Practising with Death and Dying

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 2:35:07

So tonight I'd like to offer to share just a few reflections on death and dying.

I suppose in our culture, primarily if people are going to broach the subject of death, there are a few primary or most popular directions through which they approach the subject.

One is, of course, just the fact of impermanence. The fact that we, our lives, like everything else, are impermanent. And that awareness, or the primacy of that awareness, is really spread throughout the culture, I would say. Somewhere I've said before, it seems to me it's the dominant theme in modern poetry, certain modern English poetry. Some way or another have to do with the poignancy of impermanence, the tragedy of temporal finitude, the ending of things, the fragility of things, the loss, the poignancy and heartache of separation and loss and the need to acknowledge that. This is part of life. This is what we will meet. This is what we will face. Our own and others' death. Of course, the cherry blossoms falling from the trees.

So there is, in the dominance of that theme in a lot of modern English language poetry, a lot wrapped up there. There's a sort of gentle encouragement to open to it, but there's also basically a whole metaphysical stance about what's important, about what's real, about what's perhaps the only thing that's really real, about what it means to live life truly, openly, with an open heart, with open eyes. Of course, that's huge. Can we open the heart to that? Can we bear that poignancy, loss, separation from those we love?

Sometimes, whether it's in poetry or whether it's in the Dharma, this emphasis on impermanence can have a whole other level which is really a metaphysical level and a metaphysical stance and assumption of what the Buddha would call nihilism, what the Buddha would call annihilationism, and criticize very strongly, together with its opposite pole of eternalism, criticizing both very strongly as extreme views to be rejected and avoided. The idea that everything ends in death, that we disappear in death, that there's nothing left. It's a contrasting paired view that the soul just goes on forever, lasts forever in time.

But often, nowadays, even in the Dharma, there is this kind of undergirding in the drawing attention to the impermanence and the poignancy of loss and separation. It's undergirded, again, either explicitly or implicitly by a whole metaphysic, and a whole metaphysical assumption and position that's taken as truth, which is basically what the Buddha called nihilism, annihilationism. Then that's the end. There's a complete erasing of our existence. You can say, yes, well, the atoms that make up our body will be recycled, and whatever actions and speech we've done will somehow ripple out onwards in time. But basically there's a soil underneath there, a whole layer of sediment of nihilism.

But anyway, impermanence, one way or another, or in both ways, is one of the main, most popular, understandably, directions with which to open up and approach the conversation about death.

Another, much more in the wider culture and less in the Dharma culture, of course, is a kind of eternalism. So rooted in teachings about heaven and hell and existing forever in heaven and hell, maybe with some intermediate or rather provisional stopping over places like purgatory, where you get purified before going to heaven, where you'll stay forever or you'll stay forever in hell. And that's a kind of eternalism.

Not so popular these days in widespread culture, but still I think quite popular is the notion and belief in some kind of afterlife which lasts forever. And what has become fairly widespread, quite widespread, is that in this afterlife, which lasts forever, there is a reunion with one's family. And so, again, just tracing that historically, its beginnings can be traced in the 18th and 19th century. Someone called Samuel Lewis wrote a picture of life in Virginia in the USA at the time of Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson. And this was one of the things that was beginning to emerge then. So less this idea of heaven and hell, and more emerging this idea of an afterlife that the hell bit was dropped.

So the worst of all possible fates, hell, burning in hell forever, that was sort of shorn off things. And what was left was, for many people, this idea that after death we are reunited with our loved ones, with family. And this is still very popular. Of course, there are probably quite a few people for whom that very idea of being reunited with one's family forever is exactly a version of hell. It's all dependent, of course, but just tracing ideas is an idea of an afterlife, immortality somewhere. That's part of the again quite common themes or tropes or approaches to the question of death.

And then, of course, a third one in Buddhist circles would be reincarnation or more usually rebirth in Buddhist circles. And I've said this before, in the Pali canon view, rebirth, the whole teaching of rebirth was mostly terrifying. The idea of just literally endless, forever in time, just being reborn, getting ill, dying again, going through all the misery of people around, people you love dying, and just repeating that over and over again, maybe in more or less favorable rebirths, and a lot of the levels of rebirth, pretty miserable. Pretty miserable, not the level of comfort and ease and medical security that we have these days for the most part in the West.

So the whole teachings about samsara and endless rebirth was essentially terrifying. If you were really, really lucky, or rather if you had played your cards right, which you didn't actually know whether you had done in the past, somewhere in my infinite number of past lives, I may have been a really devoted meditator and exceptionally altruistic and maybe at some point that will earn me a rebirth in a high heaven for a while until I die from there and then I'm on the roulette wheel again.

So the whole teaching of samsara and rebirth in that sense was actually terrifying.

Nowadays, most Western Buddhists—and let's acknowledge it's a certain demographic even within

Western society—are accustomed to relatively comfortable lives and security regarding illness. Even when we do fall ill, there's generally good care available. So the whole idea of rebirth carries a completely different flavor: "Oh great, we get another chance," or "It goes on for more," or "I wonder what I'll be next time," or "Maybe we'll meet again."

This gives rebirth quite a different tenor than it probably had in Pali Canon Buddhism when the Buddha was urgently teaching: get off that wheel, end rebirth. Can you not see this infinite roulette wheel—round and round and round—birth and misery and death, birth and loss and death, birth and brief happiness and death and illness and sickness and old age and infirmity and loss and separation? Get off the wheel. Really staring at that infinite repetition was just horrifying.

So it carries quite a different tone and flavor in the modern Western notion among both Buddhists and non-Buddhists. This would be another typical approach to the question of death, certainly within Buddhist teachings, but I don't want to approach it from any of those angles tonight.

There's another possible approach—some of you will be familiar with ideas and recent discoveries in quantum physics. I've talked about this in another recent talk, though I can't recall which one. There's something called quantum entanglement. When two subatomic particles, perhaps two photons, become entangled, they're essentially connected to each other. If one has a certain quality—let's call it spin, an "up spin"—then the other will have a "down spin." They're entangled in that way.

But the fuller implication of entanglement is this: when something happens to one particle, it also affects what happens to its entangled partner instantaneously, even over massive distances. It's not that one partner photon signals the other—it simply happens instantaneously.

This idea emerged when Einstein uncovered it as an implication of quantum theory and declared it ridiculous. Two things troubled him: first, this seemed to involve instantaneous communication over vast distances—information appearing to travel faster than the speed of light, which was axiomatically impossible according to his theories. Second, and wrapped up with this, it meant that the object—the photon—doesn't exist as having this spin or that spin, this property or that property, until we observe it.

So there are two implications: first, that a subatomic particle's "thingness" is not defined before we observe it. It's not just that we don't know what it is while it remains a defined thing—it's actually not a defined thing. It's fuzzy, indeterminate, indefinite. It's not a thing as we call a thing. It's not a real thing. And second, there's this possibility of instantaneous connection across potentially billions of miles, light years and light years.

Einstein pointed this out, and Niels Bohr said, "Yes, that's actually right. We're going to call that quantum entanglement. That is a prediction of the theory." Einstein replied, "Well, that's ridiculous," for both reasons I've just explained.

This sparked a debate. Einstein, together with two other physicists, Podolsky and Rosen, wrote a paper in

the 1930s with a very clever argument suggesting this was actually the downfall of quantum physics. It proved, they argued, that things could not be fuzzy before observation, could not be dependent on the observer or the way of looking. Things are things, independent of the way of looking.

It was a brilliant paper, but there was little anyone could do with it because they proposed an experiment to decide the matter. Later, an Irish physicist named David Bell—also very suspicious of this quantum idea that fundamentally, things don't exist before they are observed—proposed the actual experiment.

This notion was utterly ridiculous and deeply anathema to Einstein, Podolsky, Rosen, and especially to David Bell. He remained profoundly critical of this fundamental premise, insisting that "there's something rotten at the base of quantum physics."

Then, beginning in the 1970s and continuing into the early 1980s, a series of groundbreaking experiments emerged. Building upon Bell's theorem—a brilliant piece of theoretical work that proposed a way to test these quantum mysteries—researchers finally found a method to put these ideas to experimental scrutiny. A physicist in California, whose name escapes me at the moment, picked up Bell's theoretical framework and conducted experiments that seemed to actually refute both Bell's and Einstein's intuitions. The results suggested that, indeed, things are not definite—there are no independently existing things before observation.

When critics pointed out alternative explanations for these results, researchers refined their approach. Alan Aspect conducted more sophisticated experiments to close potential loopholes. Most recently, scientists performed the same type of experiment using light from two different quasars—ultra-high energy galaxies billions of light years away. This light originated near the birth of the universe, just after the Big Bang. Using such ancient light was meant to eliminate certain variables that might distort the results, though I confess I didn't fully grasp their technical explanation of why this was crucial.

Remarkably, all these experiments have consistently proven the same two fundamental points. First, objects—subatomic particles—are indeed not definite things. They are not things before observation. What they are and how they manifest depends entirely on the kind of observation, the way of looking. They remain fuzzy, indeterminate, indefinite—empty of inherent existence.

