Emptiness and Ways of Looking

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 2:09:52

Welcome everyone.

What I would like to try to do in this short series of talks is perhaps extend some of the lines of inquiry, some of the themes and threads from one of the recent series, *The Four Circles for Parables of Stone and Light*, and the themes certainly of ethics. I would like to extend and explore that area, that whole domain, as well as opening up some more possibilities for imaginal practice or what imaginal practice soul-making might make possible for us as practices. Some other questions and reflections on ontology and epistemology, and also on tradition and how we think of path and goal and awakening.

I think I want to start—and it makes sense to start—talking about ontology. Questions and explorations of ontology, the theme of ontology, we've woven throughout these talks, but I want to start a little bit with that.

Ontology is, to say what it is, to define it very briefly—actually best for our purposes, defined as the views and beliefs we have about what is real and what is not real, and what kinds of reality or what kinds of beings, what kinds of being different things have. So a dream has a different kind of reality than what we perceive in waking consciousness, we tend to assume. That's an ontology, it's an ontological view right there. The views and beliefs about what is real, what is not real, what kind of reality and being different things have.

Usually ontology is a word used in a very philosophical context—philosophical systems and sophisticated philosophical analysis. I mean to include all that, but the reason I'm defining it as views and beliefs is partly because, as I want to emphasize again and again, we're always with an ontology. Whether we philosophize or not, whether we read those kinds of books, whether we think in a certain way or wonder in a certain way about what's real or not real, we always have views and beliefs and conceptual frameworks, conscious or unconscious, operating. The words "view" and "belief" give much more sense of the immediacy and inevitability of ontology in our lives and in our practice, in our experience.

Particularly what I want to focus on today is emptiness and the ways of looking approach.

The ways of looking approach to emptiness—which is, if you like, the bulk of what *Seeing That Frees* is devoted to—is quite unusual as an approach to emptiness and certainly as an approach to Dharma. The whole ways of looking approach to Dharma is quite unusual, but it's also unusual as an approach to emptiness.

What I've come to understand is that it's quite easy or quite possible—actually quite easy and relatively

common—for it to be not quite understood in the correct way. People bring to that paradigm, the ways of looking approach, ideas, beliefs, formulations and frameworks that they've encountered elsewhere, read or heard—even within other Buddha Dharma contexts, of course. They bring all that to hearing or reading about the ways of looking approach to emptiness, and some of that other material comes in so that what they hear or read about the ways of looking approach is actually a little bit twisted or shaped or shaved to conform to the ideas that they already have. This is a very normal human occurrence and human propensity, something we need to be aware of and take care of in whatever it is we're talking about or trying to explain or trying to understand.

So the ways of looking approach—I've gone into this elsewhere in great detail and recently in the online seminars—has two key themes.

One is ways of looking. I'm not going to go into this now in detail, I'm just mentioning it. There are ways of looking, that we as human beings can look at things in different ways, that we have a range there, a possibility of flexibility there, a possibility of extending that range. Ways of looking mean the whole—in any moment, how are we relating to something? What ideas, conceptions, assumptions, beliefs, reactions, tendencies, likes, dislikes, propensities, emphases, kinds of attention or areas of attention—all of that together makes up the way of looking in any moment. We have the possibility as human beings to explore that consciously and really, as I said, extend that range, play with it, discover new ways of looking, develop them.

So one concept is ways of looking.

The second concept is fabrication. One realizes that different ways of looking have different amounts and kinds and levels of what we call clinging wrapped up in them. Clinging is a word that I use very elastically, meaning obviously what it tends to mean to most people—something very gross, really gripping onto something, not wanting to let go, in a very obvious or even dramatic way—all the way down to something really, really subtle.

Different ways of looking have different amounts, kinds, levels of clinging to them. That clinging turns out to be extremely important in determining what is fabricated in perception through the way of looking. In other words, a way of looking shapes, forms, fabricates what we then perceive. Look at something in this way, and that means I have that whole relationship with it. I see it, perceive it, sense it differently than when I look at it in another way.

One of the key constituents there of the way of looking is the clinging, because dependent on the clinging, the degree of fabrication—not just of how much suffering there is, fabrication of suffering, which of course is a key emphasis and inquiry in Buddhist practice, not just the fabrication of suffering, but also the fabrication of self, other, world, time, space, the whole show, the whole magic show of perception—is dependent on the kinds, amounts, and levels of clinging involved.

And so really what the ways of looking approach is, is taking those two ideas—ways of looking and fabrication, maybe a third idea, clinging, as we just said—and exploring what that is and what it involves at different levels, what might it involve. And just exploring that and seeing what's possible. What can I understand about fabrication here? How can I extend and develop my ways of looking? What does clinging involve at different levels? And through that, understanding something about the fabricated nature of things, of all things, all phenomena, all experience, all appearances.

This is a very deep, beautiful exploration. And then at a certain point, going even beyond the notion of fabrication, when one sees that time is empty and fabrication is empty, and that opens up a whole other level of the inquiry into emptiness.

So, very brief summary. I've explained that before. I'm not going to go into it in any more detail. But I want to pick up on a few of the possible ways it might be misunderstood or incompletely understood. Or we could say just fill out the understanding, hopefully make certain things a bit more clear, if that's possible.

Sometimes it has happened quite a few times that someone has been quite excited about the whole ways of looking approach and exploring it and found it very valuable. But then they say something or write something that makes it clear that they haven't really understood the sort of radicality of it or the fundamentality of it or just how pervasive it is, how pervasively it applies as an idea.

What can be quite common is for someone to say, "I play with my ways of looking, I practice that way," or even if they're a teacher, "I teach ways of looking. But then I tell people, perhaps at the end of the class or the end of the course or whatever it is, now you can rest from ways of looking." Or, "I do that, but then I just like to—I do that in my practice. I play with different ways of looking. I explore it. It's exciting. It's wonderful. But then I like to just be. I just like to rest from any way of looking."

If someone says something like that, it really means they haven't understood that it's impossible to have a moment of consciousness, a moment of perceiving anything, of experiencing anything, a moment of anything appearing without there being a way of looking. We cannot rest from a way of looking. Actually, not even the unfabricated, not even cessation of perception and feeling is really technically a rest from a way of looking. Anything we see, sense, anything we sense at all, anything we experience at all is always experienced through a way of looking.

Now, of course, we may or may not realize that. We may or may not be conscious of what the way of looking is at any time. We may or may not be deliberately playing with the way of looking, but there is always a way of looking. So it's not possible to let go of way of looking.

This isn't just a little pernickety sort of point, because if one doesn't understand that, one actually has undermined the whole structure of the ways of looking approach. It can no longer function in a profoundly and widely liberating way. If one has just converted the phrase "ways of looking" to "ways of

practicing," and there's this kind of way of practicing, or this practice and that practice—there's all these practices, which one might find all very powerful, very helpful. But then there's a time where I'm just resting from all that.

And that time of resting from all that assumes, in this kind of not-quite understanding of the approach, that time assumes that there's a possibility of not having a way of looking at any moment. And that has great implications for our understanding of the nature of perception, of fabrication, of reality, of emptiness. It limits it hugely.

So that's one thing that's very, very important.

A second thing—a minor thing, I actually mentioned it the other day in a talk, but I'll say it here as well. Although it's not possible to rest from a way of looking in any moment of consciousness, it is possible, however, to rest from deliberately practicing a way of looking. So I might be practicing a certain way of looking, whatever it is, and then I might decide to rest from that. Or I might move from that way of looking, that deliberate way of looking, to practice another way of looking.

The important thing is that I cannot rest completely from ways of looking, but also that it's actually important to move between ways of looking and pay attention to what happens when I move between ways of looking—whether I just rest from any deliberate way of looking and then I just fall back into a kind of default mode of way of looking, or whether I switch from one deliberate way of looking to another way of looking. It's actually important to see the effects, the changes brought to perception by changing ways of looking, either to the default one or to another deliberate one.

Through the contrast between what I perceive, what I experience, between this way of looking and the other way of looking—the point I was making the other day in a talk was this way of practicing insight meditation based on ways of looking is not so dependent on keeping the continuity going. Not "eighteen, maybe twenty hours a day of continuous mindfulness" and through that the mindfulness accumulates a kind of intensity and pervasiveness which allows it to see reality as it is or peers through illusion to see reality.

