Dharma(s) Discovered and Created (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:17:01

All right, just to recap very briefly, we've been asking the question: what is involved, what is necessary, what are the needed ingredients and constituents of a healthy, vital tradition? We've been looking, obviously, particularly at Buddha Dharma and also soul-making Dharma, and as part of that unearthing, opening out, shining a light on some aspects or constituents that may be less obvious, or that some implications of those certain aspects may be less obvious to us.

Part of what we wanted to acknowledge and bring more into consciousness was just how much cultural conditioning plays a part—how contemporary cultures, places and histories influence and shape and condition the tradition, the dharma, whatever it is at the time in that place. We also mentioned the unavoidable fact that creative mistakes creep in and sometimes can actually be very fertile in what they contribute to the tradition, to the Dharma, and how things get built on those mistakes, on the basis of those mistakes.

We're also opening up again the recognition and the pondering of the fact of the presence and maybe the necessity of a certain amount of conflict and argument that constitutes the tradition and shapes the community relations and the relations of ideas within that tradition. That's part of its life. So with all this, there's a whole other level of question: how much, how little, what kinds of tensions actually serve a creative function—perhaps even surprisingly—and at what point or what kinds of tension serve to actually fracture something, perhaps irredeemably? To fracture a tradition, to splinter it, to kill it?

All these factors are part of what shape Dharma, the Buddha Dharma, a tradition, any tradition. What are we going to do with that? How does it land with you? How do we orient towards that, relate to it? Where do we move forward in relation to that?

I want to add into that mix, into that sort of cauldron of ingredients, something I've emphasized many times before: the personal inclinations we bring as human beings into our choices, our preferences, our leanings, our openness or closeness with respect to this or that that we might hear or read or that's presented to us in the Dharma as a practice possibility, as a teaching possibility, as a concept, as a direction.

Personal inclinations—meaning soul styles, wishes, desires, fears—we cannot but bring that, and we must acknowledge it, we must be honest about that. There is a certain not just cultural, but personal element in all this that comes into the equation, comes into the mix, and shapes and directs our choices, blinkers us, opens certain avenues, closes certain avenues, makes certain possibilities just unthinkable or not even noticed. We just don't hear them. They just do not register.

In some ways we choose a Dharma. An individual chooses a Dharma to some extent based on their personal inclinations. And if you like, the sum or total of the individual choices will also shape the larger tradition, or sub-traditions. The Dharma that we choose—"I want this Dharma, I want the tradition to be this, I want to see the tradition to be this," or "I choose this kind of Dharma"—these choices and the wishes there, and the soul styles, are often with regard to worldview and the view of the human being. More than anything else.

What is it that determines these? What are the foci of determination? What is it that leads me to choose this kind of presentation of Dharma or this tradition or that picture of the Dharma, that model, that conceptual framework over another one? The most salient features there are actually the worldview and the human view. I've mentioned this before. In a way, when we choose a certain dharma, choose a certain image of awakening, we're actually choosing a certain view of human beinghood, humanity. So all this comes into it and we need to acknowledge it.

If we consider, for example, four different logoi or models, if you like, or beliefs about the world—and implicit views about the world is also views about what is real, so ontology—you can't get rid of it. You can't throw metaphysics out. You cannot burn it up so that it disappears and is gone once and for all. The metaphysics will come back. And it's central and basic, in fact.

So if we compare four views, four beliefs, four models, four logoi, really, of the world—pictures of the world, and implicit in that, pictures of what is real—and then see how each of them, in a way, orients the one who subscribes to that view of the world, that cosmology and that ontology. Each one of those orients the practitioner in a particular way and shapes the Dharma in a particular way relative to that worldview.

For example, if we believe what I was calling the physicalism or materialism view—in other words, there is really only matter, and there is this movement of particles, essentially purposeless, but somehow they have developed consciousness with all its complexity. But really what's there is that consciousness is an epiphenomenon of matter, and consciousness at root is just the movement of matter, of particles in neurology, and it's just a matter of time until we figure that out, how that works. But that view—there is only matter—then the whole Dharma, as one view, the whole Dharma that comes out of that is what we might call a kind of secular existentialist view of Dharma.

That's the real condition of things. There is only matter. Any sense of depth is in a way an illusion, of dimensionality is in a way an illusion. Certainly divinity and all that, and my freedom is really to be... The concepts of suffering and freedom are to be framed by that worldview, by that physicalist worldview, and my orientation then must be framed from that. The primary thing that I relate to is this strange existential situation that I'm in, to find some okayness with that. So that gives a whole picture of the Dharma, a whole basis and picture and limitation and trajectory and orientation of the Dharma.

