The Ontology of the Soul, and the Soul of Ontology

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 2:09:56

Let's continue on the track of ontology for a little bit, as there are several points I would like to make so we can weave them together.

The first comes up in relation to a question that someone asked: What is the difference between the imaginal middle way and the middle way of emptiness? This is an important ontological inquiry, an important ontological clarification that needs to be made here.

The middle way of emptiness was a term coined by the Buddha in the Kaccāyanagotta Sutta, which I mentioned the other day in the Pali Canon, where he answers Kaccāyana's question about right view. The Buddha says right view is his middle way, which falls between the two extreme views of "it is" or "it exists" on one hand, and "it isn't" or "it doesn't exist" on the other hand. That's his definition of the middle way. Much more commonly, what most people are familiar with is the Buddha defining the middle way as between sensual indulgence—indulgence in sense pleasures—and hardcore asceticism on the other hand.

But there's a second meaning of middle way that the Buddha used in the Pali Canon, and that second meaning became the primary meaning in the Mahāyāna teachings. Nāgārjuna and others picked up on this, and you could say the whole elaboration and profundity and sophistication and breadth of the teachings on emptiness in the Mahāyāna, Prajñāpāramitā and Vajrayāna comes really out of that couple of sentences exchange in the Pali Canon between the Buddha and Kaccāyana, where the Buddha uses the term middle way as an ontological kind of teaching. It really has to do with emptiness, although he doesn't use the word empty or emptiness in that exchange. It's still what we're talking about when we use those terms empty and emptiness.

So there's the middle way of emptiness. And then in the soul-making teachings, when we talk about the nodes of the lattice or the elements or the aspects of the imaginal, we also have something called the imaginal middle way. What's the difference between these two? Because they've got similar sounding titles, are they the same? Are they different? Well, they're different, and it's important to actually clarify this.

That element of the lattice we call imaginal middle way, we can also call "theatre-like quality," and we do, or "neither real nor not real." Those are perfectly adequate synonyms and adequate terms for what we mean by the imaginal middle way. So all three—imaginal middle way, theatre-like quality, neither real nor not real—they're all saying the same thing.

As an element of the imaginal, it is, like the other elements of the imaginal, primarily a description of the qualities of the imaginal realm. Something we notice, something noticed or empirically observed that is characteristic of images when they are more fully imaginal. That's how the whole elements teaching arose. It was really me trying to pinpoint the flavor of the terrain, the flavor of the realm, what's characteristic of the realm of the imaginal. Because it's clear to me that images that I would call imaginal had different sets of qualities and implications and aspects than images used in other ways or in other systems, whether it's Ridwan or other psychologies or other approaches.

I was trying to designate, to pinpoint what's the difference. As such, what was involved was simply a sort of hanging out with an image in the mundus imaginalis, in the imaginal realm—and even that, the mundus imaginalis is Corbin's term, and so we're using it differently, the word imaginal, than he used it, which is different than how Hillman used it. But it was really hanging out and then just noticing these subtle differences or subtle characteristics of what I would call images that are more fully imaginal in contrast to images that are not really what we would call imaginal.

So it's a description, an observation, something we notice. And in that, this imaginal middle way is quite a wide designation. Theatre-like quality, neither real nor not real—it's quite broad, like the other elements. The word itself, the concept itself, the designation and pinpointing itself needs to allow room to be able to stretch. I'll come back to that in a minute—to be able to stretch, to broaden, to have soft and elastic edges. It's quite a wide designation.

In contrast, when we talk about the emptiness middle way, the middle way of emptiness that the Buddha was talking about and Nāgārjuna and others picked up on, the emptiness middle way is the result of a very careful, usually long ontological inquiry in practice and in conception. In other words, after practicing with emptiness practices or ways of looking or analytical practices, after really thinking it through and thinking it through in a very subtle way, and bringing together philosophy with practice and conceptual work, meditative practice and conceptual work, what results is the middle way of emptiness. It's the result of that ontological inquiry.

While we can and we do entertain various ontological systems and conceptual frameworks when we practice the imaginal and sensing the soul, there is not one ontology or ontological view that we are aiming towards, that we are hoping to arrive at or adopting exclusively. The imaginal middle way leaves ontological inquiry out of the forefront of imaginal practice and sensing the soul practice.

So emptiness and the middle way is a result of an ontological inquiry, and in imaginal practice we're leaving that aside. We might do it beforehand or around it, but the actual imaginal practice doesn't involve ontological inquiry.

And there's no one ontology that we're hoping to arrive at and claim as our definitive position. Of course, and I'll return to this, ontological inquiries may themselves become soul-making for some people at certain times. This whole question of ontology becomes very exciting for the soul, and thus images and

fantasies naturally build up around and in relation to ontological inquiries and ontological ideas. It's also the case that the soul-making dynamic, the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, will eventually shake up and expand whatever ontologies we profess or hold. But still, ontological inquiry is not primary in imaginal or sensing with soul practice. We are not seeking an answer to an ontological question there, whereas in emptiness practice we are. We want to come to the answer, the truth about the fact of emptiness—the universal truth there.

As emptiness practices and understandings deepen and refine, the emptiness middle way becomes clearer and in a sense narrower. It's more like a razor's edge. It's very fine, this position between "it is" and "it is not," "it exists" and "it does not," "neither real nor not real." From the emptiness point of view, the emptiness middle way becomes clearer and much more like a razor's edge. In other words, the tendencies towards nihilism—"it's not real, this isn't real, nothing's real"—on the one hand, and reification—"it's real, it is, it really exists"—on the other hand, these two extreme views that the Buddha pointed to, and which the Mahayana picks up on extensively, these tendencies are gradually diminished as we go deeper with emptiness practice and understanding. As our understanding comes closer and closer to the narrow tightrope of the middle way of emptiness.

To contrast, the imaginal middle way is not such a precise or narrow concept. Partly because the whole imaginal process admits various ontologies or ontological systems, as we've pointed out several times and illustrated in different talks. So it's less of a tightrope or a razor's edge, and more like an avenue, a wide road, a boulevard rather than a razor's edge or tightrope. Within the range of the imaginal middle way, there can be various positions of more or less reification.

The concept of the imaginal middle way, like the other concepts in soul-making dharma, has soft and elastic edges. Still, starting soul-making practice with a careful emphasis on curbing the reificationist tendency, and then only later, in time, widening the range of ontological views in play—widening the range of ontological views about image or what we're sensing with soul, exploring positions at different points on the width of that broad road of the imaginal middle way—this will be the most fruitful way to progress. This order of starting with careful emphasis on curbing the reificationist tendency and then broadening out from there slowly, gradually.

If one has in the past only reified images—and that's mostly the case for those who use images in psychological or spiritual or shamanic practice, where they're usually reified—remember, even if a person says, "Well, I'm not reifying," unless they're really making it clear that they're not reifying, you can pretty much bet that they're reifying. You may not hear that word, but it takes a lot of work to not reify something.

So if one's used images in other ways, more conventional ways—psychotherapies or spiritualities or shamanic practices—and the images have been reified, then it will be very difficult to come out of that habit of reification and move towards the other side of this wide road of the imaginal middle way, to have

the facility to explore a less reified stance. If one cannot move away from the reificationist side of the road to explore the less reified road, then that whole side of the road, that whole territory of soul-making possibility won't open up.

The opposite direction of movement, from a stricter non-reifying—which is what we tend to emphasize at first—gradually to explore more reifying positions, that won't be so difficult or face so much inertia. This is because reifying is actually a normal human tendency, especially when we feel touched by an image or perception, when it matters to us, when it helps us.

A greater total territory will be accessible and open to us if we proceed gradually in this order—from emphasizing the non-reifying at first and then gradually expanding to more reified ontologies—for most people. It's all very individual, but generally speaking, this approach allows a greater total territory to become accessible if we go from emphasizing the non-reifying at first and then gradually expand to more reified ontologies that reify images more.

