The Necessity of Fantasy

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:08:40

So I really hope that you are feeling met through the interviews—the group interviews and the one-to-one interviews—and through the exchange of questions and answers through notes that happens, and through the instructions that we give each morning and in the afternoon. I hope you feel met where you feel you are, that you feel your experiences are being addressed through what is exchanged and what we're saying. And also that this is happening through at least some of what's said in the evening talks.

Because sometimes that is the purpose of what happens in the evening sessions as well—we're still adding elements to address your experiences as they're unfolding, ways of working, and so forth. But sometimes a talk has a different purpose. It has a different job to do, or different jobs, plural. There are different kinds of talks.

Tonight I want to give a different kind of talk, and talk in a different way about what may be, for many of us, different kinds of material. I want to talk differently in a number of ways.

First, I want to talk about the bigger picture. Some talks are about the bigger picture, and this one definitely is very big picture. My conception—one's conception and view, or imagination—of what the bigger picture is in which my practice takes place always and inevitably must inform and lie underneath my sense and perception and concept, my actual perception of where I am, where I think I am, where I feel I am. Where I feel I am with this particular experience is always informed in a very fundamental way by my sense—even if I haven't articulated it—of the bigger picture. Always. The view of where I am, the perception, but also the response to it, the responses to it, are informed by that. This is a really, really important insight—a massively important insight.

The second way that this talk is different is that it's a difficult talk, not an easy talk. It's difficult for many reasons, and partly because I want to talk about two subjects, and they're both huge. One is nested, if you like, within the other. The first one, or the smaller one, is ethics, which is huge. And that's nested within a larger subject, which is fantasies and image. I hope I can explain what I mean.

So this might be a little dense. Some of the ideas might be quite unfamiliar to many of us, especially people who have been moving in these kinds of circles—quite possibly opposite sorts of ways of thinking, conceptions, assumptions, and so forth. In more ways than one, it's a kind of challenging talk.

There's a real risk here, especially when I talk about the fantasy element. There's a real risk of just not being understood. There's unfortunately a real risk of being misunderstood. Perhaps the best one can hope for is to be partially understood. But c'est la guerre, as they say. We'll take the risk and plough on.

So, ethics. That word, ethics. Let's just pause and stay with the word a little bit, because the relationship with words that we have is important. When you hear that word, what happens? Or the word morality?

For a lot of us in this culture, they're kind of heavy words. We bring in, sometimes unconsciously, associations with judgment, with sin, all of that. If there's a lot of inner critic that has a lot of power operating in the psyche, these words are really difficult, oftentimes. Sometimes when there's a lot of inner critic, the whole realm of ethics becomes just another realm with which to measure the self and find the self lacking. That's all it becomes. The whole thing—as the inner critic does with so much—it can do with practice, and it turns it into something just to measure me and prove what a failure, what a loser I am. The inner critic, if it's too strong, actually blocks authentic self-inquiry into ethics. I just can't have a free inquiry into ethics when the inner critic is strong.

So all this is loaded in our culture. Some modern—well, it actually goes back millennia, but particularly some modern—spiritual traditions just kind of sideline the whole ethical issue. There are quite popular spiritual traditions around, and they literally do not address ethics in their teachings. Then it's quite interesting—the sense, the possibility of freedom or happiness in those kinds of traditions becomes dependent on something more like catharsis. If I release all this stuff stored from the past, if I do that enough, freedom and happiness comes.

That's the model, that's the conception, that's the image.

Or if I release the self-limiting beliefs I have, that brings freedom and happiness.

Right from the beginning, the Buddha is different and places ethics very, very fundamentally on the path. There's a different approach. Theoretically in the Dharma, it's partly the base of the path.

So what does it mean, ethics? Now I'm sure there's a way of precisely defining it philosophically, but I want to just be very loose with this and say what I'm talking about tonight at least is: how do I live? How do I live? And how particularly do I live in relationship to others? What is my relationship with others? So that's a very loose definition of what I mean by ethics.

Recently in this tradition, there's been a lot of crossover between this tradition and other approaches—the Diamond Approach and other sister traditions—and within this tradition, with insight dialogue. There's been quite a number, quite an interest over the last few years in relational practices, where people actually bring awareness and inquiry into working one-to-one with a partner, or in threes, dyads, triads. That sense of needing to work relationally, relational meditation if you like, relational inquiry—the sense of that as something really important has entered the image and the fantasy of what's important, or is starting to. People say this is important, this needs to be addressed.

But not yet the wider dimension. I mean not just two or three and my family and my friends, but the whole of humanity—seven billion people. And what about the other species? And not just now, but what about future others? That is not yet really part of, hasn't come into how we think about practice. We're not

yet really addressing that. It's not yet, if you like, part of the image or the fantasy of what Dharma practice really involves. It's not really central to that yet.

I don't need, I hope I don't need to spend long outlining or reminding us all of the immense challenges that we are facing now as a species and through our actions and non-action that we are also giving as a challenge to other species as well. Population, resource scarcity, pollution, climate change, conflicts. Underneath them all, or driving them all, perhaps one of the most fundamental is climate change. That will have more and more dominant impact on all the other factors—all of them—resource scarcity, pollution, all of it.

