# Dharma(s) Discovered and Created (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 2:24:45

As I mentioned earlier in this series of talks, some of what I want to speak about is really for the sake of bringing things to our collective attention—your individual attention, our collective attention—for consideration, for reflection, certain aspects, certain elements, certain strands, certain dimensions of things. That reflection and consideration obviously involves the mind, but also the heart, and even more so the soul. What does it mean to hear something, to ponder it, to mull it over, to digest and let it sink in, not just to the mind, not just to the heart, but also to the soul?

One of those strands or elements or aspects that I would like to bring into the light, to shine some light on, is the whole question of tradition, or the whole concept of tradition. I really mean mostly what we might call religious or spiritual traditions—even if you don't like either of those words, religious or spiritual, you know what I mean.

Perhaps that might strike some of you as a slightly strange subject for a dharma talk—to talk about tradition, or traditions, or what a tradition is and what's involved in tradition. I'm not sure. Of course, some of you might think, "Well, Rob, at this point, they're all pretty strange, the dharma talks." So either way.

But I'd like to reflect a little bit on tradition, sort of lay things out, unpack things, open them up and kind of look at what we've got there. Within that, particularly, I'm talking obviously about the tradition of Buddha-dharma, the Buddhist tradition. And within that, as part of what we want to look at and consider as well, is the place or how we might conceive of the place of, say, soul-making dharma with respect to Buddha-dharma. What's that relationship there? How do we conceive of soul-making dharma? How do we place it with regard to the tradition of Buddha-dharma? And what would it mean to talk about or to consider a soul-making dharma tradition?

It's too early to say anything like that, but if there were such a thing to evolve in the future, or a feeling of such a thing, a perception of such a thing among certain people, what might we unpack, lay out that would also have relevance to that kind of situation, that kind of sense of tradition, or a tradition like that?

Some people would say, well, we're at a point in history, humanity is at a point in history where it's important to reflect on traditions for all kinds of reasons. Yes, that may well be true—after modernism or in the throes of modernism or the dying throes of modernism or post-modernism or whatever. It might be true that we're at that juncture, at that point in history.

But one could ask: is the whole notion of a point in history really a reality? That's something I'll come back

to. Is there really a point in history that we can agree on? We are at this point of history. This is what characterizes this point in history, this juncture. These are the salient features. This is what's important. This is what constitutes that juncture or that point.

Some would say it's important to talk about tradition and our sense of that, our expectations of that, our views of traditions, our relationships with traditions because of where humanity is at the current time historically. But I would say perhaps more importantly: if you love practice, and if you are devoted to practice, and if you love the teachings, then—as you've heard me point out before—where there is that kind of love and devotion, there is fantasy in the soul-making sense of the word.

There is a kind of narrative image that potentially has all the qualities of the imaginal, all the elements of the imaginal filled out with beauty and dimensionality and eros. So if you love practice and the teachings, if you're devoted to practice and the teachings, there will be, wrapped up in that love and partly supporting that love, a fantasy of practice and yourself in practice and the teachings. That will involve fantasy of the tradition—an idea of the tradition, a sense of the tradition, a relationship with the tradition, an image of the tradition.

That fantasy also feeds your love. So there's again a mutual support, a mutual reinforcement, a mutual nourishment, a mutual dependency, if you like, of the love and the devotion on the one hand and the fantasy on the other. And they're not really even separable. So if you love practice and the teachings, and if you're devoted to the teachings, there will be the fantasy and there will be a sense of tradition as part of that larger fantasy, and you will care about these kinds of things that we're talking about tonight. You'll care about this question of tradition and what it involves and what to expect from it. It won't be abstract. It will matter to you. It will be of more than somewhat academic interest.

Not too long ago, I was speaking with a colleague, Stephen Batchelor, and was asking him how it was going with Bodhi College. He was telling me a few things, and one of the things he said was that they had put together a course and advertised it online about the Buddhist roots of mindfulness—really looking at the origins in the Buddhist teachings, in the Pali Canon, of contemporary mindfulness practices and teachings. He said that surprising to them was the fact that virtually no one registered for that course. There was very little interest from people who were either mindfulness practitioners or participants in mindfulness courses or mindfulness teachers or therapeutic mindfulness workers or whatever. And they were surprised by that.

On reflection, in a way, I'm not that surprised because it may be that in the way mindfulness is promoted in some circles these days and the way it's practiced and related to by many is really as a technique, or perhaps a set of techniques, for the alleviation of suffering—so that one lives one's life as one lives it, and one just incorporates these techniques as sort of useful and helpful strategies to reduce stress, anxiety, suffering, and dis-ease.

As such, as just a technique that has some utility in relieving stress and anxiety, pain for example, it

remains just that—a kind of utilitarian technique. And it rarely, or for many people, it won't ever become more than that. They may practice mindfulness every day for the rest of their lives with a certain kind of commitment—let's not call it devotion, let's call it commitment. A certain kind of steadiness of commitment is important to them, and it's really helpful, and that's great.

But it's never more than that. It's never more than a technique for reducing suffering, so there isn't the kind of falling in love with practice and the ethos of practice and the rich constellation of dimensions and aspects and elements that gather around and make up something like a Buddhist practice.

For a person who's simply relating to mindfulness as a technique that's helpful in their lives, that's wonderful, that's great. But there won't be the falling in love. There won't therefore be the fantasy. And there won't be the sense of caring much about tradition and therefore caring much about the past and the stories and the history.

So in a way, on reflection, I wasn't too surprised to hear that from Stephen—that there was very little uptake or interest in such a course. If you love, and I'm assuming most people who listen to this talk will be people who love practice deeply, who have deep devotion to practice and to teachings, there will be a fantasy, there will therefore be implicitly some sense of and care about and kind of fantasy of an eros for tradition and everything that's implied in there.

Like I said at the beginning, I just want to bring some things to light, bring some of the aspects of this question of tradition to light, lay it out. I don't want to conclude too much from that. It's almost like just, as I said, laying out some things on the ground together. We can have a look. I don't want to impose any conclusions that I might have on that kind of laying out of material and considerations. I would more give it to you to perhaps make your conclusions, but also, as I said, to ponder, to reflect: How does this sit with me? How do all these considerations or these aspects, when we lay them out and look at them and say, "Yes, there's that and there's that and that and didn't think of that"—how does it land with you? How does it sit in your heart, in your soul, in your mind? What's the response of your being? And what's the responsibility of your being? Again, the responsibility of your soul, if you care deeply.

If you love deeply, again, it goes with duty. If you love deeply, if you're devoted, there's image around, there's eros around. Things are on the verge of or on their way to being fully imaginable, and part of that will be duty, and part of the duty will be to the teachings, to the tradition.

So in laying all this out, again, I don't want to force any conclusions that I might have or any perspectives that I might have too much. Some of that will be inevitable just in the nature of the situation—it's me talking, I'm in the role of the teacher here, some authority with that, some clout with that—but really I'm more interested in the process of how it sits, how it's digested, how it's related to and held in your heart.

Certainly my intention is not to be primarily deconstructive or destructive of loyalties and notions of tradition. Some might say, "Oh, you're saying some dangerous things." I'm not sure. I don't know about

that. I think it's just a matter of maturity and honesty and consciousness and openness of mind. And then what do we do with this? How do we assimilate it, consider it, reflect on it? Where do we move from here? How do we look towards the past, towards the present, towards the future, inwards and outwards, at each other?

So it's really for you and about your process. And as much as possible, I just want to lay some things out for that kind of heart, mind and soul consideration.

If we just bring up the word tradition and immediately consider what comes to mind when we think about tradition—what is a tradition? What do we mean by tradition? And even more pointedly or relevantly, what do we mean or what's involved, what needs to be involved and included in a healthy tradition, if we might use such a term, or an alive, a living tradition? What elements and constituents might be necessary to form a healthy living tradition that retains some coherence and some vitality?

If we just think about it briefly—and I don't mean at all to be comprehensive, I just want to throw some things in a pot right now. But some of what I want to throw into that pot may not be immediately obvious when we think of what's involved in tradition. I don't intend to be comprehensive at this point, and actually through none of this talk am I intending to be comprehensive. There's other material that I've explored before around these subjects, so I don't want to repeat too much. But I do want to unearth or bring to light some elements to consider that, as I said, might not be obvious to many of us at first.

So what do you think of when we say tradition? What do you think is included or implied? If we just think almost off the top of the head, tradition implies a community for a start. So tradition has to be more than one person. And that community has to be spread, if you like. It has to exist in the present, so to speak. There's a community that extends in the present between people. And it also has to have a tie with the past, a flow from the past, and hopefully into the future.

So it's a community in the present with a past, with a connection, a feed from the past.

And that community—what's included? Again, we're just kind of throwing into a pot: what's included, what's necessary for a healthy living tradition? That community that constitutes a tradition needs to have certain things shared. So one is values. There needs to be a good degree of shared values. Some of what we can put in that part of values is the goals—what goals, what aims, what ends are considered valuable? And so there has to be a kind of common ground among the members of the community, extending both from the past to the present into the future, and also in the present among constituent members of that community, of that sangha.

