Pain, as Void and as Sacrament

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 2:34:37

What I would like to do today is to offer a few things that might be helpful working with pain, working with predominantly physical pain. Although some of what I'll share will also apply very well to mental pain, I want to offer approaches that may be helpful in working with physical pain in meditation. These are skills and arts that can certainly reduce the suffering around and in relation to pain, but also actually attenuate, ease pain, and reduce the actual sensations of pain. Or, as well as that, can sanctify the pain, the very unpleasant sensations, transubstantiate them, divinize them. I'll explain what's involved there and what we mean by that.

So certainly, what I want to address is meditative skills and approaches—development of those arts of meditation that can reduce the suffering that comes with pain in relationship to pain, can also reduce pain, the actual intensity of the pain, sometimes quite dramatically, and also the kind of transubstantiation, divinization, sacramentalization of pain.

I should say that I'm personally aware through direct experience and painfully aware that there are three types of pain. There's occasional pain, from sitting a really long time in meditation, repeatedly on retreat—back hurts, knees hurt, hips hurt. There's also chronically recurrent pain as a kind of second category. It's maybe not all the time in an uninterrupted way, but it keeps returning. Maybe it never fades completely. Maybe it does fade completely at times, or fade naturally and just go away. But it keeps coming back. It's a chronic feature of one's life. One has to deal with that. And then there's simply chronic pain. It's just there all the time.

What I'd like to offer here—ways of working in meditation—applies across the board to all kinds of pain. However, in the third category, where there's pain that's just chronic, it won't be possible all the time to engage some of these practices because one's life will naturally need to be busy doing other stuff, interacting with other people, working. I have to meet the world, be in the world, do in the world, in relationship and work and whatever else. And there's this pain pulling on the attention, but it's not possible to give it the wholehearted fullness of intention or the kind of skill and subtlety and sophistication of attention of some of the practices I'm going to talk about all the time. Because I'm busy doing other stuff. I can't give it the same quality of attention as I can when I'm sitting down or standing or walking to meditate.

And so, of course, thankfully now, most people, certainly in the West, and hopefully more and more in developing countries have access to pain-killing medication. Not to forget that if there's just chronic pain, because we can't be in deliberate, full-on, artful meditative attention with it all the time. But actually, what

I'm talking about applies to all three categories.

Partly what I'm going to do is just briefly list a selection of practices, not an exhaustive list at all. What it is, though, is a list in a little bit of a progressive or ascending order of skill or development or art. In other words, I'll start with practices and approaches, meditative approaches that are relatively easy, relatively well-known as well, and then include more and more that are actually a lot more powerful, but also a lot more difficult to develop.

What I really want to stress, though, is that they're absolutely possible. I'm not talking about anything that's not possible. So if some of this, towards the end of the list, or even the middle of the list, sounds completely outlandish and otherworldly and impossible for a human being with a physical body to accomplish, that's just not true. It's so much a matter of finding the right ways to practice and applying oneself in the right ways and really developing one's art stage by stage.

Some of the things later in the list will depend on the arts developed in the earlier stages of the list. They build on those stages as platforms. And then what we're talking about is absolutely possible. Absolutely possible. And available, accessible to us as human beings. No reason why not.

I'm not going to go into too much detail around technique because I've done so for actually most of these practices elsewhere and either written about them in Seeing That Frees or talked about them in different talks over the years and given quite a lot of detail of technique there. But what I do want to do is mention them and give some explanations of what we need to understand here. And I also want to include soul-making practices in relation to pain, sensing pain with soul, and so forth.

So, talking predominantly about physical pain, but much that I'm saying will apply to mental dukkha as well. If you're listening at a time when mental dukkha is what's interesting to you, then see if you can see how much of what I'm offering here is adaptable. And try it. And occasionally, of course, as I go, I'll try to remember and remind and put things in terms of mental dukkha as well.

The first practice is—well, the first thing I should say is probably everyone knows after being a young child that if we tense up, if we tense our muscles with pain, it usually makes things worse. Not always, but usually makes things worse. So if there's pain, a first thing to do for working in meditation is just relax the rest of the body as much as possible, because that tensing of the musculature is only adding to the problem.

The first thing may be very obvious, but it's actually quite important—just relax the body as much as possible.

The first practice is what we might call simple mindfulness or bare attention. So we're bringing mindfulness and a kind of bare attention to the pain.

What does that mean? It means trying to drop the story around the pain—the story that goes with it of

how it shouldn't be there, and why me, and maybe I'll be a cripple the rest of my life, or whatever it is. Whether it's "I am this way" or "it's not fair" or comparisons to other people, whatever story there is, the attempt with the way of looking we call simple mindfulness or bare attention is to drop the story. That's one of the strands of unhelpful relationship that we're trying to drop—dropping the story.

And seeing if it's possible to come, as part of dropping the story, to really come into the present moment, into bare or direct contact with the sensations of the pain. So less story—just what does this actually feel like? What does it feel like now, in this present moment? Not dwelling on how long it has been that way, how long this pain has been around, not dwelling on how long it will be or might be this way. So we're not joining the dots.

If you know the practice, I talk about sometimes about dot-to-dot, seeing how pain gets constructed—or actually, most phenomena get constructed, but certainly dukkha phenomena get constructed by joining the dots in time and joining the dots in space. So that's part of dropping the story. But really seeing: can I come in now? What does it feel like now? What's the sense of it now? What's my experience of it now? Really getting that sense in the present moment, coming back to the present moment.

What's happening, if you like, is we're jettisoning the story, but we're also jettisoning the projections of the mind into the past and the future, so that what we're relating to and what we're actually perceiving and carrying in the moment is not a temporally extended experience that's then made heavier and more difficult by that sense of temporal extension—all the way back in the past, all the way potentially in the future with the worry of all that. What it really is, is this sensation right now, these sensations right now.

It might also be possible, as an aspect of what we call mindfulness and bare attention, to even sometimes drop the label "pain." Sometimes even that word "pain," the labeling of it, starts to constitute something as pain. In other words, the label is not a neutral factor. It's not that there is something and then I label it afterwards and it would feel just the same if I labeled it "tomato" or "pleasure" or whatever. We start to realize that "pain" is actually a fabricating, constitutive factor. So part of the attempt in the way of looking that we call mindfulness, simple mindfulness or bare attention, is to see if I can drop the labeling "pain" that the mind is either doing automatically or deliberately.

Sometimes it might be labeling in a Mahasi technique way, which can be really helpful, but at a certain point it's like: hmm, maybe that labeling is actually not so helpful, because it's actually part of consolidating, solidifying, promulgating something. So that's really interesting as well.

So less story, more present moment, which means less temporal extension, less past and future and the worry that goes with that. Less construction by joining the dots in time. And I could say also in space, perhaps, but let's just stick with the time one for now. Dropping the labeling of pain, etc. And in all that, there's less reactivity, we could say. And in a way one's also trying to be less reactive. It's part of even that initial movement of just relaxing—just relax the body. See if I can be less reactive here at different levels of my being.

What this can lead to, if I just stay steady with that practice, keep trying with that practice, bringing that way of looking, the mindfulness and bare attention, is that the pain might just become—it's just sensations. It's stripped of all these other levels of story and temporal extension and all that. And it might even be stripped of the label of pain. It's just unpleasant sensations.

It might be, if the mindfulness is really strong, that even you find, even at this very basic level, that if you really sustain the mindfulness in these ways—keep dropping those unhelpful factors out: the temporal extending, the story, the labeling, the reactivity at a certain level—that if the mindfulness is really sustained and really strong and there's quite an intensity to the mindfulness, the degree of unpleasantness, which really means the degree of pain, reduces right there as I'm attending to it very carefully, very intently with the mindfulness moment after moment.

So that's what we might call the first practice. Actually, we might call it one version of the first practice, because a second way of doing that practice would be pretty much the same thing, but with a much more spacious awareness.

So in the first practice, let's say it was my back hurting, or the small of my back or my knee or something, I focus the attention in a narrow way on those sensations there and just work to support the way of looking we're calling mindfulness or bare attention—which when we unpacked it meant those things that I explained. I'm just focusing there in that small region, narrow attention, over and over, supporting and engaging that way of looking that we call mindfulness or bare attention.

But one could also do the same thing within a much, much larger space. So actually, again, relax the body, then let the awareness get really large. I mean, larger than the room that you're in, as large as up to the sky, even larger, if it's possible.

One way of really helping open up the awareness to a more spacious awareness is through listening, because sounds come from all different distances and directions. Simply give some attention to listening. If you can do that for a while, disregarding the pain entirely, that's wonderful. If you need to include the pain while opening to listening, that works too. Either way, support and allow the awareness to open up much more spaciously.

Then, as you hold the sensations of pain—the vedanā, the unpleasant vedanā—within this vast space, you'll notice they arise and pass away, flickering. As we pay closer attention, we naturally observe all kinds of qualities in their texture: the way they throb, pulse, and flicker. All of this movement means they're changing in time. This entire dance of appearing, disappearing, throbbing, pulsating, fluctuating sensations occurs somewhere in the body, but now exists within the much larger context of this vastly expanded space. The unpleasant sensations are simply a small area bubbling away within a much, much larger context.

You have to practice this to actually discover how remarkably helpful this approach can be. In a way, we

could say that instead of the pain occupying perhaps ninety or a hundred percent of our awareness, it now takes up much, much less. We actually have that felt sense: here is just this small area of pain within a much vaster space. Its impact on the being, on the psyche, on the citta, becomes something relatively small within a much larger expanse.

We can stay with even this level of practice, and it can lead to very deep, beautiful places, transforming our whole sense of experience and opening up our entire perspective. Whether we practice with narrow attention, as I first described, or with this much more spacious awareness, both approaches to mindfulness or bare attention will lead to a lessening of suffering in the moment. There will be less suffering in relation to, or arising from, the pain.