So the imaginal middle way, just to sum up, is really just something observed, something noticed about a quality, an aspect, a characteristic of images that are more fully imaginal. The emptiness middle way is a result of careful ontological inquiry in practice and conception. In the emptiness middle way, we're aiming for an answer, a result, to understand what that really means—it's one very narrow, razor's edge, tightrope of truth between "is" and "isn't."

In imaginal practice, we're not sticking to one ontology or ontological view, or even one ontological system. We can just as easily entertain an idea of a providential divinity, a providential dharmakāya or Buddha-nature that makes appear to us images and even events and persons in our life in response to what we need at a certain time in our path. We can entertain that kind of ontology as well as an ontology of a Buddha-nature and dharmakāya and divinity that does no such thing, that has no providence. We can equally entertain an ontology where there's no such thing as Buddha-nature or divinity or dharmakāya in any of those transcendent ways.

So we have a range of ontologies and we're not aiming at one necessarily. Ontology is not forefront in our practice. The imaginal middle way, in contrast to this narrow tightrope of truth that we're aiming for as a result of our inquiry, is a wide boulevard. We want to have freedom to take up any ontological position regarding reification at any of the points across that width of the boulevard and see what each one does.

but it might be easier if we start with the non-reification one. Because if we get too much into a habit of reifying images, it will be very hard to then open up non-reified images and all the soul realms and soul worlds that they open up.

So that's a clarification, hopefully, between the emptiness way and the imaginal way.

As far as emptiness is concerned, it's important to point out that from a strictly narrow Buddhadharma perspective, all we need to know about ontology for the sake of liberation from suffering and liberation

from avijja, fundamental ignorance, is that things are thoroughly, completely empty. And that realization of emptiness needs to have woven into it, or alongside it—hopefully woven into it—an understanding that we need to respect conventional reality. There are some conventional realities that we really need to respect.

As I pointed out yesterday, if we have penetrated to that result of the emptiness Middle Way—the understanding of the thorough, deep, radical, and comprehensive emptiness of all things—if we have done that via the ways of looking approach, then ethics and karma and dependent arising of world, self, and world dependent on attitude, dependent on action, dependent on mind state, all of that is obvious and in fact woven in. It's obvious because it's woven into the very investigation into emptiness right from the beginning, as we talked about yesterday.

If we go deep enough in our inquiry into emptiness, in our penetration of the truth of emptiness, to understand the Middle Way of emptiness in its deepest and most precise sense, then we see that no-self also is just a view. We can pick it up—there is no-self—but it's just a view. It's not an ultimate truth. And the view of self becomes just as available, or available again, if you like, as the view of no-self. Emptiness is just a view. Emptiness is empty. Not-self is just a view. Self is just a view. And all of these become available as views. We are only left with ways of looking.

But from a Dharma perspective, this is all we need to know about ontology—that things are empty, because that's what liberates us from suffering and from the root cause of suffering, which is avijja. And hopefully woven into that understanding, that ontological understanding that everything is empty, we also understand the need to respect certain conventional realities, particularly around ethical consequences, karma, dependent arising in that sense. And secondly, that we have the flexibility to respect self as much as no-self, emptiness as much as not-emptiness—to not just respect but to practice and to see those ways.

So that's from a strictly Buddhadharma perspective. That's actually all we need to understand ontologically.

And if you've really gone into the question of emptiness, you will realize that even a realization, a full realization of emptiness, still leaves a lot of questions about the exact ontology of different conventional realities, of different relative truths. In the history of Buddhism, there has been vehement argument about this over 2,500 years. Certainly once you get into the Mahayana and certainly in Tibet, really quite a lot of very sophisticated and hot-blooded polemic debate around all this.

You only have to look at Mipham Rinpoche from the turn of the twentieth century, just before and into the early twentieth century, and his engagements and dialogues with other traditions, including Gelug scholars, or look at some of the writings of the Karmapas, particularly the Eighth Karmapa, Mikyö Dorjé. Especially when it comes to this question of the relationship between conventional and ultimate reality, conventional truths and the truth of emptiness, the thingness of things and the emptiness of things. This is

really quite a long-standing argument. And in terms of how it then applies to Tantra as well and much else, there's a lot there that's left open and open to debate.

Some of that debate, particularly some of the things that Mipham and Mikyö Dorjé got interested in, actually bears very much on what we actually understand by the emptiness of something. So some of the areas of that argument pertain to the status of tantric deities, the ontological status of tantric deities and other things. But some of it actually pertains to what does emptiness mean? And therefore, is this version of emptiness actually liberating or not?

I've gone into this briefly, but in a fair amount of detail. It's quite a central piece of the last portions of *Seeing That Frees*, so you can find it there, and you can also find some references there if you're interested. But the main point is that even a full comprehensive understanding of emptiness still leaves questions regarding the exact ontology of conventional realities.

We could say the same might be true of, for example, quantum physics as it goes deeper. What exactly is the ontological status, the reality status of a basic particle? We think this table is made from molecules and atoms, and those are made of protons and neutrons and electrons, and then we go down—there's even more basic particles, though an electron is classified as a basic particle still. What is the reality status, what is the ontological status of those basic particles? And it's not simple.

I mentioned the other day, Niels Bohr, one of the founders of quantum physics and a Nobel Prize winner, said everything we think of as real is made up of things that we cannot think of as real. But now, even more, since his death, even space and time are regarded as emergent and not fundamental phenomena. At a quantum level, they emerge, they're constructions, and in some sense also dependent on the observer. Einstein did some of that work with his relativity theories, and even more so at a quantum level.

So we're still left with these questions about the ontology of different conventional realities. And this is important.

When we then come to soul-making teachings, of course they cannot help stimulating such questions, or they should stimulate such questions, and they do stimulate such questions. Not for everyone, but certainly for some people. Some people will get very derisive. Some people will be too easy, perhaps too lazy and quick to just adopt a certain ontological acceptance. But it's up to them.

And I've been through all this in other talks, so I won't dwell on it too much anymore. But the questions pertain—ontological questions don't go away with regard to soul and image and soul-making. They are all empty, yes, but as I said, emptiness realization, gone all the way to the end, still leaves questions about the exact ontology of different conventional realities.

So what about the ontology of soul? This is something we've talked about quite a lot, but very briefly, just to repeat: we can define soul in a couple of ways. One is that soul is simply a kind of way of looking—or even a group of ways of looking. Soul is the collection of ways of looking that are soul-making, that open

up a sense of soulfulness. That's what soul is: those ways of looking that open up the elements of the imaginal, that deliver the elements of the imaginal. Soul is just a way of looking; it's not an entity.

Or, if we want to define soul as a kind of entity, it's that entity, that instrument, that organ, so to speak, in the human being which looks in those ways—looks in those ways that open up soulfulness, that support soulfulness, that engender soulfulness and soul-making. Soul-making then, if we think of soul as an entity, is a kind of making or growing of that organ, of that instrument—a growing of its size, of its range, of its capacities, like a muscle that grows, or an organ, or a child's brain that's growing in its capacity as an entity.

So either it's not an entity—we think of it just as a kind of way of looking—or it's an entity, but that entity is just as empty as any other entity. It's just as empty as a self, and we use the language of self without too much problem in our conventional exchanges with each other, in the way we think about our lives, in the way we relate to what's actually very important in our lives. We use the language of self: "I want this, I don't want that, I really hope that, I feel this," etc.

But if we use entity language for soul, then that entity of soul is empty like self is empty. Like the aggregates are empty. Like the body is empty. Empty in itself. Empty of phenomenal existence. Empty of truly being an inherently existent thing. Vedanā is empty. Consciousness is empty. A moment is empty. All the aggregates are empty; any phenomenon is empty.

When I talked—I think it was in *The Mirrored Gates*—and began to talk about sensing the soul, actually playing a little bit with opening up the ontological considerations or possibilities of more reification, a bit more reification when we're practicing sensing the soul and the perceptions that come up with soul—that's a really interesting area as well.