There needs to also be shared practices, shared rituals or customs. Actually, let me open this up as a question rather than insisting there needs to be. I'd rather put it as a question. Does there need to be, or to what extent does there need to be in this community shared values, shared goals, shared practices, shared rituals, shared customs?

To what extent does there need to be shared stories—anecdotes from the past of characters, beings, teachers, disciples, practitioners from the tradition? To what extent does there need to be a shared history of that tradition? This is the history of our tradition. To what extent does there need to be a shared vocabulary, where certain words become meaningful, important, charged, rich, and also function powerfully as shorthands that people perhaps know what you're talking about when you say "Four Noble Truths" or "mindfulness" or whatever?

So shared vocabulary, shared beliefs. Again, really asking: to what extent does a healthy, vital, and living community need to share beliefs? Need shared beliefs, shared conceptual frameworks, logoi, and shared ontological commitments, which in a way are partly beliefs—what I talked about in one of the earlier talks.

Somehow, if we're going to feel part of the same community—me and this person, whoever it is, me and this group—do we actually have to share ontological commitments, a sense of what we believe and feel and invest in as truth? Including the truth with implicit epistemological considerations of what we believe are the ways to come by knowledge of the truth?

Does a living, healthy tradition need shared texts? So what is handed, what comes to us—agama in Pali and Sanskrit is often the word used for the texts, the suttas. It means literally "what has come," what has arrived, what has been received. So there is some body of received text—it could be oral, it doesn't have to be written—and that body forms a focus and a reference point and hopefully rich material for study. So there's a possible process of getting more acquainted with, more steeped in, developing understanding of this material, this agama, this text or received teachings.

But not only study—also for veneration. We can put that in inverted commas. So that might have a very obviously religious character where a piece of text is venerated to the extent that it's put in a stupa and people circumambulate the stupa or kiss the text or bow down to the text, even if they're not practicing it or don't even understand what it says. It could be that kind of religious character of veneration, or it could just be veneration in the sense of respecting the authority of that text. And it holds a certain kind of immovable or unbudgeable power. One has to reckon with what's written in that text.

So text, received teachings—oral, written—for study, for veneration, and also for interpretation, or interpretations, plural. This is where I really want to come back to this: to what extent does there need to be some focus material that is, or does it need to be, to what extent does it need to be open to interpretations, interpretation and a plurality of interpretations? So that it's not just one-dimensional, one unilinear text or material. Is there something in the vitality and health of tradition that actually needs root texts, core texts, canonical texts to have a certain openness to them, or to be related to them as if they had a certain openness?

I'm going to come back to this, but there's perhaps a certain tension between latitude of interpretation and the letter—if that's the right way of putting it. So that there's the letter, there's the text, there's the

teaching, there's the recording, there's the oral transmission or whatever. And then is there a latitude of interpretation? I want to come back to that point later.

Or another way of saying it might be: does there need to be something in the tradition—not necessarily someone, but something—that is regarded as authoritative somehow? The authority resides in that text, if not in that person or persons or body or hierarchy or whatever. In that text, does there need to be something that's regarded as authoritative? And in that way, functions as a kind of immovable anchor, something one needs to reckon with.

But is there a tension between that need for something authoritative—and I'll put that word "authoritative" also in inverted commas—on the one hand, and also a need for some autonomy of the individuals who are involved in that tradition, who are members of that tradition? Is there some kind of tension? Are both these elements needed?

Something needs to be authoritative - perhaps someone, but maybe just something like a text. And there needs to be some autonomy allowed, some wiggle room, some latitude of movement, interpretation, and practice. Maybe both elements are necessary.

How much diversity does there need to be? Is there a minimum amount of diversity required in the tradition? Is there a maximum? What kinds of diversity are we talking about? Diversity of all kinds - not just personalities, ethnicities, gender, and sexual orientations, but all kinds of diversity.

Consider, for example, diversity of directions within the tradition. There are suttas in the Pali Canon where the Buddha describes his disciples gathered in Jeta's Grove or some other location. He points out that in one corner of the field or forest, there's a group of monks sitting with Moggallana, one of his two chief disciples, interested in developing their siddhis - their supernormal powers, their psychic abilities. Over there are monks sitting with another teacher, developing something else. In yet another area, monks sit with Sariputra, focusing on jhana or some other practice.

Within the larger community and tradition, there existed this diversity of directions - what people wanted to develop remained available as a range of choices within the community.

To what extent does a living tradition need to include both people who are further along the path - more advanced, more senior - as well as those who are newer, more junior, just beginning with the teachings, not yet developed in their understanding, practice, and knowledge?

You can already hear in what I've been saying that none of these elements is actually simple. We might think we can just define tradition as involving "this, this, and this." While I'm not trying to be comprehensive here, none of these aspects are simple when you pause to consider what's involved, what might be involved, what's healthy, what becomes too much, or what's not enough.

One question I want us to consider - and if you love practice and teachings, these questions will be

important to you, if not now, then one day - is this: We've been discussing shared elements that need to be present for a living, healthy tradition. If we turn this around and ask what differences, what absences of shared ground become fatal for a tradition - fracturing it too much, rendering it dead or lifeless or stagnant, or causing it to explode in some way - what would those be?

At this point in history (if we can use that word, that idea of a time in history, which is itself questionable), this strikes me as a particularly interesting question.

For example, as I mentioned in another talk, if you're going to practice soul-making dyad or triad work - any group doing soul-making practice together - and there's not a shared conceptual framework, it might not work. It might prove frustrating and disappointing.

There's also this strange necessity, even for deep friendship, to share ontological commitments regarding the world, cosmology, and the nature of human beings. Would ontological commitments be an example of an aspect whose absence as shared ground becomes fatal for a tradition? When ontological commitments aren't shared or don't overlap enough, relationships can't really flourish because the difference is so basic. One set of ontological commitments versus another creates such a fundamental difference that it forms a fracture, an abyss. Two camps within a tradition hardly constitute a coherent tradition anymore.

All these considerations go into the pot, and very quickly we realize that none of these elements is actually simple. They all bear further reflection, further consideration, further opening out and feeling into.

Some aspects of what's involved or necessary to include in a living, healthy tradition might be less obvious than the lists I've just gone through quite quickly. And some things might be far less obvious.

So I have a question: Is it necessary for a living, healthy tradition - a vital tradition - to include some element of mystery or something mysterious, perhaps even to the point of relative incomprehensibility? This could range from the more poetic to the almost completely opaque.

Does it need some element of mystery, of something that's not clearly comprehensible? There's a question. That element is, to me at least, less apparent in, say, Pali Canon Buddha-Dharma as it's come to us, certainly in the West.

In some living traditions in, say, Southeast Asia—in Thailand and Cambodia—the actual tradition of Pali Canon Buddhism is so wrapped up with other influences. For example, in Cambodia, there was actually Mahayana at some point in history for a while. So there's a lot of Mahayana teachings wrapped up in Cambodian Buddhism. The vestiges of that are still alive and color and shape and influence the tenor and thrust and range and quality of Cambodian Theravadan Buddhism, so-called.

In Thailand, if you talk to people who've been monks and nuns there—Westerners—it's totally imbued. It's still retained, for example, the belief that you find all over the Pali Canon: the belief in devas and angels and wood spirits and the spirit of this tree and the deva that lives in that forest. And that's very much part

of the whole tenor, flavor, range, color of that version of Theravadan Buddhism.

But as we've received it in the West, it's less apparent, this element of mystery. It's become more a kind of presentation of something that's more clear-cut, rational, it seems to me—though it may still be there.

If I look in other traditions, this actually occurred to me because I was reading the translator's introduction of a book called *Gates of Light*, *Shaare Orah*, by Joseph Gikatilla, who was a medieval Jewish teacher. The translator, Avi Weinstein, was commenting that this book was written at around the same time as the Zohar. Zohar sometimes means something like Book of Splendor or Radiance. It was written around the same time, this book by Joseph Gikatilla called *The Gates of Light*.

But there were differences, and those differences were very influential in the subsequent histories and receptions of those two books—the Zohar and Rabbi Gikatilla's book, *Shaare Orah, Gates of Light*. Just to name three of the differences:

One was that the Zohar was actually written in the thirteenth century in Castile, Provence, that area, but was presented—it was faked, if you like—ostensibly to be a rediscovered text that was written in the second century, hundreds and hundreds of years earlier. It was presented as... scholars are now pretty unanimous it was definitely written in thirteenth century Provence, Castile, Catalonia, but it was presented by its author, or main authors, as being an ancient text that was unearthed.

Secondly, it was written in Aramaic, which was no longer a vernacular, no longer a current language, and it was written in a fairly abstruse Aramaic, in a strange kind of version of the language.