Here we actually need to rest from ways of looking at times, from deliberate ways of looking—excuse me—or change them in order to see the contrast. Because it's the contrast, it's seeing the contrast, the differences wrought in perception by different ways of looking that bring me the insights.

Connected to that, or a modification of that, sometimes you hear or read someone, maybe not using the language of ways of looking, maybe using the language of lenses—the lens of anattā, seeing things as not me, not mine, or the lens of impermanence. And they're using that kind of flexibility of ways of looking with a slightly different language. But then they drop back into talking about being with what is, or the way things really are. And what they mean—and it's clear that what they mean by the way things really are—is not emptiness.

They don't mean emptiness. They don't mean the emptiness of any real way things are. They don't mean that the way things really are is that they're not any real way. As if all these lenses—the couple or two or three lenses that they've sort of described and practiced with—are kind of superficial levels, above a level where it's possible to be with what is, supposedly, and the way things really are. As if there's another mode of being that is not a lens, or as if there's a particular lens that is the lens that reveals the way things really are—that's bare attention, which is a conceptually-free sort of vividness of reality.

There's a similar kind of misunderstanding here, a similar kind of truncating of the whole possibility of deepening insight, a similar kind of roadblock in the road of deeper insight. Because one has assumed there's a "what is." One has assumed an end of fabrication somewhere that's not the end of fabrication. There's assumed a lens that will show me how things really are—a privileged lens, if one is using that language, a privileged way of looking. Not understanding that one can possibly travel the road of emptiness, exploring emptiness, beyond any notion of what is or the way things really are.

There is no independent reality, independent of a way of looking, of a lens. So we are just left with lenses, ways of looking. This too betrays a kind of similarly limited understanding or even a misunderstanding—a limited use of this approach. But it was really significant. Very, very significant.

Another version of this sort of thing, this sort of misunderstanding—a very limited understanding and a very problematic understanding—happens when someone talks about ways of looking, emptiness, no real way things are, just ways of looking, and then says something like, "All there really is is a flux or a flow out of which the way of looking shapes this or that perception or appearance. But all there really is, is a flux or flow." They don't actually explain a flux or flow of what, but the problem really is in that "all there really is, is a flow, a flux of something or other." And a flux, a flow is a process, something that happens in time.

So again, there is something that's assumed to be a reality independent of a way of looking—this basic flux or flow and time, in which flux or flow must happen. Flux or flow must happen in time. And it's out of that basic reality that the way of looking then shapes this or that more familiar objects of experience that we know. But again, it's limiting, it's truncating the process of insight, truncating and limiting the possible depth of insight.

Time is also empty. Time arises through ways of looking. Take away the clinging, enough. Take away the avijjā, enough. Time is not there. Time does not get fabricated.

So there's a real danger there again, that practicing ways of looking with such an understanding, harboring in the background this "all there really is, is a flux or flow of whatever"—practicing ways of looking that way will not lead to an opening to the actual unfabricated, because it's staying entrenched in and clinging to a notion of time as something basically existing, really existing. It may even limit the amount of unfabricating that can happen with such a view in the background. Even if it's not in the foreground, even if it's not clearly articulated, maybe the practicing under the umbrella of such a view,

having that view in the background, actually brings pretty limited unfabricating through practice.

So very significant, quite dangerous in a way, in terms of the way they will really confine our openings, our understandings—really our sense of what emptiness is, and of how far practicing it can go, but really of what emptiness is, and thus of what reality is. So that's a couple of things that are really important.

The second thing is a bit more subtle, but sometimes people when they're talking about their insight practice or reporting their insight practice to me—and perhaps they've come from another tradition—they might use the language of "drilling down through illusion" or of "seeing through self." For example, "I see through self" or "I see through a certain manifestation of the meditator ego" or something.

And that language of "seeing through" is very different than the language implied by a ways of looking approach, which is more "seeing as." So, for example, when I practice anattā, a way of looking, when I practice the anattā view, I'm seeing as: this phenomenon, this experience, this thing is not me, not mine. I'm seeing it as not me, not mine, rather than as me or mine. I'm not seeing through it.

The important thing here is that "seeing through"—the phrase "seeing through," the idea to see through something, to me—has certain implications and assumptions wrapped up in it, as does the phrase "drill down." It has certain implications and assumptions, including an implicit realism. I'm seeing through, I'm seeing through the illusion, seeing through this veil to something else, which is the reality that is veiled.

And that sounds—again, it might sound persnickety, but that's actually fundamentally different in terms of the presupposition of what we are doing and how we are approaching understanding emptiness, how we are approaching this inquiry and exploration into emptiness. It's fundamentally different than the language of "seeing as."

"Seeing through," as I said, has certain implications and a certain kind of realism, a certain assumed reality implicit in it, as does the phrase "drill down." "Seeing as," to me, just implies that there are a range of ways of looking whose effects on perception interest me, and whose effects on perception, particularly regarding fabrication and dependent arising and the implicit emptiness of all that, that interests me. I can see it as this—this pain, this physical thing, this phenomenon. I can see it as this, I can see it as that. I can look in this way, I can look in that way. And that's different than seeing through.

Similarly, the language can be quite similar, and again, this is something I mentioned the other day, but it bears repeating. That word "fabrication" wasn't so popular a number of years ago, and I'm aware that some people have picked up that word now, or re-picked it up—perhaps they used it ages ago. Because it's a Pali word and it's a good translation of the word *sankāra* or *sankhata* as fabricated, people thinking about Dharma or teaching Dharma or reflecting on their own practice will very commonly agree it's an important concept. After all, the Buddha uses it. It's right there in the Wheel of Dependent Origination. It's right there regularly in the Pali Canon.

And they think of fabrication as an important concept. Seeing through the fabricated is important. For

instance, one very common idea would be that what's fabricated is *papañca*—in the common understanding, proliferation, making a fuss, getting in a tizzy over something, catastrophizing, blowing things up out of all proportion. That's all fabrication. And when we let go of that through mindfulness and bare attention and equanimity, we're actually not fabricating. We are in contact with the unfabricated.

So mindfulness, bare attention, equanimity—these are ways of looking, modes of looking that reveal the unfabricated, just things as they are.

A person might, at the same time, be interested in the concept of fabrication, agree it's an important concept, and whether they use the word "unfabricated" or not, they might implicitly agree there is an unfabricated perception that we can be in contact with, that can be revealed to us. But they have no interest in the mystical depth of the unfabricated as I would understand it—as something beyond any sense of subject, object, space, time, awareness, beyond all phenomena. They have no interest in that kind of deep, mystical unfabricated, or it feels irrelevant to life as we know it, or it's only for some people who are kind of into that.

But holding all those views together would in a strange way be making a kind of arbitrary and artificial distinction between everyday life, or life itself, and what is mystical. Because this concept of fabrication, or rather fabricating, the possibility of fabricating, is actually one strand—there's one strand of fabricating in the ways of looking approach that I would like to support and make clearer.

We're not actually presupposing what the end of fabrication is. I'm not deciding in advance: fabrication stops at a kind of bare, pristine reality of things appearing to me, or it stops at the kind of view that most people would agree on when they're not in *papañca* or not in a tizzy. *Papañca* is a Pali word actually used at many different levels. It's come to be used really at a much more gross level. So that's just one end of the spectrum of fabricating—*papañca* is very gross fabricating.

But if we follow this idea of clinging deeper and deeper and keep the idea, just withhold any presupposition or any quick deciding on where fabrication ends—so fabrication itself is an open concept—let's find out through exploring ways of looking, through getting more skilled at letting go of subtler and subtler and deeper and more refined levels of clinging. Let's just see where this process of fabrication stops and where the unfabricated is.

It's actually just one spectrum. And to me, it goes all the way from *papañca* through everyday normal perception, through quieter, more pristine awareness of that, and then through a whole series of fading. All this is one spectrum, and that series of fading goes all the way down to the fading, the unfabricating of any sense of subject, any sense of object, any sense of space or time or consciousness or anything like that.

So if it's one spectrum, one inquiry into fabrication and how we can let go of fabrication, why has a person drawn the line where they have? They need to somehow justify that. If you draw the line at just what appears when we agree with most of the other people on the planet about what is real, or what appears

when things look really shiny and clear, as they will with a kind of bright mindfulness—it's just a point on that spectrum of non-fabricating. So where exactly do you draw the line, and why exactly have you drawn the line there?