Compare this with the first view. The first might be a very conscious view, or it might remain unconscious, yet it will still operate to shape and inform what Dharma one gravitates towards.

Consider a second view: that in fact, only the unfabricated—that which is wholly transcendent not just to matter, but to all perception—is real and good, and perhaps sacred. Then this life has very little inherent value other than as a stepping stone to getting out of this life. This perspective appears quite commonly in certain sub-traditions of the Dharma and remains quite popular, as is the first view I mentioned.

But then you can hear how that orients, shapes, constrains, and limits the entire Dharma—what situation we're addressing and what we're trying to reach. What do we mean by suffering? Suffering is basically being born into this existence. Suffering is the world of phenomenal experience. Life is suffering. And freedom from suffering means getting out of it—realizing the unfabricated so thoroughly that one is not born again. To speak metaphorically, though imprecisely, one dissolves into the unfabricated, and that's the end of it. The end of dukkha. The end of rebirth.

So again, there's a worldview and an ontological view about what's real, about what the world is and its ontological status, and also what's valuable relative to that. This shapes the whole Dharma and its direction.

A third view: All manifestation is equally one and divine. It's all the same divine substance, all the play of divine awareness, the play of consciousness—*lila*, the play of consciousness. Or it's all love, or whatever it may be. What kind of Dharma gets built up around that worldview?

Again, what's our predicament? Our predicament is simply not realizing that. We just don't realize that it's all one. We think we're separate; we think things are separate. When we realize it's all one, that's the end of suffering. Nothing is more or less divine than anything else. Nothing in particular is special because of its particularities, what it is, and its uniqueness. It's only special and valuable because of the substantial equality and essence that it shares with everything else.

The fourth view would be more in line with the soul-making perspective. Those first three are actually quite popular. I don't know how much you've explored this—talking to people after retreats or with Dharma friends about what view actually underpins their whole Dharma practice and therefore shapes it. Those first three are really quite common.

The fourth is more congruent with what we might call the soul-making Dharma, and perhaps less popular in the wider world of contemporary Dharma. In that view, all manifestation is divine—but not only because it shares a universal divine essence. There is that. There is the place for that perception and that kind of liberation and that kind of beauty and that kind of eros for that universal divine essence, or essences plural. I've talked about this extensively in the soul-making Dharma.

But not only because of that. All manifestation is divine, and each thing's particularities are divine and necessary to the becoming of the divine—the manifestation in time of the divine, or the Buddha nature, if you prefer. Rather than equalizing and therefore, in a sense, obfuscating and ignoring the particularities of the things of the world and of ourselves, each particularity is divine and divinely necessary, necessary

to the divine, to the process of the divine. This includes your dukkha, your foibles, your madnesses.

How many things are there? Potentially infinite. Why? Because when the soul-making dynamic gets going, when the *eros-psyche-logos* dynamic is ignited, it will create and discover more and more aspects of things, more and more objects of eros. So there aren't a predetermined number of objects or phenomena in the universe, in ourselves, or even in this particular object I'm looking at. There's an infinite and potentially endlessly growing amount.

You can see what this view does, what this logos does to one's sense of the Dharma—what my job is, what my orientation is, what I'm moving from and towards. What is suffering then? How is suffering defined? What is its scope? What is awakening?

What is the scope of awakening and where it's leading?

So just for an example there, we could probably list more, but four logoi or models or beliefs about the world, or cosmologies if you like. Implicit in that cosmology are four ontological views about what's real. For example, only the unfabricated is really real; everything else is kind of illusion in the second one. All this phenomenal world is illusion. All this is illusion.

But these four logoi then bring four orientations, four ideas of jobs and work to do and scope and what the path is. Four dharmas, essentially, and implicit in each dharma is a kind of awakening.

How influential—what are we really choosing? I've made this point before in those talks on what is awakening, I think they were called. What are we really choosing when we choose a certain vision of awakening? Are we not both influenced by, but also choosing, really as perhaps primary, a certain model or belief or conceptual framework?

Again, if we're thinking really about what shapes a tradition, these different logoi of world and reality, different cosmology, different ontology, will shape very different dharma trajectories, very different dharmas, essentially. And what is it that predisposes us, or why do we choose one model, one idea, one belief about the world and about ontology over another? What's going on there? It's so basic in its implications, so basic in the way it creates divergent paths with all kinds of implications.

I was talking a little while ago, just as a chance conversation. I bumped into someone who was studying philosophy and had also been studying, I think, a couple of Jewish philosophers. I can't remember if it was Maimonides or Spinoza he was talking about. So we were having a conversation and he was a little bit familiar with the teachings about the imaginal and soul-making teachings and was reading his philosophy. If I understood him, he seemed to be saying that someone—I can't remember if it was Maimonides or Spinoza or Abraham Abulafia—regarded images in a similar way, as at best transitional objects.

