

Preliminaries, Regarding Voice, Movement, and Gesture (Part 3)

Vajra Music

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March 3, 2020

<https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/210/talk/62454/>

NOTE: The five talks in this series were recorded by Rob at his home. Being preliminary practices for Soulmaking Dharma, the exercises offered in these talks can be worked with before a student engages the full scope of the Soulmaking teachings. However, some of the material presented here will only be properly comprehended and contextualised once a student already has some basis of preparatory experience and understanding of A Soulmaking Dharma.

I'm not quite sure what will be possible today, but I would like to introduce the fourth exercise, which, as I'll explain when I get to it, could be seen as two exercises. I would like to introduce that, and maybe the fifth one. But before even introducing the fourth, I just thought I'd spend a little time opening up and considering some of the words and the vocabulary we've been using. By now, it's quite familiar to a lot of you who are familiar with Soulmaking Dharma teachings. Some of these words, and some of these terms – particularly as they inform and inflect and open up our sense of human being, and our human person, and personhood, and what it is to be a person. I just want to say a few things about that.

A few weeks ago, not very long ago – two or three weeks ago – I was trying to remember the actual details, and I can't remember exactly what it was that I was feeling really quite pressured about, and I'm going to say thrown off centre, unbalanced, pressured, flattened. But there were a lot of things that seemed like they needed deciding at the time – practical things, things in relation to preparing for death, and my will, and the future of the teachings, and teacher training, and all kinds of things. A lot of things that needed, seemed to need figuring out and arranging before my death.

Within that, there were, it seemed, lots of different people's requests and opinions and voices in there. I can't remember exactly what it was, but it was to do with those kinds of things, and particularly in relation to the teachings, and the future of the teachings, and teachers, and things like that. But at some point, I realized that, "Yeah, I'm really not feeling okay with all this. This has all gotten a bit crazy." And the language that came to me, or the language that seemed very natural at that point to describe what was missing for myself at that point – and that language [was] also very insightful, but it came very naturally – it was not the language of "I've lost my centre," as I said a minute ago, or "I'm uncentered," or "I need to get centred. I need to regain my centre, or centre myself," or whatever. That wasn't the language that came. I would understand, of course, those kinds of situations, and that kind of feeling flustered and pulled in so many directions, and so many decisions and all that, that that would very easily be a way that someone, that we in our contemporary society, might describe to ourself what has happened and then what needs to happen.

But the words that came, the description that came organically, naturally, spontaneously, and that contained, of course, the insight, the seeds of insight for what I needed to do to redress the situation was that, "I've lost my connection with the angels. I've lost my connection with the daimon. And I need to somehow reconnect, find that connection again with the angel, with the daimon, with the

image.” And as I said, the insight was there. In the description of the problem was the insight of the direction needed for a solution – where I needed to orient, what I needed to do, how I needed to look, how I needed to relate and think about things. And that was exactly what did indeed help: finding again these connections with the angels in relation to all this, all that was difficult, and what was at the middle, the pith of the difficulty in relation to the teachings, basically, because most of it centred around the teachings and the future of the teachings and all that stuff.

Finding my connection again, finding again my connection with the angels, in my relationship with them in relation to the teachings – all of that. That’s what had got lost, and I was trying to figure out, solve, find answers to, get through a lot of decisions and things that needed to be made. It all felt quite pressured. But I had lost that connection. I had gone into a much more one-dimensional mode of understanding that and relating to all that set of issues and decisions and problems and conundra. It was all one-dimensional. The angel wasn’t there. I wasn’t in relationship with the angel with all of that.

So when a person today uses language like “I lost my centre. I need to get centred or centre myself or find my centre, regain my centre,” what does that word kind of tend to imply, or what’s wrapped up in that kind of notion and that kind of vocabulary? Particularly, what’s wrapped up, what’s it tend to imply about the human being, and about the self, and about the person? What’s the logos, the conceptual framework of human being, self, person, that is kind of implicitly tied in with a notion such as ‘centring’?

There are probably quite a few, and it’s not set in stone. It may vary, etc. But we could think about a few of them. For instance, interiority is one of them, generally. Not necessarily, but generally. The centre of gravity, *my* centre of gravity, and therefore my sense of balance, my point of balance, is conceived then usually *within*, somehow within me. Here one’s feeling perhaps pulled out, so to speak, to all these diverse distractions or pulls or demands or questions or whatever it is, needs, and the centre of gravity, the still point, the balance point, is conceived of as *within*, usually. So there’s a kind of interiority there that’s part of the conceptual framework of the human being that goes with words like ‘centring’ and notions like ‘centring,’ perhaps.

Secondly, also, is perhaps a notion of circumscription of the human being, of the self. Like, where do I end? I end here. The world starts there, or you start there, whatever it is. When we talk about a centre, we talk about a centre *of* something, usually. It’s a centre of a circle, or a centre of a geometrical structure or whatever it is – a centre of a limited space, a limited area. Centre of a country, whatever. So there’s a delimited space, a circumscribed space. Where I end, that’s my boundary, if you like. That’s my border.