So why bother to go into all that? Well, partly for our own purposes, in the sense that our conceptual framework, the whole logos of soul-making dharma, is really based in and on emptiness. It's based in ideas like create/discover, neither real nor not real, and all that. So it's rooted in that kind of—I would say—more sophisticated ontology, a participatory ontology, or an ontology of participation, rather than stark notions of independent existence, as if that's what qualifies for reality. It's based on a more sophisticated ontology, this whole logos, this whole conceptual framework of soul-making dharma.

But partly I'm explaining the ontology of soul—just briefly, just now repeating what I've said elsewhere—partly also to kind of proactively rebuff certain expected objections and critiques from either Buddhists who tend to think in a very narrow and common way, perhaps with not very well worked out ontology. I'm trying to rebuff certain objections and critiques: "Well, that's not Buddha-dharma if you're talking about soul. Didn't the Buddha say that's not something real, that's just metaphysical speculation? Any language of soul must be just metaphysical speculation, and it's the opposite of phenomenology," etc.

I've gone into this at great length elsewhere; I'm not going to repeat it too much now, except I will say a

couple of things. So partly it's in response to that kind of somewhat typical or typically expected objection. And partly it's for our own purposes, because soul-making is necessarily rooted in a more sophisticated ontology and epistemology than the ones that most people in our culture are used to, and that our culture typically regards as simply: "This is what's real, that's not real, this is what's true," and it's because of this or that, in terms of independent existence, etc.—socially agreed upon perceptions.

It's interesting, if we just linger on this a little bit longer. Some people in the dharma, some expositions of Buddha-dharma, some explanations of Buddha-dharma, or simply of mindfulness extractions from Buddha-dharma, some people use reductionist materialism in a kind of obvious and explicit way. And they explain dharma and explain meditation and even explain liberation, perhaps, from those premises, from the premises of a sort of reductionist materialism. In other words, in terms of atoms and neurological networks, etc., and neurotransmitters and all the rest of it. And they explain what's happening in meditation and liberation as perhaps a change or even a kind of increased efficacy of, for example, neural pathways.

Other expositions of Buddha-dharma never mention atoms or those sorts of things, the components or the elements of reductionist materialism. They never mention them. They never perhaps even mention the classical scientific materialist worldview. But they try to present a more—what might seem to be a more phenomenological, let's put that in inverted commas—more "phenomenological" dharma or a more existential, existentialist dharma, and a more phenomenological existentialist idea of suffering, of what suffering is, what the problem is, and of what liberation from suffering is or might be.

The whole endeavor is given a more phenomenological or existential approach without mentioning scientific materialist elements or views. But when I explore such an approach more deeply, I quickly realize that this kind of phenomenology is very limited. There's only one way of looking that's admitted, and that way of looking supposedly sees the truth. This phenomenology assumes that all human beings, if they are honest and brave, will experience self and world in exactly this way. This is what such phenomenologies claim, and what many attempts at phenomenological philosophy and psychology do.

There's no place in this view for different ways of looking, no recognition that different ways of looking can open up entirely different perceptions and senses of self, world, and cosmos. Similarly, existentialist dharma rests on an assumption that the meaningless, flat cosmos of classical scientific materialism represents proven reality. It rests on reductionist, materialist ideas as a presumed background and basis, even when they're never explicitly mentioned.

It's interesting that this assumption—that reductionist materialist conceptions are irrevocably proven as fact—may be part of what gives some existential Buddhists their often haughty and unbudgeable arrogance that comes across in their stance and tone.

The problem with all this is that physics itself—the same scientific method that delivered that worldview starting in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—has, as it developed, begun to bring about the

crumbling of that very basis. Not just physics, but also contemporary Western philosophy has contributed to this dissolution, as has Nagarjuna's dharma and the whole Mahayana understanding of emptiness—the deeper working out of what emptiness truly means.

So that whole background view and basis—never mentioned but assumed real and relied upon—is no longer tenable or certain as truth, as the reality of things. We find ourselves in an interesting place right now in terms of Western philosophy, Buddhadharma, and certainly modern science.

I think ontology and epistemology—which naturally accompanies it—are never-ending explorations and questions. Epistemology asks: How can I trust this knowledge about what's real? What do I trust? My senses? My thinking? Scripture? Other people's opinions? I've talked about this extensively elsewhere, but I want to emphasize now that ontology and epistemology represent inexhaustible explorations and questions. I don't think humanity will ever come to the end of these inquiries, their possibilities, or the questions they raise.

Because of this never-ending quality of ontological and epistemological exploration, there can be eros for it. Ontology itself, as I alluded to earlier, can become for us an erotic, imaginal other. The whole domain, the entire inquiry, the image of oneself as ontological inquirer—all of this can become imaginal. There can be soul-making arising from that erotic-imaginal relationship with the inexhaustible nature of ontology, with ontological questions and explorations.

We can become very excited about this, deeply engaged with its possibilities for the soul. Soul-making can arise from ontology, from certain ontological views—I'll return to this point. But it can also emerge in relationship to ontology itself.

I don't remember if I said this in the Four Parables of Stone and Light series, but I was thinking: if you hear someone claim, regarding ontology or epistemology, or even concerning human emotions and ethics, that they've figured it out, that they now know the answers—in any of these areas—run a mile. I would run from such a person. Whether they claim to have come to the end of ontological inquiry, epistemological inquiry, to have fully understood what human emotions are and involve, how they arise, what they can be, or to have resolved ethical questions—I would run a mile.

Equally problematic is what's perhaps just as popular these days, especially among people influenced by some recent Western philosophy: the claim that ontology and epistemology are irrelevant. "I'm not interested in ontology or epistemology. That's all metaphysics. I put that aside. It's not relevant. It's not what the Buddha taught. It's not relevant to life." From this attitude too, I would run a mile. You should run a mile. Either of these extreme positions is, to me, deeply problematic.

I'll just say it's problematic. As I said the other day, and I've pointed out several times recently, ontology and epistemology are inevitable. They're inevitable in the very fabric of our perception—not even as big philosophical rambling inquiries with all this conceptual grinding, but they are woven in. Ontological

assessments, epistemological assessments, are implicitly non-verbally, non-thinkingly woven in as conceptions into every perception we have as human beings. They're inevitable. Even if they're inconcludable questions, ontology and epistemology are inevitable.

I don't know, but I have a sense really that Western philosophy went through a phase and called itself post-metaphysical. Well, we might now be in a post-post-metaphysical phase, or just about to be, or something like that. So there's a lot here, again, that can open up soul-making, that can be soul-making for us in these inquiries, but also allow more soul-making to open up. I want to come back to that, but let's just stay with this for a while and actually bring in the connection between eros and ontology.

Let me try to convey what I'm getting at here. The scientific method attempted—it started with this attempt—to exclude affect, human affect, in other words emotion and desire (which could be regarded as an affect), from the process of inquiring into truth. When the scientific method arose in the seventeenth century and really got going, it attempted to exclude affect and desire from the process of inquiring into truth. This instigated and then installed for modernity, for modern culture, a definition of truth as partly that which is independent of the affect or desire of an observer.

So it started with that—this is our modus operandi, this is how we're going to go about things. And then that became a definition of truth. It instigated it, then it installed it. So that's how we tend to think of what is true: truth is that which is independent of the affect or desire of an observer.

But if one realizes, as one goes deeper into all these things, that there is no truth independent of the observer... Again, this seems to be very much what quantum physics, as much as some people don't like that conclusion, is concluding. It's remained unchallenged for getting on for a hundred years now. Not unchallenged, but it has remained without convincing challenge at all. Some people still really don't like it. Very few people have really picked it up and inquired and opened up and looked further into its implications. But that seems to be, so far, unbudgeable.

So if one realizes there's no truth independent of the observer—similar conclusions from Western philosophies and certainly from Buddha-Dharma and emptiness and the ways of looking approach—if one realizes there is no truth independent of the observer, then the way of looking of the observer must be considered. And why then can't affect be readmitted? In my readmission of the observer and the position of the observer and what the observer does and how the observer looks, why can't I readmit affect and desire, and even eros? And perhaps they're given even equal status with any other affects. So desire and eros are given equal status with other affects. They're just all part of this idea that truth doesn't exist independently of the observer. There are just ways of looking, no ultimate truth, just ways of looking. And so there's what I see with this affect, what I see with that affect, what I see when there's eros, what I see when there's some other emotion, etc.