That's a phrase from D.W. Winnicott, the psychologist and child psychologist. A transitional object is

something like a blanket or a teddy bear that the child supposedly uses in the process of weaning themselves towards more independence from the mother, towards more autonomy, towards more self-sense, towards healthier relationships. In that process, they invest the transitional object, the teddy bear or whatever it is, with a kind of imaginary full beinghood, personhood, and then gradually wean themselves off the need for that imagination.

So he regarded images as at best transitional objects, which are eventually let go of to meet God directly, to know God directly, or to meet God's intellect, God's active intellect directly. Active intellect is a term, I think it originated with Aristotle, but it became quite influential. But the point is really that images are just stepping stones. Some people will need them as stepping stones for a kind of imageless, transcendent, direct participational melting into the wordless, unconceptual, non-representational, unformed sense of God.

Whether you call it unfabricated or the active intellect or whatever—different versions, it doesn't matter. So I wasn't entirely surprised to hear this kind of thing because that would again be quite common as a way of viewing these things.

It's also sometimes the way Dzogchen is related to: all these divinities and deities and visualization practices. A lot of people want to kind of bypass that or skip it over or view it as a transition, a stepping stone to actually the real deal in Dzogchen, which is the nature of mind, which ends up tending to be this kind of vastness of awareness. That's the real McCoy. The deity business is probably just some cultural accretions from the Tibetans, a bit backward. We don't really need that. We want to go for the pith, the essence, the real high deal.

But actually, if you read closely Dzogchen teachers—I'm thinking of Nipam Rinpoche and others—the nature of mind and the more formless teachings are just actually on their way to an even greater liberation which sees divinities everywhere and sees all things as divinities and does not relinquish the formed in favor of the formless.

As I've stressed in other passages in different traditions, in Ibn Arabi and others in the Islamic tradition and certainly in Buddhist Tantra: can it not also be the other way round than this person was construing? Can it not be that knowing the unfabricated, for example, knowing the formless, knowing the transcendent, that which involves no fabrication of image or perception, can in fact open the door for some people to imaginal practice?

Certainly understanding—if the understanding of emptiness deepens far enough, it provides the legitimization for some people for imaginal practice. We've talked about this in several talks over recent years.

But you can hear in this person's presenting it like that, and it does, I think, have roots in, for example, Abraham Abulafia, the Jewish Kabbalistic mystic, who very much thought that way: about letting go of

images to be able to participate in the active intellect of God. Very influenced by Aristotle, and you get it in different traditions.

So there is that spin on it. But this person's idea then, or construal, presupposes a certain aim of, in this case, Buddha Dharma or Judaism, or whatever. It presupposes that the aim is to reach the unfabricated, and all else is either a hindrance or something that's a stepping stone, in his case. That's how he was viewing imaginal work, as just the transitional objects. They can help you get close to God, but the real deal is the unformed, no image.

So it presupposes a certain aim of Buddha Dharma or Jewish mystical practice or whatever, and it presupposes or assumes a limited nature of what images are, and it presupposes a certain psychology or makeup of the soul. All these views can't help but shape and orient us, and create a kind of Dharma, and then really create different sub-traditions, or maybe actually divergent traditions, where the differences I point out become too different from each other to really feel like they cohere in one tradition.

I was talking to or hearing from a practitioner, or reading something—and it's not that uncommon these days, certain philosophers, maybe Thomas Metzinger, I'm not that familiar with his work directly, but maybe others—but their construal of what is really happening in awakening, in talk about nirvana or stream entry or arahantship or liberation or whatever, what's really happening is a neurological change in the brain. Maybe the brain and the whole neuronal system in the whole body. That's what's really happening. That's what really one is affecting through practice, through diligent practice.

One is rewiring or retraining something—the neurons. And that neurological change short-circuits the neural networks that have, up to then, been perceiving a separate self.

So here's a view then. You can hear how much, again, is wrapped up and implied by such a view. The experiential effect of that kind of neuronal change that comes from practice is the collapse or non-arising of a certain... well, this person was saying of the self or the self-sense. I would say of a certain range of self-sense. And there's the ensuing relative ease and peace and relative—I would say—liberation that brings.

But really, in that view, really there was only a neural network processing sense data in a way that produced the illusion of self-sense. So you can hear how much is, again, wrapped up, how much is implied, and what directions come out of that.