That notion also seems wrapped up, kind of subtly, implicitly, with the notion of ‘centring.’ Now, I could still have a kind of circumscribed notion of where I end. That could still be involved when I use the language and the idea of connection with the daimon or connection with the angel. But what I meant and what I mean by that, or what I would like to emphasize right now by that connection with the angels, and re-finding that connection with the angel or angels, is more a kind of expanded notion or sense of a human being. As we talked about, I think it was in the talk on death and dying in *In Psyche’s Orchard*, rather than “this area is me,” we have a sense of the larger human being is both image and analogue.¹ There are a couple of parts there: the first part has to do with circumscription, and the second part has to do with singularity. But just to stay with the circumscription: image and

analogue. I, in my life, am, to the best of my ability, or more or less at different times, the analogue of that image, of the angel.

Where, then, do *I* end? If I have this more expanded notion of self, I am actually this whole ... ‘system’ is too technical a word, but this whole gestalt, this whole constellation of image and analogue, or maybe images and analogues, and that’s all me, then where do I end in that? Where is my circumscription in that exactly? And anyway, then, the image, because of the elements of the imaginal, the angel, the image, where does the image end? Because that’s going to be unfathomable, and have unfathomable beyonds, etc.

[11:42] Where do I draw the line, then, of self there, of my human being? And so where, then, exactly, is the centre of it? If I can’t draw the line of, the edge of the circle or whatever, I don’t know where to place the centre. I cannot say the centre is here or there. So that’s another aspect: interiority, circumscription. But also, as I mentioned, singularity. Sometimes, usually, with this notion of centring, there can be a sense of the singularity of self: “I need to find my centre. I, as a singular self, need to kind of have recourse to my self, find the resource of my, find my resource in my self, in my centre.” And the sense then is the self as singular.

Now, a person in contemporary society, of course, could say, “I feel terrible. I feel really pressured. I reach out to friends and colleagues or whatever it is,” and reaching out horizontally, socially, to the horizontal sense of society and friends, etc. But one could also reach out more plurally, if you like. Not so much just to the singular self, not only reaching out horizontally to the flatly conceived society of others in which I exist, but rather conceiving of the self as a plurality. So just the fact of conceiving of the human being, conceiving of the human person, as I described and tried to really emphasize in that talk on death and dying, conceiving of the human person actually, phenomenologically, and when we have a deep sense both of our selves and of another, and when another has a deep sense of our selves, that the experience is not necessarily completely singular. And I don’t mean it’s fragmented in the way sometimes *anattā* gets taught, but I mean it’s plural, or rather, not simply singular in the way that we are both image and analogue or images and analogues – several angels, perhaps, and servant to analogue, to that plurality, even, of angels.

Quite different notions there. Interiority, circumscription and borders, and singularity are not the sort of default mode of sense of the human being, the human person. And they weren’t in that case. And I find more and more these days, when things are difficult, when there’s challenge different ways, that the sense (and I mean that word in its double meaning: the sense, the actual perception, and the idea) of my human being or another human being is more along the lines of this image and analogue, of having angelic dimensions which are refracted into the human life more or less at different times, with a duty to that. There’s a kind of doubleness there, if you like.

‘Centring,’ that word, ‘centring,’ a fourth aspect or fourth notion that might be wrapped up in it, or idea that might be wrapped up in ‘centring’ is that one then encounters one’s self, or one’s true self, or one’s core, if you like, or whatever, at the centre. Introspecting, one then finds one’s self at the centre. Maybe not Dharma 101, but pretty soon in the Dharma, you’re going to encounter the idea – and it’s not just particular to Buddhadharma – “when I look for the self, I can’t find it, actually.” One could think about centring as, “I need to centre because I need to encounter that self at my centre.” Or it could be that what I’m expecting at the centre is a kind of infinite depth of still nothingness, of stillness and

nothingness – which is a wonderful sense: one can look inside, and there are different kinds of nothingness, different kinds of stillness. But that kind of infinite depth of stillness and nothingness is what one maybe encounters at the centre.

They talk about, in the Christian tradition, in the twentieth century, there was a restimulation, a revivification of some of their contemplative practices in the Catholic tradition – centring prayer. I think it's changed now, but originally it meant just that: in the centre is this still nothingness. Beyond any image of God, beyond any word or directive, is just a kind of emptiness. This is tied up also with the *via negativa*, the apophatic tradition. Looking deep inside myself, I encounter nothing, and that nothingness, the depth of that nothingness, is the same as the depth of the nothingness of God.

This is wonderful, and this is a real mystical resource, but still, meaning something quite different. If we're *not*, if I *wasn't* gravitating towards that notion and that movement of centring and of needing centring, it's not that I'm expecting to encounter my self at the centre, nor am I expecting, nor am I kind of hoping for an experience of the still nothingness at the centre, which may, of course, be very helpful at different times. But rather, I need to reconnect with the angels. And the angel, the image, is other, *and* it's self. It's both and neither. It's me and not me, and it's not me and *not* not me. This angel, in the mystery of their being, in the mystery of this angelic constellation, this angelic relationship, this angel is both other and self. But it's theophany. It's a face of the divine. It's an expression of the divine, which is different than an emptiness. An emptiness is not a theophany. An emptiness is usually construed as an essence, usually construed as a transcendent essence beyond all attributes. A theophany is a face, a presentation of, we could say, attributes, or is a being in itself, a person in itself, you could say.