And the way we, together, we human beings are changing the climate now, today, and have been for the last hundred years—that is going to change the climate not just today or tomorrow, it will change it for thousands of years. The effects are cumulative. The carbon dioxide we're putting into the atmosphere through our actions affects the climate of the Earth for thousands and thousands of years. And this is already in motion. It drives everything.

So one of the things that's quite significant is actually the species extinction. The great biologist E.O. Wilson has reported that at present there is a rate of species extinction that is 100 to 1,000 times the normal rate. And it's been driven by human activity, human action, and climate change is one of the principal drivers of that. 100 to 1,000 times the rate—species are just going extinct, disappearing, never to appear again.

It barely made the news, but scientists and also some politicians are quietly admitting that the goal that was sort of very loosely proffered after the Copenhagen Climate Summit three years ago—that it would be kind of really a good idea if everyone agreed to keep the climate change two degrees or less because above that there is what's called runaway climate change—we don't know where it just starts feeding back on itself. We actually don't know where it will stop.

Now there is a sort of quiet acknowledgment that it's virtually impossible with the momentum that has gathered, the emissions that have already been emitted and what's happening—it's virtually impossible to keep within that two degrees limit. What we're heading for, and even the World Bank wrote this in an article the other day, what we're heading for is more like four degrees to six degrees. And that means, as an initial thing, because as I said, scientists don't even know what starts happening at four degrees or six degrees—a whole bunch of other feedback effects. We don't know. It's like a snowball rolling.

Now, in my mind that sounds quite nice. Add six degrees to here, it's a bit like the south of France. That's pretty nice. But actually that would cause immense and widespread devastation for human civilization, species and others. Massive floods—much more than the inconvenience of not being able to take a train here or there. Cities—London, New York, Mumbai—would probably become submerged, along with other cities. On the other end, droughts, crop failure has already happened in the States last summer.

leading to drastically raised food prices and widespread starvation in the developing world. Storms that we might once have considered normal become hugely magnified in their destructive power. The acidification of oceans threatens the marine life that feeds so much of humanity and has intrinsic worth in itself. And as resources become scarce—less water, less arable land—we face the specter of resource wars.

It seems that in our wider culture, as someone aptly put it, our technological intelligence has somehow raced ahead of our ethical intelligence. We're brilliantly smart with our gadgets and what we can build, yet our ethical intelligence hasn't kept pace. Even our political intelligence lags behind.

When we come together as a collective species to address these questions, we try to address them by scientizing everything. Parts per million of CO2—hugely important, massively important—but these are measurable facts. Perhaps there's a whole other level of discourse that underpins all of this, one that's being missed entirely. It's about values. It's about ethics. And it's simply not being talked about.

We discuss parts per million and changing technologies, but where is the radical questioning of how I am living, how we are living? Where is the radical questioning of what my responsibility is as a human being, given this life shared on earth that I did nothing to earn or create? What is my responsibility? This connects to another meaning of the word dharma—its original implication of responsibility, of duty.

Somehow, collectively, we're like a rabbit or deer entranced by slowly approaching headlights—dazzled by something, not moving, not engaging, not responding appropriately. What are we captivated by collectively as a society and individually? What am I so captivated by?

We speak of the intoxication of youth. What's the intoxication here? What is it that I, or we, are so intoxicated by that we cannot respond adequately? That's an open question, because I'm actually not sure. There are probably many answers. And the headlights are approaching—not the sudden impact of an oncoming car, but more like the slow onslaught of something inexorable.

The wider culture isn't responding, but neither is dharma culture. Buddhism isn't responding. Those of us in the dharma community are usually blessed, very sweet, warm, kind people who often engage in much service. Yet somehow this response hasn't really entered into the story of what we're about.

You may not know this, but Buddhism doesn't have a great track record with this kind of engagement. Perhaps a low point was Japanese Zen during World War II, which wholeheartedly, with great zeal, leapt into the expansionist imperialism of the Japanese war effort. All of Japanese Zen got behind it, with all the slaughter and darkness involved. Why? Something in the culture subsumed the dharma, dragged it along. The dharma couldn't offer anything different—it was simply incorporated into what was happening culturally.

Compare this with someone like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Protestant theologian who wouldn't stop speaking out against the Nazis in Nazi Germany. They arrested him, gave him a summary trial, then executed him alongside others who refused to be silenced. Different. I'm not promoting Christianity over

Buddhism—I'm simply pointing out that there's something in Buddhism that's not particularly strong in this regard.

You may not know that in the last year, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship—an organization that existed in America for decades, addressing these kinds of issues around peace, conflict, and engaged Buddhism—folded. It dissolved itself. Why? Not enough interest.

In the same period, the annual general meeting of its UK equivalent, the Network of Engaged Buddhists, debated whether they too should dissolve. People weren't interested. They almost did dissolve, but decided to continue.