Second, these experiments prove that space is not what it seems. Across vast astronomical distances, two particles can be instantaneously connected with no signal traveling between them. The implication is staggering: what we think of and how we sense space is simply not real. Space itself, at some fundamental level, is an illusion.

Time also proves to be not what it seems. Many other results and experiments in both relativity theory and quantum theory have equally profound implications, shattering our sense of the independent existence of space and time. Our common-sense understanding of space and time—the way we typically think about them, what we assume about their nature—is not real. It is illusion. While exactly what's

going on remains unclear, it's undeniably clear that our usual perceptions are illusory.

Space is not what it seems. Distance is not what it seems. Things can be intimately, instantaneously connected—entangled with each other across vast distances. Doing something here makes a difference over there. Doing something over there makes a difference over here, precisely because space is not what it seems.

One could certainly take these ideas and explore what they might imply about our notions of death and separation. However, I honestly don't know exactly what this implies regarding death and our experience around death and dying. So I'll leave that inquiry for now.

These are the four most conventional ways of approaching these questions. What I want to explore tonight is a more phenomenological approach—working directly with our experiences and what appears to us. A phenomenological approach involves inquiry and experimentation with our lived experience.

We could indeed pursue this quantum perspective further, because inherited beliefs and ontologies—and we are talking about ontology here—profoundly condition, shape, and limit our experience and what appears to us. Remember, the word "phenomena" means appearance. The ontology of space—does it inherently exist? The ontology of subatomic particles, allegedly the most basic building blocks of matter—what is their fundamental nature?

It may well be that if we begin questioning our inherited beliefs using insights from physics, this might open up our experience with death. Yes, it might. I'm simply not certain what exactly to extract from this beyond the most general notions of interconnectedness.

What I'd rather do tonight—what I'm going to do—is take a more phenomenological approach, starting directly with our experience and approaching inquiry from that foundation.

And especially the phenomenological approach as it pertains to, as it emerges from soul-making dharma and sensing with soul practices and openings.

So what is our experience when we approach death—our death, someone else's death, the whole question of death and dying—with the support of soul-making dharma, and through the modalities of sensing with soul and the kind of openings that sensing with soul brings?

In this phenomenological approach—as much as the phenomenological approach that has to do with ways of looking at emptiness—both of them recognize that ideas, logos, conceptual frameworks are always involved in our experience and that they condition experience. So there's always idea, conception, logos, conceptual framework involved in any experience, and it has a conditioning, shaping, fabricating and limiting influence on our experience. So an intelligent and more powerful phenomenological approach has to acknowledge that, has to recognize that.

And of course, it works the other way too. Our experience, if it's repeated enough and powerful enough,

starts to change our ideas, our logos, our conceptions, conceptual framework. That's all part of the whole eros-psyche-logos dynamic.

So this phenomenological approach, as much as it comes out of and is born by the sensing with soul approaches and openings, recognizes that ideas and logos are in our experience inevitably, and that they condition experience. It also recognizes the possibility of our flexibility with our ways of looking and with the ideas that are in the citta, in the way of looking at any moment, and the interest in that flexibility of ways of looking and the conception that's in there at any time, and what that does to experience.

This is really the tack that I want to take tonight.

In terms of ideas, of course, we must acknowledge that we have, or we are the bearers of, a mixed inheritance. As much as we are the bearers of a mixed inheritance with regard to ethics and values, with regard to ontology, with regard to epistemology, we inherit from the culture ideas and perspectives and the actual sense of things. And so with regard to death too, inevitably we also receive a mixed inheritance, a kind of hodgepodge of ideas.

I don't know if I'm making too much of this, but something came up the other day that I noticed when I was first diagnosed with cancer. Going to the hospital and going to the oncology ward for the first time—it was actually after my operation, so a few months after I was diagnosed—there was some talk, or there was a sign, a piece of paper talking about different departments within the oncology department. One phrase really struck me: "the end of life pathway"—the patient is on the end of life pathway.

Even now at the hospice, the hospice nurses talk about "end of life" like it's a phrase. And how little I heard the word "dying" or "death." In fact, I'm not even sure if I ever have heard a doctor or nurse utter those words. "Passing on." I'm not sure if I'm sensing something here. It's potentially a very big deal.

I think I'm sensing something underneath that. Are people—is the medical institution—avoiding those terms? And if it is, what's going on? Is it that life is all there is, so they talk about "end of life"?

"End of life pathways" seemed even more bizarre, almost jarring to me, as if the choice of terminology—I wasn't sure whether it had really come from the hospital administrator's flowchart of how they need to manage all these patients. So they have a flowchart of where different patients go: into chemotherapy, into radiotherapy, or after that doesn't work, then they're on this pathway, and then they're on the end-of-life pathway. Whether that's just a term reflecting more their management solutions than actually an existential position, I don't know.

But there seemed to be this avoidance of the terms "death" and "dying." Is that because life is deemed as all there is, and death is not seen in itself as something—an event, a momentous doorway? Even if it might be a doorway to total non-existence, it's still a doorway. If you just avoid that sense, or that whole notion of it, by using different words—"end of life."

Maybe irrelevant. But as I said, we've undeniably picked up a mixed inheritance, as we do for so many things in our culture. Probably even going back to India at the time of the Buddha, the Buddha had a mixed inheritance, and Tibetans have a mixed inheritance. That's just part of living in a culture that's not totally original or paleolithic.

And we inherit then a mixed bag of beliefs with respect to death—religious beliefs and traditions, even if we're not religious, that comes to us from that stream, but also secular or non-religious beliefs.

I use the word "beliefs" very deliberately when speaking of secular or non-religious positions, because usually these are not positions about death that have been thought through with any great intensity or originality. They are something we inherited from the evolving and emerging secularism of our culture over hundreds of years. And they are beliefs—not knowledges, not logical deductions one has carried out independently, not certainties, and as I said, not even rigorously examined with great questioning or intensity or vitality or originality.

So we have—all of us probably, most of us certainly—this mixed bag of beliefs, some religious in origin, some secular in origin, around death. I think it's important to acknowledge this, to realize what's going on within us, what steers and shapes and colors and limits our sense of things, in this case of death and dying.

Since being ill, I've encountered all kinds of expressions that reveal different attitudes and beliefs around death. Sometimes this mixed bag is apparent in a single utterance. I'm thinking of two people now, both staunchly, even aggressively secular. Both received serious cancer diagnoses, though not necessarily fatal. And both of these firmly secular people—one in his fifties when diagnosed, the other in his seventies—said, "I feel cheated."

How does that work? How can you feel cheated while holding such an aggressive secular position? Who is it you feel cheated by? What is it you feel cheated by? Where does this sense of expectation—to eighty years of life—come from? What's going on in the mixed bag of beliefs and inheritances that allows one to feel cheated while simultaneously espousing a strong secular, atheistic view? It's interesting in itself, these strange bedfellows that make up our view, our beliefs, our sense of things, our responses to something as basic as death.

But there's a second piece here. "I feel cheated" reveals something about one's relationship with existence, one's view of existence. The feeling that one is owed something, that one expects something about the duration of life—how different this is from a sense, a view, an idea but also a soul-sense of life and death as gift. Life, illness, and death as gift from the Divine and to the Divine. How different this is from "I feel cheated"—from the position of being owed something, expecting something and not receiving it—versus life and illness and death as gift from the Divine and to the Divine.

I mean this as a sense. All that I'm talking about in this series of talks, and most of what I discuss in the

soul-making Dharma teachings, is really based on experience. For someone outside of this sensibility, who hasn't had experiences that open up the sense of things—the sense of self, of other, of the cosmos, of death, of illness—through imaginal practice, through sensing the soul, this sounds alien and disturbing and alarmingly... well, just alarming. The sense that your death and your illness are a gift from God? How does that work? Your early death, your difficult illness, your painful illness and all that limitation—a gift? What are you talking about? It's an affront, a nonsensical notion.

But for someone who has practiced, this kind of blossoming of sensibility—where the very sense of things, including one's illness, including one's early death, can be there as gift from God, from the Divinity, from the Dharmakaya, and gift to the Dharmakaya—becomes possible. A mystical gift from and to the Divinity, to the Dharmakaya.

Even the word "mystical" is problematic for some people. For some it just means nonsense, something that doesn't make sense, or something to do with mystery. But we're not talking about mystery in the sense of the baffledness—why there is existence at all, why there is a universe, why are there human beings. Behind that sense of mystery lies a kind of bewilderment, as if it's all completely arbitrary. That kind of mystery, that kind of question—"Why is there anything at all? Why does anything exist?"—carries a different quality entirely.

What a mystery. Actually, it's already assuming a kind of purposelessness in the question. It's not really a question—it's already assuming purposelessness and calling it mystery. Just this sort of arbitrary, seemingly arbitrary arbitrariness of the fact of any existence of anything.

But here, mystical and mystery mean having dimensions, having unfathomability, inexhaustibility, beauty—all of that. And how different I feel when cheated, expecting however many years, versus the whole movement of life and death as gift—the gift of life and the gift of death, receiving that gift and somehow giving it as well, giving my life, giving my death. That being a very different kind of gift, a mystical gift.