[20:04] So rather than encountering my self at the centre, rather than encountering a deep well of still nothingness, wonderful as that might be, actually not at the centre, but *in relationship with* a theophany. Not at the centre of anything, but in relationship with. Where exactly is that in space? Quite different notions. And some of this will be, to different degrees, familiar if you're familiar with Soulmaking Dharma, some of the ways we use these words. Really what I'm wanting to point to is where the words point to, the direction of possibility in which these words and these terms point, as opposed to they themselves define this or that, and this is the circumscription, and this is the limit and definition, delimitation of these words. More to get a sense of the words are directions. They're directions of soul-possibility, directions of soul-experience and soul-conception.

If we linger on this word 'angel' a little bit, we've used it quite a lot over the last years, but just to say a few more things about it. Careful, for instance, of a limiting idea that the angel or an angel or an image kind of shows up out of the blue and will help you with something, or give you an idea, or give you a creative impulse or whatever it is, a seed or something. It might. It might show up out of the blue. And we talked about – again, I can't remember when, but I used the phrase 'the poise of soulmaking' or something like that, 'the soulmaking poise.'² In other words, taking care of the stance, the poise of one's being, one's energy body, one's attention, one's receptivity, one's humility and all of that. And in that poise, in the soulmaking poise, it's sort of opening the space, priming and preparing the space. I'm thinking now of parallels with the Jewish tradition of preparing for the Sabbath, and the Sabbath is the reception of the *Shekhinah*, the reception of the Sabbath angel who visits, who comes on that evening,

on that day, and the human being's job is partly to prepare, to make the space and the time beautiful, ready, prepared, holy, special, hospitable.

So it may well be that, with an attitude of humility, we learn to take care with that soulmaking poise, and in that way, we are in a kind of humbly waiting and primed or prepared space. Our being becomes that space, becomes a space of hospitality for the angels, and they may visit, then, sort of out of the blue. And then, with that, there may be a gift. We may be helped with this or that in our lives, given something – given an idea, given creative seeds, whatever. But careful of that as an idea that might limit our sense of angels, and what they are, and how they arise, and what our relationship with them is. Because it's often the case – and this is something I've shared before – that one has already started something. Perhaps it's a creative project, or a big piece of work, and an idea. And perhaps it feels like a lot. It feels like a stretch or a challenge. And the angel comes *then*. And the coming of the angel might be the work itself, or this project itself, becoming imaginal. *It* becomes angelic.

It might be there's me, and there's this project, and then there's this third character, called the 'angel,' that's going to help me with, in my relationship with the project. But it might also be that the work itself, or the idea that's beginning to take shape, that I'm grappling with, that I'm kind of gestating, or is wanting to come through, whatever it is, or this big project that I need to do, whatever that might be, that *it* becomes angel. *It* becomes angelic. *It* becomes imaginal person, with autonomy, with desire, its own eros, its own desire, etc.

Careful of, again, not delimiting too tightly what we mean by 'angel.' We have to delimit; we're not just open for any old ideas about angels and all that business. That's why I said the words, the concepts, are pointing us in a direction, and pointing us along a road, but that road is infinite. It has boundaries. It's not like *anything* can fall under the scope of that road, and you can just call anything 'angel,' which is, in some circles, fairly common. They just use that word too easily, whether it's used completely unspiritually, just as a kind of term of endearment, or in certain spiritual or New Age circles or whatever. And we're *not* using it in those ways.

Maybe that's a good analogy: it's like, we're pointing in a certain direction, and then one can just keep travelling in that direction. And the road changes. The road develops. The terrain around the road develops as you walk down that road. But another way of saying this is, an angel is also (like everything) a dependent arising. In what I was just talking about, we could say, in the first instance, it's dependent on the poise of soulmaking. The visitation of the *Shekhinah* on Shabbat is dependent on the reverence and humility, and the eros of the soul, and the love of the soul for the *Shekhinah* and for the divine, and expressing that by the way it takes care of creating the space for the Sabbath, in terms of body and house and setting and environment. So of course, all this applies in so many ways to soulmaking and imaginal work and ritual and all that.

But it's a dependent arising, an angel is a dependent arising, also, in possibly another sense, which is, as I said, something is already there. It's already stretching me. And then the angel visits *in response* to that stretch, in response to that task that I'm given, in response to that work that I have to do. And it might be that one possibility within that is that the work itself, the task itself, becomes angel. It becomes imaginal, angelic.

I've touched on this before, actually quite a few times, this question that some people say, "Oh, I don't get any images," or "I don't get images." And sometimes people are okay with that, but

sometimes it's like people get a little bit frustrated: "Why don't I get images?" Or they might say, if they use slightly different language, having heard other language being used, they might say, "Why don't the angels seem to come to me? They seem to come to other people, or I hear this person or that person talk about angels coming, or the angel coming, or whatever. Why don't they seem to come to me?" Or it might be voiced as, "The angels, the gods, they don't seem to want anything from me. I hear this person or that person talk, and I hear them talk about the demand of the angel, the demand of the imaginal, or the duty, or this or that. But they don't seem to come to me," or "They don't seem to want anything from me."

So this whole constellation of ideas and perceptions and things that people might think, I've talked about it quite a lot over the years: "Why don't I get images?", and what do we actually *mean* by 'image,' and what are the kind of preparations, poises of soul, but also relationships with one's emotions and energy body and all kinds of other factors that support the generation, the arising, the creation/discovery of images, angels, etc. There are lots of reasons, which I've elaborated elsewhere. One I've touched on, I just want to touch on again, and that actually has to do with desire and need – maybe two aspects.