My question, or one question I have here, is about the anthropological and cosmological view that is either implicitly or explicitly wrapped up or stated along with the experience and along with the teaching of that kind of view of what's happening in awakening and what awakening is. And my question is: what effects will that kind of anthropological and cosmological view have in terms of the ethos, the flavor of being, the range of being, the sense of meaningfulness or the possibility of a sense of meaningfulness, of the sense of beauty, senses of beauty, of eros, of soul-making? What does it do to all those possibilities?

So what is the result, again? Relatively, at some levels, similar practices, but they're all undergirded by certain anthropological, cosmological views. In this case, a kind of physicalist, neurological view—a neurologically based anthropology and cosmology. What kind of awakening does that give rise to? What kind of human being does that give rise to? What kind of possibilities does it open? What kind of possibilities does it close?

I might also point out that what is wrapped up in that is, I would say, a more limited view of what emptiness is and what realization involves. So there is, in that view that I just presented, a basic reality, which is material, which is physical, neuronal. There is a neuronal network. It can either work like this or it can work like that. If it works like this, you get certain suffering, the self-illusion. If it works like that, you don't—that self-illusion is no longer in the program. The software has changed.

But the basic reality is the neurons exist, the neural network exists, the biological functioning exists, and so on. And the only real scope of what's seen as empty is the self, the illusion of the self, and it's that that goes. Versus a view of emptiness that I would prefer and find much more interesting, exciting, much more challenging, more radical, deep, wide: that everything is empty. Neurons, matter, process, time. You've heard me say that many times, read about it.

So there are two things there. What is the scope of the emptiness view? And is it as deep and as thorough as it might be? And what is the ethos that is implied both as a basis but also as a result in that kind of view? What's the ethos of the awakening of the soul that comes out of such a view?

If we linger a little bit on this whole question of—the whole fact, actually—that there are, if we look at Buddha Dharma, we can notice that someone interested in these things should notice quite rapidly that there are quite a few different versions of what emptiness means. Everyone using the same word, mostly emptiness, and the range of what's implied, wrapped up in that term, varies hugely.

So it's certainly true in the Tibetan traditions, if you even just think about the four main Tibetan lineages and compare, say, the Nyingma or the Kagyu traditions with the Gelug tradition. The Gelug tradition was founded by Tsongkhapa in the fourteenth century, if I remember, fourteenth or fifteenth century. And I don't quite know the background, but they put a great emphasis on preserving the reality of conventional perceptions—preserving conventional reality.

I think part of the reason for that was because Tsongkhapa looked around him at the time in Tibet and saw a lot of people using the language of emptiness as a kind of excuse to justify behavior that wasn't ethical. So perhaps his thinking and his solution or his perceived need there was to lean more towards not espousing a view that conventional appearances were in fact thoroughly empty.

So you get a strange—to me, strange—teaching in the Gelug tradition which says this thing, whatever it is, is empty of inherent existence. It's not empty of itself. And there's a lot of debate that came out of that that mostly Westerners have not really come across because they're sort of spared that for whatever reasons.

But it's there in the hundreds of years of tradition—quite strong argument from different teachers. Certainly Mipham Rinpoche was very keen to point out the problems with that view, and the different Karmapas as well.

But that would be one version of emptiness that really, it's almost like you say things are empty, but it almost...

The danger in preserving the reality of conventional appearances and insisting that they are not empty, that conventional reality is not empty, is that emptiness just becomes... it has no effect. It's sort of just a kind of intellectual thing, but everything remains the same. That's one of the dangers.

Then you get different views of emptiness where again, the thrust or the aim—and often it's not made explicit—seems to be a kind of crusade against sacredness. A crusade against what we might call spirituality. And so again, what's happening in that choice of what emptiness means? Emptiness means don't get your hopes up. Emptiness means there is nothing sacred. Emptiness means there's nothing special. Emptiness means that the self with a big S is an illusion. Soul is an illusion, God is almost certainly an illusion, anything like that.

And that view of emptiness and that scope of emptiness, again, uses a lot of the same language—there's a lot of overlap—but it's got a certain purpose, and it's got a certain prescribed range and intent and scope to it, and goal to it, and vision of what awakening is.

In that, as I've pointed out, it also ends up casting the self in a certain light. So again, if I view the reality of things as this difficult existential situation—we are thrown into this world of purposeless matter in an inexplicable way, in an inexplicable universe of harsh impermanence and meaninglessness—then to see that as the reality, and then we have to find a way to face up to that reality and be okay with it, it's also casting the self as a kind of existentialist hero.

So the whole theatre of things—it's not recognized as theatre because there's presumed this is the reality—but there's a kind of theatre and one has cast oneself as practitioner. In my brave honesty I can face up to this reality which other people perhaps don't have the courage to face up to, this grim, difficult, existential meaninglessness and limitation of our existence, our finitude as human beings. But there's also a construing and a casting of the self in relation to something, as a real self-view in relation to a real reality. That's also part of what one is choosing.