So what I really want to go into tonight is just a few possibilities—many possibilities—of what can make death okay. And even that sounds like a bit of a stupid question, because what do I mean by okay? I don't just mean a kind of shrugging: "Oh well, that's death, that's just life, right? Life goes with death—that's the deal." I certainly don't mean, or I mean much more than that.

I mean also much more—this should already be clear—than just bearing the tragedy of loss. It's not just okay because I can bear our tragic existential situation, can bear the poignancy of it, can bear the fragility of life, can bear even my personal losses and the grief that comes with that in my heart. So yes, that's part of it—can I bear it? Can I hold that? But what can open the whole question up more, the whole issue, the whole panorama, the whole horizon of death up more, without reverting to beliefs in rebirth or eternal afterlife?

This is what I want to offer tonight—a few things, among many possibilities, that may be ways of opening things up, opening the sense of things up.

Now, of course, death is difficult when it's our death we're contemplating. Usually that's a difficult thing. Sometimes not, for different reasons, but that may have nothing to do with deep insight and deep opening. Death is difficult when it's ours, generally speaking, and of course it's also difficult when it's someone else's, when we love someone and there's the looming—death is looming, death is coming as the imminence of our loss. So it's difficult in both those directions, and I want to say a little bit about both.

So, what makes death okay? Clearly—well, it should be clear to most people—accumulating a lot of money is not going to make death okay. Accumulating a lot of pleasant experiences or having more pleasant than unpleasant experiences is also not going to make death okay.

Sometimes, what's more common is people accumulating experiences to make death more okay—and again, it might not be so conscious or articulated, or it might be. We have this idea of the bucket list—the things I want to do before I die, the experiences I want to accumulate. Or even a sense of someone perhaps being told they have a terminal diagnosis, and thinking, "Oh, well, I've had a lot of really good things, I've done a lot of really interesting things, I've traveled here"—whatever it is. I've accumulated experiences. So for some people, that's something they look to to make death more okay. And it might be that works a little bit for some people to some extent.

It might also be—and what I've noticed is this sort of: "Oh, well, I've had a long life," or "They've had a long life," or at least it's as long as or longer than the average length of life. And if it's less than the average, then potentially we can feel cheated. But if it's longer than the average, then there's some okayness there. And again, that may help a little bit with some perspectives.

You can see how in modern culture we have very little wiggle room to really open up the sense of death and how we might feel about it, think about it, and die.

And of course, practicing, noticing impermanence, reflecting on impermanence, letting the fact of the impermanence of all things impress upon you—a lifetime of doing that will also help with regard to death. This is very often stressed in some dharma, in insight dharma as well, as the central reflection that's stressed and practiced. And of course that may help. It may well help. It should help. But it may also be quite limited—just repeated reflection on impermanence, repeated impression of the fact of the impermanence of all things. It may also be relatively limited what that can do in terms of how we actually end up feeling about our death or the death of a loved one. So definitely helpful, but may also be limited.

And then sometimes you get the other view, typical in some streams of dharma: there's no self, really. There's no self that dies. There's just a process of the aggregates.

And so, because there's no self, there's nothing really to fear in death, because what the self really is, is just this process of aggregates in time, the physical and mental aggregates.

I've said before that to have this as the only view of self and existence is—well, I don't know what the word for it is—narrow, certainly, but kind of silly, really. It's not adequate for our psychology, it's not adequate for life, it's not adequate for death, it's not adequate for relationship, which I'll come back to. It's not phenomenologically adequate.

As a temporary mode of relative perspective that can be used as a provisional truth and provisional way of looking, it can be helpful at times on the way to something deeper, for sure. But as a primary way of orienting to the dukkha and the pain of death? Not so sure.

If you ask me—and I have actually shared this elsewhere, written a little bit about it—what is it for me that makes my death okay as I'm approaching it? Much more okay. Like a whole different level of okay, so the word "okay" doesn't really even do it. What is it that opens out the whole sense of death and brings a level of beauty and peace there?

I've shared this with you before, but I think I can divide them into perhaps four. One is emptiness practice and understanding. By which I do not mean that limited view of the self as just the process of aggregates in time. I mean something way beyond that. I mean a practice and understanding that opens to the unfabricated, the complete transcendent beyond, the deathless—no subject, no object, no time, no world, no this, no that, beyond all perception.

That sense of that realm or dimension, as the Buddha sometimes called it, does something. The timelessness of that does something. Sometimes there's a sense of that being just there, as a holy other, transcendent other, and sometimes as shining through existence, through this existence, this world of temporality and thingness and subjects and objects and selves. But it does something, either way, both ways.

Similarly, seeing the emptiness of time—the emptiness of past, future, and present. The complete emptiness of time. The emptiness of any present moment. There's something about that. It would have to be, of course. Death is connected intimately, obviously, with notions of time, senses of time. You see the emptiness of time, and that does something that opens up the sense of death.

And of course, as I've talked about recently and before, even going beyond the unfabricated, where we're open to appearances that are felt and sensed and known as empty, magical and divine. I talked about this earlier in the series somewhere or other. Empty, magical and divine appearances. And in that, with that, shot through all that—in the magic, the emptiness and the divinity—is a sacredness. That sacredness, that sense of sacredness that comes right out of emptiness practice, makes a huge difference. There's so much power in that in relation to death.

The Buddha said, with a few different examples, "One moment of knowing that is worth a hundred years of"—and he gives a lot of examples—"pain-free life, a hundred years of knowing," I think he says even knowing impermanence. One moment of knowing that, and the whole sense of existence... something

happens. It's turned inside out. That's not even the right word. But in that, the whole relationship with death is different, is opened out, is pacified and made beautiful.

So for me, that's one real way or direction or approach which really changes the relationship with death, makes it profoundly okay.

A second is related to what I said earlier about this sense of gift—at all different levels, receiving gifts or having received gifts, gifts showered on oneself, and also given gifts. At every level, I can see in my life I've been given a lot of gifts. I never felt growing up, despite all the craziness and difficulty and dysfunction, to use an out-of-date word, in our family and upbringing and all the intensity and intense sort of craziness there—I never felt that I would go hungry or go without a roof over my head. Just that level of gift, and the gift of education, and so many gifts.

At that level, but also the gift of life itself, and the gift of what's given particularly to me, and particularly to you. Your particular gifts. And wrapped up in my particular gifts and your particular gifts is your particular dukkha.

They go together, often. Certainly any gift I'm given brings—any deep gift I'm given seems to bring with it its kind of concomitant accompanying dukkha that's wrapped up in it. And I can see that I've been given certain gifts in this life and certain abilities and capacities and whatever you want to say.

So that's all these senses of gift and the sense of giving, of having given, that that has been important. It's been so important to me to give. Again, lots of different levels—just to practice generosity, but to give of my gifts and to give to the world and to give to the future, and to give of the beauty I sense, the beauties I sense, to pass that on, to communicate, to let something come through, to share that.

So all these different levels and what I talked about—when I think it was in the talk on pain and that kind of thing—this sense of gift, received and given. That sense of existence, and even, as I said, even the illness and the pain and the dukkha and the early death as being part of what I received, part of what was gift to me, part of somehow that I am sacredly giving back, or in a sacramental way giving back. That whole sense of life also does something to our sense of depth. I think very much, or I feel very much.

And then a third way is the sense of having done, having tried to do one's duty, having tried in one's life—even if one hasn't really understood it or had the words or a conceptual framework that will hold it and carry it, not been able to articulate it, only dimly sensed, or maybe not even sensed at all—that one has tried to do one's duty. One has let oneself and worked so that one's life refracts the daimon, reflects the angels out ahead that call to one, that govern one's life. So this sense too. And one can never succeed in that 100%. I've said that the reflection is never completely perfect. Virtually it's always falling short. But one has tried and let that lead one's life, devoted oneself to that, put that as primary. Even as I said, if one doesn't think in these terms at all, that one can hear something like that and understand, yes, I can see that I've done that. I've tried to do that.

And fourthly, connected to the whole thing we were talking about with the ethics talks in this series, that one has lived in a way that's tried to be—one has aspired to living a really worthwhile life, a life that is worth living, a beautiful life. One has aspired towards the good, with a capital G, towards what really matters, a sense of what really matters. Taking the trouble to find out what that is for oneself and to get one's bearings even in times of confusion and being inundated with other pushes and pulls and indoctrinations and advertisements and peer pressure and all kinds of things, risks and threats—that one has lived in that direction, one has tried to live as much as possible in that direction.

So those four things: from the emptiness in that much fuller sense, the sense of gift received and given at all those different levels and all those different ways, the trying to discern and to do one's duty—duty is refracting the daimon—and the attempt to live what really constitutes a worthwhile life, and sense of that, a beautiful life, a really good life, with a capital G. So for me, those are some of the principal things that really make a difference.