And thirdly, it's a very opaque text. What does this mean? What are they talking about? It's full of poetry and symbolism that one's not quite sure what they're referring to, with multi-layered densities of allusions. It's a very mystical, poetic text.

*Gates of Light*, on the other hand, Rabbi Gikatilla's text, was written in contemporary language, easy to understand, a clear exposition, taking one through stages of what was ostensibly similar material in terms of Jewish mysticism and mystical teachings in Kabbalah.

Ironically, perhaps from a certain point of view, what happened historically was that *Gates of Light*, this clear text written in contemporary language, designed to be easy to understand, became not very popular at all. Not that many people read it. Whereas the Zohar became an incredibly popular text—venerated, studied, commentary upon commentary written upon it. It became almost canonical, not without some contention, almost canonical in the tradition, in the Jewish religion, and garnered great respect and veneration there, despite the fact—or perhaps because—it remained baffling to many people who could not understand the language, the Aramaic, and certainly by many people who, even if they could understand the Aramaic, found it pretty mysterious what it was talking about.

You could also say it was open because of its poetic nature, because of the mysterious language, because of

the mystery of what it meant. Because of all that, it could become an object for eros. It could contain within its depths and mysteries and darknesses and allusions and poetry a wider latitude of interpretation, an infinity of interpretation.

It could become, because of its depths and mysteries, because it was kind of unfathomable, because one couldn't simply reduce it, because it had the beyonds, an object of the erotic imaginal. One could have eros, and it itself becomes an imaginal object—the Zohar, this book, this teaching, this tradition.

And because it was ancient, or because it was presented as ancient, it could quickly accrue the kind of eros for the ancient, because ancient implies tradition. And as I said, where there's love, the fantasy of tradition—the self in relation to the tradition and to the history in the past, the fantasy of the past, the fantasy of the characters in the past.

Partly the Zohar involves passages relating the wandering through Galilee of a small band of mystics, visiting different places in this beautiful land and discussing different mystical interpretations of Torah. So again, in the fantasy of tradition, if I have a love of a tradition, it involves characters from that history, from that tradition, becoming imaginal characters for me, that I have eros towards, that are important to me.

So because it was presented as ancient, because also of the relative obfuscation and opacity of it, because it wasn't clear, it allowed more interpretation. It had these dimensions of unfathomability. So it's interesting, also in the language, in the poetic language and the lack of clarity in the language.

Here is the continuation with the same tone and style:

Very interesting. I have this question: Does a living, healthy tradition, if it wants to have rich soil, need elements that are mysterious, even incomprehensible, certainly poetic?

This is less obvious, certainly, in some of what we have come to receive in the West as Pali Canon Buddhism. Maybe less apparent there. But certainly, if you look at Mahayana Buddhism as it's practiced in the West, or Vajrayana Buddhism, absolutely. The original Tantric texts are so baffling to us. If you pick up the Guhyasamaja Tantra or something and read just a translation of it, it's pretty out there and baffling. What are they talking about? Why are they talking about this? How am I supposed to relate to all this?

What's very common in the Vajrayana tradition is for people to read less of the texts in their original form, but to read commentaries on the texts, and even commentaries on the commentaries. This has become much more usual. The commentaries themselves become rich. There were actually two Chandrakirtis, two famous Chandrakirtis in the history of Buddhism, and the second Chandrakirti was famous for his tantric commentaries, particularly on the Guhyasamaja Tantra. There, as in the Jewish tradition, there are four levels of commentary. Each sentence, even each word, is given four levels of meaning. Similarly, in Kabbalistic interpretations or commentaries on the Bible, they speak of the obvious meaning, the hidden meaning, the symbolic meaning, and so forth.

The text itself, because of its strangeness and mysteriousness and partial incomprehensibility, its poetic nature, lends itself, offers itself as soil for image, for eros, but also for the proliferation of growth out of that soil—further interpretation, the richness of interpretations, commentaries upon commentaries, multiple perspectives. And the mystery never goes, because the core text remains mysterious and open.

Consider Christianity. Of the four canonical gospels, Saint John's Gospel is really the odd one out. It reads so differently. It's so mystical in its flavor and in what it says. Even the opening sentence is very famous: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... and the darkness did not overcome it." The mystery of that kind of text raises the question: How necessary is that kind of strand and text within the body of a healthy tradition?

Or again, in Christianity, the whole theology that accompanies the Trinity—Trinitarian theology of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It's mysterious. What you get is lots of interpretations, lots of rational explanations, but it remains at its core a kind of mystery that retains its mysteriousness, its unfathomability, its beyonds, its poetic nature at minimum, its mystical impenetrability at maximum.

So that's a question—something in this consideration, this laying out, this unearthing and bringing to light that I would like to explore together with you.

It's obvious to say that a tradition is embedded in and part of a larger culture, and that it contributes to that culture. Sometimes it contributes in very obvious and large ways, sometimes less obviously. Even if the tradition is very much a fringe tradition and very much against the stream of the larger society and culture, it's still embedded in that culture, part of it, and contributes to that wider culture.

But the opposite is also true. The culture contributes to tradition, whatever that tradition is—the tradition of teachings or practices. The culture, the contemporary culture and the history of that culture, contributes to and forms part of, and certainly shapes and informs, the tradition. This is probably obvious, but can we unpack that a little more and amplify our considerations of that fact and our awareness of it?

If we look at other traditions, consider Judaism. There was the importing, the confluence, the inclusion, the integration, the digestion, assimilation, the reckoning with Greek philosophy, principally Plato and Aristotle, into the body of the Jewish tradition. As far as I understand, the first person to do this was Philo of Alexandria. He's not well known, but he's beginning to attract more attention by virtue of the fact that he was the first person to consider the whole of Jewish teachings and traditions and the Torah in the light of Plato's teaching particularly, and to try to present the Jewish teachings to Greeks and Greek culture in a way that would be understandable to them.

He was quite a significant figure because he was the first person in Western history to do that. This movement of integration of either or both Plato and Aristotle as thought and philosophy and views into Judaism, into Christianity, into Islam—it was an undeniable fact, an important event, an important process in all three of these traditions. And he was the first person to do that.

Then, successively, there were different periods in history where even further integration occurred. Looking again at the Zohar and the blossoming—or birth, if you like—of Kabbalistic teachings in Judaism during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in southwestern Europe, these developments were very much influenced by Neoplatonic teachings.

There was really—and "influence" is even an understatement—a marriage, an integration, a mingling, a birth, a co-opting of those Neoplatonic teachings within Jewish thought. This represented a reconfiguring, a representation, a rethinking of Jewish mystical teachings through the incorporation of Neoplatonic philosophy.

A little later, somewhere in the Middle Ages, Maimonides—the famous and very influential Jewish teacher and rabbi—favored more of Aristotle's teachings. So what you also find in the three Abrahamic religions is a wrestling with, or contest, or dispute between two different influences from Greek philosophy: one camp more influenced by Plato, one camp more influenced by Aristotle.

To complicate matters, there were texts believed to have been written by Aristotle that were actually Platonic and had been misattributed. So people were quoting Aristotle—or thinking they were quoting Aristotle and claiming they were—when it was actually Platonic teaching. But all this material was worked into the clay, into the fabric of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In Christianity, I'm not entirely sure where Augustine of Hippo stood on this relationship. He grew up in pagan culture and would have been very familiar with Platonic teachings before converting to Christianity. Exactly how he viewed that relationship, or whether they were integrated in his thinking, I'm uncertain. But certainly Pseudo-Dionysius, whom I mentioned earlier, was very Platonically influenced, and his teachings became enormously influential in the Church—I believe he's from the fifth century.

Thomas Aquinas in the Middle Ages was enormously influential and very consciously borrowed from and worked with Aristotelian philosophy, relying on Aristotle's teachings for his interpretation and remodeling of Christian theology and philosophy.

All of this represents an enormous integration, influence, and incorporation of Platonic and Aristotelian thought into the three Abrahamic religions. For me, I almost try to imagine those religions without these influences, and it's difficult. They would be so different. My gut reaction is that they simply don't attract me without these more sophisticated developments and integrations of thought—of Plato's teachings, for example.

To add to this complexity, people traveled, talked with each other, and met across traditions. At some periods and places in history, interreligious dialogue was very open, encouraged, and fertile. What historians and academics are now tracing shows that there was Sufi influence—certain practices or views came into Jewish mystical teachings via the Sufis. There was obviously some meeting, dialogue, and mutual learning between Jewish Kabbalists and Sufis, with influences likely flowing both ways. When you

get to Christian Kabbalah, it's rooted in Jewish Kabbalah, and so forth.

All of this exists as an inevitable part of history—the history of a tradition where culture contributes, sometimes in ways that are absolutely fundamental. It can almost change the constitution of a religion and its fundamental tenets. The whole thinking behind it, the conceptual structures, can become different, even though it may be wrapped up in the same vocabulary.

What I'm partly asking is: what are the implications of this fact?