Meanwhile, at Gaia House, almost every retreat is full these days. Almost every single retreat over the past couple of years. Yet one retreat got so few registrations that it was cancelled—the one on engaged Buddhism, featuring David Loy. Someone simply called and said, "Look, no one's interested."

So he cancelled it.

At the same time, in the culture, there's been a huge spread of the mindfulness movement, which is wonderful. But I don't know. We've had forty years of insight meditation in the West now, dominated by mindfulness as a core practice. And at forty years, I don't know if there's evidence that it's actually leading to practitioners who are really engaging the wider causes of suffering. I'm really looking at that. I can't honestly look at the forty years of insight meditation and say that that's happening. The view of suffering has not so much gone beyond the individual. And we—because that's my tradition, I'm part of that—most of us are not really grappling with these issues. Not even grappling so much with the lifestyle changes that the enormity of the situation is desperately asking of us.

So I don't know if, let alone mindfulness, even the Dharma as it stands can address these issues. I don't know if it has what it takes at the moment to address these issues, if it is actually healing the civilization, if it can. I don't know. And obviously I would love to be able to sit here and say it is, we are, it's happening—but I don't really feel that I can.

David Loy, in a recent essay, asked similar questions: Has there been a commodification of Western Dharma? Is it being co-opted into a self-help stress reduction program that does not challenge what he calls "institutionalized dukkha"—the dukkha that comes from our institutions, our social structures—but actually adapts to it? Doesn't challenge it, but adapts to it. Strong words.

The contemporary philosopher Slavoj Žižek—some of you will know him, definitely not a Buddhist—wrote: "Western Buddhism is becoming the hegemonic, the dominant, ideology of global capitalism, because its meditative stance is arguably the most efficient way for us to fully participate in capitalist dynamics while retaining the appearance of mental sanity. Western Buddhism enables you to fully participate in the frantic pace of the capitalist game while sustaining the illusion that you are not really in it, that you are well aware of how worthless this spectacle is, and that what really matters to you

is the peace of the inner self to which you can always withdraw."

Now, any Buddhist knows that Buddhists don't believe in an inner self, so he's got that bit wrong. But actually, there's something here—I want to return to this because I think he's got something else a little bit wrong too. But there's something here I think we need to pay attention to. I want to return to it though.

Someone in an interview a couple of weeks ago was complaining about this and called it "do not disturb Dharma."

A friend went to a conference of environmental scientists who had met a little while before and who—because it's the fantasy of science to be objective, cool, detached, not emotionally involved—were giving out facts and figures about climate change and species loss. But amongst themselves, they were actually experiencing enormous frustration and profound heartache. In this previous meeting, they were asked to make a list of what they would wish for to remedy the situation more widely. I can't remember what the first one was, but the second on this ordering of fifty things they were asking for—the second most frequently and most important thing they asked for—was that spiritual leaders would start voicing this, would start speaking up. That was the scientists. This was the second biggest thing that would make the difference: spiritual leaders need to start talking about this.

And yet, we are silent. We are silent. You might like or not like that word "spiritual," but it means people like me and the Dalai Lama and all the rest of it.

There's enormous suffering involved in all this. The Red Cross, back in 2001, estimated—it's obviously a tricky figure, but they estimated that even in 2001, and it must be much more now—there were already twenty-five million environmental refugees, greater than the number they calculated for those displaced by war. Already in 2001. Massive suffering is unfolding and will unfold.

This is an issue of suffering. We would think that the Dharma and Buddhism is relevant because we talk about suffering—dukkha. So what I'm interested in is: why not? Why are we not addressing it? Why are we so silent about this? What's happening psychologically, spiritually, psycho-spiritually? What's actually going on? Why are we not including this?

To me, that's a fascinating question, a very troubling question, a fascinating one. I actually think there are many reasons. I don't even pretend to know them all or understand them. I just want to talk a little bit about some of them.

Certainly there's the aspect of fear and the psychology of denial. There's also the whole reality that we are part of society, and society is addicted to our way of life, and we're not exempt from that in the Dharma.

There's something more fundamental perhaps, one of the reasons that has more to do with the whole view of what the world is: What is this world that I'm in? It goes back to Descartes and would view the world as basically just stuff—just material stuff that we can shift around, in itself meaningless, in itself valueless.

Some people place the origins of that materialist worldview even earlier, in the twelfth century. It doesn't matter precisely when. You might say, "Well, that sounds like abstract philosophy." But it has become common sense for us. That's how we feel and see the world—common sense. Listen to those words: common sense. We perceive the world that way. What started as abstract philosophy becomes common sense.

And that kind of materialism, in the larger sense, actually saturates our modern Dharma. We're immersed in it. Sometimes we encounter what they call idealism, which views everything as consciousness. That's a bit more rare, but it exists too. Either way, the world becomes just meaningless or valueless—it's just stuff, or it's just consciousness. Who cares what happens?

But actually, that's not what I want to talk about. I want to talk about this piece I mentioned about fantasy, which may seem a very strange way to approach this topic, or would seem unusual at first—image and fantasy.