And of course, all of those are actually connected, those four things, kind of directions or approaches. Especially they're connected through, of course, soul-making practice and the sensing of soul sensibility—the sense of refracting one's day and undoing one's duty, the sense of life as gift, gifts received and given at all these different levels, the sense of living in the direction of what senses a really beautiful life and the emptiness of it all, the very neither real nor not real nature of all of that. All of that comes together and is intimately woven together in soul-making practice and sensing with soul sensibilities.

Actually, just to add something to that list—because most of what's in that list of four things, four supports or openings that transform the relationship with death, most of what's in there are kind of currents and efforts and movements and openings over a lifetime or over years really, directions. So just to add to that, something which I've already shared in another talk, I think it was in the talk on diet practice, soul-making diet practice, I think it was there, it doesn't really matter, but there is the possibility of being so touched by a soul-making experience, having an opening in imaginal practice or sensing with soul, where one's profoundly moved by a sense of grace, a sense of eternality, a sense of participating in something so unfathomably beautiful and divine.

When we use it as one of the elements of the imaginal—participation—we're really meaning something much more, much more profound than what its usual meaning points to, like participate in this or that. Something almost impossible to articulate: mystery, profundity and sacredness in the sense of that participation, that just having those few minutes of experience transforms the relationship with existence and with death.

So it could be in diet practice or in a group soul-making practice, or it could just be solo with so-called intrapsychic image, or it could be sensing with soul, some experience perhaps in nature where there's the sensing with soul and the soul-making imaginal perception. And one feels as if so much grace bestowed, wonder, the privilege, the profound sacred privilege of opening to something so divine, to the divine in

that way, we're just being touched by that, having that grace come, participating that way, having that sense of privilege—it changes the sense of death because of the grace, because of the privilege of participation, because of the opening to eternality, to timelessness.

And that kind of experience is very different than what I was talking about earlier at the start of the talk, trying to accumulate experiences. Because the attitude, the impulse to accumulate experience tends to be restricted to one dimension. It tends to be flat. And therefore it needs more and more experiences. It always needs more experiences because the eros there is limited to one dimensionality. Because it's not, for some reason—either because of the limited logos or for some other reason—not allowed to open up more dimensions, to open to more dimensions. It cannot penetrate and open two-dimensionality. So the pothos in the eros, that which wants more in the eros, cannot go, so to speak, deeper into other dimensions, other aspects, facets of what it wants and what it loves. It has to go, so to speak, horizontally on the same level for more and more experiences. Now I've been there, my travels, I have to go there.

No, I've been there, I have to go somewhere else. More travel, been here, been there, flown here, flown there, seen this, seen that, so to speak. We've explained this in *Ecology of Love*, I think, *Path of the Imaginal* , plenty of other places.

When the eros is allowed to open up the dimensionality, open up the logos, open up the psyche—when there's that really profound experience of an opening to some soul-making experience of the imaginal, sensing the soul—then it has, in contrast to this kind of accumulation of experience, such a humility in it. There's a real humility in it, partly because of the sense of grace, of inexplicable gift.

And with it there's also a sense of: this is enough. This is enough. This gift is enough. That glimpse, those couple of minutes, that opening to something, that sense of deep participation, that sense of the privilege of that opening and that bestowal of grace is enough. That gift was enough, those two minutes. And that makes a difference in relation to death—this humility and a sense that this is enough that comes with the grace.

And there is a sense, you know, because our experience fades, of course—experiences are impermanent. Experience fades, but somewhere in our being, even when that sense of things and that experience feels inaccessible, it's not apparent, we can still be left with: I know something. Because I've tasted it, I've experienced it, I know something, even when it's not, at some later time, apparent or accessible.

And this knowing in the being—I know something about existence, I know something about human being, I know something about life—that something that I know, even if I can't quite articulate it, I can't really encapsulate it in words, it does something in relation to, it does something to my relationship with death. It's enough. It's enough. And it makes death much more okay.

So there's also that, which I would say is really important. There's certainly the importance of the currents in one's life, these longer trends and longer strivings and longer devotions, the sense of the whole life with

all its beauties and all its difficulties and challenges and travails and tragedies, all of that as gift received, and all the gifts given at so many levels of one's life. These are longer-term devotional trends in the sense of trying to do one's duty, trying to discern and do one's duty, trying to seek out and sense what is the life that's beautiful, that's worthwhile, that's really good. And even the journey into the experience of emptiness—all this is longer-term devotions and trends.

But I just want to add to that: there's also the possibility, I think a very important possibility, of just these openings, sometimes, of soul-making practice that are so profound and so imbued with grace and beauty, and a sense of the privilege of participation—whatever we want to call it—in the divinity of things at such a deep level, that those moments—not so much longer-term trends, but moments or, you know, minutes or whatever, sometimes hours, but sometimes they're just really a few minutes—those experiences potentially can make a huge difference in our relationship with death. It's enough. It's enough. I've had that, and just those two minutes are worth more...

So that's just a little bit. I want to come back later on and share someone else's experience or approach to their own death. There's so much to say—we can only say a little bit.

But of course, like I said, sometimes it's another person's death, someone whose death is very difficult for us. And sometimes we encounter people who... What language could we use here? We feel they've lived their image. They've refracted their daemon. To use that language, we feel that. They've lived their image, they've refracted their daemon. They lived in a way that echoes and mirrors and does the duty of their daemon, of their image, of their—again if we use this language—their individual idea, the idea with a capital I in the ideal realm, individual form, their ideal person. It's a different language.

And when we have that feeling about someone, we are touched deeply by them and their life, and touched by that whole—what we feel we are sensing there and witnessing—because we sense that the divine and the deep soul is coming through that person. I'm thinking of someone like John Coltrane, for me. Early death. But somehow just did what he was here to do so devotedly, so beautifully, really living his image, doing the duty of his daemon.

And it touches profoundly. We have the sense something is going on here that has to do with—whatever your language—divinity, God, deep soul. And the soul loves that. The soul loves seeing that, witnessing that, sensing that. And of course, when we have that sense about someone else, when they die, naturally the grief then is deep for the very same reason. The soul loves that. There's so much beauty there. So much being touched by the divine. So much sense of divinity coming through. When they die, the grief will be deep for just that reason.

But in a way, you know, we have them still too. We have them still after death because in a way they are eternal. Their image has impressed itself on us.

So they can be an image for us, with all the elements of the imaginal, including the eternality and the

timelessness. But they're already image. And that image lives on with eternality, with timelessness. So we have them. Yes, there's the loss. Of course there's the loss. And of course there's the grief. But somehow we still have them.

In Bach's St. Matthew Passion, there's a really gorgeous aria. I think it's sung by the baritone or bass, but the character is, I think, Joseph of Arimathea. Some of you will know from the Gospel stories. He agreed to bury Jesus, or he volunteered to bury Jesus after the crucifixion. And the lyrics of this aria are in German, which in slightly archaic English translates as, "Make thee clean my heart, I will bury Jesus." And that's the only lyric of the whole aria. "Make thee clean my heart, make yourself pure my heart, I will bury Jesus."

Again, I know people have different histories with all this, but for me, there's just so much love and soul, certainly in the music, but also in that very sentiment: "Make me clean my heart, I will bury Jesus." What does it mean to bury, in this case, to bury Jesus, bury someone we love, bury someone whom we feel lived their image, through whom the divine came? What does that mean? Bury, to bury Jesus, to bury this person in my heart, in my soul. This is a real possibility for us, that we can do that. Bury this person in the heart, in the soul, really, so that they somehow live in me, live for me, as image, as icon.

So yes, all the grief - I really don't want to say that this erases the grief, that it'll just be no problem - but there's a whole other possibility that can open up. And even if we take that lyric there: "Make thee clean my heart, I will bury Jesus." What does "make me clean" mean? In soul-making dharma, "make yourself clean" means purity, purify. And what does that mean? It means, in soul-making dharma terms, fullness of intention. That's a purification of our intentions. It means all the sensitivity of the poise of sensing the soul and even the preparation for sensing the soul. It means the elements of the imaginal: the humility, the reverence, the grace, the participation, the autonomy also of self and other, the beauty, the eros. This is all part of "make me clean" - all the elements, but particularly fullness of intention, particularly humility, particularly sensitivity, particularly the imaginal middle way.

There's also purification when that starts to either reify or go the other end where images are dismissed. Then we don't have the container for the real power of the imaginal rippling out and opening up more and more horizons. Something will get limited, stuck rigid, like the view of reality is stuck in either realism or kind of dismissive nihilism.

So we do love deeply when we see or sense or when our sense of someone is that they have lived their image, refracted their daimon. It touches us deeply, and then because of that, yes, there's a deep grief, and we don't really want to get rid of it - we want that grief. But at the same time as the grief, alongside it, for the very same reason that there's such deep grief, there is the gift of their impression on us, which has already been made. They've already impressed themselves as image. They've impressed on us. And in that sense, we can bury them, so to speak - keep them, a place for them as image, as icon, in our soul. In our heart.

"Make me clean my heart. I will bury Jesus." I don't know if you can hear all the soul and all the love in

there. Again, with the help of soul-making dharma, we can take this and interpret it in different ways that really open it up and open up our sense of life, our sense of death, our sense of, in this case, the death of another.