I could say there is less fabrication of the suffering, because we begin to realize that the pain becomes stronger only when we look in those other ways—when we unwittingly drag in temporal extension, when we bring in our story and the "poor me" and "why me," when we engage in the kind of labeling that actually constitutes and solidifies something. It's only when we do that that the suffering intensifies. When we let go, when we drop these elements from our way of looking, we discover that suffering was stronger when those fabrications were present. When we release them, the suffering lessens.

In other words, through this way of looking—mindfulness, bare attention, whether with narrow or spacious awareness—we fabricate less suffering. There is less suffering fabricated. As we practice, there's a fairly good chance that at times there will also be less fabrication of the unpleasant vedanā itself—actually less pain, not just less suffering in relationship to the pain, but less pain too.

All these factors—bringing the self in, bringing the story in, bringing reactivity in, papañca, temporal extension, labeling—they're all fabricators of vedanā. We really want to understand this. Sometimes people speak as if vedanā is simply a given, just what it is, and all we can do is minimize the suffering—the second arrow—in relationship to it. With just this first practice, or these two versions of it, that might indeed be what we see: yes, I can minimize the suffering around it, but the intensity of the unpleasant pain remains unchanged.

As we move into other practices, that whole teaching about the two arrows—the idea that suffering is an unnecessary addition to pain—reveals itself as a provisional truth, a provisional teaching. We begin to realize that, as with the wheel of dependent origination and its twelve links, the fabrications of self, papañca, reactivity fabricate all the elements of that wheel, all the links of that chain. So as there's more fabrication—more stories of self, more "poor me," more "why me," more comparing myself to other people who I'm sure can sit comfortably—as these fabrications increase, there's more fabrication of suffering. But there's also possibly more fabrication of the pain itself, the unpleasant vedanā. We may start to see this even at this level, or it may become apparent only as we move into the next levels of practice.

Usually where there's vedanā, there's some form of clinging. Let me expand what I mean by clinging. Always where there's vedanā, there's clinging. The habitual response to pleasant or unpleasant vedanā is

clinging. We try to hang on to the pleasant or get more of it, and we try to push away or feel averse to the unpleasant. Even with the so-called neutral vedanā—neither pleasant nor unpleasant—we tend to fall asleep, and actually there's a kind of clinging in that too.

Or get dull, disinterested, bored, uninterested.

So this clinging—what we want to understand is how this clinging works as a fabricator. There's one way, as I mentioned, when there's really a lot of pushing away or trying to hold on, where the pain's very strong, there's a contraction of the muscles, and that contraction doesn't help. There's also contraction of awareness that happens with clinging. And as we discussed when we talked about the second version of mindfulness with much more spacious awareness, that contraction of awareness also doesn't help. It partly increases, as we said before, the sense of how pervasive the pain is—that it's taking up the whole of consciousness, the whole of experience.

There's also a way in which we could say that a smaller awareness puts pressure on something. It's like having a gas in a container—if we squeeze that container and shrink it, the pressure of the gas will increase. The intensity, the pressure in physics, is related to the speed of the movement, the momentum, the kinetic energy of the movement. So analogously, the pain increases when there's contraction of awareness.

But there's something more fundamental than this muscular contraction or contraction of awareness. There's something more fundamental to the way that clinging works. The degree of fabrication of vedanā is dependent on clinging. More clinging, more vedanā is fabricated. Certainly it's highly obvious to most practitioners, even after they've practiced just a little bit of insight meditation: more clinging, more suffering. But another level is more clinging, not just more fabrication of suffering, but more fabrication of vedanā itself.

This level of practice is really important and it's a basic skill for everyone to develop. It may or may not, as I said, reveal this deeper level of understanding about dependent origination and the way clinging fabricates vedanā. But then there's a whole other level.

For example, there are practices such as the three characteristics as ways of looking. Again, all this is in *Se eing That Frees*. But practicing the three characteristics in very specific ways—really engaging them as ways of looking. Those three, or actually any emptiness way of looking. Again, many, many in *Seeing That Frees*. So the three characteristics are dukkha and anicca and anattā. There's what I call Dukkha Method 1 and Dukkha Method 2, and then with Dukkha Method 2, there are different variations. I'm not going into detail because I've done this in so much detail elsewhere. You can find it certainly in *Seeing That Frees*, and you can find recordings that talk about it.

But there are many variations, and we can talk about welcoming practice—again, both with narrow attention and with spacious attention or awareness. We can talk about directing mettā to phenomena, to

dharmas. Many, many practices here, again, can be done in narrow and spacious attention.

We can talk about emptiness practices such as seeing the whole and the parts of something—let's say a pain or a region of pain—contemplating the mutual dependent rising and mutual emptiness of the whole and the parts of the pain. We can talk about the practice of not one, not many. This pain is not one, not many. And that's a way of seeing its emptiness—looking at it, attending to the pain, feeling, sensing the pain. At the same time we have this very delicate, agile, sophisticated understanding, very lightly, almost like in shorthand, very delicately in the way of looking, wrapped up in the way of looking. It's not one, not many, meaning it's empty.

And in that very beautiful, profound practice, we can again feel the pain but be aware of the emptiness of any dualities, or particularly the emptiness of the duality of pain and pleasure. We can look at the pain and analyze it with the sevenfold reasoning or other reasonings. Many, many possibilities here. Very, very powerful practices.

What we're doing there—again, most of them can be done with narrow attention focused on the pain, or with wider attention—many possibilities here, and many variations for each possibility in many cases. And what we're doing here is we're engaging a way of looking, meditatively, lightly—as I said the other day in the talk on emptiness and ways of looking—that has much less clinging in it, much, much less clinging in it.

So you can see that in the Dukkha Method 2, it's actually deliberately getting a sense, in some way or other, of the clinging in the moment—any push-pull, any aversion, any hanging on, any tension in the relationship with a phenomenon that one is attending to—and relaxing that clinging. Some of them work obviously very directly with the clinging, some much more indirectly. Or they're working with the avijjā and reducing the avijjā in the moment, in the way of looking.

So I'm attending to this phenomenon, this pain, with some degree of less clinging at some level, some aspect of clinging, and some degree and some aspect of avijjā has gone. And again, because of the map that the Buddha gave of the links of dependent origination: less clinging, less fabrication. Less avijjā, also less fabrication. As I said the other day, avijjā also is actually just another mode of clinging—it's a subtle mode of clinging. It's seen as such in Mahāyāna terminology. But this is what we're doing.

And this is what an insight way of looking is, basically. It's relating to, attending to, sensing something or other—any phenomenon whatsoever—through a lens that has, in some way or another, a little or a lot less clinging in it, a little or a lot less avijja.

And because of that, that phenomena right now, right here, right now, in this moment that I'm still attending to it, is fabricated less. The intensity of the unpleasant vedana actually starts to decrease, and sometimes dramatically so.

We can talk about a kind of hierarchy of potency of these kinds of practices in a way that's partly traced

through the thread of "Seeing That Frees." As I mentioned the other day, to look at something through the lens of emptiness, understanding that it's fabricated, is much more potent as a way of looking than just looking at it as anatta, which is usually more potent than, let's say, just impermanence. And looking at it through a lens of the awareness that knows it is anatta—is not me, not mine—is usually more potent than regarding this pain as not me, not mine.

It's empty of inherent existence. It's empty of having any phenomenal self, this pain. That's even more powerful, and so forth. So there's a kind of hierarchy, and in a way, "Seeing That Frees" is loosely organized in the progression of that hierarchy of potency, just because it's actually a hierarchy of, or a progression of both meditative skill and also depth of understanding—understanding that comes from experience.

As I said the other day, I can't look at something with a way of looking that understands it's empty until I have really understood for myself that it's empty. For example, because I've seen that it's fabricated, because I've looked at it with the second dukkha method or the first dukkha method or anatta and seen that it fades—therefore it's fabricated, dependent on the way of looking. When that's seen so many times and felt, and the impact on the being felt so many times, that understanding is consolidated. Then that consolidated understanding can be engaged, can be used as a way of looking. I've moved to another level of practice there, another depth.

So there are lots of these kinds of practices, these unfabricating ways of looking, these insight ways of looking. There are lots of them, but there's also lots to them.

As I said, for example, take the dukkha method—what I call dukkha method number two—lots of variations. Or we just mentioned the anatta—not me, not mine. We can regard the pain itself, the unpleasant vedana, as not me, not mine. But we can also attend to the unpleasant vedana, the pain, at the same time we're including an awareness of the awareness of that pain, including both, and then regard the awareness of the pain—our awareness of it—as anatta.

Or, for example, the usually completely unnoticed, so to speak, unconscious intention to pay attention. Whenever we pay attention to something—I don't just mean as a deliberate "oh, right now I've really got to pay attention," or deliberately in meditation. I mean just paying attention to anything. Whenever we hear a sound, there's a movement of the attention there. If we hear a sound, there's a movement of attention towards that object. And so that attention is something that needs an intention behind it. That intention is almost always unconscious—we don't realize it, unless we're actually making an exercise of trying to pay attention. But even then, we only realize, usually, a very gross level of that intention.

In every moment of consciousness, you could say, the mind is attending to something. It has to be. In any moment of experience, which means any moment of perception, which means any moment of appearance or phenomena, the mind is paying attention. And with that, there is an intention to pay attention to that phenomena.

Now, we could, as we're attending to the pain, also include in our awareness the very, very subtle sense of the intention to pay attention. It's a very, very subtle, moment-to-moment, almost throbbing movement, very, very subtle in the mind. And we could regard that intention to pay attention as anatta, as not me, not mine.

Or we could regard our aversion—notice there's some aversion to this pain, and what if I regard the aversion, the pushing away? I'm talking about aversion, not at the level of the mind saying, "Oh, this is terrible, I wish it would go away." Just the subtle energetic pushing, energetic trying to distance oneself. We could regard that aversion as anatta. We could adopt a way of looking where the actual object includes not just the pain, but also the sense of aversion to the pain, and regard the aversion as anatta, as not me, not mine. It's a more sophisticated way of looking.