Sometimes people say, "Why don't I get images?" I don't know. Other reasons that I've elaborated elsewhere aside – so there may well be that actually, for many people, this isn't a relevant reason, what I'm about to say. Maybe there are just other things: they're not relating in the right way to their emotions or whatever it is. But sometimes, it's like, actually, if you really, really deeply wanted images, they would come. You would have images. Images would visit you. They would arise, if you really deeply wanted them. So something, sometimes, for some people, the issue is one of desire. A person asks, "Why don't I get images?", or "They seem to get more. This person seems to get more than I do," or whatever. But it may be that actually it's not something we really deeply want, and so they don't necessarily arise. It may be, sometimes, for some people, that *that* actually is the relevant factor.

And/or – and maybe they're related – it might be that for some people, at some times (again, this is not going to be relevant to some people, or in some instances it won't be relevant), it may be, "Why don't the angels seem to come to me? Why don't the gods, the angels, seem to want anything from me?", it may be that you and I and the imaginal figures, the angels, don't need each other. We actually don't need each other. They don't need me and I don't need them. They don't need you and you don't need them, because there's nothing in the way a person is living and the choices that a person is making that needs the help or presence of the angels, of the imaginal figures. There's nothing really on the line, so to speak. There isn't really a soul-stretch.

We've touched on this before, if you remember; I can't remember where.³ They're not living and choosing in their life in ways that really stretch their soul or that open them to kind of soul-risks, if we might use that phrase. There's nothing really on the line. And they might be stretched in all kinds of ways – might be very busy, might be stretched doing something very helpful in the world, whatever, but it's not actually a soul-stretch, and there's no real risk there. And maybe it's that the angels, the imaginal figures, the daimons, don't need and won't choose someone who is not willing to stretch – stretch themselves, stretch their lives, stretch their soul. So this is also a factor to consider. As I said, it won't be relevant in a lot of instances, but sometimes it is important to realize, "This is actually what's happening," or "This is a reason why something is *not* happening."

[34:45] It may also be – and again, this will be even in only perhaps some instances of the instances that I’ve just talked about, where that is the case – it may be that the kind of stretch needed to invite or call forth the angel, the angels, the kind of stretch to which they respond, maybe it needs to be one which involves or must involve a sense of antinomy. Remember that word from the ethics talks, from “Sila and Soul”⁴ and “The Image of Ethics.”⁵ Antinomies deeply felt in the soul, and having to choose, faced with that antinomy, the branches, the roads of their divergent pulls and callings, felt sharply, deeply, genuinely in the soul. One is almost crucified, pulled this way and that by two opposing values, by the love of and the duty of, duty to, two antinomical values. And it may be that *that* kind of stretch, that kind of difficulty, is the kind of stretch that’s sometimes – or, I don’t know, maybe it’s in every case – needed. That’s part of what it means to be stretched. It may be just that’s a certain kind of stretch; I’m not sure.

So all these are things to, I think, ponder. And of course, some people – going back to something I said earlier – well, it might not bother me that much that this sense of angels that I hear people talking about or images don’t come to me. And if it doesn’t, okay. Leave it. But if it actually *does*, then these are things that you might want to include in your kind of inquiry and self-questioning.

Then, just briefly, someone was saying something about Soulmaking Dharma and *da-da-da*, and basically, the upshot was, or one of the pieces was, “Well, I’m sure it’s all really great” – I’m very much paraphrasing – “but I don’t really relate to the word ‘soul.’” And this was from a person who had been practising Dharma a long, long time. She’s a teacher. A long, long time – decades and decades. Which is, you know, probably quite a common reaction, I imagine, not really relating to that word ‘soul’ at all. Oftentimes it’s the ‘making’ that people don’t relate to, the word ‘making.’ Of course, if you understand the whole track of exploration of ways of looking and fabrication (‘fabrication’ is just another word for ‘making’), and how that deepens, and how it opens out, and the understanding it opens out, then the word ‘making’ is almost an indispensable word in ‘soulmaking.’ But for a lot of people, it’s very puzzling, because you’d usually think of the word ‘soul,’ or have a sense of soul, or use that in a very reified way: it wouldn’t be something that we *make*. It would be something that *is*, or we discover, or that just is a level of being or whatever.

Anyway, this person, it was the word ‘soul.’ And I thought about that, and know them a little bit. I said, “That’s interesting. You’ve been involved in Buddhism for thirty, forty years or whatever it is. Do you really relate to the word ‘aggregate’ (*khandha*, *skandha* in Sanskrit)?” Or put the question in the past tense: “Did you really relate to that word when you first heard it, or the words ‘emptiness’ or *anattā*, ‘no-self,’ those kinds of words and concepts?” Probably not. It might be sometimes with words like ‘emptiness,’ sometimes a sort of predisposition many Dharma folk have to that, kind of an intuition, if you like, of that insight and that whole direction and that whole teaching, even before one’s really encountered the teaching. But a word like ‘aggregate,’ it’s hard to think that one would really relate to that immediately when one hears it. It might be, but probably not.

What has probably happened instead is one has been trained and trained oneself to use words like ‘aggregate’ as skilful and helpful concepts, and then perhaps even as ways of looking. One has been trained in the use of a word like ‘aggregate,’ or a concept like ‘aggregate,’ trained to use them and think of them in skilful and helpful ways. They’re not ultimate truths. This is something I’ve said many times. The five aggregates is not at all an obvious way of dividing up a human being, and it’s hardly, I

would suspect, a way of thinking about self that one would have arrived at by oneself, if one wasn't actually handed this teaching: the five aggregates, and "this is what they are." It was handed to us by someone in a position of authority, with the authority of 2,500 years of Buddhist tradition. And then we trained ourself in those words.