We can go a little bit further into this, push in a slightly different way. If the truth—put that even in inverted commas—is instead something that's infinitely penetrable... So it's not so much that there are lots

of different angles on something, but it's more that truth is something infinitely penetrable, is a journey into dimensionality. And yes, we might say dimensionality and divinity—a journey of penetration, if you like, or opening to, if you want a more receptive mode, opening deeper to, opening oneself deeper to.

Then, if truth is defined that way, as infinitely penetrable and a journey, then there is no one final ultimate truth, except this general journey into more disclosures, more discoveries. And if that is what reality is—this deepening journey, never-ending journey, infinite penetrative movement—if that's what reality is, then it is exactly eros in the way that we are using that word.

Eros as we define it wants closeness, contact, wants to know, wants to connect with. And in that wanting more penetration, wanting more opening, it ignites a soul-making dynamic, and that allows more deeper penetration, the generation of more beyonds, the discovery of more facets and aspects of what it is that we're in relationship with, what our subject is, what we're penetrating.

So it's exactly eros in the way that we, in soul-making, are using that word. It's exactly eros which reveals the truth and reality. And in that case, eros is more valuable than other affects, and than an absence of affect, an emotion. You understand? Because eros has this tendency to penetrate further. And if truth is something that's infinitely penetrable, rather than just horizontally infinite in terms of perspectives around a circle, then it's exactly eros which opens it.

And that view of truth and reality does not posit truth and reality as what is independent of the observer, independent of observing. It recognizes the profound participation of the soul in creating, discovering what is disclosed.

Creating, discovering what is disclosed. To me this is an interesting development—this idea of eros as having actual ontological value, more significant and powerful epistemological and ontological value.

The theologian and philosopher John Milbank—I'm just beginning to explore his work, and I find it fascinating, particularly the overlaps and common desires between his work in what they call the radical orthodoxy movement in Catholic theology. I know his work only a little, but there's a famous book he wrote, "Theology and Social Theory," which I've just picked up. I was reading the preface to the second edition, where he wrote about "the nihilistic vision"—what he means by this flat, purposeless cosmos of scientism, scientific materialism.

He writes that the nihilistic vision "makes its conclusions from a cold reason that disallows to the moods of eros, anxiety, boredom, trust, poetic response, faith, hope, charity, and so forth, an ontologically disclosive status." This is exactly what I was saying before—affect is from the start ruled out of any definition of truth. The moods and affects of eros, anxiety, boredom, trust, poetic response, faith, hope, charity are disallowed any ontologically disclosive status. They don't reveal anything to us. They don't open for us any knowledge about anything that's real. Ontologically, they disclose nothing.

But if our ontology admits a category of the real which includes our participation and creativity, our

poetic response as well, then eros—and secondarily other emotions like those Milbank listed—does disclose or open up to us the truth, or we could say truths, or truth as a journey into infinitely penetrable truth, as I explained. To me this is really, really interesting.

The second point in the scientific method's starting assumptions—what was initially axiomatic in terms of methodological approach but then spread from methodological technique to become an unquestioned assumption about reality—concerns the ruling out of affect and desire. Truth becomes only what is observed in the absence of affect and desire. This has been questioned from other directions as well, but I first encountered a particular critique in reading Catherine Pickstock's book "After Writing." I found it quite difficult to read, but she's a colleague of John Milbank, and she makes the point that Descartes, one of the founders of the scientific method, defined reality as that which is clear, discrete, and easily comprehended by the mind.

That definition or delineation of objects to be investigated—what is reality? It's what's clear, discrete, and easily comprehended by mind. That's what we should investigate. We should forget about everything else because it's not real, and we want to investigate the real. That's what science is.

But this definition came itself to be taken as truth. Initially it was simply: these are the objects we're going to investigate—the ones that are clear, discrete, and easily comprehended by the mind. But at some point it became: this is what is true. Anything that did not fit that definition was regarded as untrue, unreal, and unworthy of attention.

You can see this again in quantum physics or relativistic physics. If someone tries to say that the really simple, clear, discrete things easily comprehended are these little billiard balls of basic particles, or things like space and time as Newton defined them—absolute space, absolute time, just kind of there, a big empty space not doing anything, not affected by anything, with time just flowing—these little billiard balls seem like the simplest, most discrete, clear things, very easy to understand.

But starting from Descartes' view, quantum physics has completely overturned this. If you ask someone what really is an electron, you better have a lot of patience because we don't know. The answer is definitely not simple, definitely not something that's clear or discrete or easily comprehended by the mind.

The very starting premise of this mode of investigation became a definition of truth, and when the scientific method continued along those lines, it completely decimated its own starting point and definition.

For our purposes, I want to say something about eros in relationship to ontology—the ontological value and place, the epistemological and ontological value of eros. Because eros, when allowed to stimulate the soul-making dynamic—and that's what we mean by eros in its larger definition—will open up exactly what does not fit inside Descartes' definition. When there's eros for an object, in relationship to it, that

object begins to become more mysterious to us, less comprehensible, because it becomes unfathomable.

It becomes not discrete, because it possesses dimensionality, shading into divinity. It possesses soft and elastic edges. It becomes polyaspected and complex rather than single and simple. So again, it's eros that opens up exactly—or that bursts open—Descartes' definition in much the same way as physics has done.

It's interesting too, and I want to pick up on just one of those words in that little quote from John Milbank. I noted the word "boredom" there, which I found intriguing. You tend to think, oh well, that's not a very productive or creative affect or emotion. So I don't know quite what he meant, but it was there in a list of affects with truth-indicative power, truth-indicating power, with potentially ontological disclosive status. Actually, all he was saying in that quote was that it had been ruled out, but by implication, might it be there? Even boredom.

Our boredom with, for example, this sort of typical, common insistence on the hegemony of the truth of a flatly materialist cosmos—might our boredom with that idea, our boredom with this insistence that "this is the existential reality of things," a boredom with the sort of little billiard ball idea of matter, and now even of mind, a boredom with reductionist materialism—might our boredom at those views, at being inundated and surrounded by those views, being inflicted on us and oppressed by them, might our boredom be a feeling to trust, telling us that something in that picture is not right, not true?

So I don't know what Milbank meant, but that's something I was wondering. Boredom as a valid, affective and effective indicator of truth—truth, in inverted commas, if we have this more open idea of what truth is.

Actually, just lingering with that—if we conceive of truth, and again, I feel like I want to put it in inverted commas, but truth conceived more as a process, a journey, a deepening and opening that is never-ending, if we conceive it that way, and if it is eros above or as much as anything else which drives that journey and reveals or opens truth because of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, then the discoveries on the way are still valid as partial, provisional truths. They may be partial truths, but they're provisional truths.

And so we see parallels to that in science. Again, some of this overlaps with things I said in the Four Parables series. Just as in the history of science, Newton's laws of mechanics and gravitation, for example, function—they do function—very well to predict outcomes within a limited range. Within a limited range of accuracy, but also of the phenomena that we're dealing with. Newton's laws function very well to predict outcomes. It was Newton's laws that enabled us to land a rocket on the moon—very complicated mathematics working that out. And even to send probes to Jupiter or Neptune, with tremendous accuracy of prediction. It was all coming basically from Newtonian mathematics and equations.

They function very well to predict outcomes: how this cannonball will fly, exactly where this tennis ball will land, how high it will go, and so forth, within a limited range. And because of that, because they predicted outcomes so well for so long before there was stuff that didn't fit, they seemed, for so long,

absolutely true—because they functioned so well to predict outcomes.

But in fact, Newton's laws are only—and does the word "law" even qualify anymore?—they're only, in fact, partially or provisionally true. They've been superseded by Einstein's special and general relativity theories, the conceptions and the equations. And so there's something in science where we see this—what we can call provisional truth. It's not like Newton's laws are completely not true or irrelevant, but they are not completely adequate beyond a certain level. It depends what we want to do, and depends also not just what we want to do or want to calculate or want to figure out or explain, but also depends on what our idea of truth is.