This principle of fabrication, clinging and fading—it's one principle, and it's the same principle that a person is drawing on when they say fabrication is an important concept, and *papañca* is what's fabricated, and we want to unfabricate that, get rid of that, so we can be with what's unfabricated. It's the same principle, but it's one spectrum continuing much, much deeper than that.

It's only presuppositions—essentially unquestioned reality assumptions—that one is dragging in to what's really, as I said, one spectrum and therefore a coherent system, coherent principle: fabrication, clinging and fading. It's one system, a coherent system. And then one is dividing that spectrum either arbitrarily or just in line with one's presuppositions, dividing what was coherent and undivided, a continuous spectrum, and in some way by dividing it, actually making it incoherent.

Now one can do that, of course one can, but what's the justification? It seems to me one would need a pretty strong, philosophically worked out justification if you're going to do that—to make something that was coherent incoherent.

And similarly, we encounter these minor misunderstandings, a little bit related to something we said earlier today. Sometimes someone reports to me, "I'm trying to get rid of the usual relentless sense of self." And that's actually how they're approaching their meditative practice. Again, they might have heard some teachings or picked up a book and have somehow twisted or distorted the intention—very understandably—toward trying to get rid, even momentarily, of the usual relentless sense of self. "I'm trying to unfabricate something, I'm trying to get rid of something."

That intention, to try to get rid—even if it's just for a moment, to have a moment's taste free of the usual relentless sense of self—may be coming either from an idea that's being dragged in about the reality of no-self. It's a very common understanding to drag in, to understand what we're doing in emptiness explorations as "we want to see that what's real is that there is no self." And then one's taking that idea—wherever one has heard it or read it or misunderstood it—and bringing that in, so then "I'm trying to get rid of this usual sense of self."

So maybe one drags in an idea, a habitual idea, a common idea, that the reality is that there is no self. That's the ontological truth of things—that the self has no reality, or that what is real is no-self. So one may be coming from an idea, or it may be coming from an aversion, or even a neurosis, a sort of aversion to oneself and the sense of self, or the kinds of ways that the self arises.

This is really not helpful. Aversion will certainly not help in the whole investigation. If aversion is there unconsciously, it won't help in the investigation of ways of looking at fabrication and emptiness. And if it's there driving things, it will tend to actually just fabricate more. But also it's not helpful because the

understanding is wrong. One has dragged in another understanding, another assumption about reality and truth that is different than the assumptions that ground the ways of looking approach into emptiness.

Some of this will be obvious for some of you, and some will seem not obvious at all and a bit like hair-splitting, but actually it's really, really important. And you will see it in the fruits. Because if these sort of basic grounding ideas are not correct or they're limited, they will be limiting. And what they deliver in terms of the way the whole process—meditation exploration—opens up, and what it delivers and the degree of unfabricating it delivers and the degree of understanding emptiness that it delivers, that will all be limited because some kind of basic assumptions are getting in the way or distorting things or limiting things.

So when we talk about ways of looking, what are we talking about? We're talking about the whole collection or weave, as I said, of what's involved in the relationship with anything that one's experiencing in any moment. So the tendency to grasp or hold on or push away to whatever degree—clinging in that obvious sense—the appropriation of self, the assumptions about its reality, all kinds of other assumptions, the ideas, the conceptual frameworks, the belief in time—all that is woven into the way of looking.

When we practice ways of looking, what we're really doing is taking certain elements of that whole collection of what's in a way of looking at any moment, just focusing on certain elements and changing them. So for example, the one we used earlier was anatta: not me, not mine. The habitual way of looking—without thinking about it, without it being a conscious action in the mind, or something we can even often realize is going on, certainly without it being verbal—is "me, mine, me, mine" to this experience, that experience, this object, whatever. And what we're doing when we practice the anatta way of looking is we're just changing that, changing that to "not me, not mine."

And this "not me, not mine" is something that's very, very lightly held in the way of looking, or say inserted into the way of looking. Actually, we're removing the usual "me-mine," and very, very lightly and delicately it's there in the way of looking.

Ways of looking, as we practice them, have subtexts. So when we say "empty," for example, as a way of looking, we don't really say it. We might say it just as a whisper in the mind, or we look at something and look at it as empty. That's practicing a way of looking. But what that means—we could write an essay on it, or a book even. What does it mean? We're not going through all that every time, but it has to be implicitly woven into the way of looking when we look at things as empty. So the subtext, if you like—the sometimes jokingly called "small print" of a way of looking—is often very complex, and it has to be held very, very lightly. It's implicit there in the way of looking.

If we return to the anatta way of looking, I'll focus on something that was interesting. I was talking to someone the other day, so this just serves as a good example. They had moved on from practicing the anatta way of looking with, for example, body sensations and thoughts and mindstates and things like that. They had actually moved on to what's usually more difficult, to a stage of anatta practice where one's

regarding awareness itself, the consciousness itself as anatta, as not me, not mine.

And in the course of the conversation, it became clear that the subtext here is a little more complex. So what's involved here? This person was aware that it meant there's no doing of awareness. So for them, what the anatta of awareness, what was...

The only thing that was in their anatta way of looking when they turned it on awareness was that there's no doing of awareness, which actually means there's no agency. So they needed to have that language slightly altered. It's not that there's no doing—it's that there's no one doing it. It's not that there's no effort and no doing, because when one really begins to understand at a very deep level and practice at a deep level, you see that any moment of experience, any moment of appearance and perception, or any arising of any phenomenon at all, involves doing on the part of the subject. It's not non-doing. It's the fact that we could say there's no agent, there's no agency. It's not me doing. The effort and the doing that go with awareness are not me, not mine.

So that was one thing he needed expanding. Because what he was finding was, unlike when he did anatta practice—anatta way of looking—on other phenomena, where it worked quite well with the fading and the release of dukkha, when he was trying to do the anatta awareness, it seemed to be quite limited. So we were finding out why. It's because there wasn't enough in his way of looking when he looked at awareness and said anatta—when he looked at it with the view anatta, rather.

So it's not that there's no doing of awareness; it's that there's no agency. That was one thing. But he was also missing two other factors. One is that there's no possession of awareness. It's not mine. So there's no entity of self that owns this awareness, of which the awareness makes up a part of this self, this entity. And there's also, thirdly, no identification with awareness. The awareness, the consciousness, is not me.

So we have no possession, no identification, and no agency. If you want a little acronym—if this is helpful—you can think there's no P-I-A: no possession, no identification, no agency. That understanding is tacitly wrapped up and present in the subtext of just attending to the sense of awareness and looking at it as anatta.

So even there, even before we get on to how it's empty in itself or empty-empty, even there with the anatta of awareness, what's involved in the subtext is actually fairly complex. And it needs to be woven in and understood as part of the way of looking. The way of looking needs to have that understanding in it.

This is not just about the details there, but the general principle is very important. This business with ways of looking is really—we're not talking about something abstract, we're talking about practice, and it's really an art, and in some cases a very subtle and delicate art and skill that we need to develop. It's not just going to happen like that, and it's certainly not abstract.

Do you know for yourself firsthand the effect of sensing something through the lens of a way of looking where you're regarding it as empty, compared to what happens when you're sensing something through a

way of looking that just automatically, as a default, regards it as real, as inherently existing? These two have massively different effects on perception. When you're really regarding something through a lens that really understands its emptiness, there's profound fading that happens. Of course, we move in the world and only very little fading happens when we're essentially practicing unconsciously and automatically and by habit, the view that comes out of what the Buddha would call avijjā—ignorance, delusion—which assumes the reality, the inherent existence of phenomena.

So we're not talking about something abstract here when we talk about ontology and ways of looking and emptiness. We're really talking about practices which are real arts to develop.

If one just tries it, it's unlikely that it will have any effect to just regard things as empty or not real, unless it really means something—unless I'm very clear what it means and I have ground or reason. So if I just regard something as empty while I'm paying attention to it, unless that word "empty" really means something, and unless I have really good grounds or reasons to believe that it's empty based on my experience, based on something—an understanding, an insight I've really consolidated through practice—it won't do anything. It's just a word. You might as well say "octopus" or something.

So these ways of looking need to be understood by us. What does it mean? What's involved? What's the subtext in that way of looking? And we need to have confidence in that subtext, in what it means. I have confidence. There's a real grounding in my being. There's a real reason why I can sense something, pay attention to something, and at the same time as I'm paying attention to it, regard it as empty. That has to be based on a clear understanding and a solid, consolidated foundation of understanding through experience.

I know it's empty. I know why it's empty. I know why I think it's empty - why I know it's empty.