Don't think this only applies to non-Buddhist traditions in the past—it's still happening today in the Abrahamic religions. You need only look at modern Western Buddhadharma, I think. Our contemporary Western Buddhadharma—the insight meditation tradition and other modern Western Buddhist traditions—includes so much of what has become commonplace, accepted psychological concepts, notions, beliefs, and aspirations about what constitutes health versus illness.

When we talked about self, the whole notion of self that we not just believe and think about, but actually feel, is culturally conditioned. What we regard as a healthy self, what constitutes a healthy relationship—all of this is very much given to us by contemporary Western culture of the last 120 or 150 years, since Freud and everything that emerged from that development.

This cultural influence is, for the most part, really woven in. Sometimes it's more apparent when a teacher consciously incorporates considerations from mainstream psychology into their Dharma teaching. But even when it's not explicit, it's there in the background, influencing and informing, being incorporated.

Modern Western Buddhadharma also commonly includes elements of what is really Advaita Vedanta. You can locate passages in Buddhist texts that seem to say something similar, but you can also make a strong case that this isn't actually Buddhist teaching—it's something else entirely. Yet this has become absorbed into the presentation of modern Western Dharma in many contexts.

I'm uncertain whether the Diamond Heart teachings or the Ridwan teachings are being incorporated and mixed in by some teachers in ways where you can no longer see the seams and divisions—where they become part of what the Dharma is understood to be.

Neuroscientific notions, beliefs, points of view, and models increasingly permeate our dharma understanding. Sometimes this integration appears quite explicitly—a teacher will present neuroscience as parallel evidence or explanation for jhana states, or describe how mindfulness functions in the brain. Other times, these scientific frameworks operate quietly in the background, forming an underlying belief system about what a human being fundamentally is.

This contemporary influence is already deeply embedded in our present dharma tradition. The contribution of culture—its mixing, infiltration, and shaping of contemporary dharma—represents a powerful formative force. Cultural conditions, artifacts, and trends all participate in molding the current

state of our tradition.

Consider the development of Buddhist Tantra, once popularly dismissed as merely co-opting Hindu Tantra—supposedly an assimilation of alien, impure elements contaminating Buddhism from Hinduism. More careful scholarship reveals this characterization as inaccurate. Buddhist Tantra actually proved highly influential on Hindu Tantra, and over time, they undoubtedly influenced each other reciprocally.

Sometimes this cultural exchange occurs through simple osmosis, while other times it represents deliberate, carefully worked-out integration. In Jewish history, for instance, the encounter with Neoplatonism produced sophisticated syntheses in Kabbalah, Philo, and Maimonides. Similarly, Christianity's engagement with Greek philosophy flowered in Aquinas's systematic theology. These represent very deliberate, careful integrations driven by a sense that these developments needed inclusion, that traditions must grapple with and consider new influences.

But sometimes the process resembles unconscious osmosis—almost blind absorption of surrounding cultural currents.

As we examine this dynamic more closely, what does it imply? What does it ask of us? How do we feel about this reality? What stance should we take toward these formative influences?

Contemporary culture functions as a formative condition even when tradition founders actively oppose it. Opposition itself creates influence—the contemporary culture becomes a foil, something to contrast against, thus exercising formative power through negation.

I recall learning about the ancient Vedic practice of maintaining three sacred fires—whether in homes or temples, I'm uncertain. These fires held profound significance in Vedic religion and ritual, connected to creation mythology. By keeping them burning, practitioners sustained the cosmos's functioning and order—ensuring tomorrow's sunrise, seasonal rains, the universe's continued operation. The fires represented or even constituted elements of the Vedic creation myth, so maintaining them meant participating in the ongoing recreation and life of the cosmos itself.

The Buddha encountered this widespread practice and turned it completely around. Rather than keeping three fires alive, he taught extinguishing three fires. He identified these fires with three kilesas—three defilements of greed, aversion, and delusion. The goal became extinguishing these fires completely, preventing their return.

One etymology of nibbana points to this very image: blowing out a fire. Full awakening becomes defined as the extinction of greed, aversion, and delusion—the complete extinguishing of these fires.

The Buddha took something prominent in contemporary consciousness—a practice with significant cultural influence and popularity—and opposed it directly. Instead of creating more, the path aims to end creation, to escape the wheel of birth and death, to step off the cycle of rebirth entirely.

This example illuminates how profoundly the Buddhist teachings were conditioned by their cultural context, even through opposition. It raises a fascinating question: if the Vedic creation myth had featured two fires instead of three, and Brahmin practice had involved maintaining two or four fires rather than three, might we have developed a dharma teaching about two kilesas or four kilesas instead?

This conditioning through cultural context—whether by embrace or opposition—shapes even our most fundamental spiritual categories.

I mean, certainly a case can be made to reduce the kilesas to two anyway, because one could say greed and aversion are simply two sides of the same coin. When we're aversive to something, we're actually greedy for something else. When we're greedy for something, we're actually averse to its opposite. When I'm aversive to pain, it's because I want pleasure or neutrality. When I'm after whatever has a pleasant taste, I don't want the absence of pleasant taste, and I certainly don't want unpleasant taste.

But my main point is really about the cultural conditioning—the formative influences of culture, even when they operate through opposition.

Something similar is true about the twelve links of dependent origination. These links, so central to the Dharma alongside the three kilesas and their extinguishing, were also twelve aspects of a Vedic creation myth. Again, the Buddha was in a culture where that was the belief, the dominant paradigmatic presentation, and his teaching was formed as he wanted to differentiate it from that, to spin it a different way.

The creation myth was saying, "You know what you're creating with those twelve links? You're creating dukkha. That's what you're creating. Let's not create—let's stop creating. Let's stop those twelve links." And they have pretty much the same names, even, I think, for the most part, as those twelve elements of the Vedic creation myth.

I have a strong suspicion—I don't know, but I have a strong suspicion—that the same is somehow true of the five aggregates. I'm not the first practitioner, and certainly not the first teacher, to comment that they're kind of a strange system when you look at the aggregates. It doesn't really fit together as a sort of human psychology—why those divisions? What a strange thing.

Is it just the case that these were the primary elements of human being that were, at the Buddha's time, popular appropriation points for the sense of self? So that people would either claim that they were the body—there was certainly a philosophy that "we are the body" that existed. I know another philosophy that existed at that time, another teaching, another religious tradition, was "No, your true nature is bliss"—in other words, pleasant vedanā. Or obviously consciousness, or intention, which might be closer to some contemporary cycles. "You are your mental formations and your intentions." Or even perception. People would have certain jhanic perceptions—for example, one would come to the seventh jhana of nothingness, and one would take that to be who one was.

These were extant teachings, current contemporary teachings in different spiritual traditions and philosophies around at the time of the Buddha. So I wonder: did he originate the teaching of the five aggregates, or did he just look around him and see, "Okay, so this school is identifying with that, that school is identifying with that—claiming that to be the true self—that school is identifying this to be the true self," and simply collect them together for the purposes of saying, "You know what? None of these are the self."

Again, it's a Dharma concept that was formed, or perhaps was formed in opposition, but still culturally conditioned.

But if all that is the case, then we must ask: how real are these things? I mean, we can see they're not real because of emptiness and the kinds of reflection I mentioned—like greed and aversion being two sides of the same coin. There are many other ways they're not real. Any of these links, and deep practice into emptiness, will show exactly that. There are no aggregates, really. There are no links of dependent origination, really. There are no kilesas, really. They don't form clear-cut, demarcated things. They have no independent existence.

But we can add another level of emptiness and say: they're also culturally conditioned. How real are they? So easily in our minds, they can become dogmas or truths as if they're referring to real things.

The larger point here is that cultural conditioning can happen via opposition—via a tradition wanting to demarcate itself, differentiate itself from what is around it, or wanting to push off in a different direction. This can happen in all kinds of different ways.

Just the other day, I was talking with someone whose job involves working with the Dalit Buddhist communities in India. As you probably know, Dr. Ambedkar was a Hindu who converted to Buddhism. There's a movement of untouchables—if you know the Indian caste system, there's a gross injustice there. There's a tiered hierarchy of castes and classes in India, and the lowest class—even lower than the lowest class—is untouchables. They're outside caste altogether. This whole thing is very much drawn along ethnic lines, so it's basically a metaphysically backed institutional racism and social injustice that has gone on for centuries.

So centuries, millennia. And in converting some of these people—in some of these untouchables converting to Buddhism—they then fall outside the scope of the Hindu caste system. This person was telling me that in working with those communities, he thought of me because a lot of the Buddhism they propagate in that Dalit community of converts is a kind of rational secular Buddhism. He said, "I thought of you because I know you've contested the whole premises and objectives of secularism and even secular Buddhism."

But I thought immediately: it's all contextual. And we spoke about it. It's all contextual. I've said this before—I see whatever I teach as utterly contextual. What I say, what emphasis I give, what direction the

teachings evolve in, depends on the context.