And it's also the case with all this that, yes, as I said, there will be the grief there, but something is - I don't know what the word is - redeemed? Is that not quite the right word? But in other words, it's not just loss. There's gift here, even in the death. The death is gift. The death is loss and therefore grievable, of course, and grieved, of course. But even what seems like tragic - so Jesus' death, very early death, or John Coltrane's death, very early death - what seems tragic can then have, as well as the grief, as well as the tragedy, this whole other dimension.

Clement of Alexandria, one of the early Christian theologians, understood providence—the way the divine, or translated into Buddhist language, the way the Dharmakaya takes care of us—in a profound way. For him, providence does not prevent evil or tragedy from happening. It does not prevent the early deaths of those we love, or our own premature death. Rather, it seeks to overrule such events for an ultimately good end.

We could hear this as merely doctrine, as something we're asked to believe, as a certain philosophical view. But with soul-making dharma practice—actual practice—we can open up an authentic sense of this truth. This becomes our lived experience.

We don't push away the grief or close the heart, refusing to feel the pain. It doesn't become a superficial "everything's fine" attitude, dismissing difficulty with platitudes about impermanence or getting lost in shiny images that bypass the real hurt. With all the grief present and honored, there is somehow, in the middle of it, in the midst of the difficulty, with the difficulty, around the difficulty, this sense that providence is operating. Somehow this is perfect.

I wrote in my blog once about having a sense that my illness and even my early death is perfect. Someone responded that they really didn't like this statement. I can't remember their exact reasons, but it might have stemmed from certain religious conditioning. The way they were hearing it was as dogma or philosophy—"everything is perfect, oh everything is perfect." This operates at a much more superficial level. You can hear the brittleness in such thinking, the attempt to view everything as perfect as mere mental overlay. It's hollow.

You can tell when it's brittle—it has that brittle feeling. Sometimes it's not brittle but carries a quality of delusion, as if the person simply isn't in touch with dukkha, grief, tragedy, loss, or pain.

I'm not talking about philosophy here. I'm not speaking of religious dogma or views in the limiting sense of that word. I'm talking about soul-making practice, sensing with soul. In sharing about my illness, I was speaking from sensing my condition and prognosis with soul—the difficulty, the physical dukkha, the full knowledge of likely dying early, soon, within a couple of years. Sensing all of this with soul.

Out of the very practice itself—not from some cheap idea or religious teaching or philosophy—but from the practice comes what I can only call a mystical sense that everything is perfect. Not in a way that eliminates dukkha or disconnects us from suffering, but including it all.

This sense of perfection that emerges from practice, like seeing the emptiness of things, should not lead to inaction. If the fruit is "oh, everything's perfect, so I don't need to worry about social injustice, racial injustice, environmental injustice," then something is wrong. Something is off. This indicates the understanding is coming more from undigested ideas rather than from practice itself.

This kind of sense of the perfection of things, this sense of mysterious providence working through tragedy, placing it within a bigger arc, a bigger trajectory, a bigger picture, a bigger unfolding—when it comes from practice, it is not brittle. It includes dukkha very much, includes the softness and sensitivity of heart, the openness of heart, and does not lead to inaction or indifference.

I'm really talking about a sense of things, a view of things, that emerges from practice rather than easy ideas. Most of what I've been sharing, certainly in this series and others, needs to be approached through practice rather than simply hearing without practicing. Just listening and picking up ideas or hearing about far-out sounding experiences will only cause problems or have no effect whatsoever. But when there's really that soil of practice being turned, then you have a very different understanding of what we're exploring here.

Of course, in the examples I gave—Jesus, John Coltrane, and others—these are clearly special people who give us a sense that something profound is happening. They're really living that image, really allowing the divine to come through, whatever language we use.

But this opening up, this redemption of our sense of a loved one's death, is not only for special people. It happens, it can happen, it should happen actually, in any relationship we have—in any deep relationship.

Because in deep relationship, the other becomes image for us. Deep human relationship has imaginal dimensions. I've spoken about this before, and it relates to what I discussed in the Four Parables of Stone and Light series when we explored soul-making diet practice.

So this is part of the phenomenology—in other words, part of the actual experience—of any deep human relationship, any time we really love or are truly devoted to a relationship.

If we can explain it a certain way, perhaps you can see it visually in your mind. We have what's agreed upon in contemporary society—one level of the relationship. There's this human being and that human being. The relationship happens in time. If I know this person long enough, there are the acts between us, the things we've done and the interactions we've had in the past—temporal, but in the past. I still have access to at least some of them through memory. And in an ongoing relationship, there are new actions and interactions, dialogue and all that.

So you have one level—the agreed-upon level of what human relationship is. It happens in time between two human beings who are conceived of as flat, not dimensional, other than being dimensional in the non-soul-making ways we consider human beings dimensional these days, conventionally in the culture.

You can visualize this as a diagram: human and human, with two lines between them—old actions and new actions. All of that unfolds on a temporal level, in time.

But if, in your mental diagram, above each of those humans—human A and human B, in whatever relationship they have—there's the image. Let's keep it singular for now. There's an image of human A and an image of human B. Human A has a sense of their own image, their own daemon—another dimension of their being. But human B also has a sense of their daemon. And each human has a sense of the other's daemon, so to speak.

In soul-making practice, you can play with this, but really what I'm pointing to is what's there anyway in human relationship. So you have a diagram with human A and human B, and then what we'll call image A and image B above them, corresponding to human A and human B.

That level of the image—someone living their image—is a timeless level. The level in time is new and old actions, interactions. But you actually have relationships, or strands and directions of relationships, between every corner here. You have two kinds of strands from the conventionally human to conventionally human level—the new and old interactions make two. You have human A's interaction with their own image, and human A's interaction with human B's image. Human B's interaction with human A's image. And then the images' interaction with each other.

All of this becomes much more discriminated and discrete and apparent when you really explore soul-making practice, as I unpacked in that long talk on soul-making practice in the Four Parables series. But this is a way of thinking of what's actually going on. It becomes more apparent in formal soul-making practice, but I would say it's there in any deep human relationship where there's love and devotion to each other—all these levels and all these possible connections between different levels are going on.

Some people who think this way—they're quite rare these days—use the terms image and analogue. There's the image level, or we could say the daemon level, the angel level of a human being. And then what we've called the human level is called the analogue. The terms don't really matter. We could say image and analogue—image is the timeless, and interactions between the analogue level happen in time. Image to analogue level happens sort of between the timeless and time.

Why is this important? Because, as I said, I think this is what goes on in human relationships anyway. Usually, in our culture's language, the word image is considered a secondary phenomenon. We say "an image of this or that," and this or that is primary. So it's an image of a tree—it's not the real tree.

The real tree is the real thing, and the image of the tree is a secondary thing. It represents something more fundamental or something real.

But as we were talking about just yesterday, I think Plato had that whole ontology reversed—the hierarchy reversed—so that the ideal realm was considered by Plato more real. And this world was a representation, an attempt at reflecting, refracting that more ideal world.

So I think about the image as primary, and the analog—or what we call the human—as secondary. Words are tricky here, but also ontologies are really important here.

Now for what I want to say, actually, we could have either ontology. We could have the image level as primary, and the analog, or human, level as secondary, or we could reverse that and consider the human primary and the image secondary. In a way, it doesn't make much difference, but I do think in the overall scope of soul-making dharma practice, there will come a time inevitably where, at times, the sense of that hierarchy gets reversed. You can play with that, or you can even deliberately play with entertaining such an idea, such a notion, or it would just get reversed anyway in the natural unfolding of soul-making practice for a time.

And again, it's then not clung to as "this is the truth, this is the way things are, this is the correct conceptual framework." It becomes part of a flexibility, a range of flexible conceptual frameworks that we can work with.

One of my favorite composers—I think he's a great composer—Peter Maxwell Davies, died just a few years ago, has what I think is a really stunning, stunningly beautiful, very complex but stunningly beautiful piece called "Image, Reflection, Shadow." I think it's for quintet or sextet. And "image, reflection, shadow"—reading his liner notes, what he meant by that came to him seeing, and somehow it's sort of played out in the music, a seagull over sunlit water by the sea where he lived. He used to live on one of the islands off Scotland and composed a lot of music there, which really has a lot of the atmosphere of the sea and the space and the magic up there.

Anyway, "Image, Reflection, Shadow" was this seagull flying low over the sea, and the sun was out, so it was both reflected in the water—the image of the bird, there was a reflection in the water, there was the image of the bird for his eyes, and there was the reflection in the water, and there was the shadow of the seagull on the water. And so somehow that became a sort of paradigm for the music.

But maybe these words are better: image, reflection, shadow. So reflection or refraction may be a better word than analog for some of us. Image—we are the reflection or refraction, potentially, of an image. And shadow meaning, with that connotation of relative darkness, that even our distortions are somehow poor and blocked vestiges or echoes of an original emanation.

A shadow is that. It's a vestige, it's what's remaining of light that's blocked by something, partially blocked by something, but it's also an echo of light, because it's light reflected off from other places where that thing is not in the way. But even our—we've talked about this before—even our mistakes and our neuroses and our malfunctions can potentially be seen as related to that original emanation from the

image.