And the same if we move to a level where we're engaging a way of looking that understands empty—looking at things as empty. So there are all those possible objects: not just the unpleasant vedana, not just the pain, but also the awareness of the pain is also empty, which again means more than it's not me, not mine. It's not just not me, not mine. It's empty of phenomenal existence. That's a very, very deep level of practice and quite sophisticated awareness—sophisticated understanding, excuse me.

So to be able to do that, and again, with the intention to pay attention, with the aversion—the aversion has no inherent existence. The aversion is empty, et cetera.

So there are many objects. It's as if what we could say is that pain is a dependent arising.

Through these practices, we begin to see how pain is a dependent arising because it's dependent on the way of looking. When you start to see that you can really pay attention and engage some of these ways of looking, the pain just fades. It disappears, dissipates, dissolves—or at least it attenuates. We begin to understand that the pain, the unpleasant vedanā, is dependent on my way of looking. But it's also dependent on all these other factors: attention, my identifying with the awareness of it, and many, many more.

So we could say that pain itself is a dependent arising in that it is a constellation—many things threaded together, woven together. It's already a thicket of things, hard to separate out these elements. But meditatively, one can separate them out enough. Ultimately, they're not separable, and that's one of the real deep understandings that emptiness teaches. But meditatively, practically, in our art—in our meditative art—it's possible to separate them out enough to isolate them, to work on ways of looking that target, that pinpoint different twigs in this thicket, different thorns in this thicket, different threads in this tangle. And that starts doing something.

But really, pain is a constellation. Any or all of those elements within the constellation of what we call pain can be objects of an insight way of looking. We can practice, we can train our insight way of looking on those objects. So pain is a dependent arising fabricated by the whole constellation, and it's also a

dependent arising fabricated by unskillful ways of looking at the whole constellation. Most of them are just habitual and completely unconscious. Pain itself is a dependent arising in terms of being fabricated by all these other factors of attention and whatnot. But it's also dependent on ways of looking—it's a fabrication dependent on ways of looking at that whole constellation.

There's a huge area here, and I've gone into it in lots of detail elsewhere, so I'm just listing it and unpacking a bit of the understanding right now.

A third possibility, for those of you who have developed jhāna practice to some degree, offers a quite lovely and also quite amazing way of practicing. I actually offered it on a recent Jhāna Retreat at Gaia House, and I think a lot of people were just amazed at what happened—the magic of it, and that it would be possible, and what it suggested about the nature of things, the reality of things that we believe were just givens, just primary.

As I said, oftentimes our understanding of Buddha Dharma is that vedanā is just a given. It's just what it is—this is what we're given. Unpleasant vedanā, pleasant, neither. It might vary from person to person: this person likes that sound, another person doesn't, and that might depend on history. But in the moment, it's just a given. And there's a whole other level of understanding which really understands that's actually not the case. Vedanā is not a given. Vedanā is a dependent arising, dependent on how we're looking at it in the moment, on the way of relating to it in the moment, the way of looking at it in the moment.

So here, once one's developed enough familiarity or mastery at a certain level of jhāna—wherever that is, first jhāna, fourth jhāna, whatever—then one can, if one has practiced enough with that familiarity and there's enough skill with it, actually begin to take what I call the primary nimitta of that jhāna. For example, in the first jhāna, it would be pīti. That's the dominant flavor of the first jhāna and the thing that I'm giving most attention to, the primary perception.

And if one's familiar enough and skilled enough with the first jhāna, here's this area of pain in the body. And one can just decide to see it, to feel it, to sense it as pīti—which means bliss or ecstasy or rapture, or certainly means pleasant feeling. So what was unpleasant, one just decides to see as pleasant, based on my familiarity with that perception from my jhānic experience.

And if one is skilled in the second jhāna, one can feel, sense, see this area of pain in the body as happiness. It's no longer dukkha.

It's no longer unpleasant. It has become pleasant. Its very texture and vibration is happiness. Or again, through the different jhānas, a kind of luminous stillness it can become. It's not even pleasant anymore—it's very subtly pleasant, really, but technically speaking, it's a kind of neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Actually, it's subtly pleasant. So this area of pain has just now become an area of luminous stillness. There's no pain there.

In the fifth jhāna, it has just become empty space, or it's become consciousness. If I take the primary

nimitta from the sixth jhāna, it's become nothingness, and so forth.

Again, this might sound completely unbelievable, but as I said, many people who'd never even heard of this possibility before coming on retreat at Gaia House, just over three weeks' duration of retreat, began playing with this when I suggested it and found—wow, wow—this is really possible. We're, you could say, coloring the perception of an area, we're changing the perception of an area. There's a kind of magic involved, just as there will be if one really develops the insight ways of looking practice. There will be a sense of: wow, this dependent origination business is magic. There's something in this unfabricating, fabricating, dependent on the way of looking in the moment. It's really magic. It feels like magic.

Our ability to do this—to take, let's say, an area of pain in the body and to just have the intention of feeling it as pleasure, as sukha, or as pīti, or whatever it is, or as nothingness—our ability to do that strongly implies there's only one conclusion: it's empty. It doesn't exist, this pain, as a given. This unpleasant burden doesn't exist as a given, as a thing that's a kind of absolute reality independent of the way of looking. It doesn't exist only from its own side, so to speak. It doesn't have inherent existence.

When we practice this way—let's say we develop jhānas and do that, or let's say the insight ways of looking and that happens—we understand it's empty. It's a dependent arising, but dependent on the present, not just dependent on the past. Yes, this pain is dependent on my injury. Yes, this pain is dependent on my illness, whatever it is. Yes, this pain is dependent on sitting hours and hours and hours and the body getting stiff or whatever. It's a dependent arising dependent on the way of looking in the moment as well.

So we understand something, we have that insight, and we get that. We get that it's empty, it's dependent arising, and it's malleable. It's a fabrication dependent on the way of looking, and it's malleable. It's not a solid, fixed thing—not just that it's impermanent and not fixed in that way, and not solid in that way. It's actually malleable. Our way of looking shapes it, can shape it, does shape it, and with development of our skill in meditation, can shape it from pain to pleasure, and all different flavors of pleasure, in fact. Because that deep nothingness is also, in a strange kind of mystical way, a kind of pleasure. Even in its being neither pleasant nor unpleasant, it's actually a kind of pleasure.

The Buddha talks—sometimes he says, "Sometimes I teach three kinds of vedanā: pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Other times I teach just pleasant and unpleasant." The two kinds of vedanā model is a more subtle teaching.

Seeing this in practice, feeling it in practice, doing it in practice, and feeling, sensing the results firsthand—that area of pain there—it's not that I'll just go and pay attention to where it feels good. I mean, that's a skillful thing to do, as we explained on the jhāna retreat as well. But I'm looking at that pain there, and that pain transforms. It is malleable. It's transformed through adopting a different way of looking at it.

So we understand that. The very understanding of the emptiness, the dependent origination, the fabricated nature and the malleability of vedanā, of perception—in this case of pain—implies the possibility. It strengthens and adds to our sense that this is possible, that perception is malleable, that vedanā is malleable.

So we do it, we understand the emptiness, the dependent origination, the malleability, and that understanding of the emptiness, the dependent origination, the malleability actually shores up our sense of the possibility and actually increases our skill. It's somehow like our very knowing of that—technically, our very knowing of the emptiness, the dependent origination, the malleability of it—when we have that knowing, there's less avijjā. Because there's less avijjā, the pain is actually more malleable, because it's avijjā which fabricates the pain, fabricates the kind of solidity.

Actually, when we're engaging, when we're confident, and we're approaching something with a way of looking that knows that it's malleable, it actually becomes more malleable. But that knowledge of malleability needs to be first dependent on our experience, as before.

It might be through these practices, through these emptiness practices, that there's no unpleasantness present at all. But it may be that we replace the pain with pleasure, or that it's replaced with a very deep fading and unfabricating of vedanā. For example, when we play with perception in a way that we're just seeing consciousness there, or we're just seeing nothingness there, there's a very deep fading, a very deep unfabricating of vedanā. It is not yet a complete unfabricating—it's not a complete cessation of perception and vedanā—but it's very deep. It's gone beyond the vedanā of pleasure, beyond the perception of pleasure.

These practices might sound esoteric, but they're really not. I'm moving through them quickly because I've talked and written elsewhere about them in detail.

There's a fourth possibility, or fourth basket of possibilities—a deeper level of possibilities. Once one has developed skill in these emptiness ways of looking and insight ways of looking, it's actually possible to look at the pain, to sense the pain—and you can listen and see how much of this will apply to all kinds of other phenomena, not just physical pain, but mental pain and other experiences as well. There are much broader lessons and broader relevance here.

Once one has really developed the art and skill in these emptiness ways of looking, one can engage an emptiness way of looking while modulating its intensity. Let's say I'm looking at something as empty, understanding that it means fabricated, or just a perception, or empty of having inherent existence—because I've done the sevenfold reasoning before and seen it many times, recognizing that it can't have inherent existence. So I'm engaging one of these deep emptiness practices, but it's as if I'm not completely putting my foot down on the insight pedal, so to speak.

In my way of looking, there's not the full amount of the tincture of emptiness insight. I'm putting in maybe

half the amount. In the car analogy, I'm pressing on the accelerator, but not completely. There's a whole range of how much I can lean on the knowing of emptiness within the way of looking in any moment.

This might sound outrageously sophisticated and impossible, but it's really not. It just takes practice—practicing in a certain way. It won't come about just because I've spent ten thousand hours on a cushion trying to be mindful. I have to practice in certain ways so that this kind of artistry is developed, building up stage by stage.

What happens here is that I am engaging a deep emptiness way of looking, but I'm playing with the intensity of the emphasis on emptiness within that way of looking—how much I'm leaning on that insight of emptiness, how much I'm pressing on that pedal, how many drops of this tincture of insight are in the way of looking. Then there's some fading, but not complete fading.