Secondly, and related to what I said earlier, we're not talking about big, chunky, gross philosophical ramblings rumbling through the mind. We're not talking about thinking about things. We're talking about a way of looking. These understandings, these convictions, these clarities are very subtly woven into the way of looking, so that the way of looking itself is very delicate, very agile. We're actually sensing things that way. We're not busy thinking about some philosophy.

That ability to convert clear, essentially clear philosophical understanding based on experience into a very delicate and agile and subtle way of looking - a way of sensing something in any of the six senses - takes practice to develop, usually almost always.

But I would say, I wonder if there's anything in life, anything in existence, anything that we could spend our time developing in the interval between birth and death - is there anything more worth it than developing ways of looking? If I want the fullest, deepest, widest liberation, I think that comes through liberating ways of looking: the liberation of ways of looking, the development of ways of looking, of a range of ways of looking. Because that will open up this whole territory of emptiness.

We could say, in the end, what liberation is - as well as the liberation of suffering - is the liberation of ways of looking. In other words, ways of looking become available to us. We're not imprisoned. We're not constrained. There's liberation from the prison of only certain fixed ways of looking at things, only certain fixed relationships with the world and perceptions of self, other, world, time. So full liberation is a liberation of ways of looking - liberation into accessibility of ways of looking. And of course, that enables more liberation from suffering.

But even more, if I want the fullest, deepest, widest love - not just liberation, but if I want the fullest, deepest, widest love - then if I follow that love, if I follow the eros, if I follow the metta, and I pay attention to the ways of looking, it naturally opens. And then I practice those ways of looking. What that does is it increases the metta, increases the eros. And because of that, the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, the soul-making dynamic, is ignited further, galvanized further, opens further.

There's more eros, but more psyche and logos. I'm trying to say that as image. There's more sense of things. The sense of things opens up. They show us more aspects. We can see sense levels of them, other perceptions of them - psyche. And logos - the whole idea, the whole conception of things, the perception, the conception. Psyche and logos: the perception, conception of things opens up. And in that opening up of psyche and logos, of perception and conception, idea of things, that can stimulate the eros even more. There's more ways of looking opened up. The whole thing opens up through following the ways of looking that we find are there when there is eros, and when there is metta or karuṇā. And then developing those ways, looking at what opens up further, further, further, further.

We've explained this many times in the Ecology of Love series of talks - how the whole eros-psyche-logos dynamic works, how the soul-making dynamic works in the opening up of love, basically, to whole other levels, whole other domains, whole other spread, range.

So if we want the fullest, deepest, widest liberation: ways of looking. If we want the fullest, deepest, widest love: ways of looking. If we want also the fullest, deepest, widest meaningfulness and beauty in our existence, in our life - the sense of meaningfulness and beauty - if we want that to be the fullest, the richest, the deepest, the widest, again, trusting that perception of meaningfulness and beauty enough to discern what are the ways of looking that are there when those senses are around of meaningfulness and beauty. And there will be many. And then practicing them. And what that does again is open up further the sense of soul-making. Meaningfulness and beauty are integral to soul-making.

And that will open up further the sense of beauty, and suggest, open up more ways of looking. This is all just part, again, of how the soul-making dynamic works.

It's a general principle here. If we want something—whether it's to understand emptiness, whether it's liberation, whether it's love, whether it's soul-making—we need to practice ways of looking that lead to that. Practice ways of looking in ways that lead to understanding emptiness, to a sense of liberation, to love, to a sense of soul-making.

And then what those ways of looking deliver—understanding emptiness, liberation, love or soul-making—those deliverances will also open us to more ways of looking or deliver to us a greater range of ways of looking. We practice ways of looking as powerful means to open to what it is that we want, whatever that is, what we want deeply: emptiness understanding, liberation, love, soul-making dynamic, soul-making generally.

And then we let that opening that the ways of looking have delivered—we let that, or it will, open up more ways of looking. That's how the soul-making dynamic works. It's how liberation works. It's how an understanding of emptiness works. Practice ways of looking to get X, and then let X deliver to us, suggest to us, open for us even more ways of looking.

Sometimes I think there's nothing more worthwhile in life than developing the whole notion and idea of ways of looking.

As I said, let me just revisit this point. It's quite easy to hear about the ways of looking approach and hear about emptiness and how they relate, and jump to certain conclusions before we've practiced it, or even start—get off on the wrong foot in our understanding. So a few things here, particularly with regard to ethics.

Someone might hear the teachings about emptiness and start, so to speak, at the end, as if they're being asked to believe something—which is that everything, all things are empty. They might hear that or read it: all things are absolutely empty. And then they've forgotten about the whole ways of looking thing and they just interpret as if they're being asked to believe something, that all things are empty. Whereas that's a conclusion.

So in practice, we don't start by believing anything like that. We don't start with the conclusion, because someone who would start in such a way would understandably have the concern: but then I wouldn't care, or nothing would matter, and what about ethics and that sort of thing if everything's empty? They're trying to understand it from their usual conventional point of view without really understanding it, which can only really come about through practice.

Rather, we start with these two notions that I mentioned before. Start with the possibility that there is the possibility of a range of ways of looking—that's part of what it is to have a human mind and heart, a human citta. And secondly, that we explore the fabrication of suffering, of self, and other through different ways of looking.

And that exploration, as I said, is an open-ended, experiential, and experimental inquiry, without pre-deciding the limit of fabrication, or without pre-deciding that fabrication just ends here—thank you very much, it doesn't go down to all that deep fading business and that mystical stuff—without pre-deciding that. Or nor, without pre-deciding that everything is empty and everything is an illusion. Even though we might be told that may be the conclusion, we don't know what that means yet, and it

would be silly to start with a conclusion that we don't really understand. Let's keep it open and find out.

Just take those two ideas: the possibility of flexibility of ways of looking and the extension of that range, and this idea of fabrication of suffering, self, and other. And then open-ended, experimental, experiential inquiry without pre-deciding either way.

So that should allay, to a certain extent, someone's fears around: well, you're asking me to believe this and that everything is empty, and that, to me, implies that I'm not going to care or nothing matters or ethics won't matter, etc.

But a few more things that it's important to say here. Emptiness ways of looking—in other words, ways of looking that see something or see experience, phenomena, objects, to some level or other as empty—any emptiness ways of looking is just a way of looking which we can pick up and put down. In other words, it's not an ultimate truth. It's not somewhere to park your way of looking as if we could forever stay in a certain way of looking. The whole thing is flexible and it needs to keep a range and flexibility. We pick up and put down emptiness ways of looking.

So sometimes we want to put down emptiness ways of looking and pick up a rarefied view of self, of other, of suffering, of this or that, of some ethical situation, even of something like responsibility in an ethical misdemeanor.

So how do we decide what we pick up and put down in terms of a way of looking? Well, we're responsive to what's needed. And in Buddha Dharma, we base our choice of way of looking in any moment on what reduces suffering. In soul-making Dharma, our choice is based on what opens up the soul-making. Suffering, if we're basing it on the reduction of suffering, is of self, of other, and world.

But emptiness ways of looking are things we pick up and put down. They're not—now I'm going to all the time be in this emptiness ways of looking or this view of the emptiness of all things and I'm sort of stuck there and how will the ethics come in and things like that. So that's the second point, very important.

The third point again relates to the fact that understanding emptiness or exploring emptiness through the ways of looking approach is probably more unusual. And what's more common, perhaps, is that emptiness is equated not with the kind of understanding that comes out of the whole journey through the ways of looking approach, but rather emptiness is equated with either a sort of big empty space in which appear just insubstantial objects without much self or personality, it seems, or much doing—and that's often someone's understanding of emptiness.

Or a second understanding can be: emptiness kind of refers to just a sort of machine-like process of the aggregates, the five aggregates of being.

Body, vedana, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. What's really empty is the self itself. Here emptiness means impermanence—impermanent—because there is just the impermanent

moment-to-moment arising and passing of that process of aggregates in time, a bit like a machine. And that's what emptiness means to some people, or that's a common view.

So either it's a big empty space of insubstantiality—not much self, not much doing it seems—or it's this kind of emptiness of the self which actually relates to the impermanent nature of the aggregates as a process in time. But neither of those two understandings or views of emptiness has any obvious connection with dependent arising, nor does it easily bring out the connection with dependent arising and also with karma, which are two sides of the same thing—dependent arising and karma. So those two views of emptiness make the connection not obvious.