So just the fact that one doesn't really relate to a word that one is not familiar with in itself means nothing much at all. Couldn't the word 'soul' be similarly unfamiliar at first, but eventually, with practice and understanding, actually become, like the word 'aggregate,' very fruitful, like the concept 'aggregate,' and in fact, even be, the word 'soul,' the concept 'soul,' be something that contributes and supports to the reduction of particular sorts of suffering, just as the way 'aggregates' does? That's the function of the word 'aggregate.' As I said, it's not an ultimate truth. What the teachings of the aggregates do, or are supposed to do, are designed to do, is just that. They're just a group of concepts in the service of reducing suffering. It's not an ultimate truth.

And couldn't 'soul' be just something similar? Unfamiliar at first, but with training, with practice, as understanding grows, it becomes very fruitful as a term of vocabulary and a concept, and fruitful in many ways, but in one particular way: in reducing certain kinds of suffering. The word 'aggregate' will not, on its own, authentically and finally reduce the suffering of soullessness, for example. Again, if we open up, "What does that First Noble Truth mean? What kinds of suffering are there, and therefore what does the Third Noble Truth mean, ending suffering?", we could say these days there is the suffering of soullessness in our society, in our culture. The suffering in part of that is a suffering of meaninglessness. We could bag it all together as the suffering of soullessness. It's also to do with lack of beauty and aesthetics, and lack of depth, refusal of dimensionality – all kinds of things.

But the word 'aggregate,' on its own, will not finally, fully, and authentically reduce *that* kind of suffering, the suffering of soullessness. In fact, it might even *support* it. The suffering of soullessness may be worsened by the teachings on the aggregates if I'm not careful how I pick them up, and if or when I put them down. We could choose other words as well, even words from our contemporary culture, not from Buddhist culture, like 'trauma.' It's an idea. Actually, it's a whole conceptual framework. Nowadays, when we speak psychologically, and we draw on that word and we use that term, we're actually invoking and implying a whole conceptual framework of psychology there. You can say, "I don't really relate to that." In other times, other cultures, other periods of history, it would have been a quite bizarre notion, or even just the sort of broader notion of, say, for instance, parenting experiences shape the psychology, or are a dominant factor in the shaping of later psychology. Again, there's a whole conceptual framework. Actually, there are *many* conceptual frameworks, many alternate conceptual frameworks, which overlap, that we're invoking when we even say words that point to that whole idea and that whole framework of ideas. So it could be really, really helpful, but we may not relate to it at first. It may be very, very useful, these words borrowed from psychology, and these psychological concepts and notions.

Or even when we use the word 'brain.' I mean, certainly in the Buddha's time they were aware there was an organ in the middle of the head. They had their word for it. I've forgotten what the Pali is. They looked at corpses and dissected them and whatever. But the way we use the word 'brain' now, or the way many people in our culture use the word 'brain' now, as synonymous with 'mind,' definitely

was not at all how the Buddha meant the word ‘brain’ or ‘mind,’ as being something that was necessarily primarily physical, even, or certainly not completely physical.

So there are lots of words and concepts. “This time in history, in culture, or at this time in my evolution and my practice and my journey, I don’t really relate to this word, ‘soul.’” It’s like, so what? It doesn’t mean that it cannot then be, become, with training, a very useful, very fruitful, very freeing idea, word, term of vocabulary, and concept. Back to that word, ‘aggregates,’ even if it’s just picked up as a kind of notion, without much skill in using it as a way of looking in terms of *anattā*, etc., as I would kind of outline that direction of practice, the *anattā* practice, it still functions to fabricate less. As a term of vocabulary, it fabricates less suffering. It certainly fabricates less self-sense. It dissects and kind of undercuts self-construction, self-fabrication. It might do that at all different levels, let’s say, depending on how much skill one has in actually practising with that notion.

But as a term, it’s what it does, is it moves in the direction, it stimulates the direction of less fabrication of suffering and of self, or of some sufferings and of some levels of self, let’s say. In so doing just that, in this movement towards fabricating less self, at the same time, the other side of the coin is that therefore it doesn’t honour and respect and keep in focus or keep in the sense the person. Again, the person as someone in relationship, in meaningful relationship, that gets lost. The minute we start emphasizing talk of the aggregates and a view of the aggregates, then we simultaneously lose sight of, lose sense of, the richness and multidimensionality of personhood, and the relationality of personhood. Again, I’m going back to that talk – I’m pretty sure it was the one on death and dying – sort of thinking, what could we use this word, ‘person,’ to mean, perhaps, when we’re talking about a human subject, a human being that’s more than subject, because they’re in meaningful relationship, and so they’re more than just self? They become a person, if we really want to honour and respect and keep in our sense, in our senses, and keep making sense of the personhood of a person. So they’re kind of divergent directions or modes: the notion of the aggregates, or the notion of, let’s say, soul.

Later on, in Vajrayāna teachings, there’s the possibility of seeing the aggregates, the five aggregates, as divine, as holy. But even then, we actually lose the personhood of the person. It dimensionalizes in a different way. Each aggregate, depending on different tantras, each aggregate is associated with a different divinity, a different Buddha or Buddha’s consort, or *ḍākinī* or whatever. There’s a wonderful kind of dimensionalizing and divinizing, divination that can come through that, but it still misses the person. Beautiful range of practices, yet it still misses the person. So the term ‘aggregates’ and the term ‘soul’ almost instigate mutually exclusive, opposite movements, almost.