If I've developed those practices, those insight ways of looking—particularly emptiness ways of looking—then when I attend to pain and look at it as empty, and I've consolidated that practice, developed it, that pain will fade and disappear. Here, I'm actually looking at it as empty, but not allowing it to completely fade.

You might think, "Well, why would you do that? Why would you bother to do that if you can have it completely fade?" This is a very interesting question, and there are two answers we could give. The first one is what I would consider the more important one, and I'll state the answer as a question.

Here's the question we started with: Why would you want to only partially fade some pain when you could completely fade it? It's dukkha, it's unpleasant. Why would you not just want to fade it completely?

The answer, in the form of a question, I would put like this: What is most sacred? What is most sacred? That's the answer to this question of why I might only want to partially fade it at times.

Now this question—what is most sacred—is actually a question only for those practitioners who know, through their own experience in meditation, through their own repeated experience in meditation and their understanding, who know this deep, complete fading of things. Who know the unfabricated, who know cessation, and the implications of deep fading—implying the total emptiness of any phenomenal reality, any experience, any appearance, any perception, any vedanā.

So this answer that I'm going to give will only really make sense to people who know about very deep fading and know personally through their experience, through having developed the practices that I've just talked about, particularly those insight ways of looking, which must be based on mindfulness and so forth.

The answer is a question: what is most sacred? If you know, and you've gone as far as that complete cessation, complete deep fading, reached the unfabricated, recognized the fabricated and therefore illusory nature of all phenomenal reality, then you're at a point when there is likely to be a hierarchy of

sacredness.

Phenomenal reality is an illusion. It's a fabrication, which has this connotation of illusion and lie, as does the word "concoction," both in translations of *sankhāra*, in contrast to which the unfabricated, the complete fading of all perception and all vedanā, is real, is true, because it's unfabricated. It's not a dependent arising, it seems. So one is probably at that point leaning or looking at the world as the lower tier, if you like, in a hierarchy: the fabricated in contrast to the unfabricated. And the unfabricated is the true and the holy, if you like, the sacred.

But as I've explained elsewhere, we cannot stop at that point. We can go deeper in our exploration of fabrication and emptiness. I'm not going to explain it here again—it's in *Seeing That Frees*, and in that talk, it's a two-part talk, "Approaching the Dharma," I think it's called "Other Places," as well.

We begin to see the emptiness of fabrication, emptiness of the process of fabrication, and emptiness of time—because fabrication is a process in time. The emptiness of fabrications, the emptiness of the process of fabrication, and the emptiness of time. And all that, as we go deeper then, we start to realize the emptiness of the unfabricated, which exists in a kind of dualistic opposition with the fabricated.

If the fabricated is empty, there's not really a fabricated, then the unfabricated too, as a dualistic contrast, kind of collapses. Not as an experience, but as a duality, it's collapsed. There is no hierarchy. And we come to a deeper level of realization, deeper even than realizing the unfabricated through the cessation, the total unfabricating of the phenomenal world of perception of vedanā. We come to a deeper realization that's non-dualistic.

What opens up for us then is a sense of a world of empty, divine and magical appearances—already magical to see that they're dependent on the way of looking, dependent on fabricating in the moment. But magical at a whole other level when you also realize that fabrication too is not a real thing, and a time in which things could be fabricated is not a real thing. The whole—you're at the edge of the level of what even "magical" might possibly mean.

Now emptiness starts to have a bigger meaning than fabrication. At first they were a little bit synonymous if you follow the ways of looking approach. Now emptiness means more than fabrication. And because there's no hierarchy of holiness, of sacredness, divinity everywhere, holiness, sacredness everywhere. The world of phenomena becomes a world of empty, magical and divine appearances.

But here's where language gets so tricky, because someone could hear something like that and perhaps they only know a level—still a very lovely level of practice, but perhaps they only know that level of practice that I call the vastness of awareness, where there's a very spacious, kind of effortless-seeming awareness, and phenomena arise and pass within that vast awareness, within that space, spacious awareness, and they seem very insubstantial, these phenomena. They're just diaphanous, see-through. They're of the nature, the substance of the awareness. Some people call that the opening to the nature of

mind or the realization of the nature of mind, etc.

So someone just familiar with that level of practice could say, "Yes, yes, it's a world of empty, magical and divine appearances. I know exactly what you're talking about." But no, no, no, no, no—this is really, really important. I'm talking about a whole other level.

So beautiful as those openings and those perceptions are at the level of what I call the vastness of awareness—a really, really important stage for a lot of practitioners, maybe the majority of insight meditation practitioners—we're talking now about a whole other level. As I said, this is only for people who've gone beyond that, to the total fading and cessation, to the complete unfabricated, beyond any sense of space, any sense of awareness in that sense of vastness of awareness. Any sense of phenomena arising. Any sense of all of that. Any sense of time. Any sense of the present moment. Understood the implications of that and then gone beyond even that.

So we're talking really about several quite significant stages further than this vastness of awareness of what some people call the nature of mind—realization of practice of the nature of mind, nature of awareness.

When I use—this is where, you know, the same words can be understood or used at very different levels. So here, when we understand a world of empty, magical and divine appearances...

all three of those words—empty, magical, and divine—have just very different levels of connotation. They're imbued with a very different level of understanding. I'm really stretched further there.

So, the question I asked in response to the question, "Why would you only want to half-fade when you can fully fade pain and unpleasantness?" is: What is most sacred?

If this sense of non-dualistic world of empty, magical, divine appearances means that pain—that half-faded pain, I should say, will attenuate a little bit, can't help but attenuate some—that pain is empty, magical, and divine. And I've not just gotten rid of pain; I've maybe attenuated it somewhat, but it's become empty, magical, and divine.

If I care about sacredness, and if sacredness is part of what I want—or let's say it's not, let's say at least that it's not that all I ever want is to get rid of my pain, all I ever want is a reduction in dukkha—then this level actually becomes very important.

And this ability to, based on my understanding of this non-duality between fabricated and unfabricated, which is based on my understanding of the emptiness of fabricated, unfabricated, fabrications, time, the process of fabricating, which is based on my understanding of fabrication in the first place, which is based on my practice of ways of looking—then that actually becomes the one that opens me in this moment to a beautiful sense of sacredness, deep, profound, mystical, and that touches me deeply.

I still got some pain there in that moment, but there's a whole different sense of the pain, self, and

existence, if I care about sacredness.

So that, I think, is, for me, the most important answer to the question, "Why would I only want to, why would I want an incomplete fade, want this, you know, only half-fading when I could actually fade the pain completely?" I would say that's the most important answer.

But historically, there's a very related answer, but it has to do with Buddhology, the notion of what a Buddha is. And I'm only going to allude to this. I may or may not come back to it in the context of another talk at some future time.

But there's a difference—there's quite a big difference between the notion, the Theravāda notion of what a Buddha is and what a Buddha mind is and does, and a Mahāyāna notion of what a Buddha is and what a Buddha mind is and does. In other words, the Buddhologies between Theravāda and Mahāyāna are actually quite different.

And in the Mahāyāna teachings, it's said—I think I mentioned this the other day in a talk at Gaia House, I'm pretty sure—it's said only a Buddha can look at a phenomenon and thoroughly look at it, knowing its emptiness, without it completely fading. Only the non-dual—it's called gnosis, wisdom awareness—only the non-dual wisdom awareness, or jñāna in Sanskrit, only the non-dual jñāna of a Buddha is capable of fully knowing the emptiness of appearances, fully knowing in that moment the emptiness of appearances, at the same time as keeping those appearances from fading.

So that's a kind of very basic tenet in Mahāyāna teachings. It's in the Mahāyāna Sūtrālaṅkāra and the Mahāyāna Saṅgraha, a very core text of Mahāyāna teaching. Tsongkhapa, a great Tibetan teacher, founder of the Gelug school, reiterates it in his Illumination of Thought, commentary on a basic text of Candrakīrti centuries earlier. Mipham Rinpoche comes back to it from a different stream—he's a Nyingma master. So it's in the different streams of the Tibetan lineages as well.

Not a lot of people know it, though. Not a lot of people know that teaching or know just quite the import and the significance of that teaching in the Mahāyāna, for Mahāyāna philosophy. So it has to do with Buddhology.

I'm not going to go into this too much. And what is the aim of practice? So a Bodhisattva is someone who's aiming or has vowed to become a Buddha. But in the Mahāyāna, a Buddha is not someone who is then born—like the story of Siddhartha then becomes a Buddha, teaches for a while, and then dies, and just disappears because they're not reborn anymore, like an Arahant.

In the Mahāyāna version of Buddhology, a Buddha is someone who is able to be fully awakened, fully enlightened. That means no more avijjā at all, but they can be in the world. They are reborn, so to speak, or at least in most of the Mahāyāna Buddhologies, an emanation of them appears in the world—the Rūpakāya, the three bodies of a Buddha, the Rūpakāya, the emanation of the Buddha.

There's all kinds of, you know, arcane sounding and convoluted seeming and sophisticated Mahāyāna teachings that actually come back or trace, are rooted in this basic problem: How is it that if I don't have any avijjā in any moment, that I perceive anything?

Because for a normal human being, as the Mahāyāna Saṅgraha says, and those Mahāyāna texts, for a normal human being, when I look at something, when I engage a way of looking that has no avijjā in it, then that phenomenon fades. There's no perception of that phenomenon. There's less avijjā, therefore—well, there's no avijjā, therefore, no perception.

So the question is, how can a Buddha then be reborn into the world of perception? How can they be in the world, or at least an emanation of them, be in the world and help, continue to help, instead of just reaching enlightenment, teaching for a few years, and then not being reborn, and therefore not being of help?