However, one of the reasons one might want to explore emptiness through the ways of looking and fabrication paradigm is that if we start with those notions—ways of looking and fabrication—then dependent arising is woven in always, right from the beginning. That's totally what we're exploring, what we're paying attention to. Dependent on this way of looking, dependent on this mind-state-attitude relationship that's all woven into the way of looking, dependent on this way of looking, then suffering and self and other and world arise and appear a lot, a little, or like this or like that, dependent on the way of looking. Dependent arising is woven into it.

So even something like generosity becomes a way of looking. When I'm generous, the self, other, world arise a certain way. I feel myself a certain way. If I really practice generosity, if I really am very generous and open-hearted, then I'll notice something about how self, other, world appear—if I really take it on as an inquiry. And also that suffering gets reduced through generosity in the now, in the giving. I mean, of course, you can have some suffering because you've given so much that you're afraid, etc. But generally speaking, one really explores it over time with wisdom. One sees that basically generosity becomes—we could call it—a way of looking. You see how expansive that term is.

But when there's generosity, I sense things, I sense self, other, world a certain way, and suffering is reduced. When there's the opposite, the absence of generosity—when there's, let's say, stinginess—then self, other, world get fabricated very differently: more separate, more contracted, more hard, more solid, and suffering increases.

So in this way of working with emptiness, the ways of looking approach and fabrication approach to emptiness, then ethics is integrated into emptiness right from the beginning. It's unavoidable. The approach integrates karma into our understanding of emptiness unavoidably. We see it, we know it, we feel it firsthand. And as we go deeper, we see the world is different, dependent on the way of looking.

Those other two understandings of emptiness that I mentioned briefly—the sort of big space of insubstantiality and the sort of moment-to-moment arising and passing of aggregates—it's possible, or rather it's more possible that they can lead to a kind of moral nihilism. One might assume, well, there's no self there, therefore there'll be no selfishness. There's no self in that machine-like process of the aggregates in time—momentary arising and passing—nor is there much self in that big empty space. And

with less self, there's less selfishness.

So one might think, oh, they should help with morality, and maybe they will. But neither actually—is there much of a world there, and the effects of ways of looking and of actions kind of get dissolved and not noticed in that big space or in the kind of microscopic, myopic attention to the momentary arising and passing. And then it might well be that ethics needs supplementation by separate teaching, separate teaching about sila. Because it's not quite clear what these understandings of emptiness have to do with ethics.

This is also the case a lot in the Tibetan tradition, how they emphasize repeatedly the importance of ethics almost as a separate domain than the understanding of emptiness. It's like it gets re-emphasized as if—don't forget about karma. Karma is more important than shunyata, the Dalai Lama would say.

So sometimes either their approach to emptiness is not coming through the ways of looking fabrication dependent arising paradigm—it's coming through an analytical approach where one just analyzes logically to see that things can have no inherent existence—or it's coming through some level of a big space approach to emptiness. And then those two approaches too will need this kind of supplementary teaching on ethics, because it's not at all obvious what the connection is, and there's a danger of nihilism. It's not wrapped up—the way appearances arise dependently, and arise as this or that, as well as suffering, nor the fact of arising, that it arises dependently on the way of looking. No clinging, no arising. No avijja, no arising.

But in the ways of looking fabrication approach—the ways of looking approach to emptiness—there may be no need for extra ethical teaching in terms of basic ethics, because experience through the practice teaches ethics and karma through inquiry into ways of looking, fabrication, dependent arising. It's right there.

I remember interviews really quite some years ago, and someone came in for the interview, and as part of it he said, "Well, you know, this view you have about the non-reality of things and emptiness, that really is challenging." And he was a bit concerned about it, but he couldn't quite make the challenge himself. But he said, "It's just not right, it's not right." Now, I know that he was very concerned about things like climate change. So I can't remember how the conversation panned out because he had never practiced ways of looking, etc.

I don't remember exactly how that conversation unfolded, since he had never practiced ways of looking. But it would have been worth examining among dharma teachers who are the ones who seem less engaged with social justice or environmental issues—the very things he cared about. His concern was that if you hold this notion of the emptiness of things, it becomes dangerous to caring about climate and other urgent matters.

Yet he knew I was deeply concerned with climate issues and quite active in environmental work. Rather

than dismissing the emptiness view, he might have asked a more penetrating question: How is it that you can understand the emptiness of things and still be so dedicated to climate and environmental issues, working so diligently to raise consciousness about them? That would have been far more appropriate.

If we look carefully at who thinks, practices, teaches, and talks in terms of the deepest and most comprehensive emptiness, we find they are often people with deeply engaged practice—their conception and practice of dharma extends naturally to engagement with social justice and ecological issues. Meanwhile, those who hold the most realist views, contrary to this person's easy assumption that non-realist views create problems, often show less engagement when we examine their actual practice.

Even if someone doesn't completely grasp the whole deep and comprehensive emptiness teaching firsthand, if they're drawn to it, it will still guide their philosophy and what they aspire to realize in practice. The comparison reveals something profound.

To put this whole matter more clearly: the coexistence of deep, thorough emptiness view with radical, long-term commitment to engagement should have led him to question his fears and assumptions that emptiness gives rise to moral nihilism.

We might also reflect—and I'll speak more about ethics in future talks—that it's not the non-reification or seeing the emptiness of things that leads to lack of ethical care. That's the common assumption, as this person made. But really, it's reification that leads to harm: reification of self as a center of gravity for acquisition, reification of other, reification of objects we want as real things that will give us something. That's what leads to unethical behavior.

With non-reification of self and other, the impulses to acquire things harmfully actually decrease. This deserves deeper reflection, and I'll return to speak more about ethics later.

It's very easy to misunderstand or only partially grasp this whole understanding of emptiness and the ways of looking approach, or to drag other assumptions into it. Bertrand Russell wrote something I read recently—I'm not sure of the context, though he sounds rather ticked off and judgmental: "A stupid man's report of what a clever man says can never be accurate, because he unconsciously translates what he hears into something he can understand."

I don't know the context, and it does sound judgmental, but the general point is well-taken. As human beings, it's easy for us to read or hear something subtle and sophisticated and simply squeeze it into the box of what we already understand or know. We chop bits off, shave away parts, turn things around, squeeze and change their relationships so they fit into our existing framework of understanding.

This business of emptiness is deep and subtle. Throughout Buddhist history, there's been tremendous care around emptiness teachings, and also around tantric and vajrayana teachings. Great care about who receives them and how they need to be set up. Tantric teachings have parallels, similarities at least, with soul-making dharma teachings.

Do we really need to take care that both the emptiness and the soul-making are not misunderstood, distorted, twisted, only partially understood, or grasped at a superficial level? That we don't get sloppy with all this? I think so. Throughout the history of Buddha-dharma, through millennia until very recently, there's been tremendous care around how and when teachings are given and disseminated.

It's possible for us to be sloppy in our understanding of emptiness. It's subtle, sophisticated, and runs very, very deep. For example, when asked what emptiness means, we might say it means there is no real way anything is. But that fact of emptiness—that there is no real way anything is—does not entail that a thing can be anything. The absence of a real way things are doesn't mean anything can be anything.

Put slightly differently: the fact that there is no way a thing really is does not imply that there is no way it really isn't. It's not simply saying, "Oh, things are empty, therefore anything can be anything," or "a thing can be anything." This is subtle and sophisticated territory.

So I really think it's important not to be sloppy with all this business about emptiness. We're talking about a very refined understanding. And that middle way of emptiness is really a razor's edge—a very fine line between nihilism and realism. You need to take care not to be sloppy.

Some people say—this is not so much sloppiness, but just a little more precision is needed—I've heard several times someone say, "We need to understand emptiness before we practice soul-making dharma, because otherwise we're going to reify the images." A couple of things here.

First of all, not necessarily. I don't think James Hillman was reifying his images. Very much the sense I get from reading him was that he was really interested in that territory of as-if, what we would call neither real nor not real—the imaginal middle way. And I don't think he had any training in emptiness or Buddhist philosophy or anything like that. It's more almost an aesthetic disposition, more an intuitive understanding of what the imaginal involves.

But secondly, and more importantly, the non-reification of images involves more than just seeing that they're empty. It involves the recognition of their different ontological status than the ontological status of conventionally agreed upon objects or material things or emotions.

