Dharma(s) Discovered and Created (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:34:32

If we return to consider a little bit more the influence of contemporary cultural context on the tradition—on the evolution of the tradition, on the Dharma, the shaping of the tradition—and we look at the current cultural context, one reading of our current cultural context, the larger cultural context, is that we're in a strange sort of hybrid time in a way.

We had the rise of modernism or modernity, if you prefer, with the Western Enlightenment, the scientific revolution, and one characteristic of modernism philosophically is the belief, the view, the hope that humanity can lay hold of the truth—the truth—capture it in a clear, unmediated way. A single truth that can be known. And so, of course, the science and the scientific revolution encapsulated, embodied really the central thrust of that belief and idea and hope. And, of course, there were other movements in philosophy that captured that as well.

So the legacy of modernism is still very much with us, it's still very much alive. At a certain point, as I chronicled, through reflections on science and the history of science, through philosophical considerations, other factors, political and anthropological considerations, looking at studies about cultures, there was a kind of rise of a collection of related movements that we can loosely bundle together under the term "postmodernism," loosely.

And postmodernism very much aggressively challenged the belief and the idea that there could be a direct perception of truth, that there is one privileged perspective which reveals the truth or reality—whether it's scientific or philosophical or social or ethical or whatever. And so there was a rise of postmodernism, particularly in intellectual circles, but some of that spilt into non-intellectual circles, the person on the street, the everyday person who's not in academia.

So one reading of our contemporary larger cultural context is that we're living in a sort of mixed time, where to a certain extent what is still very much dominant as the mainstream cultural paradigm is essentially modernity: that there is one truth, that science can lay hold of it. Mixed with that is a kind of filtering into the common consciousness, if you like, of a kind of postmodern reservation, objection, hesitation to that proclamation or that idea of there being one truth, one reality, one privileged perspective which we can come to or which this person or that person or this culture or that culture has over and above another culture.

So these two kind of opposed ideas or opposed views about reality and truth and epistemology—and as I said, it covers all kinds of areas of human existence, not just science—they coexist in the common consciousness in a strange way, so that there is a reluctance to close down the possibility of people just

having different opinions and different views and takes on reality or perspectives, at the same time as there is a kind of dominant view of this is how reality is, and it tends to adhere to the classical scientific materialist and secular view. So that in itself is a strange mix of postmodern philosophy with the dominance of more modernist views. They mix together. It's a strange combination.

And what does that imply? How does that play out in how we view the Dharma, sense the Dharma? What influences will that have on the Dharma, but also on how we view dharma?

So one of the traits or thrusts of postmodern thought and philosophy is this objection to any claim of reaching or knowing a universal truth, and any claim that there is such a universal truth, or that one can hope to arrive at a perspective which will reveal that universal truth. And rather, truths or reality perspectives or worldviews or even morality views—under the rubric of the postmodern gaze, the gaze of postmodernism—are viewed as just so-called truths. They are viewed more as just cultural products.

And so one of the constituent or related movements of postmodernism is a kind of postcolonialism. So academics and others looking at the influence of the aggressive colonialism of Western European countries, but you might also say the US, on indigenous cultures and other cultures around the world, imposing their views of reality. It's happened in all kinds of ways: imposing aesthetic, imposing reality views, imposing legal views, imposing sociological, economic modes of thinking and action. And wishing to recognize that and reclaim some of the indigenous power from those oppressive impositions spread through colonialism.

Part of all that study brought the view that there are no universal truths, there's just different cultural views. Now, of course, even among modern philosophers, this is not a simple fait accompli as an argument. There's nuances to this. It's much more sophisticated than I'm presenting here. However, that objection or nervousness when anyone claims a universal truth, any person or any culture or any religion, is part of the thrust of postmodern philosophy that has, to some extent, filtered down into our ordinary culture.

So I heard from a colleague who was teaching with another teacher, and the colleague of mine played two pieces of music in the meditation hall one evening. And her co-teacher afterwards said, well, she should be careful, she shouldn't assume that those pieces of music will be universally felt the same way by everyone in the hall. So I think they were two pieces of music by basically two white men—I think it was George Harrison and Leonard Cohen. And this co-teacher was saying, well, careful of the colonialism there, supposing that music by two white men will be heard by everyone the same way, will land in the same place as my colleague was hoping it would to communicate a certain point or create a certain atmosphere.

So, fair enough. Good point, perhaps. But at the same time, this co-teacher was probably, I would guess, overlooking the presumption of universality in the Dharma itself. In other words, the Dharma tends to proclaim, and most dharma practitioners presume, a universal truth—that the Four Noble Truths are

universal truths, or certainly universal. That the pith of the Four Noble Truths, that craving brings suffering and releasing craving brings a reduction in suffering, just that much—this is assumed to be a universal truth.