So, with the full weight and force of their complete prajñā, paññā wisdom, insight and jñāna, their gnosis, which means no avijjā, and with no unskillful saṅkhāras, no karma of subtle craving or clinging—how can a Buddha be reborn without avijjā and without any saṅkhāras, unskillful saṅkhāras, be reborn so that they can be in the world, which means that they have to perceive, so that they can help?

To help you have to perceive, which means there needs to be a world, there needs to be a perception of a world.

So some versions: an Arahant is totally liberated, but has removed their avijjā completely, but they still have a kind of momentum of saṅkhāras, karmic momentum of saṅkhāras, that's only exhausted when the Arahant dies.

So it's a bit like a car that's been running and then runs out of petrol. And its momentum, even though it's run out of petrol, it's run out of the avidyā that would keep it going, it's still going to go for a while until the conditions are such that the friction of the road or whatever or hill makes it stop.

This represents one model for how an arahant exists in the world. Their continued existence until death is simply propelled by old karma, the stream of sankharas arising from past actions. At death, this karmic momentum is exhausted, and they are never reborn because there remains no more avijja and the stream of sankharas has been depleted.

But if you're not reborn, then you cannot help. And if you don't perceive—if you're not reborn into the world, or the world of perception is not reborn—you cannot help. Without this capacity, you cannot embody infinite compassion.

The bodhisattva in Mahayana teaching has a different aim. They seek to remain in the world with that full prajna, complete jnana—which means no avijja—while maintaining the ability to perceive simultaneously. This spawns all kinds of complicated conundrums and philosophies within the Mahayana

tradition. Yet very few people understand the roots of these teachings. It's as if the Mahayana were given a kind of riddle to solve, which they did beautifully, creatively, and in various ways.

Vajrayana practice is essentially a mimicking of the Buddha mind. Tantra and Vajrayana involve this seeing of divinities and perceiving appearances as divinities. Tantric texts speak extensively about seeing the elements—earth, air, fire, and water—as divinities. "Seeing appearances as divine" is a fundamental Vajrayana phrase.

When practicing different Vajrayana methods, we can understand them as mimicking a Buddha's mind. The hope is that through this mimicry, we eventually become like a Buddha through the habit of imitation. What we're mimicking is that ability to fully know the emptiness of something while simultaneously sustaining the appearances without them fading.

Only the non-dual jnana, the wisdom awareness of a Mahayana Buddha, can fully know the emptiness of appearances without those appearances dissolving. For all the rest of us, we must either lean fully on the emptiness—in which case the appearance we're observing will fade and disappear, and perception won't be fabricated—or we must back off and allow the appearance to reconstitute.

When we play with this incomplete fading, we're actually practicing a light touching, a gentle including and emphasizing of the emptiness within our way of looking, ensuring it doesn't completely fade. In this way, we're mimicking the Buddha mind, Buddha perception. As I explained earlier, it becomes possible in that space, in that middle ground, dependent on all the insight and art of practice cultivated before, to begin perceiving all things as bliss—primordial, cosmic, divine bliss, not merely as piti.

Yes, they are pleasant, yes divine, but blessed. The bliss here means something deeper in Vajrayana teachings. The nature of all things is bliss, as the teachings declare—not simply that everything is pleasant, but that all is divine and blessed.

Dzogchen is said to contain nine levels of teaching within it. Yet it's not uncommon to encounter Dzogchen teachings, practice them, or read about them while understanding them only at the most basic level—in terms of the vastness of awareness and the so-called nature of mind. Many of the words can be employed at different levels, different depths of understanding and different stages in the art of practice: divine, magical appearances, bliss, insubstantial, empty.

There is much more here, but I won't elaborate further now. What I will say is this: through developing both our insight and our meditative art—this practice I'm describing of deliberate incomplete fading—through the gradual cultivation of our insight into emptiness and our meditative skill, we are granted both the license and the ability to fabricate for the sake of greater sacredness.

We fabricate to be touched by a sense of the sacred, of divinity, of beauty—to open to that reality, immerse ourselves in it, dwell within it. This serves sacredness and beauty and opens a completely different level of what we might call healing. There is physical healing, the fading of pain and finding relief. But there is

also this divine contextualizing, this transubstantiation of pain into something magical, empty, and divine within a cosmos that is magical, empty, and divine—a universe of appearances that are magical, empty, and divine. This constitutes an entirely different dimension of healing.

The license to fabricate for this purpose and in this way is based on understanding that this represents a deeper insight. It is actually more profound than going completely into the unfabricated, than complete unfabricating. But it is only a deeper insight if we have experienced and understood that deeper or complete fading, that total unfabricating, the unfabricated itself.

If I haven't understood this completely, then merely a relative insubstantializing of pain or phenomena is not necessarily the deeper insight. But if I have gone all the way—gone completely to the unfabricated and then moved beyond that—then I understand that this partial place, this partial fading, this middle region of empty yet appearing, embodies and manifests the deeper insight. This understanding is only possible if I have gone deeper in terms of fading experience and realization.

So we have these four groups of practices: mindfulness in various forms, insight ways of looking, the playing with perception and jhanic qualities, and the deep emptiness ways of looking without complete fading—all oriented toward sacredness. There is also an entire set of practices usually called exchanging self and other, truly exchanging the happiness of self and other.

I won't say too much about that, but again, it's covered in *Seeing That Frees*. There's a section on exchanging self and other, and by that point, what becomes possible in this set of practices depends greatly on what one has developed through previous insight ways of looking practices and understandings of emptiness and fabrication.

Essentially, when we encounter pain or dukkha—and this applies equally to mental dukkha, hindrances, depression, or whatever arises—we begin relating to it in a completely different way. While actually in contact with this dukkha, paying attention to this experience here and now, I say: "I take on, I accept, I want this dukkha." I take it from someone somewhere else, someone I will never know or meet, to relieve them of their burden of suffering.

This involves a kind of magical thinking. We can also practice the opposite with happiness. When experiencing joy, or even just imagining a specific experience of happiness, we give that away to someone else in meditation.

Again, we're speaking not of a philosophy or way of living, but of a meditative way of looking—which means it's light, delicate, agile, and subtle. If we're working with physical pain, we remain in contact with that pain while looking at it in this particular way. By taking it on, by welcoming it in this manner, the practice relates closely to welcoming practice and certain versions of the dukkha method.

This is a very beautiful practice that connects us with others through the heart, beautiful intention, love, and compassion. It's also magical, opening so many possibilities.

When I decide to take on this suffering—this present experience of suffering—that very act lessens my normal, habitual, compulsive aversion and pushing away. I'm relaxing that aversion, which begins to attenuate the unpleasantness because there's less aversion, less clinging, and therefore less fabrication of the unpleasant. This actually makes the pain easier to bear.

If I can linger in that beautiful space where the heart is connected, the pain is somewhat eased, and I'm taking on suffering for others, I remain connected with compassion, beautiful intention, and sacrificial intention. My attention stays with the unpleasant vedanā, which attenuates as I change my relationship to it in the moment.

One can also mix this with emptiness. As the sensations become more unfabricated through this practice, I might taste unfabrication for the first time and realize their emptiness. Or perhaps I already understand emptiness from other insight ways of looking, and then I can work with these empty sensations, this empty unpleasantness, taking it on while knowing it's empty—which makes it easier to accept for the sake of others.

There are so many variations and possibilities here, such a beautiful realm of practices. This can be tremendously creative, opening up the malleability of perception and the sense of divinity in perception. By mixing love with emptiness, we move toward Buddha mind, or at least mimic Buddha mind, heading in directions that echo tantric and Vajrayana practices.

What often happens understandably when there's dukkha—mental or physical—is that the self contracts around it, becoming hard and woven around the pain. Here, we're opening up that sense of self, releasing that contraction. This is part of what's occurring in these practices.

The possibilities are vast and creative, engaging the imagination and opening pathways that are tantric, quasi-tantric, or Vajrayana-like. But there's also the possibility of imaginal practices within this realm, as I mentioned at the beginning. One possibility might be somewhat similar to exchanging self and other, related through its use of imagination and engagement with the self.

So where there's an imaginal relationship with an object, with pain, it will start to involve the sense of self. The soul-making dynamic and the imaginer will spread to include the sense of self. We can actually deliberately include the sense of self from the beginning.

Let me explore this a little more deeply. Here's this pain, here's this dukkha, here's this illness, here's whatever it is. One can have some kind of image of it as a sacrifice, or oneself as a sacrifice, as a sacrificial victim, if you like. This may be a fully blown image of a sacrifice with oneself in that role. It could also be much more subtle than that. But in some way, the pain and the suffering and the self are woven into an image of sacrifice.

This might manifest as a detailed, prominent image of being a sacrificial victim in relationship to the pain. Or it might be that the whole notion of sacrifice and sacrificial victim remains vague, not so filled out as

an image but rather a kind of potent idea. Rather than paying attention to an actual image of being burnt on an altar or whatever it might be, it's actually just the notion – like a tincture – the idea of a sacrificial victim that remains vague. It might be just a kind of archetypal idea.

This archetypal sense might remain in the background while what's more in the foreground is the pain itself. The image functions more as an ideational background or a sense of a vague archetype. Or it might work through a very specific archetype – the obvious one being Christ. Perhaps there's an identification with Christ's passion, Christ on the cross.

Again, this could manifest in different ways. The image of Christ might come very much to the foreground while the pain is still there, but the image of Christ and the sense of identification becomes more prominent. Or it could work the other way – it's just in the background, the archetypal idea and sense and resonances and soul beauty of the archetype of Christ and the identification with that remains in the background, while what's in the foreground is myself, my particulars, this experience. But that has become imaginal, and partly the image of it is sustained by the background archetype.

We talked about this word "sacrifice" just the other day, very briefly, but the etymology here is "to make sacred." In Latin, it means to make sacred, to make something sacred. I'm not talking about Hollywood meanings of the word sacrifice with strange rituals on altars with blood and weird stuff that we don't understand. It might include that, but the question, as always with soul-making practice, is: is it soul-making? What's needed here? What degree of image, what degree of image in the background, what kind of image? It might be very subtle, or it might be dramatic and intense, but the question is: right now, what's soul-making?