One person who's troubled by all this said, "Why don't we do what the Protestant Christians do, what Evangelical Christians do? They ask this beautiful question: What would Jesus do in this situation?" Beautiful. What would Jesus do? You use the fantasy, you use the imagination. What would the Buddha do?

Well, actually, I think it's a lovely question, but you run into a problem immediately: Whose Buddha are we talking about? Whose Buddha? If you read enough biographies or even passages referring to the Buddha, you realize it's a fantasy of the Buddha. It's an image of the Buddha. We have a fantasy, an image of the Buddha, and within that, an image, a fantasy of the direction of practice—Buddhahood being the direction of practice, of the goal.

Whose Buddha? Some Buddhas don't give a damn about the world. Some Buddhas are thinking about other things entirely.

But actually, even more than that, with this business of fantasy and image, if you go back and read the original texts, the Pali Canon, you find they are actually saturated—it's not obvious at first—they are saturated in fantasy and image. The whole thing is saturated with a certain fantasy and image, and that is of a kind of equanimous removal from the world. Sometimes we don't quite like that in some aspects, so we've kind of covered it over a bit or filled it out a bit. But actually, that is the dominant archetypal image of Pali Canon Buddhism: in the world but kind of removed, on the way out and not really that involved. Cool, non-attached, equanimous. Maybe warm.

So I wonder if we can question that as the dominant image and actually critique it even. And maybe that makes some of you nervous. But to that I would respond: Why are we not free to question that? Why are we not free to question the dominant images and fantasies of Buddhism, of Dharma? And if I feel, or you feel, that you or I or we are not free to question and critique that, I would just respond—I would ask in

response: What fantasy, what story and what imaging tells you or gives you the sense that you're not, that I'm not, that we're not?

Do you see it's a religious fantasy? "I can't go back and question the Buddha." It's part of a religious story. Do you see what I mean? There's a religious fantasy at play even in the non-allowing of the questioning, the non-allowing of shining that kind of light on the tradition.

There are other problems here. In the Dharma we tend to talk a lot about letting go of fantasy, non-fantasy, about being with things as they are, about meeting actuality, letting the story go, and so forth. All of which is quite important, but it's almost an indoctrination there.

We assume that letting go of fantasy is actually possible. If you go deep into Dharma understanding, into emptiness and dependent origination, you actually see that what we perceive—our reality—is being constructed all the time, and the mind is playing the dominant part in that construction. Part of this construction is the fantasy, the image, the story that we have of what we are doing, what life is, what this is and what that is.

Certainly, meditatively it's possible to let go of fantasy. But you don't arrive at a bare actuality—everything empties out. You go into non-appearance, levels of non-appearance. One can emerge out of that meditation, but once I emerge into the world, I'm back into the realm of fantasy, of imaging, of story.

Even now, or monks in the Buddha's time who come out of their meditation, perceive themselves in fantasy, in story, in image: "We are monks in the dispensation of the holy Buddha. He is the holy Buddha. I am on this track of the tradition." Even now, 2,500 years later: "I'm on the track. I see the past behind me, the tradition stretching through this self and this time and this place and all the work that went into it, into the future"—story, fantasy, image.

I'm not denigrating fantasy and image. It's necessary. It's part of the way the psyche works. I'm using it more in the sense that Jung or Hillman or those kinds of psychologists would use it. I'm not talking about being lost in some elaborate daydream. I'm talking about levels of resonance, levels of meaning, colorings of things, the way we give vitality and meaning and direction and beauty and love to things in our existence and the self in that.

Rather than trying to get rid of fantasy or trying to pretend that it's not there, maybe it would be helpful to really acknowledge that it is here—we are saturated in it. The way we tend to talk, the way I dress, the way this place is set up, its decor, certainly the images, what we talk about, what we don't talk about—it's all part of the fantasy and the image, the story of what's happening here. And it's beautiful. But let's acknowledge that it's here and it has tremendous power. It's in everything that we love. It has to be there.

So admit fantasy, image, story. It's here. We cannot live without it. Mythos, fantasy, image, story—from the mythos comes the ethos. From the mythos, from the fantasy image story, comes the ethos, meaning the ethics and the feel of things, the emotional resonance of things.

That's one thing: acknowledging, admitting, recognizing the power. The second thing is, has the Dharma tradition, either recently or right from the beginning, shrunk the range of fantasy and image? Has it contracted it down to predominantly one? The archetypal range of expression—has it contracted it down to one? And is that very singleness the problem, or a problem?

We could ask, here in this culture—and some of you have been around many years—where is the madness? Where is the divine madness? Where is the warrior? Where is the raging? Where is the balls? Where is the wildness? Different kinds of wildness. Where is the diversity of sexual expression? I don't just mean being open to LGBT, important as that is. I mean the different sexual personae, the archetypal ways that can express. Are they given equal honoring? What about sensuality or the breadth of artistic expression and range and feeling?