This may or may not be explicitly trumpeted as such, but I wonder whether most dharma practitioners, people who are steeped in the Dharma, actually just assume that universality. Now, most Buddhists don't try to enforce their view or their way on others. They would acknowledge and allow any person's freedom and autonomy to choose their path, their religion, their conceptual framework. But perhaps, just like a fundamentalist Christian who is not evangelical might believe that those who don't choose Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Saviour will not go to heaven—they might believe that, or even believe such a person will suffer in hell for eternity—without being aggressively evangelistic about it, they won't foist that on others so aggressively, but they're still harboring a certain view.

Is it the case that people who are steeped in Buddhism or consider themselves Buddhist assume, without aggressively foisting it on anyone else, that those people who choose differently—who don't practice a relinquishment of craving and other aspects of the Buddhist path—will suffer, and do suffer, because of their kilesas, because of craving? This is an interesting question to me. Do we assume that Dharma is universal and proclaiming, and the holder of the repository of universal truths, at least some of them?

Culturally speaking, there's a good case to look at Pali Canon Dharma teachings and that whole thrust towards transcendence and solitude and renunciation with regard to relationship with senses and sense pleasure, and regard that as, in quotation marks, "male"—as a kind of style where the thrust of Pali Canon Dharma is quite male. I think that case could be very validly made to a certain extent. It's certainly been a very patriarchal structure.

One of the related movements within postmodernism is feminist studies and gender studies. One can very easily imagine that kind of critique from the perspective of a feminist thinker, looking not just at the patriarchy through a couple of thousand years of Buddhist history in its power structures, but also at what could be seen as a typically male flavor and range and leaning in the archetypal style of its aims and its methods. To remove oneself from the world, to not be reborn, to transcend the world, to regard sense pleasures as something to be renounced, the emphasis on solitude—all these things.

How much is universal truth in there? When we talk about different worldviews spawning or setting up different dharmas, the view of the round of rebirth being equated with suffering, and then the release from suffering—liberation, nibbāna—coming from not being reborn again into the world, into any world, if that is central, then we're not just talking about cosmetic differences here. We're talking about something really fundamental.

Is that very transcendent movement away from the world, away from sense experience, something that is created by males, colored by males, reinforced by males, and reflecting a male archetypal style? The language is fraught here, so I'm certain to tread on some toes. I apologize, but I hope you get the basic

point I'm trying to make.

Several practitioners have told me, "I'm actually not interested in the unfabricated. I care more about relationships and the beauty in relationships." A woman practitioner told me that. Is that just because she's deluded, or is she actually holding on to and trying to preserve and create space for something that's been sidelined and denigrated by a male-oriented and male-shaped teaching and thrust?

Do we assume the Dharma is universal and the repository of universal truths? And if we don't, then what? The same question applies to soul-making Dharma. Do we assume the soul-making conceptual framework is universal, reflects some universal truth, with all these ideas we're putting out?

One of the, hopefully, strengths and sophistications of soul-making Dharma is that, as I've mentioned a couple of times, the whole idea of breaking of the vessel—*shevirat hakelim*—is integral to the whole conceptual framework, including with reference to conceptual frameworks themselves. Part of the whole conceptual framework of soul-making dharma is the fact that conceptual frameworks need to be stretched, need to be soft and elastic, will shatter at certain points, will have holes in them, will have certain inevitable incoherences that may fracture and may break and may need to be expanded, rebuilt.

Sometimes I wonder, and Catherine and I have touched on this several times—how much of soul-making Dharma is a reflection of my personal dispositions, my history, my preferences, my blind spots, my views, my style of consciousness, my soul style? Even things like the emphasis on fine discernment, subtlety of awareness with regard to emotions and energy body—this is just part of how my soul and my consciousness tends to work, or how I've developed it, how it has been developed over practice. It's something that Catherine shares to a huge extent and has similar tendencies of subtle discernment. How much of that is necessary and how much is, as I say, the teachings themselves actually just a reflection of my style and not necessarily necessary?

These are questions. What do we do with all this? If we stay with this strange amalgam, this uneasy, relatively incongruent amalgam of modernism and postmodernism, modernity and post-modernity in our contemporary wider culture?

One of the other aspects or faces of postmodernism, in terms of the arts—someone told me that the whole postmodern movement actually started in architecture and some of the other arts—is the introduction of pastiche elements. Elements that belong to different artistic styles were placed and juxtaposed in the same building or piece of artwork, so that pastiche, that kind of, from a certain perspective, incongruous juxtaposition of different elements and styles and traditions within one piece, is also characteristic of postmodern art to a certain extent. This is all grossly simplified, but it doesn't matter for the points I'm making for now.

And over the years when I would see her, she would make statements that seemed to me to be taking concepts and insights from her years of insight practice and then sort of grafting them onto or projecting

them into the images and the cosmology and the theology of this other tradition she was now practicing in.