But we see a similar thing in Dharma. The relative truth of dependent fabrication, dependent unfabricating—it still functions. From its basis, from an understanding of "yes, if there's clinging, if there's aversion, if there's selfing to some degree, it will fabricate more; if, to the degree that I let go of clinging, let go of aversion, let go of fabricating, let go of delusion, avijjā, there will be unfabricating"—from the basis of that relative truth, we can accurately predict, as I was sharing recently, the fact that when you direct mettā at phenomena, keeping this phenomenon in your attention but directing mettā and compassion right at it as you pay attention to it, the phenomenon fades.

Or the same thing as I mentioned yesterday: if I view something as anattā as I'm paying attention to it, or any of the other three characteristics, there'll be some degree of fading. Even though fabrication and dependent origination, as we would conventionally understand them to be operating between separable phenomena—"this gives rise to that, dependent on this comes this," etc., as if they're separable and real entities, phenomena—that whole view of fabrication and dependent arising is not ultimately true. "This is fabricated by the mind," or "self is fabricated by clinging," or "this link in dependent origination is dependent on that link of dependent origination"—the twelve links as separable, real entities—that's not actually ultimately true.

But the relative truth of dependent fabrication and dependent unfabricating still functions, just as Newton's law still functions. They have a provisional truth to them. And impermanence as well is a provisional truth—a relative or conventional truth. Ultimately, neither impermanent nor permanent is true of anything, as Nagarjuna points out, because time is empty. Other reasons too.

So there's a parallel here in these three domains: science, classical dharma, and when we get into soul-making. The whole idea that conventional truths—the truths that open up through science, through the conventional truths of classical dharma, and the conventional truths of what we encounter in soul-making—these are provisional truths. They're provisional truths, but we can still have a journey, a directionality, a sort of infinite penetrability into truth in the bigger sense.

If we stay with this idea of conventional truth, something else I want to point out is that very easily conventional truths are assumed real. That's why I say conventional truths are provisional truths. It doesn't mean they're worthless. It doesn't mean they don't have a place. It doesn't mean they can't be

relied on. Cause and effect reliably—if I drop something heavy on my head, it'll... Well, it's actually not such a good example, but cause and effect, conventional truth still functions. It's a provisional truth.

Provisional truth can still be relied upon to a certain extent within certain provisos, within certain limits. What happens is conventional truths are then usually assumed to be real in all kinds of ways. Conventional truths are typically assumed to be real, assumed to be ultimate truths. So that's really one thing to be very, very important, very aware of and to be concerned with. It's something I've talked about and written about so much.

There's a second thing, which is also important. I've mentioned it before, but it's really worth emphasizing again, maybe with a slightly different illustration and angle. When we assume or when we adopt a conventional truth, one question is: is it real? Is it ultimately real or is it just a conventional provisional truth? But a second question is: what does the adoption of this conventional truth lead to? When I assume and conceive and look in the terms of this conventional truth, this provisional truth, what does it open up for me and what does it close for me? What does it bar from my experience, from my understanding, from my journey, from my life and practice?

Let me give an example. Recently, I taught the jhana retreat at Gaia House, and I am very, very ill, probably in the last stages of my life, with a lot of pain, and experimenting with—the doctors are experimenting, trying to find the right medication for pain, sometimes just making me foggy and affecting me in all kinds of ways, and tired, and other times really not touching the pain very much. There's a lot of pain, there's a lot of difficulty, there's not a lot of energy. A lot of my time is spent struggling with my digestion, or on the toilet, or whatever.

And I managed, with the help of the angels I think, to teach a twenty-three-day retreat just recently at Gaia House, jhana retreat, and several people said or wrote to me something like, "Your willpower is amazing. Wow, you have such willpower." But I appreciate the affection and the kind of compliment there, though I want to just linger on this, although it sounds analytical and nitpicky.

I just want to linger on this, because if a person is conceiving of what a dying person is choosing to do and then somehow able to sustain over time, teaching every day for hours despite all the other challenges—and if one conceives of that as a result of willpower, what's that actually implying?

Willpower to me implies—what is willpower? Will. What is the will? It's a faculty of the ego or the self that can decide autonomously to do or not to do something arbitrary. In other words, what it decides to do or not do is irrelevant. You understand? It's just a matter of something called willpower. The ability, the capacity is purely a matter of the strength and steadiness of something called will.

What about love? What about love of something? What about eros again?

Does that have no place in why something is possible? Why something is sustainable? What about the call, the calling or the wish of the daemon, the demon? What about a sense of duty, a sense that honoring the

demands of the angel is more important, more beautiful, more sacred than living comfortably or longer even, or living with pleasant vedanā or at least minimally unpleasant vedanā?

Of course, even before we get talking about eros and angels and soul duty and love and all that, what about just other factors like the capacity to see in different ways, the emptiness of dukkha, the emptiness of difficulty? What about qualities like patience? Patience to stay with what's difficult, what we call forbearance. It's one of the six paramis in—I think it's one of the six paramis of the Buddha religion, certainly one of the ten paramis of Mahayana. So there's a whole level that we could just look at in terms of classical Buddha Dharma teachings that's actually involved, rather than just simplifying it into this thing called will.

But what I want to emphasize more is, what about other dimensions of being? Aspects of our psychology, love, eros, again, the calling of the daemon, the sense of duty, the demands of the angel and the sense of that being more important than anything else in life. The honoring of that. That's more important, more beautiful, more sacred, as I said, than comfort or minimizing unpleasantness.

And if such a person is thinking in this way that doesn't include love, eros, the demand of the angel, the phenomenological fact of the call or the wish of the daemon, or the sense of the duty to the angel, if they are thinking without any of that, and if they are, on top of that, explicitly or even subtly, implicitly comparing—let's say themselves and their willpower to mine, and judging mine, again I want to put that in inverted commas because I don't think of it in terms of willpower really, and they're judging mine to be more, then they may be simply rather not understanding their own psychology, let alone my psychology—their own psychology or finely or accurately or carefully enough so their what seems like to them perhaps their relative absence of or their relatively weak willpower is—I say really, because otherwise they would mention it. Otherwise it would be included in how they assessed this, what seems to them, something quite remarkable, this feat of teaching through all that.

Their relative absence of something called willpower, relatively weak willpower, is really an absence of connection with their daemon, or their angel. A blocking, perhaps, somehow, of that connection and of their eros. And an inability to sense themselves as image and sense their lives with soul.

So I may come back to this, because all this actually bears on questions of ethics, on ethical choices. It applies, let's say, to ethical choices and to our individual ethos, our individual character. We may come back to this in another talk.

Now, of course, it's not that someone who has the kind of erotic relationship with a calling or a project or a creative project or an offering that they want to give or a service that they want to do, it's not that someone who has a sense of eros and duty to the angel and demands of the daemon and all that love—it's not that they will always feel that way. They always feel filled with love and eros and the juiciness of all that. So, of course, there will be times when the sense of calling, of love, eros, is not there, or is much diminished. And then there's, there may be at those times a reliance on something we could call will, or

resolution, or discipline, or something. Actually, I'm going to come back to those words.

But it's like parenting or being in a long-term relationship. You know deep down that you love something, and that you're totally committed to it, and that it's meaningful and important. You know that even at the times you are not, and it's that knowledge that sustains. It's not simple willpower, it's a knowledge of the soul depth of something. Even at the time you're not feeling that love or eros so directly.

So, at the risk, considerable risk probably, of sounding anal and maybe crossing the line into some kind of pedantry about words and the words people use. If someone had said to me, or if they'd used the word discipline, on the other hand, rather than will, because will just means, from the Latin, just means I want, I want something. It's from, just to stay with the intention. Discipline, on the other hand, is related to the word disciple, and from the Latin disciplina, which means teaching, or discipulus, which is a pupil, disceres, is to learn in Latin.