There are views of emptiness that are just about simplifying things. Emptiness is really just the fact that all there is is processes. There is no mystery or depth to the whole notion of emptiness. It's just the fact that there are processes—there are atomic processes, there are neurological processes, there are mental processes that happen in time, this moment of consciousness, that moment of consciousness, that moment of awareness—and they're chained together in cause and effect. And our job is to see that's just a process. Don't make a big deal of anything. Don't make a big deal about the self. Don't make a big deal of anything

else. Just this process is kind of atomizing and stripping down.

Some people will choose a version of emptiness that is based on what they can tolerate in terms of the fear that might come up for them. So they might hear about radical emptiness, that everything is empty. There's not even atoms, there's not even a process, there's not even time, there's not even space. Not just self is there as a kind of process in time. But a person might land on that view for lots of different reasons, one of which might be fear. When I hear or read about an emptiness that's even deeper than that, saying, well, it's not even a process, then the ground feels like it goes... Just hearing that, the ground seems to go from under my feet, and I'm afraid. I don't like that. So sometimes a person is choosing emptiness or a version of emptiness—and again, when I choose a version of emptiness, then my path, my tradition or sub-tradition will come out of that—and it might be based on fear.

Sometimes it might be the case that one is committed to or invested in one version of emptiness over another and wants that to be the truth of emptiness, might be partly based or conditioned by one's experience. There's maybe very little mystical experience, or one is afraid of those kinds of openings and pulls back from them in meditation. Or they're just very rare, those experiences. And actually what's happening there is a movement of, well, I don't want to think that I'm a failure. I don't want to think that there is some experience that perhaps other people have had, but I, maybe after years or decades of meditating, I've never had. And so the fear of seeing oneself as a failure actually is what conditions why one is committed to or invested in or wants this version of emptiness to be true over that version.

So partly it's based on what it delivers in terms of the possibilities, ranges, and limits on the worldview. Partly it's more to do with self—the self-view that's already existing, or fear of a self-view, or wanting to cast the self in a certain way. Or it's a commitment to a certain view of emptiness because of what we want, because of what we gravitate towards in terms of the possible ranges of self-view that we want to open up and experience, and a sense of the cosmos, and perhaps a sense of sacredness and divinity.

Someone also, conversely, might find that ego slips in because they might feel, "Well, I've realized emptiness, and there's nothing more for me to realize there. My version is complete." They consider themselves an arahant and declare, "I already know. There's nothing further for me there"—that familiar arahant stock phrase. So one becomes invested, for a slightly different ego reason, in whatever level one has reached in terms of a view and understanding of emptiness. This too is possible.

And then there's the view that I would favor, wrapped up in the soul-making Dharma perspective. What's the leaning there? What's my inclination? What's my personal soul star? What is it that I wish for? What does my soul long for? Yes—to open up the possibilities of self, to open up the possibilities of experience. A huge range is what I want. To open up the possibilities of sacredness, to open up the possibilities of how I can sense and conceive of the cosmos. I want my emptiness to be integrated into those kinds of possibilities, to support those kinds of possibilities.

If we linger a little longer with this emptiness business, I can point out a few more things in relation to the

different views and soul-making Dharma's relationship with emptiness and imaginal practice's relationship with emptiness.

There are, as I've said, many different kinds or interpretations of emptiness despite the same word being used throughout the Buddhist tradition. Some are intended from and in the direction of a kind of anti-sacredness. In those construals, as I was pointing out, one's existential plight and material existence are real, and anything else is not. There's a kind of anti-spiritual agenda there.

As I've pointed out elsewhere, I would say that for many people, the very hearing about emptiness is already wrapped up with mystery and sacredness. It's not just a strategy or tool or concept or set of practices that liberate, that reduce suffering. Certainly it's that. But people love to hear about emptiness and they're drawn to explore it because of the mystery and the sacredness. My leaning and favorite inclination is to say that this is part of what we are wanting from emptiness. And I would say it's part of what comes when we explore emptiness deeply. As I've pointed out before, it's not just what we desire—it's also what the emptiness delivers at a very deep level.

Some people hold what's quite common—this process view. For some, their view or understanding of emptiness involves a certain reification of something or other. For example, the aggregates. For example, time. And for example, the process of aggregates in time. That would be a very common one: the self's not real, but what is real is this process of aggregates in time.

But again, just as in the secular existentialist version, this view of emptiness and understanding of emptiness actually implies that certain things are still real. And it also implies that images are not real. The imaginal is not real and not valuable because only this process of aggregates exists, which we can arrive at and perceive if we just train bare attention. We'll see that's all there is—just aggregates. That's the view there.