So the concepts seemed to carry more weight for her than the images. The insights she had developed through insight practice were being mapped onto very different religious imagery and framework. Which is interesting—what happens when we take the conceptual understanding we've developed through one tradition and apply it to the images and stories of another?

This raises fascinating questions about what we're actually relating to in spiritual practice. Are we relating primarily to concepts, to insights, to ways of understanding? Or are we relating to particular images, particular stories, particular cultural frameworks? And how much do those images and frameworks actually matter versus the underlying conceptual understanding?

I think this connects to something really fundamental about how we approach dharma practice. If I'm identifying strongly as a Buddhist, what exactly am I identifying with? Is it the particular cultural forms—the statues, the chanting, the robes, the Pali terminology? Is it the philosophical framework? Is it the community? Is it some combination?

And this matters because it affects how we relate to teachings that draw from multiple traditions or that use unexpected images and examples. If my identity as a Buddhist is primarily about loyalty to Buddhist cultural forms, then I might feel uncomfortable when a teacher uses Hebrew mystical concepts or Christian imagery to illuminate dharma points. But if my identification is more with the underlying commitment to freedom from suffering and the cultivation of wisdom, then perhaps I can be more open to teachings that draw skillfully from various sources.

This question of identity and allegiance in spiritual practice is not trivial. It shapes how we receive teachings, how we practice, how we relate to other traditions and practitioners. And it's worth examining honestly what's actually motivating our preferences and reactions when we encounter teachings that don't fit neatly into the boxes we've constructed.

And then she was telling me that she felt drawn to Buddha Dharma again and was explaining that this draw was because she had felt Kuan Yin calling her home to explore some of her presence as a figure in her own right, as a presence within herself.

So this reconnection with Buddhism came through the sense of Kuan Yin. My question is—and I don't know what was the case with this person—but my question is really: is it just an icon, in this case Kuan Yin, typically conceived and labeled as Buddhist, or is it something more? Because if it's just the icon, where is the Buddha Dharma in that?

Actually, representations of divinities throughout history have passed, they've moved, they've been traded, they slip and are shared between one culture and religious tradition and another—countless, countless times. Academics have traced that in all kinds of ways. So just because it's Kuan Yin, and Kuan

Yin is regarded as a Buddhist deity, Bodhisattva, etc., does that make it a return to Buddhadharma? If it's only that it's a typically Buddhist deity, if there's nothing more than that, just the borrowing of a deity and a relationship with that deity—perhaps through visualization, perhaps through image, etc.—where's the Buddha Dharma there?

Similarly, I heard that when Christian missionaries went to Tibet, they started trying to teach the Gospels and teach about Jesus and teach the theology of Christianity, they actually had very little impact and very little influence because the Tibetans heard the stories about Jesus—the beautiful healing stories and his sacrifice and all of that—and just heard it and said, "Oh, he's just a Bodhisattva that we'd never heard of before." And so he was just easily, without any friction at all, accommodated into their already large pantheon of deities and Bodhisattvas. And they completely missed the essence of Christianity. And certainly missed any differentiation between what they were believing and thinking in their conceptual frameworks, explicit and implicit, and the Christian ones.

So again, when we talk about traditions and eclecticism and borrowing and referring to all that, what are we actually talking about? What actually has the clout? Is it just a kind of representation, or is it more the deeper, essential conceptual framework with the delineations and things? So there's a lot of considerations in here, I think, to reflect on.

I've made the case before, and I get the impression I'm not the only one who feels this way, but in many regards, the postmodern movement, philosophically at least, kind of reached a dead end, or has come to a dead end in a certain way. Partly it was supposed that in the attack on any proclamation or hope or idea of a universal truth that could be arrived at by adopting the perspective that reveals that truth would open up the ground for more fertile cross-pollination and conversation.

I don't think that has happened, or it doesn't seem to have happened very much. It certainly hasn't happened much in philosophical circles, as far as I can tell. And the whole thing kind of got, well, died, to some extent. And I mentioned someone, for instance, like Richard Rorty, who made such an insistence in his very smart critique of truth claims and privileged perspectives on reality, and deconstructions of even the attempt at ontology and epistemology. And then was hoping that this would, in his words, open up the conversation. That was the most important thing, to open up the conversation, keep the conversation going. But very little came. Certainly in his writings, there's very little conversation happening. And it didn't seem to spawn much or open up much of a conversation or much fertile creation and discovery, either in terms of ideas or anything else.

And I made this point before, but partly the problem is that a lot of the academic philosophers lack any technology in the sense of any meditative technique and capacity and developed practice to actually shift ways of looking, to move in and out of different ways of looking, so that their very sense of reality, their very sense of cosmos, their sense of human being, their perception of things, actually changes. Of course, that's the central thing, as I would say, we practice in Buddha Dharma, at least as I tend to most commonly

present it. And that takes practice.