Is it rather that something—this calmness, equanimity, warm stillness—has actually become the dominant thing, the dominant image, the image to which consciously, explicitly or implicitly we feel we're moving and should move? So other kinds of things, certain other expressions or manifestations or archetypal ranges actually get relegated. Maybe they're seen as morally inferior in some cases.

Maybe they're just relegated or sidelined. Maybe they're tolerated—we can be mindful of that and tolerate it. But it's still one thing that we're drawn into, and we don't actually regard those others, those other images, fantasies, archetypal expressions as equally beautiful, that diversity—honoring them equally. I don't even mean we need to integrate all of that. I'm not even going in that direction now.

Some of you may have heard of the teacher Andrew Cohen. He used to be involved many years ago, before my time, in this tradition at Gaia House. Now he has his own sort of tradition where he is a teacher. I read just a small passage from his biography some years ago, and he relates an incident with one of the senior teachers in this tradition, donkey's years ago. Something happened in an interview or over a couple of interviews, and the teacher—the senior teacher from this tradition—I don't know what happened exactly, something got a little heated and he shouted at Andrew. And Andrew said this was unbelievable. It just blew his mind. How could a spiritual teacher shout? How could they shout? This is showing anger. And how can you be a spiritual teacher and have that? And it ruined it. I don't know if that was the breaking point, but something happened, and off he went and did his own thing.

What's interesting to me there is: what's in the image? What's in the image of what a spiritual teacher is like? And by extension then, what we are moving towards—what this person is supposed to be embodying as someone who's further along on the path. What's in the image? What's included in the image and what's excluded even from consideration in the image? Shouting, anger—or what? Don't even think that has anything to do with it.

So within the Dharma, there is not—I could look and say it does exist, but generally there is not really much life force in the fantasy of engagement, of dynamic response to these gargantuan crises that we face right now. You certainly get outdoor Dharma, wilderness Dharma, but it's kind of about being equanimous

or calm in nature, or connected to nature. It's a different thing. And you certainly get people with veggie gardens and stuff. Great! Is that really going to hack it?

So I don't want to suggest shrinking the fantasy either to one of "now we're all going to be eco-warriors." I'm not suggesting that at all. What I want to really suggest is expanding—expanding the range, that somehow it's gotten too tight.

Let's explore this a little bit more about the image and fantasy, because we have image and fantasy of the goal and of the path. And wrapped up in that, part of it is simplicity. Just to draw out that dimension: we have an idea that both the goal and perhaps the path are simple, that we're aiming for some kind of simplicity. It's so attractive as a notion.

And maybe, secondly, we're also then too simple in the way we regard, say, agitation. So it's interesting—generally we want to do away with agitation, we want to move away from agitation, let that go. And yet certain kinds of agitation are okay. Perhaps if it feels like something is catharting from my childhood or whatever and I'm agitated as I go through that, that's maybe allowed. Or the agitation of, in some traditions, the fourteenth stage of insight or whatever—that's allowed because it's seen, there's a conception behind it that allows it. But generally, we don't like agitation. We let go of agitation.

Or, again, too simple in the way that we're considering rage.

That which rages within us and that which is outraged or might be outraged.

So much of our attraction to simplicity stems from this understanding. But climate change is not simple. It's not a simple issue. And the forces that are coming together to propel this juggernaut—they're not simple at all.

So we like this simplism. And perhaps we're a bit seduced, understandably, by our complex lives. Seduced by what feels like a siren song. And maybe there's something missing in there, something even a bit foolish. Endlessly letting go of agitation, maintaining non-involvement, even using the word equanimity—dressing it up as equanimity when it's actually non-involvement. Is that what's needed? Are we too much in the thrall of one dominant direction?

We use words like wakefulness and awakening. But maybe with all that, we've been lulled to sleep. Or some dimension of the being is being lulled to sleep. And though we might be very alive and sensitive in some area, in some other range or arena, there's actually quite a numbness there. A disengagement.

It's interesting—historically, and I think I mentioned this in the opening talk—Buddhist ethics has a lot to do with simplification, in fact. That's one of the driving reasons behind Buddhist ethics. It's a kind of safety net, as one of my teachers would say. Just keep the five precepts. It forms a safety net for your practice and for your being, for your heart and your consciousness. So I don't have to think about what lie I told to that person. I don't have to remember the lie and how it relates to other things, or who I gossiped about

behind their back, or what I took. I don't have to keep being troubled by all that. It simplifies, and that simplification allows calmness because I'm not agitated by my non-keeping of the precepts.

But within that there is a kind of individualism. The range of ethics is very individual, and the notion of awakening is very individual. Nowadays, if we think at all about the bigger picture, the wider picture in modern times, we perhaps hope that by working in our personal way on ethics and meditation and awareness and kindness—in our circle of family and friends and work colleagues—hopefully that will ripple out and cause a wider change in the wider culture. Oftentimes that kind of idea is there.

But maybe we don't quite understand. We're a bit naive, underestimating the power of what we are up against or what we are creating. The enormous power of the social structures and assumptions that form the fabric of our society—a globalized society. Because we do now live in a globalized society, a globalized world. The carbon that we emit, the climate change that is happening—it's not localized, it's globalized. It's everywhere.