I talk about soul, talk about angels, talk about all this, but in dyadic practice, in soulmaking practice, and even in some of these exercises, all this that we’re pointing to now when we talk about these different words, and all the different shades and meanings and scopes and dimensions of what these words mean, and what they point away from, and where they point towards, and what they open up, all this kind of emerges naturally, I would say, through the process of sensing with soul. You’ve probably experienced it if you’ve done dyad practice. At certain points, “Who am I in relationship to here? Who is this other?”, or a triad, “Who are these others?”

And sometimes when we’ve been leading that on a retreat, you’ll hear on the recordings, sometimes we stimulate a shift in the sense towards sensing with soul, towards sensing the other as angel, others as angels, just by asking the question. When there is soulfulness, when there’s soulfulness in the field, and

then asking that question, “Who are these others? Who is this now that I’m beholding?” Just asking the question in a field of soulfulness can stimulate a further opening of the sensing with soul, or we begin to perceive other as angel. Other times, we might deliberately suggest: “Can you see them now as angels?” Or deliberately just start speaking of these others as angels. Or a person makes that deliberate shift in their sensing, like deliberately calling up an image, deliberately deciding to sense/see other as angel.

[53:43] But all these words – ‘angel,’ ‘soul,’ ‘image’ – they imply an unfathomability. They also imply, going back to something I said earlier today, neither a simple singularity nor a simple doubleness. If I’m seeing this person as angel, I’m seeing them as neither simply single, nor double: “They are usual Tom, Dick, or Harry, and Tom, Dick, or Harry’s angel or whatever.” There’s a mystery in the kind of impossibility of finally dividing them up as one or two, this being that I’m encountering, this being that I’m sensing with soul. But all these words, when we use words like ‘angel,’ or ‘soul,’ or ‘my soul,’ or any time we talk about image, there’s that unfathomability there. And there’s this ‘neither one nor two,’ *really, simply*, as well as, implied in the words ‘angel,’ ‘soul,’ or ‘image,’ etc., the dimensionality, the divinity, the infinite echoing and mirroring. So that infinite echoing and mirroring is of the angel into this person’s life, and this person’s life and this person’s being as the infinite echoing and mirroring of the angel, and the angel also a mirror and an echo of the being, in a kind of two-way, back-and-forth echoing and mirroring each other. The mystery of that kind of sense and notion is also wrapped up in the sense of ‘angel’ and ‘soul,’ as of course is also the imaginal Middle Way, neither real nor not real, the theatre-like quality.

So when we use these words, ‘angel,’ ‘soul,’ just like ‘image,’ all this is wrapped up there. And also eternity. The angelic dimension is the timeless dimension. I perceive this person as angel, perceive an angel, just an image, or the angel that I’m in relationship to, or the soul, etc.; implied is eternity. So the angel, as we said, I think, in that talk on death and dying (I think it was that one), angel is not of space or time. The being of the angel, the dimension of the being of the angel, is not of space. It’s not located inside me, or next to me, or behind me, or wherever, above me, below me, but nor is it located in time. It’s *refracted*, this angel. He/she/they are refracted into space and time. And there’s a sense, too, of participation – that the angel is something, if we talk, again, going back to the examples I gave of needing to reconnect with the angels, there’s also a sense of re-participating in something, or reconnecting with my sense of participating in something, and the mystery of *that* word.

So when we use these words, all these other words, all these other notions, are kind of woven into the meaning of these words. They’ve become really rich words, ‘soul,’ ‘angel,’ just like ‘image.’ And again, similar to the analogy I said about these words are like roads: they point in a certain direction, but that road goes on forever. It’s another way of saying all these words and concepts and perceptions, especially like ‘soul’ and ‘angel,’ they have soft and elastic edges. Actually, all those words, like ‘participation’ and ‘divinity’ and ‘eternity,’ all of them: soft and elastic edges. And they *will* stretch. So our notion of what we’re talking about when we say ‘soul’ and ‘angel,’ that will stretch over time. It will deepen. It will be deepened. It will be complexified. It will be variegated as the sensing with soul is encouraged, as soulmaking goes on, as the soulmaking dynamic is allowed to do what it wants to do. Soft and elastic edges. They will stretch. They will deepen, complexify, and yeah, variegate.

Okay, so let's introduce – let's call it the fourth exercise. We might consider it two exercises, so the fourth and the fifth, or set of exercises; I don't know. This one is in fact a dyad exercise, or these two are dyad exercises. So I'll try and describe.

[59:49, **exercise four, part one + variations** begins]

If we take it as two exercises, the first part – if you say it's two exercises, two parts, of one exercise in two parts – the first part in a dyad, and setting that up, whatever it needs to set that up, in terms of the temenos, in terms of the space, in terms of the presence. In the first part, really, one person in the dyad blesses the other, and the other person receives the other's blessing. So one is blessing, and one is receiving. We've done quite a bit of this in different ways in the past, but I just want to add a few more pieces in there, a few more variations as well. So some of it will be familiar, and some will be maybe less so.