I find myself speaking almost exclusively in the West, to people who live in a predominantly secular culture of secular modernity, in a situation where that kind of ideation—both within and outside of Buddha Dharma—has enormous clout. In a way, much of the soul-making Dharma teachings are placed in that context and in response to, in dialogue with, the dominance of secular modernity thinking.

Were I or we in a situation like the untouchables in India, where one is actually being subjected to great injustice—unthinkable injustice—based on some kind of metaphysical mumbo-jumbo and the hyped-up, mysterious authority of a certain spirituality and cosmology, might the soul-making dharma actually be given quite a different spin? Might it have a whole different element because it would be responding to that context and the dominance of that paradigm?

So, laying some things out. Where does it land? How does it sit with you?

All kinds of influences come through integration, but also through opposition—integration through opposition, if you like—from culture. Again, if we cast our eyes about us in contemporary Buddha Dharma, or even wider than Buddha Dharma, we see the prevalence of mindfulness teachings, which is wonderful in the West and is doing so much to help so many people. There's a whole range in how it's presented and the context in which it's presented.

I know only very little about it because I'm not really in that world. But there's some kind of more popular end of things—pop mindfulness—where mindfulness is defined as non-judgmental awareness. That definition has actually become quite prevalent, sometimes even feeding back into Buddhism itself and what might be called Buddha Dharma as well as secular mindfulness. Not everywhere, just certain strands.

Defining mindfulness as non-judgmental awareness can be enormously helpful. Why is it helpful? It's helpful partly because of our culture of judgmentalism. Again, even that formulation of the tradition was formed in a context.

But if you study the Satipatthana Sutta, the original discourse on mindfulness, you realize that this definition of mindfulness as non-judgmental awareness or presence, as well as the range of those teachings, leaves out so much of what's in the basic fundamental discourse on mindfulness, which is only a few pages long.

Completely gone are, for example, the death reflections and the vivid imagination of one's death and one's rotting corpse. The whole section on foulness of the body. What seems to be gone sometimes is the whole fourth foundation of mindfulness. So there's non-judgmental awareness of body sensations, non-judgmental awareness of feelings and pleasantness and impulses, non-judgmental awareness of thoughts, moods, mind states. But the whole fourth foundation, which has a slightly different kind of tack and flavor, is often gone.

If I read about the fourth foundation of mindfulness in the Satipatthana Sutta, a lot of it is exactly what would be called, by some teachers of modern mindfulness, "discrepancy-based processing"—which I've touched on before in the Eros and Feta talks. That phrase, discrepancy-based processing, was a kind of foil to the presentation of mindfulness.

Discrepancy-based processing is when I'm in this moment feeling there's a discrepancy between what this moment is and what I would like it to be. I'm processing or relating to or viewing, sensing the moment through a lens that's based on that discrepancy and wanting to move towards what I think or feel the moment should be.

The teaching is: that's fine sometimes. When the tiger is chasing you, it's fine. When you have to catch your train on time, it's fine. To a certain extent, some of that is important in life. But mindfulness is something different. Mindfulness is non-discrepancy-based processing.

Yet reading the fourth foundation, it's hard to take that conclusion away from it. The Buddha talks about feeding the seven factors of awakening.

What feeds the seven factors of awakening? What starves them? The Buddha instructs us to feed them and to stop starving them. The same applies to the hindrances—these are all categories in the fourth foundation of mindfulness.

Very much the thrust of that teaching in the fourth foundation is about feeding and starving. It's about doing. It's about discrepancy. Why do I need to feed the factors of awakening? Because there's a discrepancy between the current state of how active and alive and well and flourishing my factors of awakening are, and where they could be or where it would be better if they were. The same applies in reverse with the hindrances—there are too many hindrances, and it would be better if there were fewer. There's a discrepancy between where things are and where it would be better if they were.

So one is looking in terms of discrepancy and then instructed to act on that discrepancy in the direction of the desired outcome. Many of the other concepts in the fourth foundation are really what I would see as ways of looking, or lenses—looking in terms of the aggregates, looking in terms of the six sense spheres or sense modalities. This isn't bare attention; it's attention through a certain lens. Why? Because that lens is liberating. Because it's a way of looking that liberates. It's a seeing that frees.

So this whole presentation that we sometimes get in mindfulness as "non-judgmental awareness"—I think I know where it comes from. So many people struggle in our culture of fractured communities, ego psychology, and individualism. There's so much pain that comes from judgment and self-judgment, judging oneself and one's experience and where one is. So it's understandable that mindfulness would be given that kind of—I say spin, but it's more than a spin. It's a kind of truncation, if you like.

Yet when we compare it to what we have of the original discourse, it's like, wow, it really is a truncation and a partial view at best. As I said, the fourth foundation does have the encouragement and directive to

discern, to notice the difference between what is and what could be, what is and what would be better, and to direct oneself towards that—to cultivate this, to cut that, to remove it, to strive to engender this or that.

Now I'm not saying this as a criticism of that kind of mindfulness. I'm really, really not criticizing even popular mindfulness approaches. I don't myself have much enthusiasm for this sort of attempted project of "what the Buddha really taught"—this looking back in history and trying to shave off everything, trying to find the original teachings pure from any accretions or cultural conditionings. I don't subscribe to that project. I think it's not necessarily helpful, or rather it can be held in a way that's not necessarily helpful and not that interesting.

I've said this before, but Nietzsche has a phrase—I can't remember the German, but it translates as something like "the fantasy of origins"—this belief that the original thing is better than what developed over time. Of course this is absolutely commonplace in the way most people in a religious tradition think of that tradition. Of course the Buddha's the real deal. Of course the origin and the start is the real deal.

But might it be that the real deal is something that's grown into over time, like a human being, like anything else that can grow? That the better or fuller or certainly richer—almost more real—thing is more in what it moves towards over time rather than at the origin? Anyway, this whole project of historicizing or historiographing is exactly that—it's a project.

I would say, along with a number of other contemporary philosophers, that in the project of history we project backwards. We can't help but bring our agendas, our spins, our perspectives, our contemporary perspectives, which are influenced by all kinds of cultural conditions, cultural valuings of what's important, what's significant, what's relevant, what's not relevant. Our own personal psychology is woven into all this, our motivations. So what we select as a central thread or central teaching, or what we dismiss as "just a cultural accretion" or "an impurity"—that's all very much conditioned by our own contemporary culture and by our own psychology. And we project that back.

So history, in a way, is not one thing. Referring back to what I said at the beginning of the talk: is there a point in history that we can say, "This is the point in history we're at now," and we can all agree, "Oh yes, that's the point in history we're at"? There are histories, there are versions, there are spins, there are perspectives, there are stories woven, all coming, in each case, from a different set of conditions that form that perspective, those agendas, those spins, those selectings of certain threads.

There's a quote from John Snyder from an introduction to a book by Gianni Vattimo called *The End of Modernity*. He writes: "The work of such theorists as Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau, and Hayden White on the rhetorical and literary elements present in historical writing has belatedly led to a widespread recognition of the narrative and therefore fictional basis of a unified image of history. History appears today, rather, as a kind of writing which persuades its readers through the use of carefully chosen rhetorical strategies of the 'truth' of its account of events"—truth in inverted commas.

I remember—some of you will be familiar with it—there's a book by Howard Zinn, a U.S. historian, called *A People's History of the United States*. It asks: what if you write a history of the United States that they don't teach in schools?

A history written from the perspective of First Nations or African Americans who were slaves reveals a very different narrative entirely. There are multiple histories, multiple stories, and the idea that there exists one definitive history that we can somehow distill down to find the pure truth of what existed at the beginning - I would question that assumption. And even if we could achieve such distillation, is that necessary? Might this too be just another fantasy of origins, this pursuit of "the true thing" or "the real thing" - the real Buddhism, the real Dharma?

This was slightly a tangential point, but my intention is not so much to criticize what we might call "pop mindfulness" - though the very phrase sounds inherently critical - but rather to illuminate the culturally conditioned interpretations and presentations of Buddha Dharma. These conditionings are unavoidable. We exist within that soup. As Heidegger observed, we are "thrown" - thrown into a particular historical context, thrown into specific cultures. This thrownness inevitably influences and shapes how we see, how we relate to phenomena, how we interpret teachings and experiences.

I'm simply wanting to bring certain elements, aspects, and considerations to light for your reflection and contemplation. So what does all this imply for you? What are the implications? How does it land in your being? How will you hold all this in your mind, in your heart, in your conceiving, in your view, in your fundamental orientations? What is your relationship to these questions? How does your heart respond? And what shall we do with these insights as we move forward in our practice?

Some practitioners may identify as purists of sorts, seeking the Buddha's original teachings stripped of all subsequent additions. You might find yourself drawn to this fantasy of origins, unconsciously buying into the entire historical project without recognizing the projections involved - what Nietzsche called the fantasy of origins. But I would ask: is it even possible to not be thrown? Is it possible to somehow divest oneself completely, to scrub oneself clean, to cut off and sunder all those cultural accretions, indoctrinations, and learned perspectives, views, and values that we inherit from our culture? Can we transcend this thrown state - thrown into a specific time in history, a particular place, a distinct culture?