So I can have the idea that there are the possibility of different perspectives. But if I can't actually engage different perspectives, it just stays completely at the level of the written academic word or debate. Nothing is really affected in the being and there's no real exploration of new ground, of different perspectives, no real creation and discovery happening. So that's maybe one reason why the whole postmodern philosophical movement kind of just sort of died or petered out, lost its life.

A second is, and again I've pointed this out before, that often many of those philosophers espousing the impossibility of seeing truth or arriving at the existence of one truth or arriving at one preferred perspective on reality, most of those philosophers espousing that actually had a hidden agenda. Sometimes it might have been hidden to themselves, I don't know. And that hidden agenda involved a kind of strongly secularist, almost nihilistic, materialist stance. That was their basic ontological commitment. And on top of that, they might have even had an agenda to cut down, to denigrate, to make impossible, to bar from the conversation anything that reaped to them of more spiritual views, more ennobling views, other dimensions, divinity, etc.

So, saying one thing, but actually blocking the discourse from opening up in certain areas. This also just closed the discourse so it ended up atrophying and nothing really new came into that plot other than people repeating over and over, "There's the absence of truth," and bashing each other, slapping each other's wrists when it seemed like this person or that person was claiming some kind of privileged perspective, usually without realizing it.

Now, I'm sure that in recent years and even the last couple of decades, I'm sure there must be thinkers and burgeoning movements that I'm just unaware of. Someone was talking to me even just the other day about metamodernism and saying that this was the beginnings of a philosophical movement that had something in common with what we were teaching and may provide part of a way forward out of this sort of dead end or lifeless pool left over from postmodernism and this strange mishmash of the dominant modernism with sort of filtered down postmodernism.

But at the same time, soul-making as an art preserves its own irreducible mystery and unfathomability that cannot be fully captured or explained by these other purposes, no matter how noble they might be.

This understanding of dharma as art opens up tremendous possibilities while simultaneously providing the necessary constraints that make meaningful exploration possible. When we conceive of our practice this way, we're no longer bound by the rigid truth claims that can become so problematic in both religious and scientific frameworks. We're not required to defend absolute positions or universal truths in the same way. Instead, we're engaging with something that has the fluidity and creative potential of artistic expression, while still maintaining depth, rigor, and transformative power.

This artistic approach also allows us to embrace what we might call "multiple truths" without falling into

the relativistic trap that postmodernism sometimes creates. In art, we don't say that all artistic expressions are equally valuable or meaningful, but we also don't reduce them to a single measure of truth or beauty. There are qualities, there are depths, there are resonances that some works have and others don't. There's discernment involved, but it's a different kind of discernment than purely rational or empirical judgment.

The same applies to soul-making dharma as art. We can discern between practices and approaches that seem to generate more soul, more depth, more beauty, more meaningfulness, and those that don't, without having to resort to absolute truth claims. This discernment itself becomes part of the artistic sensibility we're cultivating.

When we view our spiritual practice through this lens, we're also freed from some of the cultural constraints that might otherwise limit our exploration. We're not bound by what's considered culturally acceptable or intellectually fashionable in quite the same way that we might be if we were making scientific or religious truth claims. Art has always had a certain license to explore territories that other domains might find too controversial or uncertain.

This doesn't mean anything goes, of course. As I mentioned, the constraints and resistances are crucial. They're what give the artistic exploration its power and depth. But these constraints come from the internal logic of the practice itself, from what actually works to generate soul and meaning and transformation, rather than from external cultural pressures or intellectual fashions.

The intellectual component is certainly present, but in a way, soul-making will always have these beyonds that deliver and open up—domains whose purpose transcends the merely moral, cognitive, or utilitarian. These elements are there, but soul-making will always be more. And as such, one might ask, "Well, what's the point? What's the use of it?" The answer is simply this: soul-making is the use of it. It stops there in that kind of circular, self-proclaiming declaration.

If we linger a little longer with this whole idea of postmodernism—and I'm sure I'm not the first person to point this out—when you ponder it deeply, you can realize something quite striking about one of its central tenets. Characteristic of postmodernism is this idea that beliefs and worldviews emerge from or are constituted by historical and cultural context. They're not universal truths, the argument goes, but are simply conditioned by particular historical and cultural circumstances.

This is the typical postmodern critique or analysis—really, an explanation of ideas, views, worldviews, and beliefs. But one could point out that the very idea or belief that views emerge from historical and cultural context is itself a view emerging from a certain historical and cultural context. What does that do to our understanding? The idea that ideas are culturally emergent is itself a culturally emergent idea. Again, we can point back to Heidegger and others who explored this recursive dilemma.

