I'm working with someone whether they're in that or not, and they recognize it if I point it out often—not everyone, but if there's enough sensitivity and familiarity, it's palpable. You're in a different realm there when there's not the reification. So I think it's sometimes really palpably obvious, and it seems to be something that many people struggle with for different reasons.

But I was talking with Catherine as well, and we realized that we don't want to get attached to a position of non-reifying. There may be a spectrum of reification in imaginal practice which we are free to move along at any time, more or less, and maybe for different reasons at any time that it's more right to reify, more appropriate, more helpful for whatever reason we have in mind.

So it might be, as I said, something to do with a person's personal growth, something to do with the fullness of their being. Or it might have to do more with the experience itself and the image itself—that there are whole categories of being, categories of experience that share a lot of aspects with imaginal experience, but they're not imaginal. We're talking about other things. We're talking about opening to different realms as perceptions that are as real as anything else, as real as seeing my friend walking down the street or having a cup of tea or whatever. It may well be—my inclination is to say there are many kinds of realms of experience and being.

And in those cases, to adopt a non-reifying stance in the imaginal way may not be attuned or appropriate. So it's complex—really complex. But it feels important to mention that there are certainly realms beyond the imaginal.

There's a whole spectrum of psychic phenomena—ESP, shamanism, energy perceptions, aura perceptions, and all that. This is all important and significant, I think. Again, I wanted to differentiate it from the

imaginal. But I've also heard accounts of people in the process of dying reporting as they're on their deathbed perceiving angels, perceiving other planes of beings, knowing things about friends or relatives on the other side of the world without any communication—all kinds of extraordinary phenomena.

Since my diagnosis of the metastases and the high likelihood of dying soon, there are times when I also feel as if other planes of existence are opened up to my perception. I shared this very briefly in another talk the other night. Sometimes it's almost like the perception of the angel, or the angelic dimension of a human being, is weighted more heavily than the perception of their ego or human aspect—if we can even separate those two.

This has a different quality than what we're calling the imaginal or the imaginal middle way. There is really a sense of opening to something that has the ontological status, the degree of being and reality, equivalent to any human perception or any physical perception.

I just want to mention this. It's obviously a huge subject. I don't have it figured out at all, and I don't know anyone who does. But this business of the importance of the imaginal middle way—it's not quite the same as emptiness. It's quite a wide middle way, and we might have a range within it of more or less reifying. Again, it's quite individual when to lean toward less reification, more fluidity—"Can you notice that theatrical element?"—and when actually to lean toward more reification, even if it's imaginal. Sometimes this sense of your soul may be more real, this imaginal sense of yourself, this imaginal sense of the angels or the angel, more real, more important, more significant, more central, more of a solid pillar and guide in your life than anything which conventionally, socially agreed-upon perception would sanction.

There are individual differences at different times, certainly in teaching, but we also get a feel for this ourselves—moving within that range of the imaginal middle way. And there might be a whole gamut of experiences that fall outside of the imaginal altogether, and therefore the imaginal middle way doesn't pertain to them so much as the emptiness middle way pertains to them, as it does to any object, physical or otherwise.

I just wanted to mention this as the teachings evolve and to point that out.

Let's stop for tonight. I will hopefully say more about emptiness in a later talk.

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