Therefore, the imaginal is not real because it's not that atomistic process. The options, certainly for the imaginal and imaginal perception, are not opened up. Only the self is impermanent; the phenomenal world is not. And there's not really this possibility of sensing the soul, of cosmopoiesis. There's not really the possibility of legitimizing that through that version of emptiness. It absolutely does not legitimize it, because what is true is atomistic process in time. Images and all that are just papañca in that view.

What's also implicitly true in that view is that impermanence is real. Sometimes emptiness comes almost to be synonymous with impermanence. But again, in the view that I would favor, the understanding of emptiness goes deeper than impermanence. So yes, definitely things are impermanent. But actually, as Nagarjuna and others have stressed, things are neither impermanent nor permanent. They're empty. Time is empty.

Thing is empty. Impermanence is not the ultimate truth. Permanence is not an ultimate truth. And I think when we really go deep into practice—really working with the teachings and the practices around

clinging and subtle clinging, letting go at subtler and subtler levels of clinging, seeing how that's tied into unfabricating and how that allows an unfabricating of the whole realm of perception—we actually see: no clinging, no impermanence. Without clinging, there is no impermanence, because there's no thing at all. There's no flow. You can't talk about flow or process. You can't talk about sense data. You can't talk about atoms, whether they're material atoms or mental atom-moments. There's no time. There's no present moment.

So again, very different versions of what emptiness means, with hugely divergent implications for what they open up, what they call us to, and what they limit or not. As I said, emptiness in the way that I would favor understanding it, conceiving of it, exploring it and presenting it—it will open up sensing the soul. As I perceive the world more through the lens of emptiness, I come out of that a little bit, then inevitably, if the emptiness understanding is deep enough, the world becomes sacred, and all kinds of possibilities for sensing the soul are opened.

Emptiness also, in the way that I would conceive it, helps support the stance of the imaginal middle way—so crucial to the fully imaginal experience, the opening of the fully imaginal. So imaginal perceptions are neither real nor not real. They're like theater. And I've said before that the ontological status of images and conventional, what we might call conventional worldly perceptions, is surely different. They're both thoroughly empty at a deep level. There's something about deep insight into emptiness that just, for many people—not for everyone—helps support that stance of the imaginal middle way.

In our view as well, understanding emptiness actually legitimizes, for some people, imaginal practice and sensing the soul. I mean, it was my way, as I've shared before. I wasn't particularly drawn to images. I didn't have a lot of images. It had been, if you like, practiced out of me over the years. But because there's no comparison of an image to something that's supposedly real, the ontological status of the imaginal doesn't get denigrated. If I've seen the emptiness of everything, there's nothing that I can harbor as "Yeah, but that's not real, but this is real." So in that sense, there's no reality or pure perception that I can compare an imaginal perception to.

As I said, some people will need that deep emptiness to really purge themselves or divest themselves of that lingering belief that's fundamental to avijjā, to ignorance—that there is something real, whatever that something is, and that we can know that. Some people don't need it, as I've said before, because they're already in an artistic, poetic relationship, so to speak, with existence and perception, or their reading and research into some modern philosophy kind of legitimizes it, etc. Maybe some from their research into modern physics.

Just while we're on the subject, and again I've said this before as well, but it's also true that the influence can go the other way, the support can go the other way—that imaginal practice, when repeated and over time, can actually bring insight into emptiness, can open the insights into emptiness. And there are a few

people, definitely more than a few, who the directionality of support is more that way. With the coming and going of all these images, many of which are kind of surprising, one begins to question the reality of this or that view of the self, for example.

I've said before, again, just talking about emptiness and its relationship or place in the whole practice of soulmaking—and it will have a different place for different people, as mentioned—so I've said, you know, careful not to be sloppy or lazy with the understanding of emptiness. There's a way it can be a bit glib and easy, rather than, for me, what's actually really quite sophisticated and subtle and profound understanding. That the view of deep emptiness is really radical in the sense of really absolute—cuts to the root of all things—and wide, comprehensive. So all that is possible is something that's really quite a journey, as I said when we talked in the series about emptiness.

There is the possibility for some people to explore the practices and understandings of emptiness in ways that are enormously sophisticated and subtle, go very deep and very, very wide. And at the same time—perhaps here's another tension—I acknowledge too that we each perhaps have a personal relationship with emptiness, if you like, and with epistemology, as we mentioned. Epistemology is personal, I said in the talk on epistemology. And epistemology of emptiness is also personal.

So on the one hand, don't be sloppy, don't be lazy. There's a possibility of really, really refined, careful understanding with regard to emptiness. And at the same time, acknowledge that there are different personalities here, different soul styles, different soul needs, and personal relationships with emptiness, personal relationships with epistemology, or personal epistemologies almost to a certain extent.