So emptiness is something that applies to all objects. It applies to, like we said at the beginning, this solid desk—it's empty of inherent existence. But it also applies to the dream your daughter had of a monster chasing her that came out from under her bed, as it applies to an imaginal image in meditation. Emptiness applies to all objects. It's not enough of an ontological assessment here.

What we need to do is understand that an image, an imaginal image, has a different ontological status. It's not just that it's empty. There's a different ontological status than conventionally agreed upon material objects. So that if that lion in the image wants to rip me apart and eat me and devour me, I understand in the meditation that there is a different ontological status than were it a real lion—but they're both empty. So there's something we need to understand a bit more precisely. It's not just the fact of emptiness that

allows us to navigate imaginal practice. Different ontological status of images and conventional objects, but both empty.

When it comes to emptiness practice, and something I've said recently that I want to highlight again, is I think eros is really needed. We really need to be erotically curious about emptiness and the practice. We need to be passionately interested and excited even. You know, the necessity of eros for practice is actually the necessity of eros in life and in helping with all kinds of things—something we should emphasize.

So I think of someone I know, she's probably 85, and she has never trained her mind in meditation, not interested in any of all that. She's 85 and she has some physical dukkha, but a fair amount of mental dukkha in relationship to her physical dukkha and other things. But she has never trained her mind. So her reactivity is going to be more than someone who has trained their mind through mindfulness and meditation. And she's got lots of habits of the citta, habits of the way she relates to things, that are not going to really help, that will actually increase her dukkha.

So you'd think, okay, mindfulness will help her, training in mindfulness will help her, and undoubtedly it will. But I have a question: is it mindfulness that would help her the most? Because this person is also, I would say, not actually deeply interested in anything. And I've known her for quite some years, and I would say that she's never really been deeply interested in anything.

So she's been happy enough in her life, periods of less happy and all that. And now she's getting old. She is old. There's more mental dukkha. But is it the mindfulness that would actually help her most? Because she's also not deeply interested in anything. There's very little, in other words, eros in her life—eros to this deep interest in something that would give her life soulfulness, meaningfulness, beauty, vitality. In that, there'd be an increase in well-being and happiness.

So which is the more important ingredient? The mindfulness or the eros? The eros is really, really important in life.

In relationship to suffering, yes, eros cuts, but without it, a life without eros will inevitably have some form of depression in it.

To get back to what I was saying before, I think emptiness practices need to be fueled by eros, by a kind of erotic curiosity and excitement. They will be much more profoundly and widely helpful and liberating if one is really interested in emptiness, excited and passionate about it, loves it, loves exploring it. Instead of emptiness and emptiness practices just being a set of techniques to reduce suffering—which they can be regarded as: "Look at this this way, practice this way of looking and there will be much less suffering"—but if they're just related to as a set of techniques to reduce suffering and decrease unhelpful cognitive patterns, I don't think we're going to get all the wide, deep, liberating juice out of it.

Actually, we could say that with any practice—mindfulness, metta, generosity, compassion—we need eros

for that practice.

In the Mahayana suttas, I'm pretty sure it's from the different Prajnaparamita suttas but maybe other places as well, they say things like: a bodhisattva only teaches emptiness to those whose hair stands on end when they hear about it. They're so excited. Or they shed tears of joy or being moved, even if they don't understand it. It's only to those people. In other words, emptiness—the teachings of emptiness and the practice of emptiness—are not being set or received in fertile ground if it's coming with, "Oh, I should practice emptiness. My dharma friends are into it, or they say it's the best thing. Emptiness is the best, or emptiness is necessary. You can't be a proper practitioner if you don't practice it, or it's advanced, so my ego gets a certain boost or gratification in practicing that level of teachings."

All that will be a dry soil, an unfertile soil.

Practice of emptiness, practices of emptiness, inquiry into emptiness, exploration of it, needs eros. Absolutely. I think to be really fertile, it's the juice, it's the moisture, the water in the soil that allows it to be fertile. And it's that eros that also will prevent us being sloppy with it. We're not satisfied. The eros wants to go to more refined understanding, a more subtle understanding, a more careful and precise understanding of emptiness. So again, care with the sloppiness.

Care, as well as I said before, in regard to the ethics question, care not to start with a conclusion about emptiness. So someone—I had a question from someone a while ago that ended up on my desk and they were asking about trauma. And they were saying, "Well, in your book *Seeing That Frees*, basically, or the book *Seeing That Frees* is basically saying that trauma is empty, whereas there was another book they were reading and it was basically saying that trauma is real and it's neurologically wired and it's a real physical factor." And then the phrase they used was "the body keeps the score."

So you get these two views. Either it's empty—which was attributed to, "That's what *Seeing That Frees* says, that's what Rob is saying, it's just empty"—or this other view: it's a real thing. It's an absolutely real thing, and it's real because it's neurologically wired. You can't get away from the physical reality of that.

So why not bring a bit more care and openness and subtlety to the investigation here? This is a really, really important investigation. Why not acknowledge some dependence—there must be at least some dependence of the experience of trauma on factors in the present? So here's this traumatic event or series of events, maybe even series over a long time, and just acknowledge that how that arises for me, its effect in the present, how it comes up in the present, depends on factors in the present. It depends whether it's met by love, met by warmth, met by spaciousness, or whether it's met by harshness and judgmentalism and contraction and all kinds of other assumptions and all kinds of things. There's some dependence. We must know. Everyone must agree on that.

The experience of trauma, how I actually experience it in this moment, depends to some extent on factors in the present. And maybe just start with that without assuming either of those other extreme views. "Rob

says trauma is empty," or the extreme view of "it's a real thing, the body keeps the score, it's an absolutely hardwired real thing." That's not what I'm saying, by the way, that one extreme view. It's not what *Seeing That Frees* says or the way it approaches it anyway.

But why not just start with some—acknowledge there's some dependency of the actual experience of trauma on factors in the present? The experience of trauma depends, to some degree, on factors in the present. And then, just start with that, and then keep exploring. Exploring with practice and with ways of looking without presupposing either extreme view.

Or again, presupposing how much or where is the limit of the effect of conditions in the present on trauma. Same principle. Keep it open. Keep it an investigation. Don't jump to either a realist or a nihilist view—what the Buddha called extreme views. The middle way is the middle between extreme views.

What else is trauma after all but an experience? We don't talk about trauma if it's gone completely and there's no experience, it has no effects whatsoever in the present. Trauma is its effects in the present. So that's what we're talking about.

This is really, really important. You're just starting with the idea—a very gentle, open idea. I don't know. They must be somewhat dependent on present factors. This experience of trauma must be somewhat dependent on factors in the present. Let's find out how much. That would be a ways of looking approach. And the way I would teach it is to find out. Find out. Just keep going. If you come to an absolute, that's it, okay. But find out. Because it also might be the case... I'm just pursuing this particular theme around trauma, that other factors are at play here.

So again, rather than argue between two views that are kind of absolute, abstract—abstract by which I mean they're taken as positions by belief rather than experiential inquiry—rather than argue between two views that are extreme with regard to trauma, either that it's an inherently existent, unbudgeable reality of the body and nervous system, on the one hand, or that it's empty on the other hand, it would be much more helpful to start with what should be quite obvious: that traumatic experiences will vary differently and have very different effects dependent on the attitudes, habit patterns of mind, heart, will, soul, and relationality that accompany them.

And those habit patterns might have been already established as habits before the occurrence of the traumatic incidents. This person might already have had, before this traumatic series of incidents, a quite strong tendency to aversion. Might already have entrenched, unfortunately, a habit towards what we might call laziness—a habit towards easily collapsing psychically, in terms of her strength and power and uprightness. Might also unfortunately have a lack of wisdom and a habitual avoidance of challenge, an avoidance of the unpleasant that became inculcated as a habit into the life, into the mind and being. Might have developed in many areas a weak will, and yet in other areas a kind of stubborn will.

All these pre-constituted habits and factors may be part of determining—more than the actual traumatic

incidents themselves—how the trauma and its effects play out in her life over decades. It's not so much the trauma; it's the fact that those traumatic incidents landed in a soil that was already teeming with not-so-helpful ingredients. And they were habitual ingredients. So when the trauma comes up again—which again is already a presupposing notion—when it comes up again, it meets those same unhelpful habits, and it plays out in the soil of those unhelpful habits, and they create a really much more difficult soup.