Looking into and probing a little bit into Buddhist precepts and ethics and their history, there's a lot about trying not to do. I try to undertake the precept to try not to harm, to try not to kill, to try not to steal, to try not to be abusive sexually, to try not to lie. It's quite negative. But then, quite interesting, like throwing in a moral dilemma.

So if I'm walking by a lake or the sea and a young woman is drowning and shouting for help, is it morally wrong not to help her? Clearly it's good to help her—we say it's good, it's kind or whatever—but is it morally wrong not to? In Dharma language, perhaps it's good karma to help her, but is it bad karma not to help her? And if my equanimity is disturbed or whatever else is disturbed, is it still bad karma? I don't know. Stinginess is bad karma, but you have to kind of search for that teaching.

Now, that's one person passing by another person in trouble. Amplify it to a globalized situation and these moral dilemmas become quite difficult. Because one can always say, "Well, there are other people around, and everyone else is walking by. No one else is stopping, doing this or that, or stopping flying, or whatever it is." The whole situation morally becomes so entangled and so easy to just shrug away.

If I look at it karmically in a globalized situation—if you believe in karma—my bad karma for not jumping in to save her is dissolved in the very globalization, in the very complexity and wideness of what's happening. Is that okay?

Molière, the writer, already in the 17th century, said: "It is not only for what we do that we are responsible, but also for what we do not do." That's a hard thought, especially if the inner critic is strong. It's a hard thought. The inner critic just takes that as so heavy. Not just for what I do, but also for what I do not do. The action I don't take.

Complex—all this is complex and difficult.

This complexity is not easy or simple, and it proves genuinely agitating. Woven into all of this—as part of the images, fantasies, conceptions, views, and assumptions we hold—are our beliefs about the Dharma itself, about practice, about the goal and the path.

We speak of suffering, of dukkha. But what is dukkha? What on earth are we talking about when we use this word? This is the problem, isn't it? Dukkha is the problem. The Buddha said, "I teach suffering and the end of suffering." But what do we mean when we say dukkha? What is the problem we're actually addressing?

And what do I believe? The second noble truth follows the first. If the first is dukkha, what do I believe is its cause? These are fundamental Dharma conceptions. What are we actually talking about? What are we actually addressing?

Because dependent on my conception of what dukkha is and what I believe its cause to be, the other two noble truths emerge—what I believe it looks like to be free of dukkha and what I need to do to get there. Dependent on my conception of the first two truths comes my understanding of the remaining two.

Is dukkha individual? Is it purely personal, or am I including social structures, social assumptions, and by extension, environmental factors? If, for example—and this view is quite popular—my notion of dukkha centers on my patterns, my personal patterns that prevent my freedom of expression, this becomes the dominant framework. My patterns, probably rooted in family and past experiences, become the primary challenge.

Such a view, when it becomes dominant, has enormous effects. It will profoundly shape the fantasy and image of what freedom looks like and what's involved in achieving it. It will determine what I imagine it means to help others achieve freedom. When this perspective shrinks around us as the primary lens, there's no inclusion of attention to social and environmental roots of dukkha.

We have the Four Noble Truths and the three kilesas—greed, hatred, and delusion. We say awakening means eradicating the three kilesas. These lists and concepts, these Dharma frameworks—we use these terms constantly. But they're like skeletons. The Four Noble Truths is a skeleton. The three defilements form a skeleton. They need fleshing out. How do we flesh them out? That's what brings them alive.

It's difficult to read the Pali Canon, the original teachings, without sensing that the goal was to escape the wheel of rebirth, to avoid being reborn again. You can reinterpret and remove elements, but the teachings don't quite hang together without this framework. That's fine—I have no problem with leaving rebirth out of the equation. But if that was the central image and fantasy of what awakening meant, what is it now? What will it be? What is our image and fantasy of awakening, of liberation, without that foundational concept?

For many people, that framework has disappeared as a central organizing principle. What fantasy and image replace it? I've come to think—and I don't see any proof for this—that some people, even engaged

Buddhists, claim that when the self is released, when the three kilesas die, a person will naturally become engaged. They argue that having less self automatically leads to addressing the social roots of dukkha, to caring for environmental ethics, to making radical and important changes in lifestyle.

I'm not sure. I don't know.

I was at an engaged Buddhism conference—I don't know when it was, Yuho was there, perhaps a year ago. David Loy was speaking, and he offered an intriguing historical perspective. He suggested that shortly after the Buddha died, monasteries arose—Buddhist institutions that needed the support of local kings, both financial backing and military protection. Because they depended on this support, they couldn't speak out. They had to confine their discourse and teaching to individual dukkha, avoiding any discussion of socially caused suffering and the social roots of dukkha. For that reason, they simply decided to confine their teachings to individual dukkha and maintain the status quo. According to this view, that's why we have Buddhism as it is now.