Be careful not to buy into a gory, Hollywood, incomprehensible understanding of the word sacrifice. But in including the self in what's happening, and maybe this imaginal notion or image sense of sacrifice, sacrificial victim, then the whole thing can become imaginal. The elements of the imaginal can ignite – the divinity, the beauty – and it starts to really include the person and my particulars, and maybe even the sense of the necessity of this suffering, the necessity of this sacrifice, the necessity of this dukkha to the divine. I'll return to that.

Before I come back to it, let me say a few things about all this. Any Dharma practice should bring about a reduction of pain in the here and now, in the present. Even something like doing mettā for other beings, or compassion, or whatever it is – any dharma practice should bring about a reduction of pain, even if that's not what one is aiming for, even if one isn't trying to or isn't paying much attention to the pain, or if one is, or if one can't help including it in the attention. Any dharma practice should bring a reduction in pain to some degree.

Why? Because any dharma practice – all dharma practices, even practices like mettā – are effectively reductions in the moment of clinging. Reducing clinging brings a reduction of fabrication, and with the reduction of fabrication, the pain gets fabricated less, the unpleasant vedanā get fabricated less. So any

Dharma practice should bring a reduction in pain right now – not because I'm distracting myself by paying attention to my metaphors or whatever, but actually because there's less clinging. It should bring some degree of reduction in pain, even if it's just a little bit, in the here and now, not because one is distracting oneself through practice, but because there's actually less clinging.

That's the understanding of dependent arising.

But more importantly, I think—again, what's the point here? What's the point?

The Buddha spoke about meditation, particularly jhāna, but actually all meditation, as pleasant abiding in the here and now. This being one of the reasons to practice meditation—that one is actually able to abide, to be, to dwell in a pleasant state in the here and now. Pleasant abiding in the here and now is one of the reasons for meditation, for developing meditation.

But the other reason the Buddha gave, of course, is for the development of insight and the ending of the fetters, the ending of the āsavas, liberation, nibbāna. Obviously we regard meditation as a process leading to, developing that insight so that there is at some point liberation.

This first reason he gave—pleasant abiding in the here and now—is often not so much emphasized in contemporary teachings, but it's a reason he gave: this is why we practice meditation, for a pleasant abiding in the here and now. In other words, can I abide pain-free? But also to develop insight. And that second reason, the development of insight, is actually the main point. Or rather, it's more important than pleasant abiding in the here and now.

Sometimes people say, "Well, this can't be right, what you said about fabrication and all that business about emptiness and pain disappearing and fading and not being fabricated, because the Buddha suffered from back pain. So you're telling me that it's possible not to fabricate physical pain, but the Buddha had back pain?"

But the Buddha said he could be without his back pain as an old man when he entered certain states of meditation—very deep, unfabricated states—and then the pain would disappear, unfabricate. When he moved about the world, as I said right at the beginning, when he moved around in the world and was interacting outside of that degree of meditative art and deliberate meditative attention, the pain was experienced again, refabricated again.

What's more important here, though, is that the point of these teachings—the main point of these teachings about fabricating and emptiness and learning to unfabricate—is not, or at least not primarily, to live free of pain, to live a life that just isn't touched by pain because one has learned these tricks so that one never has to experience pain anymore. This pleasant abiding is a secondary level of reason. It's important. It's a relief. We need to have some relief. We need to have that release from dukkha as much as is possible for us.

But the primary reason is not to live free of pain. Rather, it's in seeing the dependent arising, unfabricating, and therefore the emptiness of pain that there's a much more general sense, a profound sense of freedom in relation to existence that emerges for a human being. Because I see the emptiness of things—not just pain, but emptiness of everything—a much broader, deeper and more general sense of freedom in relation to the whole of existence emerges. That's more important. The insight is more important.

And that sense of existence changes, and this sense of the emptiness of all things—that has a bearing on my whole life. It influences my relationship with the whole of my life: the painful, the pleasant, how long my life is, how short my life is, how I feel about all that. It depends on this level of insight. This level of insight into emptiness changes my whole sense of things.

But I would say even more important, more primary than that, is not just this changed sense of freedom, of liberation in relationship to the whole of my life and my death. Even more important, and I'd say even more primary, is that seeing the emptiness of things deepens and opens a sense of the sacredness and mystery of all things as well. A really deep emptiness, as we talked about the other day—and actually, I talked about it on the jhāna retreat as well, and a little bit today in this talk—opens up and deepens a sense of sacredness.

And to me, that's the most primary point. Second is this profound and widespread sense of liberation in relation to my whole life and death. And then third is the very gift we're very grateful for: the possibility of pleasant abiding in the here and now, relief from pain.

To me they have a hierarchy there, which I think I mentioned also in one of those emptiness seminars, in response to a question.

But also in soulmaking practice, that again translates as... Some of these soulmaking practices—and I'll describe one in a minute, or like what I alluded to with the playing with the idea of sacrifice—they will attenuate, they will reduce the sense of unpleasantness, the amount of pain, the intensity of pain in the moment. But still, that's not the point. Soulmaking is the point when we're doing soulmaking practice.

So all this, of course, is related in the Dharma to what I said about that middle space of half-fading, that region of the spectrum of fabrication, spectrum of fading. It's also related to the exchanging self. In other words, in those practices there is a sacredness, a beauty, a divinity that we open up to.

But when we come to soulmaking practice, soulmaking is the point of soulmaking practice. This is the primary point.

And yes, secondarily, we can often experience dissolving of suffering, relief from suffering, relief from dukkha. But the primary point of soul-making practice is soul-making.

I remember recently hearing that old gospel song "Oh, Happy Days." I was listening to it—I hadn't heard it

for years and years—and I realized that I had been carrying the wrong lyrics in my mind for many years. The actual lyrics are "Oh, happy days when Jesus washed my sins away," but the version I thought I knew was "Oh, happy days when Jesus walked." I much preferred my mistaken version—not "when Jesus washed my sins away," but simply "when Jesus walked." That touched me and touched my soul much more.

In other words, there was an image wrapped up in simply Jesus walking, maybe with some of his disciples. The image wasn't Jesus Christ with trumpets blaring and triumphant glory and little pink cherubs floating around with gallons of white light gushing down from the heavens. It wasn't that. It was sort of not even that distinct as an image, but in a way very ordinary looking—just Jesus as a young man walking, perhaps with some disciples and other people around, just walking. That was it.

But captured in that image of Jesus walking was all the stuff that I can't put into words: Jesus, his mercy, the mystery, the beauty, the divinity, the humility, the tenderness, the love, the compassion. When I think "when Jesus washed my sins away," it's almost like "Oh, happy days, happy because my sins are washed away"—there's a release, something for the self's process. The image I had with my wrong lyrics was just Jesus walking. There was nothing for the self's process in there. It was just the imaginal beauty of that. As I said, it was even a really subtle, vague image, but it moved me so much more than something oriented around being happy because he washed my sins away.

The gift and the grace in the image was not in washing my sins away, not in being saved—"Amazing grace that saved a wretch like me." The gift and the grace was much more mysteriously and subtly, and all the more powerfully for how mysteriously and subtly and quietly it was woven into just the image of Jesus in that sort of very earthy, humble, but divine way with all that beauty there.

So what's important in our dharma practice? Of course, you have to decide what's important for you. I'm just sharing that for me, if I put these things in a hierarchy, even in deep emptiness understanding, the most important thing is the sacredness. The freedom comes, the pleasant abiding comes, of course. But if I had to put them in a hierarchy of what the point of all this is, I would put the sacredness on the top, even above the freedom. And in soul-making practice, it's the sacredness too, and the soul-making, basically.

Just to fill out a little bit with an example from myself a few months ago: I've been in quite a lot of pain for the last few months in different ways from the cancer. So I was meditating and was in quite a lot of pain, and I just want to describe one possibility to get a little bit of a sense, hopefully to amplify and illustrate in a helpful way.

First, sitting in meditation with lots of possibilities—could have done all those emptiness things, or the jhanic thing, whatever—but at that point I was more inclined toward seeing what was possible in terms of soul-making practice, in terms of sensing the soul. That very intention invites and demands a certain poise of soul-making, which means I need to be there with my energy body awareness, I need to be there with that open and filled with that kind of sensitivity. I need to be there also with a receptivity and

opportunism even around the sense of soulfulness.

Part of that poise is also confidence that it's possible that something here can be sensed with soul, that soul-making is possible in relationship to this dukkha. So there's energy body awareness, there's receptivity to the sense of soulfulness, there's a little bit of opportunism, also dependent on a kind of quiet background confidence, which is partly based on experience—or it might need to just inject a little bit of trust. There's also humility in the poise.

Here's a very challenging situation: dying of cancer, pain coming in often baffling ways and quite intense ways for long periods of time. Humility in relation to that situation, but also humility in relation to soul. That's part of what we might call the poise of soul-making—the sort of space in which the possibilities of soul-making are supported or prized. We're ready for that. Also, the knowledge that image or sensing the soul is a way of looking, something that I need to engage.

I'm not going to just be given it. I need to make sure that I take care of the elements, take care of looking in certain ways, the way of looking, and so forth.

Part of the poise also might be what we call the soul-making poise—but just slightly less fabricating. So that's one of the elements of the imaginal: just slightly less fabricating. And also the fullness of intention. The intention is soul-making—not just relief of dukkha, not just whatever else it might be.

Also, within this poise, or what I've called at other times the kind of crucible, I need to feel both the painful, difficult, or uncomfortable sensations. So I can't draw away from them. They have to be included. I need to feel them, feel the dukkha of that. I need also to feel the emotions initially as emotions. There needs to be some pathos there, some dukkha—you know, the emotions that go with this pain. I didn't understand what could help it, even physically. I was trying to stretch, wondering if it was my back, or this, or that. There's a lot of confusion, and a lot of work and time and energy going into trying to figure it out.