Is such divestment actually possible? Can we truly have a perspective that isn't culturally conditioned? Or when we attempt such purification, is there actually just a selective relinquishment occurring? We selectively abandon certain cultural influences while remaining blind to others that continue operating, driving us, shaping our view, determining what we pay attention to and what we fail to see entirely.

This leads to another crucial question: might it be that some of these cultural conditionings, accretions, integrations, shapings, and influences are actually improvements? How would we determine what constitutes improvement? What loyalties are operating within us, what hidden drives are at work?

These questions ultimately transcend mere mental inquiry - they are certainly not abstract or academic pursuits, not even purely intellectual. They penetrate the heart and affect the soul directly.

Opening this entire constellation of elements even further, laying them out more completely, we might ask: to what extent does a living, healthy tradition need to embody those characteristics I enumerated earlier - shared values, beliefs, ontological commitments, texts, and so forth? To what extent and in what manner should we hold the inevitable conditionings and shapings from both historical and contemporary culture?

Here's a fascinating new question: to what extent is conflict actually inevitable within a tradition? Might such conflict be a necessary component of that tradition remaining healthy, alive, and vital?

This inquiry strikes me as profoundly important. I want to quote from philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, who I believe is still living. In his well-known book *After Virtue*, which explores ethics - though I'm not entirely enthusiastic about the work, it contains some interesting insights - he addresses how discussions of tradition often become polarized between conservative political theorists and their opponents.

And so there's a way that they look at it that's a little bit misleading because of their ideological agenda. MacIntyre writes, "Characteristically, such theorists have followed Burke, Edmund Burke, in contrasting tradition with reason and also the stability of a tradition with conflict." So the contrast of tradition with reason—in other words, tradition is just received stuff that hasn't really had the scrutiny of rational thinking. And the stability of tradition, on the one hand, with kind of conflict. Conflict does not go with the stability of tradition.

But as MacIntyre continues, both contrasts obfuscate. They just confuse things. They hide a reality here. "For all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought, transcending through criticism and invention the limitations of what had hitherto been reasoned in that tradition." All reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought. So he says this is as true of modern physics as it is of medieval logic.

"Moreover, when a tradition is in good order, it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives to that tradition its particular point and purpose." I'll say that in other language in case that's a little difficult. So in other words, a healthy tradition, he's saying, when a tradition is in good order, part of what makes it healthy and in good order and alive is that it involves an argument. It's constituted by an argument about what? About the things that are valuable in that tradition, that give the tradition its point, its purpose. So what is awakening? What are we trying to do? Where should practice lead? What does a good practitioner look like and do? The argument, rather than being something that's anathema to tradition, is actually part of a healthy tradition.

So he continues: "When an institution—a university, say, or a farm or a hospital—is the bearer of a tradition of practice or practices, its common life will be partly, but in a centrally important way,

constituted by a continuous argument as to what a university is and ought to be or what good farming is or what good medicine is." Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict. Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict.

Indeed, when a tradition becomes Burkean—in other words, when there is that dichotomy between, okay, if it's a tradition, there's no reason, and if it's stable, there's no conflict—when a tradition becomes like that, it is always dying or dead. A living tradition, then, is "an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition." In other words, what's valuable to that tradition, and for that tradition.

This, to me, is—oh, yeah, right. It's partly sort of semi-consciously obvious, but actually one needs to think about it a bit more. Oh, yeah. That's actually really part of the weave, the tapestry of what makes that a healthy tradition, a vital tradition.

John Anderson said, "Don't ask of a social institution"—in other words, an embodiment, instrument of tradition or part of a tradition—"don't ask of a social institution what end or purpose does it serve, but rather ask of what conflicts is it the scene?" Of what conflicts is it the scene?

Now, that can, when you first hear it, sound—well, that's pretty pessimistic or even cynical. But seen in the light of what we've just been talking about, what Alasdair MacIntyre was explaining, the need for, the necessity for conflict and argument in a tradition, it's not necessarily pessimistic or cynical at all. And actually the philosopher A.N. Whitehead wrote something like, "A clash of doctrines is not a disaster, it's an opportunity." A clash of doctrines is not necessarily a disaster; it can be an opportunity.

Of course, we could go a bit further and say—but what happens when, I might ask, what happens when all that remains of tradition, of a tradition, are words and names? So if we talk about Buddhist tradition, the word awakening, the word suffering. But the divergence of interpretations of what those words mean has become so wide as to be an abyss. People are talking about completely different things when they're talking about what they think awakening is meaning, or what suffering means to them, what the goal is. What you're relating to and trying to overcome.

So when that divergence of the beginning becomes so wide that it becomes an abyss, and attached to each interpretation are more fundamental metaphysical and cosmological views and fantasies, I would say this is the case among certain, definitely certain ones I know, contemporary traditions of Buddhadharma. Actually, some of the rifts there, conceptually, have become close to too wide to navigate, in some cases.

So what if that abyss renders argument—the kind of argument Alasdair MacIntyre is saying is important—what if it renders argument either impossible, it's become too wide, there's almost very little common ground even to have an argument that's fertile? Or at least seemingly, if not actually pointless.

Or another possibility—and it may come out of the situation or the perception of the situation that I just described—another possibility may be that someone or some subgroup within a tradition either suddenly

or gradually stop caring about their identity, or stop identifying with that tradition so much that eros has gone for the tradition, and so the fantasy of the tradition goes as well, because eros and the imagination and the fantasy go together.

And in not feeling so identified with that tradition and not really investing it with eros and imaginal perception, fantasy perception, they actually don't have the energy or the will or the desire to engage in the conflict, engage in the argument. And not engaging in the conflict and argument atrophies the tradition. Their withdrawal, their non-engagement in the conflict actually ends up lessening the tradition or impoverishing it or weakening it or sometimes just killing it.

Let me read another passage by Alasdair MacIntyre from a different book, from an article. He's elaborating on this point that overlaps here, but I think this point is really important. This is from an article called "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science."

He writes: "The connection between narrative and tradition has hitherto gone almost unnoticed, perhaps because tradition has usually been taken seriously only by conservative social theorists." Again, usually the people that talk about tradition are those with a vested interest or certain spin on tradition and what it needs to be and what it means.

But he continues: "Yet those features of tradition which emerge as important when the connection between tradition and narrative is understood are ones which conservative theorists are unlikely to attend to."

This is the important point: "For what constitutes a tradition is a conflict of interpretations of that tradition, a conflict which itself has a history susceptible of rival interpretations."

Let me read that again. What constitutes a tradition is a conflict of interpretations of that tradition—a conflict which itself has a history susceptible of rival interpretations. In other words, not just the interpretation of the tradition and the text, but also a conflict about how to read the history of that conflict. Even the whole argument can be seen from different perspectives, the history of that argument.

Then he continues: "If I am a Jew, I have to recognize that the tradition of Judaism is partly constituted by a continuous argument over what it means to be a Jew." I actually think a better example would be Buddhism. And then he says: "Suppose I'm an American. The tradition is one partly constituted by continuous argument over what it means to be an American and partly by a continuous argument of what it means to have rejected tradition. If I am an historian, I must acknowledge that the tradition of historiography is partly but centrally constituted by arguments about what history is and ought to be."

He writes—this is a very important point: "Notice that all three kinds of tradition, religious, political, intellectual, involve epistemological debate as a necessary feature of their conflicts."

So we're back to what we talked about in the last talk and the centrality of epistemology. What was that

phrase by Moscovici? "Questions of epistemology are questions of social order." When we differ about epistemology, in our views of epistemology, in our leanings there, that might be healthy to a certain extent, but it's part of what gets argued about. And again, the abyss can become so wide that it's unbridgeable.

"Notice that all three kinds of tradition, religious, political, intellectual, involve epistemological debate as a necessary feature of their conflicts. For it is not merely that different participants in a tradition disagree; they also disagree as to how to characterize their disagreements and as to how to resolve them. They disagree as to what constitutes appropriate reasoning, decisive evidence, conclusive proof."

Remember what epistemology means: How do I know? What is appropriate reasoning? What is decisive evidence? What is conclusive proof? What are the bases of my knowledge? So epistemological differences are quite fundamental to this. They're wrapped up in the kind of arguments and conflicts that a tradition has to have as part of its health—conflicts about epistemology.

But again, I would add: What happens when they get too wide? What happens when the rifts over epistemology are more like abysses? All these questions are for you. I obviously wrestle with them as well. But as I said at the beginning, I want this to be yours.

What else can we unearth here? Part of the conflicts within traditions and within the institutions that embody or transmit or carry traditions are between what we might call the conservative tendency and the innovative tendency. You just have to join a board of some institution to see that this will be the case. I would actually view that conflict as a kind of archetypal tug of war between the conservative tendency and the innovative tendency. There's something archetypal about it. There's something actually inevitable about it.