So you can hear just how complex all this is. Certainly complex if we're, again, thinking about what's in this pot that we call tradition, what contributes to a tradition, to our sense or to anyone's sense of what the dharma is—what are the rival or competing directional pulls, the assumptions, the inclinations, the cultural factors, the personal factors.

And you can hear when we talk about personal inclination - just how much care with regard to honesty and awareness is asked for. To be aware, to be conscious and honest about our wishes, our desires, our motivations for this or that version of this portion of the Dharma or the whole Dharma or the trajectory or the tradition. This is asking us to admit this, to be honest, to be careful, to open things up and to really be aware.

What can happen - and I realize I may be repeating something from earlier, but this feels so important - is that when we look at Dharma culture, sometimes it's hard to step out of it and actually see what's going on when you're immersed in something, when you're inside it.

Certain words and ideas - liberation, awakening, freedom, depth - are actually quite vague in their meaning to a practitioner who might be hearing them frequently and using them extensively as orientation points. They get spoken by authorities in Dharma talks and writings, repeated by teachers,

repeated by practitioners themselves. And actually, aided by their vagueness, supported by their vagueness, they become charged for the practitioner in the context of Dharma practice - doing retreats, hearing this language, repeating it for oneself. They become charged, they become orientation points and goals.

But if you actually ask two questions: First, what exactly do you mean by liberation, awakening, depth, freedom? And second, is that what you really want the most? Freedom from suffering gets repeated so much, we hear it constantly, we repeat it ourselves constantly. The very vagueness of the idea almost contributes to a lack of clarity, a lack of full honesty about whether this is actually what we want and what we even mean by it.

For some people, as I've pointed out before, it may actually be beauty that they have longed for in their practice, that has kept them on the path all these years - a love of beauty, an eros for beauty. It may be the beauty of goodness, of the profoundly good heart. It may be the beauty of truth, certainly. But it's never only freedom from suffering. Not for someone who really loves the path. Can I see this? Can I admit it? Can I see that there's not a problem with it? Can I see that it's right?

The person may find - and this is probably quite common - that if they're really able to pull aside the veils and scrutinize what's going on with all these words buzzing around, all this charge, all this repetition, they may feel that what they want is beauty. They long for beauty, they're devoted to beauty more than they're devoted to freedom from suffering or reducing their suffering much further. Sure, at times they want less suffering when suffering coalesces in certain ways. But actually it's something else.

What if there's the possibility of seeing oneself as a disciple of beauty? Not primarily as a seeker of liberation or any reduction in suffering. But because that's the paradigm, and that's what gets repeated - liberation from suffering, which can sometimes just mean reduced suffering - that's how one tends to think of what one's doing, what one repeats to oneself and to others.

What if you actually broke out of that? Or just experimented: Why don't I relabel myself, reconceive myself as a practitioner on the path? I'm a disciple of beauty. I'm devoted to beauty. My eros, my longing is for beauty. What would that do?

Honesty and consciousness is asked for here. And in acknowledging this need for honesty and self-awareness, in acknowledging the inevitability of how different soul styles or different soul desires and inclinations come into a person's perception of the Dharma, their choice of a Dharma tradition, their contribution to it - in acknowledging all that, it also brings up the whole question of autonomy and authority.

If we admit and are honest that we actually desire this - that what we really long for is beauty, and sometimes when push comes to shove, we'll choose beauty over a reduction in suffering - then that invites the question about autonomy and authority. Am I going to trust that desire over and above the language

that is promulgated, the common language, what the teacher is saying, what I read? That's part of the question of autonomy and authority.

But there are other aspects. Within a tradition, what is my relationship with authorities in terms of how much can I have my own investigations, my own lines of investigation, my own criteria for what satisfies me in my investigations?

Sometimes a person ends up asking a certain question of either a teacher or a number of different teachers over and over, sometimes for years, but there's not much movement there. What's happening? Sometimes what happens is they have several authorities. They're giving all the authority to those authorities, those teachers, and then they can't decide between them. Because this person says this, but that person says that. Or I read here, but I read over there.

How will you resolve that question, whatever it is? It could be a question about any aspect of Dharma. How will you know? When will you be satisfied in that question? How much are you actually living that question in terms of tailoring and shaping and directing your practice to go into the depths of that question so that that question can be opened up and answered? Or is it just, "I'm practicing how I usually practice, but I'm asking these questions to different authorities and getting contradictory answers"?

So this whole autonomy of investigation—in practice, in experience, in meditative experience, in thinking, in reading and listening—becomes crucial.