Does this relativize the postmodern claim as truth? Does it mean that this very idea about cultural conditioning and contingency may not be ultimately true? And what does that do to our sense of

possibilities?

There's often an agenda in this typically postmodern assertion—sometimes hidden, sometimes explicit. When postmodern thinkers insist that ideas and views come from culture and don't reflect any universal truth or movement toward such truth, there's usually an implicit prohibition. What's being forbidden is the notion that cultural conditioning itself might represent something like divine movement—the life of world soul intelligence, or something of that nature.

This would be a definite taboo for most postmodern philosophers. Yet one could retain the insight about cultural conditioning while suggesting that the conditioning itself reflects something larger being worked out through humanity, through world soul—a movement of the divine, of Buddha nature. This idea, which in a way sanctifies cultural contexts and movements, is too reminiscent of Hegel for most contemporary philosophers.

Hegel, who was enormously influential before becoming almost the focal point of vehement philosophical attack, had this notion of absolute spirit—that culture, society, religions, philosophies, and art are all part of a wider movement and evolution of spirit. One of the problems with Hegel was his proclamation that this process of spiritual growth through cultural evolution had reached its zenith in his own philosophy—which is, of course, problematic for obvious reasons.

But we could entertain—neither as truth nor untruth, but as a perspective, a conceptual framework we're free to move in and out of—a very similar idea. We could see cultural conditioning and context as part of a divine movement of world soul intelligence, using whatever words feel appropriate. The key difference would be regarding this movement as open-ended, rather than having already arrived at its summit or moving toward some future peak where we'll all recognize perfection.

We could regard this divine movement as open-ended, just as we regard soul-making as open-ended. The awakening that soul-making opens and delivers would be endless in its possibilities, endlessly fertile, and still—still a divine movement.

As I said at the beginning, there's a great deal here to unearth and illuminate. I want to hold back as much as possible from imposing any conclusions I might be inclined to draw from all this, and simply expose these considerations for our collective contemplation.

When we put all these pieces together—the considerations about history, cultural context and conditioning (past, present, and future), and the place of our personal inclinations, desires, and soul styles—it becomes possible, given everything we've explored, to conceive or situate soul-making dharma in at least two ways regarding its place vis-à-vis mainstream Buddha dharma.

Given all we've discussed, it's possible to write this history—remembering that history is fiction—in at least two ways. One possibility is that soul-making is part of Buddhadharma. As such, it exists within the perimeters, boundaries, and scope of what we understand as Buddha Dharma. It certainly evolved from

Buddha Dharma insight meditation as its foundation, utilizing many of the tools, concepts, and meditative techniques that are part of Buddha Dharma practice and teaching.

Soul-making emerged very much from deep exploration of emptiness, as I've explained. We can—as I have done in certain talks, perhaps including "What Is Awakening?" and others—trace these connections and demonstrate this continuity.

rethink or better expand our sense of the four noble truths, expand our sense of what do we mean by suffering and what do we mean by awakening, especially now if we cannot assume that everyone believes suffering is just being in the realm of rebirth from life to life and liberation is getting off that wheel of rebirth and not being reborn again. Then the whole notions of suffering and awakening become more open to different interpretations.

And it's possible to expand what we mean by suffering. We talked about including the suffering of soullessness and the awakening of soul. So I've explained all this at much greater length. But then we're really using the framework of the Four Noble Truths and expanding its range. And certainly there are other elements of Buddha Dharma that we could say in soul-making Dharma are the same concepts—they're just expanded beyond maybe what many proponents of mainstream Buddha Dharma would put out there.

So, for example, we talk about in the Dharma: Sila, Samadhi, Paññā—ethics, samadhi or meditative absorption and well-being and concentration, and paññā, wisdom. So you can see that when I touched on yesterday the relationship between emptiness and image, we're really opening up the range of insight regarding emptiness and its implications.

Or, for instance, when I mentioned that the truth of anicca—perhaps not an ultimate truth, as many Buddhists would consider it, the ultimate truth of impermanence—we're actually expanding the insight and saying, well, actually time is empty too, and all things that exist in time are empty. And so with the emptiness of time, the door is opened to a perspective of timelessness, eternality. So it's almost like more insight, deeper insight, widens the range and the scope of what's actually possible. So there's paññā there.

If we talk about samadhi, I've talked a lot about, for instance, the fluid back and forth between samadhi states and working with an image. The reality or the experience of wherever you are working in meditation with an image—there's a fork. You can go into the samadhi more, you can go into the image more. I've delineated four or five kinds of realms or experiences that one can be in with an image or with the essence of an image. And so this is also extending—alongside the eight classical jhanas, we can extend the range of what kind of states it's possible to settle into and regard as realms, meditative realms, states of relative meditative stability. So again, all the samadhi is there, all the paññā is there—it's just stretched a little bit.