Which bits the trauma? Which bits the pre-existing habit that was developed? So there's a lot to inquire into, and sometimes we're too quick, too sloppy in saying either our trauma is just empty, don't look at the past, or just giving it some kind of inherent reality without looking carefully enough at conditions. And it's exactly looking at conditions and what we can do with conditions in the present, including insight ways of looking, including bringing other factors in—it's exactly that that's going to help.

So how can I help in the present ends up being the same inquiry as what's inherently existent here. They go together because of the whole ways of looking approach. Because in the ways of looking approach we're interested in what gives rise to more suffering here, what locks suffering into place right now in this moment, and what decreases suffering. So the whole inquiry into ontology and into reality is totally connected with the inquiry into what's helpful with regard to my suffering. Sometimes people again have the idea of emptiness as being something very abstract or not really relevant to their life, but it's really not.

Another thing people sometimes—or it's tempting, again very understandably tempting to do—is to equate the understandings of emptiness with the understandings of quantum physics. So the understanding of emptiness, ways of looking paradigm with the understanding of quantum physics. Again, this is very tempting. There's certainly some really, really interesting parallels, I think, and fruitful parallels. But I think we have to be a little careful here, partly because physics as a discipline can change, and trends in physics can change at any time. What Thomas Kuhn calls paradigms in physics can change at any time, and then change back.

So we have to be a little careful with equating the two and then using quantum physics as a sort of foundation where our understanding of emptiness depends on quantum physics or our belief in emptiness depends on quantum physics. I know I've talked about it in the past and I think it's really interesting, but it's more wanting to use those understandings to really shake up and shake loose and challenge the kind of usual assumptions and beliefs about reality, which often boil down to beliefs about material reality and the way it must exist independent of the observer, in a kind of Cartesian, Newtonian way. And really wanting to expose and shake up those assumptions and beliefs in response to what can often be—and even in the history of the Buddha Dharma, there's a sense of—the outrage at hearing emptiness teachings, the conclusions that a practical expression of emptiness yields.

So Einstein, as many of you might know, was very, very opposed to the whole implications of quantum

physics. This idea that the moon doesn't really exist, or the moon isn't really there until you look at it. It's not there when we aren't looking. That seems to be what quantum mechanics, quantum physics is implying. And in various ways over many years, he tried to expose the flaws in quantum physics. But every time he failed. And at one point he teamed up with two other guys, Podolsky and Rosen, and they came up with a kind of thought experiment that seemed to really undermine the framework of quantum physics and this idea that things might not exist independently of our way of looking, of our observation.

And then, after he died—yes, it must be after he died—a physicist called David Bell came up with a way that one might actually decide whether Einstein, Podolsky, and Rosen were right or whether quantum physics was right. And then I think after David Bell died, a French physicist called Alain Aspect devised an experiment and was actually able to test it. And what it found were two results that are kind of not really arguable with.

One is that in some instances, non-locality is a fact of nature. Two particles are somehow woven together. They can affect each other, or it seems they can affect each other, across massive distances of space instantaneously, faster than the speed of light. In other words, space isn't quite what it seems to be. But the second one, for our purposes—interestingly, that first one is the second one for our purposes—is that quantum particles do only become real, become only this or that when we observe them. So this was a result of this experiment by Alain Aspect. Quantum particles are actually only real when we observe them.

And Einstein was really clinging to his preferred beliefs regarding reality, regarding nature, regarding the cosmos. Again, this is like, how passionate am I about wanting to go deep with these questions? And also the importance of recognizing what is it that I want to be true, which I've talked about a lot before.

Well, so in the—I've said this before, but the Schrödinger wave equation is a complex mathematical equation in abstract mathematical multidimensional space. And in a way, it describes what we will see, or the probability of what we will see when we look in certain ways at subatomic particles. When we look, we see something. And dependent on how we look, we see this or that, a wave or a particle, etc. But the Schrödinger equation kind of depicts, if you like, what exists when we're not observing. But it's not really something we could call real in the sense that it doesn't depict a thing that exists in time. As I said, it's an abstract mathematical equation in multidimensional space. It's as if there's a kind of indefiniteness of matter, an indeterminacy of matter before observation.

So again, there are parallels here to the ways of looking and emptiness understanding that I would like to offer. It's not saying there is the complete non-existence of matter. Matter is a complete illusion. It's just a mental projection. Some spiritual teachings say that. There is no matter. Matter is just purely mind. What the ways of looking and this emptiness approach and other approaches to emptiness stress much more is not that there's nothing there at all, there is no matter, but that it's dependent on the way of looking, that it forms to be anything and what it forms and where it is and all that.

So there's again a parallel between this ways of looking, understanding emptiness and certain quantum physics understandings, for example, the Schrödinger equation. Matter is—again, it's not that anything can arise, because there's no way something is, because the Schrödinger equation is essentially indeterminate, it just gives probabilities, it doesn't then mean that anything can arise. It's not the case that it was an electron in one moment, and then when I looked in the next moment, it was the Hollywood set of Mary Poppins, or a Boris Johnson speech, or the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia, or whatever. It's not the case that anything can come from something.

But matter is indeterminate, indefinite before observation—an object, a phenomenon in experience. It's indeterminate, indefinite. It's the observation, it's the looking, it's the relating to that makes it something.

And dependent on the way of looking in that moment is what we experience. So there are parallels there with quantum physics.

I think in one of those Dharma seminars recently—maybe it was one on ontology, I can't remember—but ontology is basic and unavoidable in life. Again, when we talk about ontology and emptiness, we're not talking about abstract philosophies. We're not talking about something that only is really relevant in microscopic, super-advanced physics or whatever. Ontology—views and beliefs about reality—are basic and completely unavoidable in life.

As I said, you would have a very different response, a different kind of concern, if your daughter reported, when she came down for breakfast in the morning, that there was a monster under her bed in the night and was chasing her. You would have a very different concern if you just thought that's a dream. Maybe some of you would be concerned what it meant about her unconscious and whatever psychological problems she had. But it would be very different from the concern than if you actually thought there was some kind of monster there, or a bear, or a tiger, or a snake, or something. So ontology is just part of our life. In every moment, we're making decisions about what's real, what's not. It's woven into our perception of everything.

That's why I said before, if you really practice and know how to practice the ways of looking and get to the point where you can engage a way of looking that holds something in attention and regards it as empty, and see what a vast, radical difference that makes to the experience of that thing compared to just the normal way of looking where there is the assumption of the reality of that thing. And that assumption of the reality is just normally woven into our experience. There's always an ontology, an ontological conception.

This is part of a larger point about there always being conception. There's always an ontology and an ontological conception woven into the perception of anything. But unless one has experienced holding, in one's way of looking, a different ontological conception, practicing that, practicing with the agility of that, and seeing what it does, one probably doesn't even realize that, or one thinks it's something one doesn't realize that ontology is woven into perception. But it's inevitable, and it brings with it, of course, a

hierarchy of value judgments.

I mentioned this the other day in the talk at Guy House. Again, relating to your daughter reporting a monster under her bed. Our ontological assessment brings in a certain value judgment. What do I need to do? But in practice, the hierarchy of value judgments that goes with ontology is actually constitutive and active in and as practice.

So, for example, in mindfulness practice, there's the idea communicated, the teaching communicated that papañca and story and self are somehow not real. They're fabrications. They're less real than what we might encounter as bare sensation or what is revealed with bare attention, with mindfulness or equanimity, etc. In Dzogchen and Mahamudra teachings, the nature of mind—which can be interpreted in all kinds of different ways and at different levels—is real, whereas this or that other thing is not real or less real. Or in Zen teachings, some Zen teachings, often what we know through thinking and concepts is not real.

So these ontological judgments are wrapped up with value judgments and they constitute and are active in and as practice. They get reinforced by the teachings and sort of indirectly by a kind of even non-verbal rhetoric, if we could even use such a phrase, without much philosophical or psychological unpacking, explaining, questioning, probing. But it's there.

So that, of course, in, let's say, mindfulness teachings, the relationship with image, imagination, the possible imaginal, would be, well, that's not what's there in bare attention and mindfulness. It has a much lesser status, it has a much lower place in the hierarchy of things. Occasionally it might be helpful if a person gets stuck or it might be helpful for the arising of faith. Imagine the Buddha or imagine this or that. Or if you just can't do it without mindfulness alone—as if mindfulness alone, that's the real practice. Real practitioners don't need this second-best use of the imagination, this unreal thing. That's kind of for weaklings or people who, when you hit a hard spot, you just need a little extra help.