(4.1) One person, it's their turn, and they bless the other. They bless them through movement, gesture, and voice. But what you cannot do as the blesser is you cannot use any known language, any language known to human beings. You can utter sounds, you can use your voice, but not any known language. Somehow you're conveying blessing and emanating blessing, expressing and manifesting blessing. So one thing here is, what does that *mean*, that word, 'blessing'? And again, back to what we just said about these words – soft and elastic edges, and it will grow, and it will deepen. The meaning of the word 'blessing' may already be very wide, or it may not. It may start as, "Well, I'm not really even sure what it means exactly."

But it is potentially wide, deep, and multidimensional, and open, and elastic, soft and elastic. So that, as we practise more, sensing with soul and especially in relation to blessing and being blessed, we can hopefully create and discover more and more of what 'blessing' might mean. It might start, for instance, as just *mettā*: "I'm not really sure about that word, 'blessing,' but I know what *mettā* means, and I'm familiar with that." It might just start as that. Okay. Let it start as that. Maybe it includes praise, what they call – 'doxology' is the fancy word. Words of praise. Doxo-logy. Or, in this case, movements, gestures, and vocalizations of praise. So maybe that's a slight expansion from just the notion of *mettā*. It starts expanding. Maybe it includes that. Maybe it includes also gratitude – that in one's praise, there's gratitude wrapped up in it. I remember – again, I can't remember what talk it was from, but that word, Eucharist, actually means 'thankfulness' or 'gratitude,' I think, in Greek.⁶

It may be, as I said, either within this exercise, or as we repeat the exercise, or as we generally just do more soulmaking practice, and our sense of soulfulness grows, and the range of experience and ideation grows, it may be that this whole notion grows, of what it means to bless, and what it means to be blessed. And in the exercise, it might be that as we're doing the exercise, the self, the sense of the self, the sense of the other, and the sense of the world, the environment, maybe even time or whatever, all that can become image. Maybe if I'm trying to use my voice without language, and trying to say, trying to bless, but without language, it might be that the sounds, the words, or maybe not even words, but the sounds uttered and heard become image. They become imaginal. And who is blessing? And who is blessed? All this becomes image, and in so doing, it becomes imaginal image, its meaning expands and deepens.

So just in terms of the exercise, then, maybe you're in a dyad. You're facing each other. One person takes the first turn to be the blesser. The job of the other is the one who is blessed. Their job, their task, is twofold. It really has to do with just silent sensitivity and receptivity. They want to notice. They're looking at and listening to and opening their whole energy body. We've done all this kind of thing before. You open the whole energy body, and all the senses open to the other and their blessing, and their movement and voice and gesture. Open to the sound and the visuals and all the senses, the whole energy body in relationship with, sensing with the whole energy body. But then sensitive to one's own experiences, one's own experiences as the one who is blessed, and one's own experiences of the energy body. And that includes whatever emotions, whatever soul-resonances, etc., arise and pass within that.

So for the one who is blessed, it's a task in sensitivity, and opening the energy body and the senses to that really full relationship with the one who is blessing. And then tracking, noticing what happens, primarily in the energy body and the emotions, as this person blesses you. One wants to establish that, a really good energy body and emotional sensitivity and awareness. And then, on top of that, when that's ready – probably that needs to be there before one then opens it up to including any sensing with soul or soul-sense of the whole relational field there, and the whole experience of being blessed, the other, the self, the moment, all of it. But practically speaking, or at least from the outside, so to speak, one is just silent and still and open, and the task is one of sensitivity in the energy body, in the emotion, and then in the soul-sense. One is not responding.

And then, maybe after ten minutes – well, you can time it yourself. Ten minutes might feel like a lot, doing something like this. It may be that this is really quite difficult, that some people find this really quite difficult. They're a bit sort of baffled or stumped what to do, how to do this at all. But hopefully it can also be fun. A few variations to throw in, but yeah, let's say after about ten minutes, you can reverse roles, and maybe you need some silent meditation or something in between, perhaps, to gather, or maybe not. You'll have to see. Ten minutes, as I said, may feel very long. It may feel very difficult and awkward, and one isn't quite sure what to do and what sounds to make, etc. Or it may be that actually it *needs* ten minutes, or it needs longer, to get going, to get into a kind of groove, because it's unfamiliar. For some people, it may not be at all. But either way, even if it's difficult, hopefully it can be fun as well. Lots to discover there as an exercise.

So if you're in the blessing role, then you can improvise your utterances. Improvise what comes through your mouth. Take your time. It may be very fast – there's a very fast flow – or a very slow flow. It may be there are pauses in between utterances or movements or gestures, or that it's just continuous streams. Or maybe a continuous stream, then a pause or whatever. It may be loud or soft. See if you can let your sense of any soulfulness that's there, any sense of soulmaking, let that sense guide you, just as we use that as a guide in imaginal practice, etc.