If we talk about sila, about ethics—actually I hope that I will be able to talk about that after this talk. So

again, I would urge the view that what's happening in soul-making dharma is actually we're expanding the ethics. We're certainly not getting rid of the ethics. So again, our practice is based on ethical care and ethical attention. But it perhaps widens it.

I've talked about sometimes, in talks like "Meditator's Revolutionary" and "Necessity of Fantasy," the almost unconscious limitation on our ethical sensibilities and our ethical stands and actions—the limitations imposed by a limited range of archetypes that we inherit or that are the legacy of mainstream Buddha Dharma. And so soul-making dharma might open up the ethical range more because it opens up the range of archetypes through which one can sense and tune to the ethics of the situation and then respond as well. So I'm going to elaborate on that in the talks to come.

Or even dana—we're very much rooted in the practice of generosity in all kinds of ways, and I've talked about that when we talked about opening the energy body, the importance of that, and radical generosity. But it's also possible to say that in soul-making, in some of the particular elements of soul-making, dana is implicit. In duty, for example—duty that, in relation to an image, has to spill out somehow into the world. Somehow, even if it's actually purely intrapsychic, duty in relation to an image, there's some kind of dana, there's some kind of giving of the being that is expressed through that duty.

One might also say, regarding dharma, that the soul is intrinsically and naturally generous, that it wants to share itself, to display itself, to show and manifest its gods, its daemons, to mirror and echo infinitely in life, in body, in speech, in perception, in mind, in art, in work, in so much. It pours itself out endlessly. It wants to impress in that good sense that I was talking about. It wants to connect. It wants to share. Soul wants to reach out to soul and impress and be impressed upon. There's a generosity in that.

You could say soul serves itself, but from another perspective, soul is more than me, or certainly more than ego. It's always at least tied to or tending toward the social and the community, the earthy and the cosmic, the hidden worlds as well. It serves all of that. In its service and devotion to soul-making, it serves all of that. It doesn't—again, because of the intrinsic tendency to expand, it expands into all these domains as well. So there are all kinds of directions, aspects, levels, dimensions of generosity wrapped up in soul-making Dharma.

The one view is that soul-making Dharma is just within the scope of Buddha Dharma. It's just one sub-tradition, much as Vajrayana is, or Insight Meditation is, or whatever, within Buddha Dharma. And really what's happening is we're just expanding the range of what we mean by Dharma, Sila, Samadhi, Paññña, without

without letting go of any of what we already meant by dhana sila samadhi paññña. We're just expanding it.

But a second way of writing a story, or seeing it, situating it, conceiving of it, is that actually, Buddha Dharma is in soul-making. It's a part of soul-making. So why? How could we say that? Because soul styles and soul desires, as we said and emphasized, they direct and determine what kind of Dharma I want,

because what kind of world I want to sense myself in, what kind of vision and sense of humanity, what kind of liberation, what kind of flavor of being.

And so the soul style, whether it's conscious or not, the soul wishes to feed into determining the Dharma. And again, we could regard that as a movement of the world soul, in a more global sense, if you like. So that Dharma itself is an expression of soul, of soul-making. And as such, it's a dynamic, evolving, moving, volatile, and multi-faced, multi-aspected, multi-directional movement of soul-making.

So one view is soul-making Dharma is within the Buddha Dharma, and another view is the Dharma is in soul-making. Buddha Dharma is a movement of soul. Was, is, will be a movement of soul. It's conjured forth from soul. It's built by soul. It's shaped and determined by the desires and the movements and the inclinations and the processes of soul-making. So we could look at it two ways.

Somewhere before, I can't remember, and it was probably in the context of saying something else, but I think I said actually you could see it three ways. You could make a claim that soul-making Dharma is well within the scope of traditional Buddha Dharma, and maybe even stretch it and claim that the Buddha did teach soul-making Dharma, etc. So that's very typical in religious innovation, is to claim the innovation, paint it as an original teaching.

So then you get the stories of the Vajrayana was proclaimed by the Buddha, by Siddhartha Gautama in his lifetime but just to a secret set of disciples or just in secret to a select set of disciples, for example. It's always been there and then it was only revealed gradually over time. Similar with Mahayana, etc. So there's a painting of something—again to do with fantasy of origins, it's to do with the way religions think backwards to the founder and the truth being behind me, truth that I'm trying to replicate. But one could paint it that way.

As a first option, one could perceive soul-making Dharma that way. One could perceive it as completely having broken out of the bounds of Buddha Dharma and being something else. A vessel has shattered, it's open, and now it's outside of the perimeter.