I just want to point out also it's not so black and white—in other words, what's conservative, what's innovative. But also it's not that we can point a finger and say, "Oh, that person's always conservative and that person's always trying to break new ground and be radical." Anyone, any one person can manifest both tendencies with respect to different aspects of Dharma or Buddhadharma, if we're talking about that as an example. And obviously that's the one that's going to be mostly relevant to most of the people listening to this talk.

So the same person at different times, in different arenas of discussion or debate, could manifest either conservatism or a kind of more radical innovation. But my main point is that it's inevitable. There's something archetypal and therefore inevitable about it. The whole point about Jung's teachings on archetypes is these things will occur. They're patterns that occur inevitably in human being and manifestation, inner and outer.

So there's an archetypal tug of war between, let's say, conservatism and innovation. And therefore we need to expect it within a tradition and within institutions that try and promote and nourish and sustain

and support and offer a tradition in the world. Expected, but also, I think, regarded as a creative tension.

So again, back to Alasdair MacIntyre's points—the argument and conflict are actually healthy. And here there's a tension between two seemingly opposed tendencies, conservatism and innovation. And there's something in the difficulty of that, in the rub of that, that we should not just expect, but actually perhaps we can regard it as a blessing, difficult as it can be at times. That conflict of opinions that pull in two different directions, two different perspectives—actually out of the friction and the ferment of that is a kind of creative tension that can be fertile.

So again, there's an analogy here between what I was talking about in the talks on epistemology and ontology between the latitude of logos, the latitude of concepts and conceptual frameworks which we can include in our practice, in our explorations. If we talk about soul-making dharma, in our remit and range and furthering and growth of soul-making dharma, there's a creative tension, I pointed out, between the latitude of the logos that we entertain on one hand and what we might call the resistance or the constraint of the material on the other hand.

If you remember, I was talking about that with regard to science and with regard to epistemology more widely. The constraint of the material is through, well, something has to tally with my experience, with my phenomenological observation of things. I can't disregard that. That forms some kind of constraint on the kinds of conceptual frameworks and concepts and ideas I can entertain. Something, again, has some kind of authority, which again forms, to some degree, some kind of constraint on the latitude and range of the logos, the concepts, the ideas that I build on.

Things have to be somewhat at least coherent between all the different elements of ideas and practice and what I've received from authority and whatever. Something has to, in my phenomenological observation—principally the ideas themselves—something has to be coherent. So that need for coherence or that demand for a certain amount of coherence also forms a certain kind of constraint on the range and latitude of logos.

So there's an analogy there. Out of that tension between the need for latitude and the permission and the legitimization of a certain latitude of logos, the tension between that and the constraint, the resistance, the solidity of the material, that it's not, as I said, just thin air. There's something that I need to work with and partly against to shape this crucible, to mould this crucible.

So there are parallels there now, again, between the considerations of epistemology, ontology, and what we can build conceptually and therefore what supports and opens further soul-making, and this whole notion of creative tension in tradition—the resistance of conservatism versus the latitude of innovation.

And again, I'm putting this out to you as many of you will probably already have deep love and commitment and devotion to the soul-making dharma. All this applies to soul-making dharma as well. If we can talk about it as a sub-tradition or tradition or whatever, everything that I'm saying applies to that

and needs to be considered—maybe now, maybe in due course, maybe whatever. It all applies, because I'm talking generically about traditions.

So to be loyal to the logos of soul-making will include, I think, a healthy loyalty, an alive loyalty, a vital loyalty, will include elements that are conservative. What was actually said here? What's actually the... Can we be true to what was said and not just go off on any whim of direction because it feels good or feels exciting or whatever? It will involve that. It will also involve, I hope, innovation in time and integration and connections with other traditions, with other influences, with other considerations, with other concepts, practices.

So to me, being in a tradition—I very much feel this in terms of Buddhadharma—that I am, we are, we can be in dialogue with the tradition. It's a two-way thing. Actually, maybe it's more of a polylogue, if that's even the word. It's a multi-personed, multi-pronged conversation. And that's part of what makes it healthy, that there's some rub and resistance and tension. It's part of what allows the friction that allows things to ignite in a good way. And of course, that ignition can ignite so that things burn and something is burnt to cinders and fire goes out. There's nothing left to burn. All is to consider.

Let's add something to the pot or drag something up from the bottom of the pot for our consideration to add to all this. Pierre Hadot is a writer—maybe some of you know him—who writes about philosophy and different religious traditions.

In his article "Philosophy, Exegesis and Creative Mistakes," Pierre Hadot explores how interpretive practices on authoritative texts—those considered canonical within both philosophical and religious traditions—often generate all manner of mistakes. He provides numerous examples and writes: "It frequently occurs that exegeses, interpretations, construct entire edifices of interpretation on the basis of a banal or misunderstood or mistranslated phrase."

He continues: "The modern historian may be somewhat disconcerted on coming across such modes of thought so far removed from his usual manner of reasoning. He is, however, forced to admit one fact: Very often, mistakes and misunderstandings have brought about important evolutions in the history of philosophy"—and I would add religion and spiritual traditions. "In particular, they have caused new ideas to appear."

In other words, some of what gets integrated into a tradition, some of how a tradition grows, doesn't come through the very careful, conscious deliberation that we might consider Thomas Aquinas to have engaged in during the Middle Ages with regard to Christianity and Aristotle. Instead, it actually comes from misunderstanding, mistranslation, scribal error, complete misconstruing—and one isn't even aware of it. Yet again, paralleling the story we told about Newton building his magnificent edifice of Newtonian physics on two ideas later proved invalid—absolute space and absolute time—similarly, in traditions, all kinds of errors and mistakes can come in that actually end up proving very fertile for that tradition.

One of my teachers is very dear to me. His teaching is very dear to me and hugely influential. I remember years ago hearing him talk about his teaching of the Buddha-dharma, sometimes telling stories about the monastery he was in and the teacher there, the abbot. Then I read the abbot's teaching from a more direct source—a more direct quote, an extended interview with this abbot—and I was completely struck. How on earth did my teacher get his teaching from this abbot? How could he interpret this abbot as saying the things he then reported him to say?

The whole flavor of it, the whole thrust, direction, ethos—the feel of it, the scope of it—was so alien. For one, I feel extremely glad that in his situation—because he was in Thailand not speaking Thai—he kind of had to piece things together. Occasionally he had translators giving him little bits of the teaching, but the rest he had to figure out with maybe pidgin Thai, getting the general vibe. I wonder whether he came away with something completely different.

But I'm extremely thankful that was the case. His not knowing the language, not being very gifted with languages, whatever he brought in terms of his predispositions—I think this gave birth in him to a dharma that was extremely influential and inspiring for me, beautiful, and very much opened what the Dharma could be. I don't know whether I would have been very taken with his teacher's dharma, the abbot's dharma, had I just heard it translated by someone completely fluent in Thai.

So we add to our mix the possibility—in the past, recent present, even now, and certainly in the future—that there can be what Hadot calls "creative mistakes," unwitting errors of all kinds happening. Misunderstandings, misinterpretations, mistranslations, misconstruals that actually end up being formative and constitutive of a tradition's trajectory. This too is something we have to recognize as fact.

And again, the question is: How does it land with you? What are we going to do with it? How are we going to view it? How are we going to relate to it? What are our responsibilities there?

There are all kinds of tensions here. I was hunting for a sutta I couldn't find earlier—but there's a sutta somewhere in the Pali Canon where the Buddha hears that a monk is teaching something about the nature of consciousness in a certain way. He basically tells the other monks, "Go get that monk, bring him here." He sits this monk down who's teaching something about consciousness that the Buddha did not agree with, and he basically publicly humiliates him. From our modern reading, that's what it really sounds like—really scathing in front of the whole assembly of monks: "That's absolutely not what I'm teaching, that's not how to regard consciousness."

I couldn't find that passage, but I think it's mirrored in another one I did find called "The Water Snake Simile" in the Majjhima Nikaya 22. Just to listen to some of the language to get a sense... In this case, the monk in question had certain views. He would say: "As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, those acts the Blessed One says are obstructive when indulged in are not genuine obstructions."

So the monks told the Buddha, and the Buddha said, "Go get him." Again, he was placed in front of the

assembly of monks and basically humiliated. Let's see what the Buddha says, just to give you a bit of flavor of this.

And the Buddha asked him, "Is it true that you've said that?"

And he said yes.

Then listen to what the Buddha says: "Worthless man. Worthless man." This is in front of a whole assembly of monks. "Worthless man. From whom have you understood that Dharma taught by me in such a way? Worthless man. Haven't I in many ways described obstructive acts?"

And then he explains his actual teaching. But you, worthless man, through your own wrong grasp of the Dharma, have both misrepresented us as well as injuring yourself and accumulating much demerit for yourself, for that will lead to your long-term harm and suffering."

And then he turns to the monks that are gathered there, and he said, "Then the Blessed One said to the monks, What do you think, monks? Is this monk, whose name was Arita—is this monk established in this doctrine and discipline?"