So there are all kinds of emotional strands and aspects within a kind of heart pathos. There's the physical dukkha and then there are the emotions. And at first I need to actually feel those emotions as emotions. Feel the dukkha there and some compassion for it. Compassion in the mix. Some amount of—really it was just spontaneous compassion that was there. This is all part of what I'm calling the poise of soul-making, or what makes the vessel, the space ready for soul-making. Part of what I have called in the past the crucible.

In other words, included in it is—we are deliberately including, I was deliberately including the emotions. They weren't super strong at that time, but even if they were, if they were super strong, that would need to be what's included. There's dukkha here, there's a kind of grief here, and so on. So it's including the emotions and a kind of softness in holding them. This is also part of the art, part of weaving that crucible or forming that crucible.

So I'm not relating to the emotions in a way that they're just becoming sensations. Nor am I relating to them and to the dukkha—their emotional and physical—as without story. When I talked about the mindfulness approach, I'm sort of relinquishing story, putting it aside, dropping story. Here, I'm not relating to it without story. So I'm actually including the story, the story of my life, the narrative of my life, the sense of myself in time. That's all part of the ingredients.

And so including the story also means including time. So I'm not just focusing on just this moment, just this now of these sensations. And the time awareness, as I'll describe as I go into explaining what happened, the time awareness actually is quite multi-leveled and complex. Because the time awareness included, as things opened up, it included the flow of time, it included this moment's experience of whatever was happening in this moment with the pain, and so forth. But it also included what I've described several times before as a sense of my whole life—what's this—*sub specie aeternitatis*, from the perspective of eternity, from the perspective of after death.

And the narrative of my life, almost like the whole narrative story of my life, viewed from, so to speak, beyond time or after death. The whole narrative of my life seen from that perspective of eternity—like it's an eternal sort of snapshot but it's got the whole narrative in it. So the time awareness involved, or that came, actually included all of that. Includes the story, includes the sense, or really the image of my life, of my whole life.

So my whole life, when it's looked at in that kind of *sub specie aeternitatis*, that eternality, that perspective from beyond death, is already kind of well on its way to becoming image, a fully imaginal image.

So including everything that I've just said in the poise of soul-making, including the self and the sense or image of my whole life, especially in the face of death, knowing I have a terminal diagnosis, knowing I'm dying. And this sense of self and the sense of my life is kind of circumscribed by the before life, before birth and after death times or periods. So somehow in the time awareness, there are all kinds of different senses and levels of time that we're talking about.

I may come back to this, but this relates to what I was talking about in yesterday's talk about the emptiness of time and what that might open up for us in terms of healing. I hope to come back to that in a moment.

But what came—so all these ingredients there, and then what came was a kind of sense of a ritualistic giving back of the moments of physical dukkha, the physical challenges and illnesses throughout my life. And I've had long years of chronic illnesses—a kind of ritualistic giving back of all those moments of physical dukkha, physical challenges, physical illnesses, to the divine, to the gods, to the angels.

But these gods, divinities, angels—they were not vividly seen at that moment. So we're not talking about that kind of image where they were vividly seen in the imagination. The sense of them was there, it was clearly felt, it was palpable. So they were very much a part of the image, their presence was felt, but they

were not vividly seen in the imagination.

But there was this ritualistic giving back of these moments of physical dukkha and all the illness, the physical illness, moments of illness. And the sense of those sensations over a life as holy gift, sacred gift, which I was asked and agreed to bear. This was the imaginal sense that just came. All the soul-making poise and possibilities were there, and there was the receptivity and the attentiveness and a certain sense of one's whole life, *sub specie aeternitatis*. Somehow wrapped up in this ritualistic giving back of what I was given as sacred gift, as holy gift, which I was asked and somehow agreed to bear. It was a grace that

It was given to me. Someone had to carry this. For some reason, I didn't understand. I didn't know. And now there was, in the meditation, the handing them back with reverence. Of course, that handing back also echoed a little with the sense of dying soon, but in the meditation, handing them back with reverence and with care in this kind of ritualized, sacramental way.

The image was as if of passing back a ritual object in a ceremony. Again, this wasn't visually clear in terms of distinct, clear visual details—other images are, but this wasn't. Rather, it was the imagistic sense, the imaginal sense of the whole thing. It's part idea, part sense—not just the moment, but actually the whole of life and the whole transaction of life.

This touched my heart deeply, and the heart became very tender with it all. Peace came, and actually then pleasure in the body. Where there was pain, actually pleasure spread. So that's not the point, but there was this attenuation of the unpleasant vedanā, and pleasant vedanā came—to some degree, the reduction of the discomfort in the here and now.

But all the elements of the imaginal were there, and this sense of grace and beauty and all the rest of it. And then the painful sensations were also there. It was almost like they were still there as well as the pleasant, in this curious, mystically colored, mystically flavored mix of sensations—the painful and the pleasant. And the painful sensations became kind of like ethereal jewels floating in space, radiant jewels floating in space. And the heart bowed to all of that.

And the weariness of chronic illness—for some of you who have had chronic illness, you know just how tiring it can be for the psyche to have to deal with that day in, day out, month in, month out, year in, year out. Acute illnesses are very dramatic and, you know, both for the person going through it and also for people who love them or people around them. They stimulate a lot of interest and compassion. And there's a way in which chronic illnesses—they might be less intense sometimes, but they're asking something different of the psyche: to bear over a long time. And it can be wearying.

The weariness of the chronic illness was redeemed and given dimensionality and this divinity and eternality and meaningfulness and duty and purpose. But duty and purpose that the rational mind could not understand. I don't understand. What's my duty? What's the purpose of this? But it feels like it has a duty, a purpose to it. It feels like there's some meaning to it, wrapped up in the meaningfulness. But I

cannot say what it is. I cannot understand with my logical mind what it is, what it could be. Beauty, love, lightness, the melting of the heart.

I mentioned Plotinus, this founder of Neoplatonism, the other day, and in the last years of his life he had developed some kind of illness. It's not really clear to us now what that illness was, but at any rate, he was abandoned by all his students because they feared that they would catch his illness. They feared that his illness was contagious. So I think for the last two or more years of his life, he basically lived in a kind of solitary exile.

There was one of his students who was also a doctor who stayed with him through that period, whose name I've forgotten now. But he was abandoned by the rest of his students and he lay dying. And as he lay dying, the doctor was with him, tending to him, just being with him as he died. And after he died, the doctor wrote down his last words.

Unfortunately, this doctor—which seems to be the case for doctors nowadays as well—had not very good handwriting. So it's a little bit unclear exactly, but it was one of two things that he said. Either it was a description of what he was doing as he was dying, and he said, "I'm trying to bring back or trying to give back the divine in myself to the divine in the universe." Or he said, as an instruction, "Give back the divine in yourself to the divine in the universe." And those were his last words.

Give back the divine in yourself to the divine in the universe.

And so this reminded me a little of that. We could say, oh, just awareness is divine in terms of it's the same substance, the same divine nature of mind in everyone. But that's all just like water everywhere.

It's all water. There's no difference between my awareness and your awareness and the next person's awareness. It's all just the divine substance of awareness. Once you mix it back into divinity, it's all just the same, like mixing water in water.

There's another kind of sacredness and divinity, a kind of sanctification of our personhood that we're very much interested in as human beings in soul-making practice. And that's more inclusive of our particulars and our particular narrative and our particular dukkha and the necessity—as I mentioned earlier—the necessity of our particularities and our personality and our dukkha to the Divine.

So in this sense, in this image of this kind of ritualistic giving back of these moments of physical dukkha, these physical challenges, to the divine, to the angels, to the gods, whose presence I felt but didn't really see vividly. And the sense of these sensations over a life being given to me as a grace, as a sacred gift. Because someone had to carry this for some reason I didn't understand. Something I was asked to do and agreed to do.

All of this, neither real nor not real. All of it theatre. Understood that way because it's image. But in that way, the divine in me being given back was something very personal. It wasn't just my awareness, let's

say, being the same nature as everyone's awareness, universal awareness. So this, perhaps just as an illustration, one possibility.

I mentioned very briefly—we talked about time the other day and the different views of time as different conventional views of time one's adopting and what they open or close. And I mentioned that idea of the Neoplatonic idea of the soul engendering time because it wants to know the divine attributes or the level of angels or what was called intelligences or ideas or forms. It wants to know them and they are eternal and timeless and it can't grasp them, it can't know them all at once. So it engenders time. Soul engenders time so that it can know them all. But they have to be one after the other in sequence, in temporal sequence. We mentioned that the other day.

And because the self is always more than one thing or more than one way of looking at it, more than one narrative, more even than one soul narrative, because we have many angels, not just one angel, out ahead. So you could say the soul engenders time to know that particular angel, where there is this eternity of contract of being given as grace, as gift, a sacred gift, this pain. And then that's played out or stretched out over time, over fifty-something years, between birth and death. Because I also need to have times within that, other times, where I know other senses of self, other angels. Not just that one—I'm more than that. There's more to my soul than one story, one narrative, one angel. There are more angels to my soul than one. So it's just an illustration.

I don't know if we can make a summary, but there's a lot about the poise, the soul-making poise, if that's our intention for soul-making with a certain dukkha, with a certain physical pain. There were a lot of elements, a lot of aspects to that that I ran through. And then potentially this including the self, including this kind of beyond death, this *sub specie aeternitatis*, this view of one's whole life, one's whole narrative. So time and timeless get woven in. The way of being with the dukkha and the emotions and the story that don't cut them out, but also don't squeeze them or look at them in a way where they just become sensations. So all this is part of the crucible. And then an image, right? There's one possible illustration.