Or, a third way, one could regard soul-making Dharma as part of the expansion of Buddha Dharma in the West. The current birth, actually, of Buddha Dharma in the West. Buddha Dharma very young in the West. And that we are involved, and not just people involved with soul-making Dharma, all of us, anyone, are involved in that kind of meeting of cultures. Just as when the Buddha Dharma went to Japan or China or Tibet, and it met with indigenous cultures, the cultures and religious thought and conceptions that had been there for a long time, and sensibilities and styles of being and soul styles, and it had to kind of marry the two, and it did, so that Japanese Zen is much of it grossly different than, say, Tibetan Buddhism or Theravadan Buddhism, etc. It's taken on, it had to be expanded and shaped in the context of that meeting of cultures.

So that would be a third way of regarding, a third story about soul-making Dharma in its relationship to

traditional Dharma. Actually, part of that expansion is happening right now. So that movement of the Buddha Dharma meeting Western culture at this time, and we're in that process. And that's where soul-making Dharma sits, as one of the discoveries, creations, fermentations, explorations of that meeting.

So there's three options there. And I think I pointed out whenever I mentioned this before that, and then of those three options, which do you prefer? How would you like to see this? And how much, again, is it just a kind of archetypal or soul style that determines the story that we, or you, tell yourself? In other words, do you want to see yourself as a renegade revolutionary, breaking out, starting something new? Do you want to see yourself as a midwife, a part of the gentle care of birthing new life and new growth? Or do you want to see yourself as loyal and traditional within an already established range of what's already agreed upon as this is Buddha Dharma? And maybe which story I choose depends on soul style.

So, I don't know how you feel now. Maybe that's just a few too many groundlessnesses in there for you. I don't know. With all this reflection and all this, what we've sort of exposed in the pot, how does this land with you?

And if there's two ways of spinning a story, soul-making Dharma is in Buddha Dharma, or the Dharma is in soul-making, Buddha Dharma is in the soul and is part of soul-making—might that also be a version or an instance of what Lee Smolin quoted about the hypothesis of duality? Two very different ways of looking at the same thing. They seem completely incongruent, but they are merely two ways of looking at the same thing.

The Buddha Dharma is a part of soul-making. So I don't know how this lands with you—whether it agitates you, makes you nervous, makes you angry, or if it excites you, baffles you, perplexes you, or even depresses you.

I wonder whether part of opening to all this and reckoning with it—acknowledging it, pondering it—is actually part of a kind of psychological and spiritual maturity of soul. To ignore all these considerations would be somewhat immature, like saying, "I don't want to acknowledge that, I don't want to think about it—it's a bit too much."

Perhaps looking at what we've got here, admitting this mix and the nebulousness and groundlessness of it, is asking something significant of us psychologically and spiritually. To be able to do this, to be willing to engage with this, requires a kind of maturity of soul. And is it possible to open to all this and assimilate it, digest it, relate to it in a way that's actually fertile for soul-making—helpful, beautiful, expansive?

Someone once asked me, probably more than once: "Why is soul-making dharma so complicated? You've got all this stuff going on, all these words." It's a good question, and I'll offer a few reflections in response.

Partly, it's because supporting and justifying what stands other than our culture's dominant, taken-for-granted, habitual default views requires a complex movement. It's difficult to do that kind of work. Owen Barfield offers a helpful metaphor: the movements a hand makes when you untie a shoelace

are actually very complicated movements, but the resulting state is relatively simple when the two sides are untied. That state is simpler than the knot itself.

It may be that untying—if you like, recognizing, exposing, untying—a lot of the deeply ingrained assumptions, perspectives, conclusions, and views we typically hold because we live in this culture at this time and have been saturated in Buddha Dharma, may actually require quite complicated movements, like untying a shoelace. But then things become more open.

A second reason for the apparent complexity is simply that logos and intellect are part of the soul-making dynamic. They're part of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic. The soul wants and needs complexity, not only simplicity. Yes, the soul wants simplicity at times—it wants a kind of spiritual simplicity, and it also wants simplicity when overwhelmed with dukkha. But it doesn't only and always want simplicity. It also wants complexity, interesting and fecund terrain, materials and challenges.

As we've pointed out in the soul-making dynamics, the soul itself will complicate and complexify, as well as simplify at times. In the movement toward the unfabricated, there's a progressive simplifying—simpler than anything we usually consider simple, simpler even than oneness. But the soul also wants complexity. Working with images and sensing the soul tends to complexify, tends to add more and more faces, aspects, dimensions.

Both movements are part of soul-making—the imaginal complexification and imaginal practice in general are only part of the larger potential range of soul-making, which can involve both movement toward simplification and movement toward complexity. The soul wants both. The soul is hungry—infinitely hungry, infinitely thirsty.

The third possible reason for complexity is that we need a sophisticated and robust philosophical framework—conceptual framework, ontology, epistemology, psychology—because much of what we're discussing will be quite alien and perhaps even shocking to many people who hear it, many dharma practitioners who hear it. This work has received and will receive criticism, ridicule, dismissal from some people who are very influenced by or attached to mainstream views and beliefs.