Again, there's a tension here because sometimes what happens is a person has given all the authority to other people and they're not, if you like, living their own questions and self-determining. There's not enough autonomy in their own investigations, their own inquiries.

So I ask: What is involved in a really powerful investigation for a human being? What's involved in the art of inquiry for oneself, so that one knows, so that one arrives at a place where it doesn't matter what this person says, because I have satisfied myself. I've seen for myself. I've understood for myself. I've made sense of it myself, questioned for myself in a real, alive way.

Sometimes what happens is the other side of the spectrum. A person has a certain experience and decides that, "Oh well, I've reached the end." So whatever you're saying, Rob, or whatever this other teacher is saying, "I don't think that's true because I've seen this"—a certain experience.

So, for example, a certain level of unfabricating where the personality goes very quiet, but the world just feels very vivid and bright. And it seems like—the sense of the understanding, the sense of that experience is "I'm just experiencing things as they are without the self." And one stops there. And one has decided, based on that experience, that that's the end of it. That's the understanding of emptiness. Anyone who says other stuff just can't be right. All this business about complete unfabrication or cessation or whatever.

To me, that would be a bit like journeying, taking a car to the south of England and going to somewhere

like Dover, the Cliffs of Dover, where there's the sea, and just deciding, "Right, that's it, that's the end of the land, that's the end of terrestrial Earth. There is no more land after here." Versus getting in a boat, going across and seeing—after a little paddling, you'll get to France. And sometimes you point in the right direction. And so, there is more land. There is a deeper unfabricating than what I've experienced.

So the question becomes: How much am I over-concluding? Am I concluding my investigation too early? Am I over-trusting my experience, even though that experience might be limited, and I'm deciding it's ultimate?

There's that phrase from the Dzogchen tradition: "Trust your experience but keep refining your view." So yes, if that kind of relative unfabricating where the personality goes very quiet and the world just opens up very vividly—not much thought, etc.—it's great. Trust that experience. In my map, it's a relative unfabricating. But keep refining the view. Keep refining the practice. Keep refining your understanding of what's happening there. How do I frame that experience? Is there more that can be unfabricated? What would that be? How would I get there?

And also, part of the art of inquiry is a kind of structural awareness of the levels of ideas.

So how things kind of fit together - how conceptual frameworks fit together. What's a relatively small fry contention or quibbling? I think I mentioned this before, so forgive me if there's repetition: people arguing whether there were two or three types of vedanā. You can see it both ways - does it really matter?

Sometimes we don't recognize what are the more significant levels of ideas. Sometimes people hear about the ways of looking paradigm, for example - that whole conceptual framework - and it just doesn't register how radical and important in its implications such an idea is. It's a kind of meta-level idea that just doesn't register: you can look at things in different ways. One hasn't grasped its structural place, hasn't grasped the edifice of ideas, how ideas are actually... one can create a hierarchy of ideas. What's more or less significant? What's a real basis, a real meta-ideal, a pan-ideal, and what's just a relatively insignificant piece in the structure and conceptual framework of a particular dharma?

This relates to what I mentioned - I can't remember in which talk - developing a nose for what's significant and what's not. This strand of investigation, this piece, this understanding, this discernment - that's actually significant. This one is not so important. There's a lot involved in what I would call artful inquiry, or the art of inquiry.

All this is necessary if I'm going to have a degree of autonomy in relationship to whatever authorities exist in a tradition. So important. And again, this question of the tension between autonomy - do we need a necessary or healthy... or I'll put it as a question: does a tradition need a degree of healthy autonomy for its members, for its sangha, the individuals? And does it need authority? What's the balance of those? What's the tension? That's the range of tension there that's necessary to a healthy, alive tradition.

We see in all this - I've touched on this, but I want to draw this point out - there are many things being

said. Just how... views about the world and views about the human being, what we might call cosmologies and anthropologies, views about the cosmos and beliefs about the cosmos, pictures of the cosmos, pictures, models, beliefs, views about what a human being is and what constitutes a human being - they are not irrelevant.

It can be fairly popular to say, "Ah, the Buddha was a genius because he just sidelined the whole cosmology that was around at the time. He took the teaching and made it purely psychological and therefore universal and not dependent on some kind of cultural accretion or cultural fashion of a view of cosmology and anthropology."

But you start to see when you consider all these things I've said that actually, that's not irrelevant at all. Those views of cosmology and anthropology may be much more primary, and may be much more primary in their significance and their determination of what the Dharma is - what we believe is the real Buddha-Dharma, or that we choose. And as I said, as part of what is the Dharma, what is our notion, what is our sense, what is our image of awakening - views of cosmology and anthropology are not at all irrelevant. They are extremely significant.

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