As I was reflecting on that a little later, I also wondered then, in that image sense of receiving these pains, these discomforts, these health difficulties, chronic health difficulties—in the image sense of receiving all that from the divine, from beyond or before life as part of my image, the image of me, the angel of me, the image of it as my duty to carry this for some reason, to manifest, to express it. And the image then of giving them back ritually, reverentially. And again, none of that reified—neither real nor not real, imagine a middle way, theatre-like quality.

Reflecting on all that, I reflected on a couple of things about ritual, actually. And I have to tell another little story here. There was a period after about a year... Actually, you're supposed to get, for the cancer I had, typical or standard treatment is six months of chemotherapy. And I persuaded the doctor—because I knew it was stage 4 cancer and the prognosis was very poor—I persuaded the doctor if he would just continue giving me chemotherapy after the six months. And reluctantly he agreed.

But after two more months, I actually developed an infection, what's called a sepsis, which is very dangerous, as some of you will know, when you're on chemotherapy because chemotherapy depletes your immune system. So you have this infection which could rapidly spread and just kill you because you don't have an immune system up and running strongly because the chemotherapy has knocked out your immune system.

So after about eight months of chemo, I ended up in hospital with this sepsis, and the doctor was really quite concerned, and he said, "Absolutely no more chemo," etc.

And so he said no more chemo, and I had to take a break. He didn't want to give me any more after that, which I understand—he was very concerned. It's a long story, and I won't go into all the parts of it, but I found another doctor who was willing to give me more chemotherapy. This new doctor, on the other hand, was more anxious: "You better start it soon, because if you wait too long, the cancer's just going to come back."

But in that time when I wasn't on chemo, my body also started to recover from the effects of the chemotherapy, which is really quite toxic and depleting and damaging to all kinds of organs and systems in the body. So I was beginning just to feel a little more human, a little better. It had been, as I've shared in other talks, really quite a lot of dukkha going through the chemo—not just because of its effects on my body and energy, making me feel sick with diarrhea and all the rest of it, but also, as I've shared elsewhere, just how difficult it was to go into that chemo ward and the soullessness of it.

So in this period where I had been almost three months without chemo, and some people—this doctor and others—were really anxious for me to start again, I could really feel a part of me that was saying, "I really don't know if I can." It was really hard to envision putting myself back in that soulless chemo ward and putting my body through that—primarily the soullessness.

Then I remember working with Catherine one night on soul-making practice, and I asked if we could do a ritual. I had decided I would go back to chemo, but it was a big deal—it felt like a big ask of myself. So we did a ritual one night that I devised. I can't remember exactly now, but we had a little crucible, and I cut some of my fingernails and put them in there, along with a bit of my hair, facial hair, some dead skin I peeled off, some saliva, and body hair from my arm—different body parts, as the Buddha enumerates in the Satipatthana Sutta.

I put these in the crucible and then offered this up—offered my body in anticipation and ritual preparation for re-entering chemo, trying to relate to it soulfully, in a soul-making way, in relation to the challenge and dukkha of that coming experience. We burnt those body elements, those parts of the body. There were other aspects—I included some element for my mind and perceptions, because that was what was quite difficult as well in the chemo ward: the soullessness, the plastic, the atmosphere, what people talked about and what they didn't talk about.

The point is, we made this ritual, Catherine and I did it together, and it was very beautiful. It really helped me take that next step and re-enter chemo.

But one of the things I was wondering about—especially after this image of a ritual in the "Sensing the Pain with Soul" meditation I described earlier—is this question: When does materialization in ritual actually increase and support the soul-making? And when does it decrease the soul power and the soul-making?

To me, this is a really important question, because in the meditation I described earlier in this talk, it was an image of a ritual with no action. I was just sitting cross-legged in meditation posture, just meditating. There was no materialization of anything. In the pre-chemo ritual with Catherine, there was materialization. So when does materialization enhance the soul-making and the soul power? And when does it decrease it? And why?

This parallels other questions—for instance, when you get a sense in meditation of your energy body moving in certain ways, or dancing, or vocalizing, or roaring, or whatever it is: When does it help for that to be actually materialized, concretized, acted upon? And when does it actually disempower it to do so? When does it have much more soul power, much more soul-making power, when there's no materialization, no concretization or actualization in physical reality of that image of what's happening in the energy body or what the energy body wants to do?

I think this is a really important question, and we need to be open to both approaches and able to do both artfully. But when is one going to be more helpful than the other, more soul-making, and why?

Some go back to Neoplatonism—Plotinus held that action is always inferior to contemplation. But I would disagree. We do include rituals on our soul-making retreats, and we have included movement, and hopefully will include vocalization and other practices at different times. But still there's this question of when to act and materialize, when not to, and why it helps sometimes and not others. Other times the reverse is true.

So that's one question.

This remains an ongoing question, and I find it truly fascinating. But a second inquiry emerged following that meditation experience I described—an illustration of the possibility of working with pain through imaginal sensing. I began to wonder whether giving is always a necessary ingredient of soulful ritual.

Consider the Eucharist, for example, the Catholic Mass. In that vision I described, there was receiving—the sense of being given something—and then the reverential giving back. All of it was ritualistic receiving and being given, then ritualistically offering it back, all pervaded by a sense of reverence and beauty. But I wondered: is this always a necessary ingredient for ritual? Or is it one of the more empowering elements that can enhance ritual?

I still don't know the answer, actually, but I wanted to share this ongoing inquiry with you. It is intriguing. I became curious about the word "Eucharist" itself and began exploring its etymology. Eucharist actually means thankfulness, thanks—implying a gift. Of course, there's the gift of the body and blood of Christ that one receives in the Catholic Eucharist. But there's also the gift of Christ's peace, when he says, "My peace I give unto you." Beautiful. There's the gift of that dimensional, divine, sacred peace, and all the dimensionality of what that can mean—Christ's peace given to us, "My peace I give to you."

But there's also, as far as I understand it—I didn't grow up Catholic—a gift from the congregation to each other. They give that peace they've received from Christ to one another. So there's this dynamic of giving and receiving, which is part of what I was wondering about.

It's also interesting that another word for Eucharist, or for similar ceremonies in other Christian denominations, is communion—holy communion. Communion suggests something like union with God—not so much oneness, but being together. There's communion with God and communion with the church, with the body of Christ, which also means the church itself. And so there's a giving of oneself in communion.

Another word for Eucharist is Mass, from the Latin "misa," which derives from the verb "mittere"—to send away. In English we have "dismiss," and words like "missive" or "mission." We're sent on a mission; a missive is something we send. There's a dismissal at the end of the Mass, and that's where it gets its name. You're sent away with the priest's blessing and having received the Holy Sacrament. Perhaps one interpretation is that we who have received what has been given to us in ritual—this gift from God—then go out as gifts from God to the world, to others. We're giving ourselves, passing on that gift; we become the gift that's passed on.

I don't know the answer yet. But since ritual is very much a part of soul-making practice, and I'm deeply interested in understanding what's involved and what's important in developing that dimension, this remains an ongoing inquiry. We don't have set, prescribed, formulaic rituals—we haven't so far. We've kept them very open; they're always created there and then on the retreats when we've done them. Sometimes they have spontaneous elements. We don't have one ritual or even several rituals that we repeat. So far, I like it that way, though I remain open. But I'm very interested in this question: is receiving and giving a necessary part of ritual, or is it an ingredient—a possible ingredient—that can be very empowering?

One last thing, connected to what I just said: I am actually open to the idea of developing set ritual formulae that get repeated. I'm certainly not closed to that possibility. But I do think there's something valuable in this capacity to create and discover rituals that are new, fresh for soul-making work.

Connected to that, I described that practice, that imaginal practice of sensing pain with soul. But what I really want to communicate—what I most want to illustrate—is a possibility, and to give a general sense of what may need to be involved.

Some or all of what I pointed to in terms of the poise and other elements—what I really want to say is please don't assume that imaginal practice is formulaic, that there's a formula. Sometimes it might seem that way, but for me it really needs to, I think for its full flourishing and the fullness of its possibilities, retain a sense of improvisation and creativity, opportunism and openness and flexibility.

Some of those earlier practices I described with insight, ways of looking or whatever, we could say they're more or less formulaic. Actually, even then, there are lots of improvisatory possibilities and variations. But I think when we come to imaginal practice and the art of that, we need to be careful of getting into a sort of formulaic way of thinking—first I do this, then one, two, three, like that.

It's so often the case if I'm working with someone in an interview that I have an intuitive sense at some point; it just comes that this or that needs to happen, X or Y needs to happen, or something needs to be put in relationship with this image or whatever. But that X or Y that needs to happen, or whatever it is, is often not something I've actually thought of before or mentioned in talks, or systematized in the teachings.

So to me, part of the beauty comes in the improvised, open, attentive nature of the way we approach the practice with this flexibility. And there's grace there, because when one gets an intuitive sense—oh, this needs to happen, or this needs to get emphasized, or I need to put this image in relationship with this other thing, another image, or another particular dukkha or whatever it is—and they're not things that one has thought of before or formulated, then that's part of the grace. That's part of the discover-create. It's part of the humility in relation to soul as well.

So yes, we certainly can talk about what goes into making a crucible for soul-making work with dukkha. We can talk about the elements of the imaginal. We can talk about what I called today the poise of soul-making, of readiness for soul-making. We can talk about what goes on in there, but there's not necessarily a certain order. And there might be other things that get left out or things that occur to us, that are given to us as graces.

So the whole thing really becomes an art that's partly improvised, and not just stuff that I'm doing, that's coming from my will. It's in relationship—so to speak, in relationship to soul, to angel—we are given. And part of what we're given is an intuition, or intuitions about what might be included, what might need to happen.

So yes, of course, this is part of the balance. There is a place for working, for technique, for art. But there's also the place for grace, and the other, and soul, and the infinity of soul as other, and the notion of receiving from soul what we hadn't formalized, hadn't occurred to us, hadn't figured out. It's not a technical step. So both. There's a balance. There's a straddling of those two aspects or moments, directions.

Thank you for listening.

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