And they say, "How could he be, Lord? No, he's not."

And it says, "When this was said, the monk Arita sat silent, abashed, his shoulders drooping, his head down, brooding at a loss for words."

The Buddha doesn't even stop there. When he was sitting like that—silent, abashed, his shoulders drooping, his head down, brooding at a loss for words—the Buddha continues: "Worthless man, you will be recognized for your own pernicious viewpoint. And then I will cross-examine the monks on this matter."

My point is just this: the Buddha is not saying, "Hey, it's cool, everything goes. People can have their different points of view. We're all happy family here. Let's not get entangled in arguments about what is the true teaching, the true dharma." He's quite scathing and not afraid to publicly—again, what we would read as publicly humiliate. And he's very protective of what he sees as: this is the dharma. This is the dharma that I have set in motion. And that, whatever that is, is not.

As I said, there was some sutta that was quite similar in terms of its social playing out, but it was more about something about consciousness. But here, I found that one.

Another time, it's from Samyutta Nikaya. On one occasion, the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatthī in Jeta's Grove, in Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. Then Venerable Mahā Kassapa, who was a senior disciple of the Buddha, went to the Blessed One and on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. Actually, all this is quite instructive about the social aspects of tradition. And again, this question: what's needed, what's necessary, what's not.

And he says, as he was sitting there, he said to the Blessed One: "What is the cause, Lord? What is the reason why before there were fewer training rules and yet more monks established in final gnosis—in arahantship, enlightenment? Why before there were fewer training rules and yet more monks established in final gnosis, whereas now there are more training rules and yet fewer monks established in final gnosis?"

And the Buddha says, "That's the way it is, Kassapa. When beings are degenerating and the true Dharma is disappearing, there are more training rules and yet fewer monks established in final gnosis."

This is within the Buddha's lifetime. This is his perspective. As time goes on—I don't know how many years this is after his original enlightenment—he continues: "The Buddha, there is no disappearance of the true Dhamma as long as a counterfeit of the true Dhamma has not arisen in the world. But there is the disappearance of the true Dhamma when a counterfeit of the true Dhamma has arisen in the world."

So in other words, there's false Dhamma. He's pointing out there's a counterfeit Dhamma. There's false teaching being put forward as true Dhamma, but it's counterfeit. And he's saying when that's the case—boy, watch out. There's the disappearance of the Dhamma.

And he continues: "It's not this or it's not that that makes true Dhamma disappear. It's worthless people who arise right here within the Sangha who make the true Dhamma disappear. The true Dhamma doesn't disappear the way a boat sinks all at once."

And he continues: "These five downward leading qualities tend to the confusion and disappearance of the true Dhamma." So he's obviously been thinking about this. "Which five? There is the case where the monks, nuns, male lay followers and female lay followers live without respect, without deference for the teacher. They live without respect, without deference for the Dhamma, for the Sangha, for the training, for concentration."

Interesting. These are the five downward leading qualities that tend to the confusion and disappearance of the true Dhamma. But these five qualities tend to the stability, the non-confusion, the non-disappearance of the true Dhamma. Which five? There is the case where the monks, nuns, male lay followers and female lay followers live with respect, with deference for the teacher. They live with respect, with deference for the Dhamma, for the Sangha, for the training, and for concentration. These are the five qualities that tend to the stability, the non-confusion, the non-disappearance of the true Dhamma.

So he was very much concerned, and yet was not able to completely stop in his lifetime this proliferation of what he called counterfeit Dhamma—watering down, mixed teachings, mixed confusions, misrepresentations. And he was really quite strong about it.

You get that whole tension, and that whole kind of what seems almost—may seem like harshness to some people's ears—may seem like harshness and rigidity and a narrow-mindedness and an attachment and an anxiety on the part of the discoverer of the Dhamma.

Yet at the same time there's another story—and I can't find it again somewhere in the Pali Canon—where after the Buddha's death, as they were trying to codify and collect the teachings and canonize them with the help of Ananda, they found this Arahant, this old practitioner who was still alive some years after the Buddha's death and had lived when the Buddha was alive. They presented to him what they had codified so far, and he said, "Well, okay, that's fine. If that's how you heard it, if it's okay with you, I prefer to stick to the Dhamma that I heard myself from the Blessed One's lips, from the Buddha's lips."

It touches me when I say that.

They said to him, "Okay, since you heard it from the Buddha's lips," and he was an Arahant, so he had the certificate of acceptability and authority. They said, "Okay, you go with that."

There was this agreement to have this diversity of Dhammas there. Actually, they hadn't heard his version—it wasn't part of their codified version. And he wasn't really familiar with theirs. And he was like, "Well, okay, we'll just be divergent like that and it's fine," and there was mutual respect and mutual allowing and inclusion.

So there's this tension between constriction, constraint, authenticity, and latitude.

I heard also something quite interesting to me—that as the tradition went on in early Buddhism, and this again may have started with... I'm not sure how much the seeds of this were in the Buddha's direct words, but that differences of Vinaya, of the monastic discipline and rules and ethical precepts, were actually more significant than differences of interpretation of doctrine and teaching. I don't know if that's true, but I heard that somewhere.

This is quite interesting as well. Again, within the body of tradition, what latitudes are more acceptable than others? Somehow, somewhere along the line—again, maybe seeded by something the Buddha said, contrary to some of the other passages I've just read—it's okay if people have slightly different doctrinal interpretations, or maybe even quite different doctrinal interpretations. But really differing over interpretations of the Vinaya, the monastic discipline, the laws and guidelines of behavior and speech—that's a big deal.

Why is that? Maybe because the monks and nuns needed the laity's respect. They were dependent on them for alms. They needed to be regarded by the laity as being noble, upright, strict and rigorous in their observance. So maybe there was a practical necessity there for the tradition. It's also the case that when ethics gets neglected, all kinds of fractures will almost inevitably follow in a community.

I've also read—just putting these almost divergent pieces of a puzzle together—that at the beginning of the Mahayana, when the Mahayana began to grow and flourish in India, it was quite common to have monasteries where some practitioners were overtly Mahayana practitioners, openly Mahayana in their thinking and aspirations, and some practitioners were Hinayana practitioners. They coexisted in the same monasteries very amicably and peacefully, simply agreeing to have different views and directions.

To me, this is really interesting. It doesn't happen now. When that stopped happening is an interesting question. Why it stopped happening is also an interesting question.

How much that original amicable cohabitation was just a result of the fact that at the beginnings of the Mahayana, maybe a Mahayana practitioner was just someone who had a slightly different aspiration? So back to shared goals. All the understanding was the same, but there was simply the view that it's possible for some people to aspire not just to Arahantship, but to Buddhahood, which was much more demanding and difficult to attain. But the whole conceptual framework, the ontological commitments—they were all the same.

At some point later in history, the beliefs, the conceptual frameworks, the teachings, the ontological commitments actually became more divergent. It was no longer possible for those people to consider themselves as really part of the same tradition.

All this is interesting to me. What's involved here? What goes on in traditions? What's necessary? To what degree are different elements necessary?

To what degree are divergent elements necessary? Is there even—last thought for now—is there even a kind of higher-level tension that is necessary for a vital, healthy tradition? Is there a tension, maybe not at a meta level, but at a higher level, between unity or harmony—better yet, unity, a sense of unity—and also differentiation?

We can be in a tradition with the view that "it's all one, we're all saying the same thing, we're all agreeing." Sometimes to me that's just baffling—it's obvious that people are talking about different things. Sometimes I say something and someone interprets it just according to what they already believe, convinced that I'm saying the same thing they are. This is interesting, at least. Actually, quite frustrating.

But we need some sense of unity—at least harmony, but even more, unity—since this does form a cohesive tradition. And there's a tension between that unity and harmony on one hand, and differentiation on the other hand.

As I've pointed out—and I've spent a long time talking about this in the *Eros Unfettered* teachings series in "Dilemmas and Delineations," and maybe some other talks—it's through careful differentiation, careful discernment, that we recognize: actually, that idea is different from that idea. That conceptual basis is different and will lead in a different direction. That word is being used in two different ways, or four different ways, whatever it is. Actually discerning between them, differentiating between them—because out of that differentiation can come greater efficacy, greater power, greater precision in terms of where we're headed and our ability to actually get there.

By power, I don't mean power over—because that's another thing we haven't really touched on that goes with traditions and hierarchies, where this person or this group has hierarchical power over another person or group within that tradition. I'm really talking about power as efficacy—efficacy of an idea, the

power of an idea, the power of a certain practice or certain way of practicing, a way of thinking, or whatever it is.

That differentiation, careful distinction and demarcation, delineation of ideas, concepts, practices, is actually necessary for a practice, for an idea to have power. So maybe there is also this need for careful differentiation, and there's a need for harmony and unity. And so maybe there's a tension between those two as well within the tradition.

Let's stop there for now. There are other aspects I want to also bring to light to consider.

Thank you for listening.

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