Therefore, it needs the surety, stability, and robustness of a more sophisticated philosophical, conceptual framework and psychology. And that means more complexity, more detail, more going into things at a deeper level, more drawing on a wider range than usual in our considerations.

We could say more as well. If we're going to acknowledge that stretching of conceptual frameworks—or breaking not just conceptual frameworks but perceptions, heart ranges, and all kinds of experiential ranges—if that kind of breaking of vessels is an inevitable part of either gentle stretching or the shattering and rebuilding of vessels in an expanded way, then shattered again...

If this whole movement or cyclical, spiraling growth of breaking vessels, stretching and breaking vessels, is an inevitable part of soul life and soul growth and soul movement, then we actually need a conceptual

framework and a logos that includes and accommodates the possibility of breaking vessels in its very conception, and that is wide in its possibilities.

So if you just make a dharma that fits, that becomes a vessel, and then something in the soul pushes out and expands through that, the vessel was too small. The vessel has to be wide, and so there's more in it. That more can also be a little overwhelming or complex sounding to some people.

Sometimes people say to me, "Soul-making dharma is what the world needs now. It's exactly what we need in this time of crisis, and it's almost as if it's the one thing that's going to save humanity." I would be much more humble, I think, in an assessment and say it's one possibility. Soul-making dharma is one possible dharma for our times.

It does seem to me to have certain strengths, certain assets. It includes the personal, the particular. It does not just dismiss the self or reify the self, but offers an infinitely expanded range of possible self-expressions, self-theaters, self-explorations. It has, I think, the advantage of not being a realist framework or realist philosophy, which is problematic for all the reasons I've mentioned over recent years and even in this set of talks. It's more congruent with developments in thinking about science and philosophy from recent years.

It allows and promotes, as an integral and inevitable part of its movement, the ability to sense the world with soul, to sense the earth with soul, to sense each other with soul. The reverence and the sense of divinity, dimensionality, beauty, humility, care, eros come with that. So we sense the earth that way. We sense each other that way. We sense ourselves that way. There's a framework, both of ideas and meditative art, that supports that.

Again, you could say that's a really helpful possibility at this time. It allows a potentially much deeper care. It gives ground and ongoing support and range to the kinds of care we have for the earth, for each other, for ourselves, including ways we can think about activism and engagement as part of that. Of course there are other ways, but within the soul-making dharma it seems to offer all that.

It also recognizes the importance of choices about anthropology and cosmology, and recognizes how much those visions or views of what is a human being, what is the cosmos, how is the cosmos, what kind of cosmos do we live in—how that will affect what kind of dharma we have, what kind of sense of tradition, path, and goal. Recognizing the central, basic influence and import of anthropology and cosmology on the vision of the dharma, the sense, the scope, the version of dharma and awakening. Recognizing that and actually accommodating all that.

We don't have to insist on this kind of anthropology or that kind of cosmology. Actually, we can accommodate more coherently, more integrally, all these different views. We understand where they come from. There's a soul need for this or that view, and it will spawn this or that direction, this or that sense of the path, this or that sense of the goal. Rather than assuming that we're all talking about the same

thing just because we're using vocabulary in unclear and not very well-defined ways, we recognize, acknowledge, accommodate and explore the diversity in a larger range of whole conceptions of the dharma. So all that can fit in too.

But in response to those people—actually they're not that many—who are attracted to soul-making dharma teachings but struggle a little because it's too much, too complex, there are too many possibilities for practice, too many new words and ideas: I have to say that some of it, I don't know if I would have put it out there at such a rate over the last four years were it not for my health situation and having obviously a very difficult prognosis and the possibility of dying at any time. It felt important to me to get the material out. I didn't want to feel like I died without trying to put that out there.

There's no need to digest it all at once. Hopefully these teachings are there for a while and you can return to them and pace yourself.

One extreme reaction would be, "I need to eat all this now, I need to digest it and understand it right now," and kind of over-consume or consume at a pace that not just your mind, but also your heart and your soul and your life and your relationships cannot accommodate.

Another extreme would be just to throw it all out because one is maybe attached to simplicity, for example.

But a middle way would be to take your time. Again, it's so much a matter of responsiveness, attunement, care, listening, attentive calibration of your soul and your soul's needs—how's it landing, how's it going, how is the assimilation going.

Culturally, I would say we need at this point other options rather than just the dichotomy, the split between rampant consumerism and greed and craving on the one hand, and an over-simplistic view of desire on the other—that desire, unless it's desire for compassion and liberation from suffering, is basically bad and not trustworthy. That whole third possibility or middle ground, a more complex, more nuanced exploration of eros, of desire and psychology and the soul aspects and dimensions and considerations of that—that's also necessary. So that's in the mix for some of you who are wondering.

Okay, let's stop there.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.