If a person uses that word, or if I think about it in those terms, there's a discipline involved in staying steady and showing up and offering that despite everything, all the challenges. Discipline implies that it's not self-enclosed. It's not self-deciding. It's not totally self-instigating and self-actualizing, as the word will is. We now commonly understand, actually, both words, will and discipline. But going more into the root of the word discipline, it could open out a different sense. It implies a relationship. At least its etymology implies a relationship. An imaginal relationship, perhaps. The image of offering something. The image of being a servant, doing one's duty. The image of what one wants to offer. The image of the retreat. The image of the teachings. The image of passing something on. The word discipline, in its more etymological meaning, invokes, implies, involves relationship.

It can become imaginal relationship and humility. I have to be humble to learn from this person or that person, or this thing, or that event or situation, or this experience. I have to be humble. Something has to be greater than me—the one who teaches, the thing that teaches me. And it implies, in all that, there is implied an other, and that can become an erotic, imaginal other.

So it's possible that the whole thing becomes an imaginal constellation. If we're talking about ethics and what it takes to stay true to one's ethics—really stand firm, courageously, unmovingly, unwaveringly—it may be that there's an image of that virtue, as we touched on in the Soulmaking Dharma talks on the Four Parables retreat. The virtue itself has become image, has become imaginal. And there's other there, and I'm in erotic, imaginal relationship with that other. I'm a discipulus and humble in relation to that other.

But it also might be a work project, a certain duty, a creative art project. Etienne Souriau talks about the angel of the work, the disciple of the angel of the work, perhaps. Just opening up words now to get a fuller sense of what can be involved here, when things are difficult, when things are challenging. When we want—how our sense of things can be extended. Put it that way. And not shrunken and amputated to fit into narrow and flat psychologies and philosophies.

So the word discipline could potentially, if we look at its etymology, open up more. Another word is resolve. A person could have used the word resolve: "Oh, you have such incredible resolve." Again, we typically hear these words—discipline, resolve, etc.—just as we hear the word will, as something totally self-instigated, self-initiated, self-sustaining, self-actualizing.

But the word resolve is from Latin re solvere, which means re, again, and solvere is to loosen, to loosen again. And solvere means to loosen or to release, but one of its meanings is to free from debt. So to free from debt again. What might it mean? To free from debt to the angel again, because the angel's demands are infinite and never-ending.

So I honor the angel by trying as best as I can to discern what my duty is and to carry that out as best as I can. And it will be not an exact copy of whatever the image is, or whatever the angel seems to be completely. I will always fall short. We've talked about this before. But there's, in that resolve, I'm freeing myself from debt because I'm paying my debt. Then I'm freed from that debt—the debt to the angel, to the daimon, the duty. And re again, because it will never end. And there's another duty, and the angel is always out ahead.

Or again, if we want to open up the potential meanings here, someone might have used the word sacrifice. I think someone did. And that means in Latin, sacer facere—facere is to make, and sacer is related to sacred, holy, to make holy or sacred.

Now, this isn't about me. I really want to point—again, I want to point something out about what I started with here, which was the general point about what conventional truths are we adopting? What do they lead to? The conventional truths that we adopt, the provisional truths that we adopt—in this case about psychology—what do they lead to? What do they open up or what do they limit?

Someone thinks in terms of certain ways, in terms of words like will, discipline, resolve, thinks of them as being self-enclosed, self-instigating, etc. Sacrifice already, hopefully it's already got the hint of another level in it, because it's already got the implication of making something holy or sacred. But it can lose that—it has lost that a lot in our culture.

So this isn't about me. I want to open up something about the ways that we tend to think about our psychology, about what drives us, about what we're doing, about what makes certain things possible or not. The question is: what do these ideas, what do the truths we are grasping at and holding onto, or even just adopting, open up or not? Where do they take us?

So if we go with the etymology of sacrifice—making holy, making sacred—what's holy? What's sacred here?

Again, the angel and the angel of the work. Very often these days when I teach, I carry an image not just of contemporary practitioners and students, but of unknown future practitioners - those who will never be known to me, existing elsewhere in space and time. This future sangha becomes a sacred, imaginal other

to me, sensed as sacred.

To refract that angel of the work into this plane of existence, to bring forth that refraction, is sacred. To labor for this is doing for what is sacred. *Fiche* - doing. *Sacre* - sacred. Sacrifice: doing for what is sacred. Feel it as a making sacred.

If we're accustomed to certain psychological frameworks, all this may sound pompous or grandiose, and of course there's that danger. The ego can seize upon it, reify it, and create all manner of complications. But when held in the right way, in the soul-making way, it actually opens up dimensions and distances, perspectives and possibilities. We're then fueled and supported by something very different from my will and our flatly conceived notions of motivation.

It's important to understand that there will be times - of course there are times - when one doesn't have the sense of the other, of the calling, of the eros, of the love. Then perhaps we're in a mode of simply getting through, where the sense of the other, the love, the eros, the images, is much diminished.

Here we encounter another word: commitment. In long-term relationships or parenting, one is committed. *Com* derives from the Latin, meaning "to put together" or "to join." When you make a commitment, you join. But what are we joining here? In partnership, in commitment to our children's education, upbringing, safety - what exactly are we joining?

We could say that in those times when it feels flat, like drudgery, when we're not seeing with a sense of soul, when there isn't the depth and eros and calling and love - when we lack that sense in the moment - what are we joining? We're joining that very flat drudgery to the knowledge of the holy. In long-term commitments, relationships, or parenting, we rest upon that knowledge. We're joining what feels like flat drudgery to the holy, joining the holy to the flat drudgery. It's connected as if by an umbilical cord, fed by that knowledge and that sense.

Even this morning, I felt the effects of medication - so tired, lacking in mental energy, deeply sleepy. How would I manage these talks? With what seemed like very reduced mental capacity, sitting in attempted meditation, at some point the ideas themselves - these very ideas I'm speaking about today - became sensed as angels.

The ideas became erotic, imaginal, other, angelic. They wanted to be communicated. These concepts, some of the things I've been exploring today, want to be shared. There's a parallel here with the notion of the ideation of the imaginal, which I introduced on the Four Parables retreat. The ideas become sensed with soul and transform into images, into imaginal images.

Even when my mind feels tired, foggy, sleepy, lacking in energy and brightness, I can sense as other - not other than me, but as other - their energy, these idea angels, these angel ideas. I can sense their energy, their brightness, their desire and eros to be made manifest. Somehow I can trust that their eros will enable that manifestation.

This question - what does a conventional truth that I'm adopting deliver? Where does it take me? What does it open up? What does it close? - reveals that selves and others and worlds and cosmoses depend on the conventional truths I entertain or adopt, and much more powerfully when I assume they're real. These truths might limit certain avenues, entire realms of opening and being, possibility, conception - all of it.

Again, willpower versus eros or daemon. It's a helpful psychological notion—psychological theories, assumptions, so-called realities. It's a helpful idea. But compared with eros and daemon, it's very much less rich. And if we just have notions of willpower, we're actually missing part of our psychology. We're totally not seeing part of our psychology.

One could even go further and try to reduce willpower. You know, there are currents of reductionism in psychology that exist. And you could try to reduce willpower to a kind of quasi-electronic circuit of intentions and vedanā. Then the question becomes whether the reactions to vedanā—either unpleasant vedanā or pleasant vedanā that are not associated with what your intention has set out to do—overpower or deflect the intention.

Someone might experience the pleasant vedanā of having a nice long rest when they could be up preparing talks or interviewing. Or the pleasant vedanā of eating something that might be pleasant in the mouth, but will later be difficult in the digestive system, which may affect their capacity to teach.

One could try to reduce willpower to this idea of a quasi-electronic circuit of intentions moving along electronic pathways and vedanā. The question becomes whether reactions to the vedanā overpower or deflect the intention. You have a series of little gates in the circuit—one, zero, zero, one; one, zero, zero, one; zero, zero, zero, one. It depends on each electronic circuit junction whether a reaction has overpowered or deflected the intention, or whether the intention has stayed true to its course.