So we get the reflection or refraction when we're more true to that image. But even our messed up stuff can be seen, our distortions as poor and blocked echoes or vestiges of that.

Actually, in fact, image and whatever we're going to call it—refraction or analog—are mutually dependent. They affect each other. It's not so much that it's not entirely or strictly speaking a one-way emanation process from image to reflection, refraction from image to analog, from image to human. We understand as part of the soul-making dharma understanding that they affect each other. There's a mutual dependency there.

And another thing about this idea, before I say what this has got to do with death—in a way I've touched on it, hinted at it, alluded to it—but we could, and I did when I said, "Can you imagine a diagram where images above?" You'd draw the image above the human just to get a sense of all the different lines between the different corners. Of course, we could, I suppose, conceive the relationship between image and analog here in spatial relationship or spatial constellation as like above, below, or below, above, or around, within, or within, around. The image is within the human, or below it comes up from the depths, the dark, rich depths of the earth, or it comes down from the luminous heights of heaven, or whatever.

We could conceive them in spatial terms like that, in any of those spatial terms. But much better, I think, is probably to jettison the idea of a spatial and a temporal location or existence of image or angel or daemon.

I've touched on this before, sometime in the last year or so. This is really, really important. Perhaps the analog is the manifestation in space and time, a partial and refracted manifestation in space and time, of what is non-spatial, non-temporal, what is timeless, the image. So this image has a kind of timeless existence. The angel is neither spatial nor temporal. And the analog is this refraction or reflection into time and into space of what is not spatial and not temporal.

And again, we can say all this—"Okay, that's really metaphysical, far out metaphysical ideas"—but is it not the kind of sense we have of things if we just open up soul-making practice? That at some point, this is the kind of sense we have of things.

And this is there in a germinal way, at least, or a non-articulated, non-discriminated way, in relationships where there is love, and deep relationships, and intimate relationships, and we have that. That's all mixed up, and it's just our culture doesn't have the language or the conceptual framework that supports that kind of articulation or discrimination.

So what I want to ask now is: what happens to this whole constellation of relationship, which means the sense of relationship after one person dies? Because actually, in a way, most of the fabricating constituents of the sense of—let's say the person who dies, for the person who remains alive—most of the fabricating and the creating, discovering constituents remain.

The image of the other, the memory of past interactions, actions, and even potentially new interactions, but mediated by a purely—I could say purely—imaginal consciousness. So of all the kind of strands of connection in our little diagram, it's only the—

And this brings us to a profound question: what happens to this entire constellation of relationship—to the very sense of relationship itself—after one person dies? Because actually, when we examine it carefully, most of the fabricating constituents of the sense of the person who dies, for the person who remains alive, most of the creating and discovering elements actually remain intact.

The image of the other persists. The memory of past interactions and actions continues. Even potentially new interactions remain possible, though now mediated by what we could call purely imaginal consciousness. In our diagram of connection, it's really only the analog-to-analog, human-to-human level of new actions and fresh interactions that seems to have gone after death.

Most of the fabricating, creating, discovering constituents of the sense of the one who has died—what makes our sense of them—is actually still there, remaining after their death. And honestly, I don't know if any of these constituents are really fully separate from any other. I don't think they are.

But as I've been suggesting, if a human person—what we mean by human, what we sense of a human person—is really comprised of what in this scheme I've tried to explain as image and human, or image and analog, then we must ask: does death really change that much? Is it possible that death changes only a small portion of the actuality of human relationships?

The image-to-image connections remain. The human-to-image and image-to-human relationships continue. The memory of human-to-human actions in time persists. All of this remains intact.

I hope I've explained this clearly enough. I probably could have done better, but this is so different from how we usually think, from what we've inherited in terms of our understanding of human being and what we're in relationship with, what constitutes a person. There's no room in our culture for this imaginal level, or for this idea that somehow this person is refracting something timeless, that relationship is multi-stranded and multi-dimensional between two human beings, that a human being is multi-dimensional.

This notion is very unsupported in our culture, so what I'm trying to say might sound completely bizarre, even ridiculous, if you can follow it at all. And I certainly don't mean to suggest that if you just see things this way, there'll be no grief. But it's certainly not the same as saying, "Oh well, they died, but you've got your memories at least." I'm saying much more than that.

Right now, in relationships with the living, if we open our sense of that, if we can sense with soul, with love, then we begin to sense what's actually there, what's already there in our understanding of human

being when they're sensed with soul. And what does this do to our sense of death, our sense of loss? It doesn't take grief away, but it offers something that in many ways we prevent ourselves from receiving, from being open to, from having. We are prevented by the culture, by our linguistic and conceptual inheritances.

When someone we love dies, there are still all these different dimensions of relationship present that were there when they were alive too. It's not as if now they die and suddenly they're moving somewhere in some spirit world, and maybe we can communicate with them through a séance. While we're alive, these other dimensions are already there.

When we acknowledge these other dimensions and connections, these different strands of communication, of love, of connection, of seeing, of intercourse while we're alive, we begin to have a different sense of how much we've actually lost when a person dies. Image remains with us. Image communicates with us. We communicate with image. Image communicates with image. Memory becomes image.

Consider this sense of human being, this sense of human personhood. What is it to really be a person? What would it mean not to limit our sense of what a human being is, what a human person is, what our personhood encompasses?

Much of the Dharma involves deconstructing the sense of self, seeing its fabricated nature, stripping it down. And that's immensely valuable. We can explore completely unfabricating the sense of self, or working with less fabricated senses of self, or discovering the most basic sense of self—just the barest sense of a subject, of awareness, the barest sense of an object, and the most basic sense of time, of a present moment. This represents the most basic level of self-fabrication, just this side of the unfabricated.

And then we fabricate, fabricate, fabricate. One way we can fabricate is toward papañca—crazy ideas about ourselves and others and relationships, all reified and tied up in knots. But there's also skillful fabrication. We've talked about soul-making fabrication, the fabrication of soulful image, the imaginal.

I'm uncertain about the language, but we could say that one is a self whenever there is any perception of objects, whenever there's any subject-object relationship, even the barest—just a nothingness and an awareness, subject-object, object-subject. But we are persons only where there is relationship of some complexity, with some sense for us of meaningfulness and depth and dimensionality of our personhood and another's.

This relationship may be with a physically manifesting sentient being, someone alive with us, or an animal. It may be relationship with a divinity, an angel, something purely imaginally manifesting. Or it may be something in nature, supposedly non-sentient. Perhaps the division between self and person isn't quite right linguistically, but the distinction between subject and person might be useful.

We are persons when we are in relationship, when there is relationship of some complexity for us, with

some sense of meaningfulness, of depth, of dimensionality of our own personhood and of the other's. Even when there are just the beginnings of that meaningfulness, that depth, that dimensionality—even just the beginnings of what we might call elements of the imaginal—then we're more than subjects; we're persons.

You can use the word "self" for the whole spectrum if you prefer. But both subjects and persons are empty; they're dependently arisen. And as always—and I keep emphasizing this—the fact of emptiness, the fact of their emptiness, the fact of the emptiness of any conception, any sense, any view of subject, self, or person, means that we are actually free to view in this way, because all views are empty.

We're free to view that way, we're free to pick up that view, if we want. And the question is: what does it lead to? What does it open for us? And what does it limit?

As I said, if I love someone, and I think, "Oh, they died or they're dying," and so I'll use my Buddhist history and practice and regard them as a process of the aggregates—it just does not do justice to our relationship, to their personhood, to their life. It certainly doesn't do justice to soul; it's phenomenologically incomplete. What will it lead to if that's my only view? If I'm always trying to, or thinking I should, see the other person as a process of aggregates?

Just going back to teachings we've given for a while, there's the whole teaching about fabrication: there's unfabricating, and there's skillful fabricating and unskillful fabricating. The question is: what does it lead to? All of it's empty. All of it's empty. So we can pick up anywhere on the spectrum and adopt a view. And the question is: what does it open for us? What does it deliver? What does it give us?

I hope you followed this. I probably could have explained it better, but I think it would be very common to think, "Well, okay, that's all a metaphysical theory about what a human being is and about an image and an angel and a level of angels and all this stuff." Is it though? Or again, is it more a phenomenological account? In other words, it's how we experience persons in relation to our person anyway, when there's love, when there's a real depth of connection, when there's a soulfulness in the connection. When we have a sense of a relationship that we're devoted to.

We have been gradually, over the course of history, over recent history, indoctrinated to believe and then to experience in line with a view of what a human being is and what the cosmos is. Some of this we traced in the recent talks on ethics, the image of ethics. It started from metaphysical theories, from philosophies, from theological moves about not having intermediaries and about the elevation of ordinary life and not having hierarchical order of the cosmos, which then got replaced with horizontal order.

All those philosophical, metaphysical and theological moves had repercussions. This has been very sketchily traced through history. So what we feel now as normal and non-metaphysical—we feel like we're just seeing things as they are naturally without any overlay or distortion through metaphysics and philosophy and strange religious notions—actually had its roots in philosophy, metaphysics, theology and

religious notions.