So all these kinds of... Ontology is inevitable. It brings with it value judgments, not just reality judgments, which is what ontology means. Those reality judgments involve or imply value judgments. And all that's wrapped into practice, often in ways that, as I said, are communicated very, very strongly and repeatedly through different streams of Dharma and different styles of teaching, but not with a lot of real unpacking philosophically or psychologically.

So we need to be aware of that, I think. The importance of ontology, the importance of asking into all this, how we approach these questions and these explorations and inquiries into ontology will determine so much of what our practice is and what our practice delivers, what is legitimate and what opens for us.

So for the Buddha, I would say he was very concerned with this. Again, it's maybe popular these days to say he wasn't interested in that at all, he wasn't a philosopher, da-da-da. But I would say he was very concerned. There is, of course, his... You know, some people say there's only two suttas in the Pali Canon

which address emptiness, and they've got emptiness in the title. It's the Greater and Shorter Discourses on Emptiness, or something like that. One of which isn't really about emptiness in any sense at all.

It's a strangely given title. And this reading back of Mahayana versions of emptiness as not what the Buddha originally taught is just, again, a little sloppy, a little lazy.

There are so many incidents one could point to in the Pali Canon. A lot of them are explored in *Seeing That Frees*, but there are many, many examples. When Kaccayana asked the Buddha, "What do you teach about right view?" the Buddha replied, "I teach the middle way, the middle way between is and is not. That's the middle view. Most people assume phenomena either exist—they are—or they do not exist—they are not. But I, the Buddha, teach the middle way: neither is nor is not."

What does this mean? It means the whole emptiness teaching, and it takes a lot to unpack what he means by that: neither real nor not real, neither is nor is not. It takes considerable exploration, but it's right there. And in the many investigations of dependent arising and dependent ceasing and dependent origination as a whole, it's right there.

There's a case where Sariputta is talking to a monk called Mahakotthita, and he tries to explain dependent arising. He explains how consciousness depends on nama-rupa. Nama-rupa means not just body, but the perception of forms, and perception itself, and attention, and contact, and vedana, and intention. Sariputta explains that perception and vedana depend on consciousness. Then he goes on to explain that consciousness depends on intention, perception, attention, feeling. So perception depends on consciousness, and consciousness depends on perception. Vedana depends on consciousness, and consciousness depends on vedana. Mahakotthita responds, "Excuse me, what?"

Of course, it's baffling. But Sariputta is pointing to this mutual dependency, which is exactly what we mean by emptiness. These two things—consciousness and perception—they're not two, but neither are they one. They're neither one nor two. They're empty. They're mutually empty. They're mutually dependent.

So it's there throughout, in many places in the Pali Canon. And it's, of course, tied to... the Buddha was concerned with this, and an understanding of ontology was very much tied to what he meant by liberation. It's there in his definition of right view—one of the definitions of right view. It's there completely in what he pointed to as the most central insight of his night of awakening: this dependent arising, and particularly the mutual dependent arising of nama-rupa and consciousness, of perception, vedana, and consciousness. Mutual interpenetration, mutual inseparability, mutual dependence. This causes that, but that causes this at the same time.

Dependent arising is the thing to understand, the thing that a liberated arahant understands, has penetrated. Similarly, the Buddha didn't just talk about the anatta of phenomena—that they're not me, not mine. He also used the word *sunya*: they're void. This means something different. They're void in

themselves, they're empty in themselves. He gives different analogies regarding the aggregates and how they're empty of substance, empty of inherent existence.

So it's totally there in the Pali Canon, if one looks for it and knows what to look for.

Regarding awakening and emptiness, I think we need to make another point, which I've alluded to several times recently, but I'd like to draw out more fully. Someone was asking whether they just need to understand emptiness to be liberated, or whether there's a certain amount of psychological work they need to do as well. "Do I need to resolve and understand my psychological stuff?"

What's interesting is we never seem to hear anything like that in the Pali Canon about people's self-judgment or their inner critic, or their incapacity to sustain intimate romantic relationships, or their inability to commit, or their frustration at their own lack of self-expression or inauthenticity, or anything like that. There seems to be no report of that kind of dukkha in the Pali Canon.

It's also interestingly absent in, for example, the teachings of Ramana Maharshi or Nisargadatta Maharaj. You just hear these teachings about emptiness or the nature of awareness or that kind of thing. So why the absence? Is it that in the time of the Buddha in India, they just had better parenting? So people didn't have psychological issues? Or is it that the sense of self and the expectations of self and of relationship are very different now than they were in the time of the Buddha's India?

In terms of awakening and the self-view and penetrating the self-view in the first fetter of stream entry, we nowadays need and want and expect practices and realizations to address and to decrease or even eradicate that kind of suffering – the suffering around self that comes from a certain set of expectations and a certain self-sense and a certain expectations of self and of relationship. We expect, need, want practice and realization to address all that.

So I have a question: Do practices and realizations need to be different now? Or is it enough that we can just work with the emptiness? Those teachers like Nisargadatta and Ramana had very different socially constructed senses of self that they had to deal with than we do. Very different socially constructed senses of self they had to deal with in themselves and also in the issues brought to them by seekers and students. And on top of that, their role and status as constructed by Indian spiritual customs with respect to the guru – there's a whole way you are, a way you hang out with, a way you talk to the guru. There's a whole relational paradigm there. They have a certain role and status and it's determined within a certain range how you hang out with them, what you do, what you ask them for, what you expect from them, what the social situation allows and what their role and status determines.

So that meant that they also didn't have to deal with or even encounter a lot of the self-burdens and self-expectations and shapes and relational dynamics and relational expectations that most of us do. And we're expecting this one thing, this insight into emptiness, even if it's the emptiness of everything, to address what may be very different selves, different self-sense, different socially constructed self that we

have nowadays in the West. Different sufferings, different challenges to address.

I can think of, and probably many of you can think of, people who seem to have had tremendous depth of practice in the past, whether it's jhānic, samādhi and emptiness understanding, but they don't seem to have much capacity or skill with, let's say, personal intimacy and personal connection. Maybe our notion of awakening needs to involve more than just insight, more than just insight into emptiness. Maybe awakening or enlightenment, or liberation, also implies certain skills with respect to the kinds of challenges that we have to address because of the society we live in, and because of the way the self is constructed differently in our society.

So yes, emptiness. Yes, it's empty. But I still have to have a certain set of skills. I have to be able – you know, if I realize that everything is empty, but I'm really insensitive in relationship, my capacity for intimacy, I just don't seem to be able to meet people and navigate that territory in terms of deep connection with people. Is that awakened? Am I satisfied with that?

So it might be, I do need to work on some of my psychological stuff, if we use that term broadly. And those kinds of skills, as well as the emptiness understanding and skill in emptiness practice, become a part of, or aspects of, a much larger thing called awakening.

But the emptiness piece delivers a lot. It really delivers a lot and it really opens up a lot. Even if it's not in itself the single thing that we can rely on and hope that everything in our life gets taken care of. But it does open a lot of doors the deeper we go into it.

So if we take it very deeply in practice, that the middle way of emptiness can, for example, open up the conceptual legitimacy and practice possibilities of flexible ways of looking and perceptions, for example, of particular divinities, not just universal sense of divinity and sacredness, of universal emptiness, but of particular divinities and particular sacrednesses that we go into with the soul-making practices. If I go deep enough in emptiness practice, it opens up the conceptual legitimacy for those, and it opens up the practice possibilities as well, for the flexibility of ways of looking and of perception that perceive particular divinity and not just universal divinity, particular sacrednesses and not just universal ones.

And actually more broadly, we could say that the realization of deep and comprehensive emptiness, really go deep, we've realized there is no ultimately true conceptual framework regarding conventional reality. There's no ultimately true way that we can explain the workings of conventional reality. Again, that doesn't equate to saying all conceptual frameworks are equally true or valid, but that there is no ultimately true conceptual framework regarding conventional reality.

And that understanding comes out of emptiness going very, very deep and very wide. That then legitimizes and opens up the possibility of a range and a flexibility of conceptual frameworks and ways of looking within conceptual frameworks. It's not just ways of looking, but whole ideas or systems of thought. We can also move between them with the same ease and flexibility and agility and lightness of touch,

lightness of holding as we move between ways of looking. This comes out deep practice of emptiness. And of course, that too is very relevant to soul-making dharma, soul-making practice. It's one of the things we emphasize quite a lot.

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