One can have a neurological model that's something along these lines—probably a lot more complex, but something along these lines.

Does that kind of reductionist explanation constitute for us an understanding? What does it do to our lives? Does it enrich our lives?

It might help at times to frame our process, our experience, our practice in those kinds of ways. Here's an intention, here's a vedanā arising—careful with the reaction. Can my reaction be taken care of so it doesn't deflect the intention from its course or overpower it?

But that's only one conceptual framework, really—one way of looking. And the important thing I want to say right now is it misses so much else.

Even if we think and practice that way, and even if through thinking and practicing that way we're able to better stay with an intention despite many incidents of that intention encountering unpleasant vedanā or

pleasant vedanā pulling it away, or thoughts and beliefs that may deflect it—even if we're able to do that so that we get to do what was important or meaningful for us because our intentions stayed steady—such a framework does nothing to illuminate what actually is meaningful to us. It does nothing to illuminate meaningfulness itself.

What is meaningfulness in such a framework? How am I going to explain meaningfulness in terms of these neural circuits and gates shutting or opening, or neurotransmitters being secreted from one neuron to another, or movement of atoms and molecules across a membrane, or electrons?

Well, we'd have to reduce meaningfulness again. What is meaningful? It's just another pleasant vedanā. It's just another one or zero. Or meaningfulness just becomes the meaningfulness node of the circuit—just another one or zero on the binary circuit computer model of the brain.

This is such a poor and impoverishing psychology. Yes, to a certain extent it might be useful—we can adapt that kind of thinking to a way of thinking about mindfulness practice—but it leaves so much out. It's poor and impoverishing as a psychology.

All this becomes really important when we talk about ethics, and I hope to do so in a few days—to talk more about ethics and virtues and reductionist, behaviorist explanations that try to reduce our notions of ethics or virtues and really decimate them into more reductive and behaviorist notions.

Charles Taylor has written about this several times—he's a Canadian philosopher. I think he's still alive, though he's pretty old now. One of the things he says in his book Sources of the Self, and elsewhere as well, is that explanations like that actually end up being of no use—I would say almost no use—for a person living life. Certainly when it comes to ethics and virtues, they're no use for a person living life. They leave out what he calls actually indispensable ideas and terms.

This is quite pernicious because we tend to think that a real understanding, a real explanation of ethical behavior or feelings about virtues or what's really going on when we're ethical or virtuous—a real explanation must be based in realities. And the only realities are the realities that natural science, basically physics, has decided are real. In other words, atoms, electrons, neutrons, protons, and all the rest of it. Everything else is not really real. So try and explain everything using those constituents.

There are so many problems with that—I've gone into this already in this talk and in other talks. But the point he makes is that for human beings, in a cosmos where there are human beings, attempts at reductionist and purely neurological explanations—which anyway always fall short of actually explaining anything—they don't explain consciousness or mind from matter. They haven't yet, and I don't think they ever will.

They actually fall short. But apart from that, for human beings in a cosmos where there are human beings, such attempts at purely neurological, purely reductionist so-called explanations don't actually form the best account. The best account means what makes sense of things. What do I need to use as a human being

in order to make sense of things, in order to navigate the world of ethical choices?

And I use the term "ethical choices" in a very wide sense to include things like: here is something that feels important to me, and there are a lot of reasons why I could decide not to do it.

And all these other challenging concerns. So that's ethos ethics as well. They're provisional truths, but they're not necessarily the best accounts because they're not the accounts I can work with. I cannot talk in those terms and explain to myself in those terms of reductionist neurology in a way that makes sense to me of the choices I need to make and of what will help me make those choices and help me to carry them out and stay steady.

Just as certain notions or models in physics—it's called the standard model of particle physics—seem to be, for now (it's actually hitting some serious problems), but seem to be, for now, for us, the best account we can manage of physical reality. When we get to the human reality, they're not the best account anymore. They're simply not the best account.

So this question, this inquiry, is really important, so crucial. What does this conventional truth that I'm holding, that I'm adopting, that I'm even just entertaining—what does it lead me to? What does it bring? What are its consequences for my experience, for my sense of things, for my sense of self and world and other? So it's that question. And there's the question: am I assuming it's real? Am I actually assuming a conventional truth is an ultimate truth? Is something real? This idea, this model, this notion is actually a reality. Am I assuming that?

So two questions there. We need to be careful with assumptions, but we also need to be careful with conclusions.

Sometimes we have a notion and a model, and it does function in the way that good science functions, where a theory or a law equation in science works as a provisional truth. It works, as we said, because it has predictive power—because that notion enables you to predict something happening or occurring or unfolding, if this or this is the case, that otherwise you wouldn't have been able to predict. So it has predictive power.

An example from the soul-making logos, from the soul-making Dharma logos, would be this: we can predict, we can expect, that unless we block the soul-making dynamic, unless we block the eros, or psyche or logos is blocked in some way, we can expect that the natural process of the soul-making dynamic will begin to involve not just the imaginal object, but also the self becoming imaginal, and then also the world becoming imaginal in some kind of cosmic theosis. Or if we start with the self in other and world or whatever, that this spreading will include self, other, world—and in fact, as we've discussed many times, self, other, world, eros—all become imaginal. They become infused with the imaginal, become infected, drawn in, involved, caught up in the whole soul-making dynamic and become imaginal. That's a prediction that we can make so that we expect that it bears out.

In our practice we can notice it. In doing interviews you can notice it. You can expect it. You can look for it. And if it's not happening, it's pointing to something being blocked. And then the question is: okay, where is it blocked?

So that would be an example of a conventional truth, or a conventional notion, that has only conventional truth and still has predictive power, and therefore is a useful provisional truth, a useful provisional tool, a useful notion.

Or take the whole notion of the soul-making dynamic itself—that eros will ignite that whole dynamic so that psyche, eros in seeking more, pothos in eros in seeking more, will open up more beyonds in psyche: more images, more dimensions, more aspects. So more will be perceived. And that will inflame eros even more. And the whole process opens up even more until it pushes on logos. And I'm describing it in one order—there are many possible permutations of how it opens. Pushing on logos and then the ideation changes. Either it's stretched or shattered. And all that opens up the sense of the beloved other even more, and there's even more eros. And so the eros-psyche-logos dynamic will work like that.

Both of these predictions—that self, other, world, eros become imaginal, and that the eros-psyche-logos will galvanize each other, deepen, widen, open, complexify each other—both of those predictions come from the very basic sort of provisional truth or notion or theory: soul loves soul-making. Soul loves soul-making. Just that simple kind of axiom leads to these other levels of notions. It's all provisional truth, you could say. But there's predictive power in provisional truth, again, unless they're blocked—but in that case it points to: aha, okay, where's the block? And you can find the block, perhaps unblock it, and then you see the process happening as predicted.

So that's an example of a provisional truth being used to make valid, helpful conclusions through its predictive power.

But careful with this. Some while ago—well, in fact many times—people, in my own experience as well, find that they've independently received or arrived at or opened to the same or very similar images. Either both have similar images of one person in a dyad, or they've arrived at them independently in all kinds of ways. But it's not that one person shared an image with the other and described it, and then the other person got a sense of the image.

They arrived at them kind of separately. But the people themselves were connected in some soul-making relationship. And I'm careful of what does that imply. What does that imply?

So here's an image that's shared, and one of the perhaps tempting conclusions is that from the fact that two or more people spontaneously share the same or a similar image, it could be that the image itself, its content, should be reified. Now because we've arrived at this independently, it must mean there's something true about this image—true in the sense of real.

It doesn't need to imply that. It doesn't automatically imply that. So careful about conclusions as well.

Careful about assumptions, but careful about conclusions as well.

It may imply—this fact that two or more people independently share the same or a very similar image may imply, or it's more likely that it implies—something like the fact that the *citta*, the mind or the soul or consciousness, is not as bound by and not as bound to the individual physical organism as we typically assume in our modern culture.

So there are two conclusions there, and to me the second is the more justifiable conclusion, or step towards a conclusion. It suggests more than a reification of images.