It also had its roots in the gradual birth of the modern novel, this view of humanity with emphasis on particularities, on ordinary life. One of the main origins, one of the seeds of the modern novel, was journals written by Puritans. You had this view of very personal, unmediated relationship with God in a non-hierarchical universe.

So all this—we tend to think, "Oh, you've just described some really complex, bizarre metaphysics as some kind of weird idea that you're trying to superimpose on the way things really are." But maybe our sense of the way things really are is actually, first, an indoctrination, an inculcation, an inheritance from something that started there, from metaphysics, theology, philosophy. And second, our sense of the way things are is not actually an accurate report for us of the way things are for us.

Look closer, sense closer when there's love and the relationship is really alive that way. Again, is it not the case that at least the germs of what I'm trying to talk about here are actually already there in the sense we have of things? There's something that we've inherited that just makes us rule that out, or not take that seriously, or not see it even—not sense it, not discriminate, discern, and articulate it, and then in that way give it support.

So we lose someone to death, they die, we're left. And yet it may be that a lot more is possible in terms of the continuing sense of relationship, connection with them than we tend to think. That a lot less of the real whole of what was there in our relationship, what flowed in our relationship—a lot less is lost of the whole than we thought. That much more is still open, still possible, still alive really.

And yes, there's still grief. There's still loss. There's still the pain of that. There's still the wishing it weren't the case, perhaps. But to open this up, it's almost like we have to allow ourselves to see and sense—the sensing the soul will really help to open up this sense.

So that's one possibility, that's a few possibilities. I want to share something from a close friend in relationship. She was okay for me to share this; I asked her. A slightly different—well, quite different—journey and approach to the loss of a loved one. In this case, my being given a metastatic diagnosis: pancreatic cancer, which is pretty much always fatal. And it was shortly after I got that diagnosis, with all the implications that we knew, that life was—I was going to die from this, probably quite soon.

So this is part of her report I will read.

Again, what I'm really showing here is how can this terrible, deep grief and loss at the death of someone we love be opened up in a different way? How can the soul-making and the sensing of the soul help and support that to be opened up in a different way? A different sense of that, different possibilities.

So I'd gotten that diagnosis and knew what it meant and the implications of dying, that I would not be

cured from this disease, that it would kill me relatively soon. And so she was quite upset and quite distraught. This is only part of her account, so this is in her words now.

"Can this become soul-making?" he gently asked—he is me. "Can this become soul-making?" he gently asked, reminding me through his question that this was possible and what I wanted. Thank you. Yes, it can, I said. Recognizing in that moment I was a little stuck and in some vague contention with the reality of the situation. And while contention felt better than collapsing, it definitely wasn't soul-making. And so perhaps this can be my question now as we embark on this leg of the journey.

And she kind of just lists her awareness of what this leg of the journey would involve and imply, and the dukkha and the loss and all of that. "And so, can this become soul-making? In theory, yes, it can. And what will support that? Remembering this question for a start and recognizing that caring for the dukkha in this way could be a fitting and beautiful offering to my beloved friend"—in other words, caring for the dukkha through soul-making. "My faith tells me this is possible. I have faith in soul-making. I've done a lot of soul-making practice. My faith tells me this is possible, but I do not know what this will look like as we face this time, or if I am up to the task. But I can see that the question itself offers a frame, a way to orient to the time ahead, whatever it may bring."

So I really want you to hear the wisdom in this. It's all about the skill in the approach, and the wisdom in the approach. There's this difficulty, stuckness, then contention, collapse, then just contention, then it's, oh, can it be soul-making? Yes, it can. I have some faith in that. So that's already a big step. And then what will support that? And the question, can it be soul-making? What will support the soul-making here itself? That question, as she says, offers a frame, a way to orient the time ahead, whatever it may bring, whatever the time ahead may bring.

She continues: "And as I let the question strike me, I light up. My sense and my posture straighten naturally, and I line up as if I'm filled with trillions of iron fillings that line up before a magnet." Okay, I recognize this is helpful. She's using the energy body sense as telling her she's on the right track. Taking on this question, can this become soul-making? "I am already much less in contention with the reality of the situation. And my loving desire is switched on again towards what I most love, soul-making. This lining up, as well as being strengthening and helpful, seems to make my human heart at once incredibly vulnerable, impactable and tender, and at the same time, steady, bright and unwavering, as if allowing this question to strike me has the effect of beginning to shape me into the kind of organism that might be able to perceive all of this soulfully."

See the art and the skill here? Just, can this become soul-making? What will support that? And that question, together with a little bit of faith, starts to do something. Starts to shape her into the kind of organism, as she writes, that might be able to perceive all of this soulfully.

"I sense myself at a threshold now, where the conventional sense of myself, who is looking forward in time to the painful and demanding journey ahead, gets the sense of more possibilities with this inevitable

dukkha. Something in the air is attractive to me, and my soulful antennae, my soul antennae are piqued. More is possible here," she realizes. More is possible here. "And, staying close to the emotional impact of this news, I feel first what I might still call a contention with reality."

I don't want you to die. I don't want my beloved friend to die. Because I don't. But I let myself sense this without collapsing around it.

She lets herself sense the contention—I don't want you to die—without collapsing around it. And then comes the desire. That's the other side of "I don't want you to die." I feel a strong desire, a desire for him to be well and a desire for him to live forever. I want you to live forever. Not cutting that off for being ridiculous and unrealistic. Just letting myself have it. So human, so understandable, so passionate.

And very close to this desire, I feel a kind of objective helplessness of being human beings in the face of death.

So there's so much here. There's the contention, the "don't want," then realizing there's a want that's the flip side of the "don't want." Not dismissing the want, even if it sounds ridiculous—I want you to live forever, how could that possibly be? Unrealistic. Letting herself have it, letting herself have that very human, understandable passion. And then, close to that desire, very naturally, there should be this sense of helplessness. We're helpless as human beings in the face of death.

And she continues: As I sense the current of the desire in my body—this desire, I want you to live forever—it comes through this vulnerable and utterly human spot in my heart. And that narrow spot in my heart starts to expand with the current. And as it expands, it is also illuminated. And as everything gets brighter in the whole citta, I am stopped in my tracks. My senses are arrested by a beauty that I start to sense.

Something is happening here and a beauty is opening up, and it's arresting. Right there, not divorced from the pain and reality of the situation, not losing any of its personalness, right there, he and I are being woven into image—the soul-scape of extraordinary beauty. Horizontal time is relieved from being the whole and the only truth. And I am somehow being loved by this whole scene, by the whole image.

He and I woven into image, and horizontal time not the whole truth. The whole scene is loving her—that's her sense.

And the grace of this—until now only unwanted suffering—the grace is apparent and makes me humble. His illness and imminent death, not reducible to a single meaning for him, for me, or for the Sangha. This perception is so blessed, so blessed.

Pain is not necessarily taken away, but it is happening within a soulful cosmos, where dimensionality and meaningfulness are shimmering with a startling beauty right here in the tragedy and loss, at once deeply human and utterly beyond.

Can this become soul-making? Yes, it can. And I bow.

This was the first stage, actually, of a journey with this whole ensouled relationship with death. It started to really open something up.

A little while later, she had a dream. In the dream, there was a black snake coming out from down under a kitchen counter in the house where she grew up, and she was sitting in the dream with her family, and everyone was sort of horrified—oh my god, it's a black snake, that shouldn't be there. At some point in the dream it shifted to, somehow, that's not wrong. It's not wrong that this snake is there. At first it felt it was wrong, and then somehow it didn't.

So in the way that sometimes what is immediately disturbing to the mind, the usual mind, or the mind thinks, "oh, that's wrong, that can't be right," in imaginal practice—in a similar way, that shift happened in the dream.

The next morning, she took that image of the black snake into her meditation practice and let it become imaginal, helped it become imaginal, and found that the snake loved her as it would if it becomes imaginal—it's one of the elements of the imaginal—but also that the snake itself seemed to kind of contain multiple images. And one of these images related to, or kind of related to then, my death and her feelings about my death.

So again, at some point later on, there was again this "I don't want you to die." And again, she really let herself feel it. And letting herself have this "I don't want," loosened something. Really letting herself have this "I don't want you to die" loosened something without dissolving the "I don't want."

So we can loosen things so that they dissolve and completely unfabricate, or we can loosen things so that enough slight unfabricating occurs that they can actually become more soul-making.

So it's like a cry out to the cosmos: "I don't want you to die. I don't want you to die." And she also realized that if she were either a good Buddhist or a good existentialist, she wouldn't have this thought, "I don't want you to die." And again, "I want you to live forever"—how ridiculous that sounds from either a Buddhist perspective or an existentialist perspective.

With all this, she noticed something else: that her sense of death, her almost subliminal sense of death, was a kind of big black empty space. And she realized—very subtle discrimination—she realized, "Oh, this is the usual sense of death in the cultures that I move in." Either it's a kind of nihilistic nothingness, just a big black empty space, the end of personhood, or it's a kind of spiritual big black empty space, a kind of universal emptiness of oneness or essence.