It's a nice idea, but I don't know—it's conjecture. Is it true? We have modern traditions like this one that have no need to pay lip service to any government, military ruler, or king. Other contemporary approaches—the Diamond Approach, modern Advaita—all point quite similarly at the self and seeing through the illusion of the self in some way or other, using different language, yet they offer very little discourse about engagement.

So perhaps the idea that the self, the ego, is the problem may not be psychologically sophisticated enough in relation to all this. Maybe we need new fantasies, or there's one thing we certainly need: new fantasies, new myths, new images to be included. Mindfulness alone, but even insight alone, perhaps without the right fantasies or appropriate images, simply will not bear that fruit. It will not give birth to that kind of engagement, that kind of wrestling.

So can I, can we as teachers, give you new myths? What new myths? What new stories? What new fantasies? What images? Will you demand of me new myths, new stories, new images, new fantasies? And what will they be?

From the fantasies, from the images, from the stories, from the mythos comes the ethos—comes the ethics. In the wider culture, what are the images? What are the fantasies? Norman Brown said that if you want to change a civilization, you need to change the imagination of the masses. That's what actually transforms things—you change the imagination of the masses. Ben Okri puts it more gracefully: "Stories are the secret reservoir of values. Change the stories individuals and nations live by and tell themselves, and you change the individuals and nations."

The stories, the fantasies—they also condition the emotions we have. The very fact that we're not speaking and sharing with each other much in our culture about the enormous grief of species loss, of climate change, of what we are actually engaging in together and giving rise to—this is partly because it's not in

the image. It's not being nourished by the right image. Grief and outrage haven't become normalized through images and fantasies.

Anthropologists and historians recognize how the emotions we feel as human beings—emotions we consider so primary, so natural—are actually deeply conditioned by the stories and conceptions in our culture. In medieval Europe, there existed a whole range of emotions that we have completely lost because they were tied to certain conceptions of God that no longer exist in our culture. Conversely, we experience emotions they never knew because we inhabit entirely different fantasies, images, and conceptions of self.

So what fantasies? What images? In the wider culture, there's something very beautiful from the wonderful astronomer and physicist Carl Sagan. In an address he gave to a graduating class at an American university—it must have been shortly before he died—he showed them a large photograph taken by the Voyager 1 spacecraft a few years earlier. He's offering them an image, giving the world an image:

"We succeeded in taking that picture from deep space, and if you look at it, you see a dot. That's here. That's home."

That's us.

On it, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever lived, lived out their lives—the aggregate of all our joys and sufferings, thousands of confident religions, ideologies and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilizations, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every hopeful child, every mother and father, every inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every superstar, every supreme leader, every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

The earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that in glory and in triumph they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of the dot on scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner of the dot. How frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds.

Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the universe are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this dark vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves. It is up to us.

It's been said that astronomy is a humbling and, I might add, a character-building experience. To my mind, there is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly and compassionately with one

another and to preserve and cherish that pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known.

To me that's beautiful. It's an image, and wrapped up in it is a certain fantasy—a cosmic fantasy of our cosmic situation, and the rhetoric goes with it. It's beautiful rhetoric. No problem with rhetoric. Image, fantasy brings rhetoric. We have rhetoric in here. No problem. As I said, fantasy is good. It brings meaning, brings image.

But we've had that image since 1969, when Apollo went up and turned around and took the photo. Maybe it's not enough for all. Maybe we need a plurality of images and fantasies, and this is really what I'm getting at.

So what image, what fantasy, what do you love? Because there's so much love coming through what he's saying. And maybe it works for you—for me it moves me tremendously. It doesn't work for everyone. It will not work for everyone.

What do you love? What do you love? What has more meaning for you even than your life? What has more beauty and more importance than your pleasure or your pain, your suffering? More beauty and more importance than anything else. What image, what fantasy gives that?

What happens if we don't have a fantasy? If we don't have a spiritual, a meaningful, deep image in the psyche—or images in the psyche? One thing that can happen is we start sacrificing at the altar of the god of convenience. Convenience fills up the void left by the absence of meaningful fantasy, of vitalizing fantasies.

Sacrificing what? Sacrifice used to mean "make something sacred," but it's the opposite. We're actually letting go of what's sacred. Everything's about convenience. That's one possibility. Or perhaps convenience itself becomes the fantasy. But it's a pretty thin fantasy. It's a pretty meager fantasy. A mean fantasy, actually.

that shopping in big supermarkets feels so wounding to the sensitive soul? Sometimes people who've done a lot of retreats think it's because there's so much sensory stimulation. I actually don't think it's that at all.

I wonder—and all this is questioning, I don't know the answers to any of these things—I wonder if it's actually because what is the supermarket? There isn't the deep care for deep beauty. It's gone. It's not addressed. It's not brought into the equation, into the economic equation, the fiscal equation. There is also not any real intimacy with either the produce or those who sell. It's a place of non-intimacy. What it is a place of is convenience. Let's put everything in one place and people can park and it's convenient. And that trumps what is more meaningful and more deeply beautiful. And it's painful and it has an effect.

So in the wider culture, what are the fantasies that we can maybe give rise to, that we need to give rise to? What are the dominant ones? What ones can we question? What ones can we bring in?