The imaginal middle way doesn't apply to the latter conclusion, or the suggestion that minds are not really just bound up and ending with our skin—they're not bound up with my neurons, my brain, bound to and by individual physical organisms as we tend to assume so easily in our modern culture. That may be suggesting a fact of conventional or provisional truth.

The imaginal middle way doesn't apply because we're not talking about images then. We're talking about the nature of the *citta* and the capacities of the *citta*, the boundaries of the *citta*. The imaginal middle way should still apply to the image, in soul-making *logos* anyway. So it applies still to the image, even though they've both been arrived at independently, sharing the same image or a similar image. But the imaginal middle way doesn't apply to questions about where is the boundary of the mind here? Is it just as we tend to think, within the physical organism?

Sometimes things like this happen. Many things happen, and we have to—in soul-making practice, all kinds of things happen, and it's extremely interesting. But careful of our sort of logical process and what we tend to think something implies, what the conclusions are, what's suggested by some experience that's happened.

Especially something like that, because one of the things in our culture—one of the sort of ontological and epistemological assumptions in our culture that's pretty entrenched—is that if a perception is socially agreed upon, in other words, if it's not just me perceiving something and you can't perceive it, if we—you and I and another person—perceive the same thing, then that social agreement of a perception tends to validate the reality of that perception for us.

That's one of our epistemologies: that we need to socially agree on something for it to be real. And anything that isn't socially agreed upon is not regarded as real. So that's one of our received criteria for what is real and what constitutes knowledge of the real. It's received and usually unquestioned epistemology and ontology.

So it can be tricky. Because we're sharing an image spontaneously, we tend to think, "Well, it must be real," because that's one of the criteria we tend to use for deciding what counts as real.

Let me take this point a little further about assumptions and conclusions and conventional truths. The

question is: what do they lead to? What am I assuming? What am I concluding? What conventional truths am I adopting or clinging to? And what does that lead to?

We've talked about something very different. Now let me talk about the nature of time, for example, and explain something briefly.

Going back centuries and centuries—millennia, really—there were two views of time, two persistent views of time we can trace through the centuries in Western and I think also in Asian thought and Eastern thought. One of them is that time is something real. It's essentially a substance, like Newton's idea.

The other, though, is that time is essentially the product of the soul. It's something that the soul kind of creates, let's say, or co-creates.

The second point of view—that time is a product of the soul—was the view of Plotinus, who is regarded as the founder of Neoplatonism. He probably would have regarded himself just as a Platonist, but anyway. He held that point of view, and his explanation for it is that the soul is unable to grasp the contents of Intelligence. I have to explain what that word Intelligence means in this context.

Intelligence means, we could say, the attributes of Buddha-nature, or the attributes of divinity, or the attributes of the ultimate One, the angelic essences, you could say. The soul is unable to grasp the contents of that *pleroma* of Intelligences, those attributes of divinity.

In other words, here you have Buddha-nature, you have God, or you have the ultimate One. And just as with *Dharmakāya*, we could say the attributes of the *Dharmakāya,* there's a kind of transcendent nature beyond being and non-being, a kind of unity.

And then there's another level where the attributes of the Dharmakaya—love and compassion and power and countless other aspects—become manifest or visible at a level of reality before they become physically manifest. So there's a way that this Dharmakaya, for example, if we use Buddhist language, can be conceived as totally beyond any attributes, totally beyond even the attribute of being or non-being, one or nothing, or many.

And then another level where one can focus on the attributes of God, the names of God, the attributes of the Dharmakaya. So the soul is not able to grasp all that in one movement, in one indivisible act. Instead, it must approach them one by one, or perhaps in groups, and it must come into contact with, and behold, and get to know, and open to, and get to love, and practice manifesting those aspects of the divinity of the Dharmakaya. Let's say several at a time. Can't do it all at once. Maybe one by one, maybe several at a time.

But in so doing, it engenders time and produces the sensible world as a temporal world. Soul here really means world soul. So these hierarchies of reality where soul—world soul—engenders time. Time is a product of the soul because of its need to know and manifest those attributes of the transcendent divine, but its inability to do so in one gulp, in one gestalt. So it does so bit by bit or aspect by aspect, one by one

or several at a time, and in doing so it engenders time—engenders time and also the sensible temporal world that we live in. World soul and our soul as part of, or as mimicking, the world soul.

It's a very different idea of time than absolute time as Newton would have it—independently existing time.

Now, in a very different way, the whole ways of looking approach and inquiry into emptiness that I talked about before, and that I've outlined in Seeing That Frees and other places—this phenomenological approach to emptiness and dependent arising—comes to similar kinds of conclusions. That time is a dependent arising, dependent on the way of looking. Even time, even something so basic, is fabricated. We've arrived at similar conclusions, though here we have what sounds like a very metaphysical or arbitrary metaphysical theory. I doubt that it was. I think it was probably as much something that came out of philosophical thinking as it was something that came out of meditative exploration, I'm guessing, for Plotinus and others.

And in Seeing That Frees and this phenomenological approach, ways of looking approach to emptiness and dependent arising, you have something that comes out of meditation and then realizes time is empty—the sense of time is a dependent arising. And then again, as I mentioned earlier, in recent years in quantum physics, there's also this sense that perhaps time is not a fundamental reality, but an emergent reality. And quantum reality as such is dependent on the observer.

So even within Neoplatonism, by the way, there were different points of view. Plotinus had that point of view. Iamblichus had a different point of view, a more substantial view of time, apparently. Alexander of Aphrodisias, who was actually a commentator on Aristotle, said that humans are poetae of time—the poetic creators of time. Time is part of our poiesis, and we talk about cosmopoiesis. Well, so there's a poiesis of time. So it's the subjectivity of time as its primary ontological reality, as opposed to the objective existence of time.

But what I want to ask again is, if time has no ultimately real existence, no inherent existence independent of the soul or the observer, what does that imply? What does it lead to and what does it imply for liberation? What kind of liberation does such an insight bring? What scope does it mean for what liberation means and involves? What also does it mean for soul-making? What does it mean for psychological healing?

We tend so much to think of the past caused this difficulty in the present. Time moves that way and it's an inexorable reality—time and the placement of things and the direction of causality, etc. So what does it mean then for psychological healing? Again this question: what we hold onto, what we adopt, what we grasp in terms of assumptions, conclusions and conventional provisional truths—what do they deliver? What do they open up for us and what do they limit for us?

So what becomes possible is a whole new way of approaching psychological healing, and doors that might

open up—depths and areas of psychological healing that may not be reachable, possible, touchable through any other means—may be opened up, for instance, just from a different metaphysic of time. The whole notion of healing and how healing might be or what it needs or what's involved, but also a notion of human beings.

If our notion of time is not of something ultimately real, independently existing, what does that mean for a human being? What does it mean about death? I'm hoping to come back to talk about perspectives on death, different perspectives on death. But we jump so easily into very simplistic notions, all of them reified, around death and impermanence and time. And also around a human being. A human being is someone who's born and then dies and that's it. Whatever. Or they live forever in heaven or hell or whatever it is. Too simple. Too reified.

I mean, you know, again, valid, conventionally helpful, conventionally perhaps to a certain point, but provisional truths. Maybe not the whole truth.

Well, if you can see then, you can understand what gets blocked, what avenues, what openings, what experiences, perceptions, understandings, transformations become impossible if we're entrenched in the conventional view of time.

For example, I was talking about thinking of ways of looking, practicing ways of looking, teaching ways of looking, but actually harboring this idea of some fundamental, basic, sort of nebulous flow or flux to which we apply ways of looking and get this or that appearance of this or that object, but that basic flux being real, and time with it being real. And what that then prevents us from opening to, understanding, reaching, being touched by, what vistas, what realms get prevented, how significant this is.

But if time can also be opened up that way, conventional truths about time, different conventional truths about time can be adopted. What might that do? How might that open up for us areas and questions such as psychological healing and the nature of a human being and death? Not to mention liberation and soul-making.

These are important questions, important realizations.

Okay, I think we'll stop there for today. Thank you for listening.

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