She thought, "Hmm, my logos here, what I'm used to thinking, my habitual conception and notion is part of my sense of death here. That's being brought in automatically, and it's coloring, it's shaping, it's forming and limiting the view I have of death"—either to the standard secular view, a kind of nihilistic view, or a

kind of spiritual assumption of dissolving into universal emptiness.

Realizing she was conditioned by the logos, as we talked about right at the beginning tonight. And that realization—ah, that there's some conditioning by the logos, by the imported habitual notions here that she gets from the two main cultures she moves in: mainstream secular culture and the culture of Buddha Dharma, spiritual circles. Realizing that fact of the conditioning by a logos, by an idea, by imported habitual, unquestioned ideas—in realizing it, that lost its grip, and the sense of my death was allowed, and death itself was allowed to become more imaginal.

She also realized something else: that there was a notion that if she could accept the pain, then she would be at peace with it, or she should be at peace with it. So there was a lot of realizing about what the imprisoning logos was, what the limiting logoi were, and where she'd gotten them—because the acceptance and peace with it also comes from Buddhist and spiritual teachings.

It was that realization that loosened something, and then the sense of death could become imaginal. And then she said there was a sense: "Then I got the sense that your death is eternal. It's always here. My friend's death is eternal, it's always here." So it was more than accepting death—it certainly wasn't not wanting death, but it was more than accepting death.

As it was allowed to become image and become eternal and always here—"your death is always here"—then she got the sense, the very palpable and moving sense: "Your death loves me. Your death loves me."

Of course, from a mainstream, conventional, typical perspective: what on earth does that mean? "Your death loves me"? But when things and events become imaginal, when we sense them with soul—even things and events, not even talking about sentient or inorganic beings like trees, but things and events, "your death"—when it becomes imaginal, when they become imaginal, they have personhood. They have intelligence and autonomy and love and eros.

There's so much skill here and beauty in the way of working—very difficult, but then so much being touched, the soul being touched by this sense of "your death loves me, your death loves me, and your death is eternal, it's always here, it's always already happening." The death has become image with all the beauty and all the gifts that are given to us when we sense something with soul, all the gifts that opens up in our sense of something.

In a way, that was a second stage. And then something happened, perhaps more long-term, in her logos and the ideation that she carried around: that death is not only an impersonal thing, and more importantly, that impersonal depth is not more true than personhood. As if that big black empty space from a spiritual perspective or from a nihilistic perspective is somehow more true—well, actually she's talking mostly in a spiritual context. Sometimes we're taught to see that emptiness is more true, that the absolute is more true than personhood.

Now with these experiences, impersonal depth is not necessarily more true than personhood. So it opened up something more permanently in her ideation and perspective, her logos around death.

This becoming image of my death, becoming imaginal, my death loving her, a little later on enabled her death to become image for herself, to become imaginal image. So here is the third stage.

She's describing a practice she did actually while she was taking a flight. So she was practicing on a plane, and her death became image. She writes: "My death as beloved other, as deity, as enchanted—the most fulfilling perception. I love the image of my death. She is here as beloved other, the most intimate other. She knows me so well. I feel loved in a way I had never before known."

So my death is here as beloved other, the most intimate other who knows me so well, and I feel loved by this, my death, in a way that I have never known.

I love her, and I ask, "How can I come closer to you? I want to know you more." So there's the eros, an eros in a way that's going to allow the whole eros-psyche-logos dynamic to ignite further, open, expand, complexify, deepen.

And she writes, "I contract for a moment in judgment as fellow passengers on this flight throw away their plastic cups after one drink. I contract and lose sight of my death, of the sense of the image of her death. The destruction of the planet and our ignorance, seemingly more real than my beloved. But I see my heart is lost for that moment, and so I light a candle at the altar of my beloved, and I kneel."

Again, just to highlight the skill in working, something distracts, something contracts her. In this case, she's on a flight that she had thought a lot about even taking, given the climate crisis, decided to take it, decided on the balance of things it was the right thing to do and her soul felt the soul-making choice to do. And then contracting at this throwing away of plastic so easily. That distracts her and interrupts her process. There's a contraction of the being, and she loses the image. And she says, "Okay, I recognize what's going on. Can I, so to speak, light a candle at the altar of my beloved and kneel?" So there's the taking care of what I called the other day the poise for soul-making that enables us to open to soul-making, to image.

And then she says, "Tears upon my return and the settling of the disorientation that came in the contracting. I love you"—she's talking about her death—"I love my death. I love you. You feel like the most meaningful relationship I have ever had. In so many ways it is as if you were there before I was born."

Again, from the mainstream point of view, this probably sounds completely mad—someone talking about the image of their death: "I love you. It is as if you were there before I was born. You define my existence, not in the existentialist or literal ways of being an end point. Your reality status is not end point. That designation flattens you, and in so doing one would not see your beauty. You are more a beginning point, if anything."

But careful—there's no implication here of the usual beliefs of afterlife or rebirth or whatever. She's not talking about beginning point in those senses, the beginning of the afterlife, the beginning of the next birth or whatever.

"You are the most beautiful image I have ever seen, and the death of my body in time seems like one tiny image within your numberless dimensions. I can hardly believe it. It is not that physical death is insignificant—it is indeed one image in the wings of your magnificence, but you are so much more. You, my death, are resounding right through the cosmos. You are so intimately personal to me, and yet you seem to ring everywhere in many spheres, all at the same time. You know me as a point of time and space, and you love me as a human more closely and precisely than anything, and yet you also intimately mirror a multitude of other images that seem to exist in multiple other realms."

So the whole image is, again, doing exactly what we'd expect if eros is allowed to galvanize and open the soul-making dynamic—eros, psyche, logos—and mutually fertilize each other, complexify, take each other deeper, wider, further.

She continues: "This is different from the personal and seemingly eternal death in Carlos Castaneda"—I don't really know that work, but she's referring to it—"where one can consult this intimate companion about how to love one's life, knowing that death is always here at your shoulder. My death is not principally a point in time, or related to the point of space and time of my physical death, and nor is my death an annihilation, and nor is she impersonal. My death is somehow my fulfillment, and meeting her now I am called to my fulfillment. But this fulfillment is now, and eternally now, when she is known in erotic, imaginal meeting. I am drawn to this fulfillment, but it is not a fulfillment of accumulation of qualities—it's not that kind of fulfillment. It is a fulfillment of knowing my place as soul in a sacred cosmos, so completely woven into all dimensions, and that guiding divine being is my death."

"Here, death as idea is soft and elastic, and death in time is one image in the divine theater. It is not about making my physical death unimportant or relativized or small. To say 'small' would contrast it with 'big' or 'bigger,' and this is not the correct word for what is more than or more than one image. Logically, one should be able to say that the collective of multiple images is bigger than or greater than one image, like ten is more than one. However, in imaginal tonality and in the imaginal middle way, 'smaller than' and 'bigger than' do not make sense. In eternality, in an imaginal middle way, 'smaller than' and 'bigger than' do not make sense. It is not governed by logic. Size and proportions only belong with the arising of time and space and the appearance of this world. This lack of proportions is somehow very significant."

"And this is very different from the results of Buddhist reflections on death, as I have practiced them at least. This reflection does not rouse my passion as an urgency for a path of practice in time"—that's how we usually, or one of the ways we usually teach reflection on death, to arouse urgency for practice, path of practice in time—"but it does rouse my passion as a tremendous eros for eternality, for timelessness. It does also bring a steadying of my heart, but I wouldn't say it is an equanimity born from understanding

and including the whole picture and being able to see the conditions of the world of time and space from a great view"—it's not that kind of standard way, one of the standard ways we reach equanimity, seeing the whole picture, stepping back, taking a larger view of conditions and the large span of time and space. "Rather, the steadying comes from the mind easily concentrating because this is the most compelling, meaningful and loving encounter."

There is no effort to steady the heart. We could unpack this a lot more, I think, and explore the steadiness and equanimity from many other aspects. She's touched on some of that in other talks about eros and equanimity. But there's so much to say here.

She says, "My death smiles at me as I recognize this. My duty is to re-enchant death."

So much here, in terms of the skillful ways of working, in terms of the ways something can start as a difficulty. Just asking the question, "Can this be soul-making?" Can we allow it to open up, get a different sense of it? Then that can be added to by an image that at first seems to have nothing to do with it—a black snake—and open further. And then we get a very different sense of things, a very different sense in this case of her friend's death.

This gave her confidence and a platform, or I feel like was a spark that in turn allowed her to sense her own death with soul, for her own death to become image. And that opening up all the sense of beauty and dimensionality there, sacredness—in terms of the death, but also in terms of the whole cosmos.

So much that's instructive, I think, in all this. I wanted to include that for that reason, as well as what I shared earlier—to offer some possibilities for opening up our sense of death and dying, whether it's our own or another's. What can we bring to that? How can we meet that with soul, genuinely? What happens, what might happen when we do?

These are real possibilities for the soul, possibilities that make a real difference. So important. So there for us.

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