So you want to be feeling, sensing the energy body, the resonances in the soul and the energy body. You want to be putting, as you're blessing, your whole energy body in relationship with the other. It may be that you deliberately bring in or play with the deliberate introduction of an image of yourself, that you inhabit a certain image, perhaps that you're familiar with, or certainly that's arising at the time, or an image of the other, a sensing with soul of the other, or of the space you're in or, as I said, of the movements and gestures and utterances themselves – that you bring in deliberate images, a deliberate imaginal sense of what they are. It may be that there's an image that you bring in that's a third, so that

this imaginal figure is somehow coming or, if you like, in touch with you, and through you, they are blessing the other, but it's really coming from this. So there are all kinds of possibilities here. For some people, this is going to be really quite strange, and may take a little getting used to. It may feel a little awkward; others, maybe not at all, and it's just easeful and delightful and fun. [1:12:19]

(4.2) Then a few variations, okay? One is (4.1), the only rule is 'no words.' You can make any movement or any gesture or any vocalization. So any movement, gesture, or vocalization is okay, but not words, as I said. No language. A second possibility (4.2) is no words and also no vocalizations. So you can only use movement and gesture, no voice. Still, how do you bless just through movement and gesture? What wants to come? What feels soulful there? Can I sense that, be in relationship, and follow that thread?

(4.3) And a third possibility is no words, but no movements or gestures either – only vocalizations. Okay? So you've got (4.1) movements, gestures, vocalizations, all okay. Then you've got (4.2) only movement and gesture is okay. And then you've got (4.3) only vocalization is okay. So three variations.

Sometimes it might occur to you to sing a melody if you're allowed to vocalize. That's fine. Maybe that's part of the blessing. You hum or sing something, and it's part of the blessing. If you *do* do that, make sure that sometimes you try it without singing a melody, without singing anything. Again, we're interested in really opening up ranges here.

Okay, now, either the second part, or a separate exercise – we could conceive of them either way. You could separate this exercise number four into two separate exercises and do them at different times, or you can kind of just segue one part into the next.

[1:14:32, **exercise four, part two** begins]

The second part, or the second exercise, would be then the same thing, but dropping any idea of an attempt to express or convey some meaning – in other words, something that one *could* say in words. Even blessing may be something that one could, aspects of it could translate into words. Maybe it's just a second part. You're taking it to another level, really, dropping any idea of an attempt to express or convey any meaning, something that *could* get put into words, or an emotion. You're not conveying or expressing an emotion, or an image, or an event, or a story, or my story, or your story, or whatever it is. There's just movement, gesture, and voice. And dropping any sense of an attempt to express something with that, to convey something that *means* anything with that.

Remember, we have the element of the imaginal 'meaningfulness,' and this also 'not reduced to a single meaning.' So what happens, then, if we recognize soul is more than this or that meaning? Even if the meanings are important, even if the meanings are important to soul, soul is *more* than that meaning, than any meaning. And soul is also more than heart. So what happens now? Perhaps, then, also the notion of blessing may get kind of altered or dropped. Does that make sense as an exercise? [shuffles papers] I'll just see if there's anything else I want to say about that.

In what happens in that second part, then we could say maybe we've gone beyond blessing in the usual sense. It's an interesting word, 'blessing,' and I think it sort of occupies an area that's at the edge of what could be put into other words. But in a way, in the second part of this exercise, we're just encouraging what we're doing through movement and gesture and voice to extend beyond the notion of

blessing in the usual sense, because we're trying to drop any attempt at expressing or conveying any meaning or anything that could be put into words.

[1:18:31, **exercises end** – see Part 4 for elaboration on and a variation of the exercises in this talk]

I think that's it. Hopefully that's clear for that exercise. I think we'll stop for today there, and add the fifth exercise at a different time. Hopefully that's enough to be going with, and that makes sense, and you can play with that. As I said, it might feel very awkward. It might feel very, very strange for some people, and maybe not at all for others, everything in between. It might feel difficult. You might feel very self-conscious. All kinds of things. But it might also be fun. Wherever it starts, it can grow. It might start, even, it feels all very nice, and maybe you're used to it from different retreats that we've done to some extent, but then even from where it is there, it can grow and deepen and complexify and become a lot more subtle as well, and involve a lot more sensitivity, both on the part of the one who blesses, and the part of the one who is blessed.

Maybe in the second part of this exercise, we're even talking about something that's beyond the notion of blessing, in the way that we usually use that word anyway. There's just an exercise, or there is just a dyad, using movement/gesture/voice with the purpose of, the intention towards, deepening sensitivity, extending range, and being receptive to soul, receptive to soul and a vehicle for soul, a vehicle of soul. And all that – that sensitivity, and that opening up of where we can sense soul, and how soul can express through us, and what we can recognize as soul – all that becomes the main point, and it has an extraordinary range of subtlety that's possible there, and sensitivity, and growth, and dimensionality. That's a big part – range and depth, sensitivity and including subtlety. Of course, it doesn't have to be subtle only, but it can move into that territory more and more. So that's what this is for. That's the purpose of this. That's the invitation.

¹ Rob Burbea, "Practising with Death and Dying" (20 Feb. 2020), <https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/210/talk/61078/>, accessed 30 Aug. 2020.

² E.g. Rob Burbea, "Pain, as Void and as Sacrament" (13 Feb. 2020), <https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/210/talk/61071/>, accessed 28 Aug. 2020.

³ E.g. Rob Burbea, "Heat and the Material" (28 May 2019), <https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/210/talk/58771/>, accessed 30 Aug. 2020.

⁴ Rob Burbea, "Sila and Soul" [Parts 1–9] (9–17 June 2019), <https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/210/?search=sila+and+soul>, accessed 27 Aug. 2020.

⁵ Rob Burbea, "The Image of Ethics" [Parts 1–6] (14–19 Feb. 2020), <https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/210/?search=the+image+of+ethics+orchard>, accessed 27 Aug. 2020.

⁶ Burbea, "Pain, as Void and as Sacrament."