But in the Dharma culture as well, and this is my world and that's what I want to address, can we shake

something up? Can we open something up? So that there's less of a kind of monolithic dominance of the equanimous, non-attached acceptance of a situation, the doing nothing attitude as a style of existence. Less monolithic the simple, the simplifying, the non-agitation, the non-fire of rage. Can there be a greater range? Can we admit and open up a greater range?

It was interesting when the Occupy movement was there and Rowan Williams, then the Archbishop of Canterbury, had no problem actually publicly saying, "Yes, I agree, this is great, there should be a Robin Hood tax," making political suggestions. Archbishop of Canterbury. As far as I was aware, no one in my Dharma circle felt it was appropriate for a spiritual person to be commenting on matters like that, about social structure, etc. Why? It's not in the image.

Or again, if we go back to that situation with Andrew Cohen and his teacher back then, we might notice and question and feel morally troubled if a teacher or someone who's been practicing a long time is, for instance, promiscuous, and we think, well, that can't be morally right—sexual promiscuity. Or if there's a bit of wildness in how they are and what they express, or if what seems like rage or anger is coming through, we maybe notice that more than we would notice non-engagement. It's an absence—we don't notice an absence. What if we turn that around and actually one starts to question the non-engagement? Say, that can't be quite right, maybe.

Go back to that Žižek quote. He's saying, "You guys, you're retreating to your thing and you can just turn the world off with your meditation." I think what he got wrong there is people need to rest. Even a soldier—apparently you can only give soldiers sixty continuous hours of combat before they start to lose it. But even an activist needs to rest. Meditation is rest, deep rest.

What he's mistaken is the dominant image in Buddhism, in Dharma, is not so much of meditation as entering into deep calm and then emerging. It's actually the dominant image is a life of calm, a pervasive equanimity. So even if people say, "It's okay if you can't get deeply calm," the implicit, often, or explicit image is of a life of equanimity. And that is poisonous, perhaps.

It's fine—I mean, beautiful—to be able to rest deeply, but to try and have a calm life, an untroubled life, an equanimous life, so that the image, the fantasy that's beginning to get quite pervasive is one of an equanimous or spacious busyness. So I can do all this stuff and be really busy with the demands of modern life and yet inside I'm equanimous and spacious. And maybe that's not such a great fantasy and image to have, popular and attractive as it might seem.

Maybe again, included in the range of images can be this sense of: is there a place for a kind of Dharma that's not about me? It's just not me and my suffering. It's much wider.

So can maybe, as a part of all this increasing the range—we can't force anyone into falling in love with or adopting a certain fantasy or image. It's impossible, especially in a postmodern era. Sometimes the eco-psychology movement, I feel, tries to sell this kind of Mother Nature image, but it won't be. Some

people just think Mother Nature—they feel there's a bunch of hippies talking. I don't relate to it. It won't be for everyone.

Going back to the Buddhist tradition, we have the fantasy, the image of the bodhisattva. But it's not forced on anyone. At the beginning, when it came to preeminence—when it was arising—this bodhisattva image, this fantasy, actually found expression in monasteries where people who took up that fantasy and image coexisted very well and very peacefully and amicably with people who didn't take it up. Mahayana and Hinayana, no problem living together and simply saying, "That's your fantasy, it's fine, this is mine." No problem. There has to be, perhaps, a plurality.

Originally this bodhisattva fantasy and image involved the idea of many lives and a kind of transcendent goal of unbelievably transcendent Buddhahood, almost difficult to even wrap one's head around. What might it mean now? What might it involve now—a modern version of the bodhisattva? What image might that be, without all this business about lives and other realms and transcendence?

Might it be a range of images, and within that greater space, a wider range of fantasy and wilder range? The fantasy, the images, admit wider and wilder.

The Buddha in the time of the Buddha talked about the lion's roar of the awakened ones. Upon awakening they utter the lion's roar. What is the modern lion's roar? What might be included in the modern lion's roar of awakening?

So is it that these other aspects that we tend to perhaps dismiss or just not notice or not give life to or feel troubled by—we tend to want to try and tame them or look down on them. Maybe there's something about honoring them deeply, allowing them, making them available.

And if you're listening and you think, "That sounds dangerous, all this talk about wildness and rage and outrage—it sounds dangerous"—maybe it is. Maybe there's no such thing as a path without danger. I don't think there is. Any path has dangers—eyes open to danger. There's always danger.

But if the only or the dominant image is equanimous non-involvement, warm but not really getting involved—it seems safe, seems like there's no danger. Safe, sane, sanitized. But maybe there's a huge danger lurking there through the very non-involvement, the non-agitation, the non-outrage.

So maybe one element in all this that we're facing—one small but perhaps important piece—is to do with widening the range of what we honor. And I really mean honor in the fullest sense, not just tolerate: honor the images that emerge, the fantasies that emerge. And then maybe that's one element that allows—that will, might allow, might contribute to allowing—the Dharma to actually really offer something to the world at this time.

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