

A SECULAR DHARMA TALK

Imagination, creativity, and magic

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I'm going to reflect this morning, this evening, wherever we are, on imagination, creativity and magic. I've always been struck that Buddhist communities, Buddhist societies and countries have generated remarkable works of art and literature over the centuries. We can see this for ourselves in Japan or Tibet or Sri Lanka.

Whatever Buddhism does, it is clearly a catalyst for the imagination, creativity, and art and literature. This is very hard to dispute. But I've also been surprised and puzzled as to why in Buddhist thinking and writings, there's very little discussion, if any, as to what it means to be imaginative, or creative.

For a long time, I thought that there was no concept in Buddhism, particularly early Buddhism, for the ideas of imagination and creativity. I never came across them. No one ever talked about them. Look them up in a Buddhist book or dictionary and you won't find them.

Recently I started to change my mind on this, and will argue during this talk that imagination and creativity *are* present in classical Buddhist formulations and lists but, for whatever reason, they've been lost, buried, disguised as something else.

Let me tell you what I think those terms are. Imagination is the meaning of the word *saṅkappa*, the second limb of the eightfold path.

Usually it's translated either as intention, as in 'right intention', or thought – 'right thought'. Never, as far as I'm aware, is it translated as 'imagination'.

As we reflect on this, though, we will find that imagination may be a more helpful way of thinking about *sammā saṅkappa*, the practice of 'right intention', 'right thought', which I'd like to recast as 'imagination'.

The classical term for creativity is, I think, *iddhi*, and yet *iddhi* is translated as something like 'magical power', 'miraculous power', or something like that. This is a very good example of a term that originally would have had a practical meaning that everybody could have related to – creativity – that has been turned into a specialist occult practice of producing miracles or magical events of one kind or another.

Let's look at imagination. I'm not going to try to define the term. It's one we all use quite regularly. We value it, perhaps. We know intuitively what it means to be imaginative, to have an imagination. Imagination is something that for many of us is liberating, a life-affirming quality that often brings us great insight, great joy, and a real sense of being alive.

My sense is that this practice is grounded in a non-reactive awareness, and as we meditate we temporarily put to one side reactive patterns of mind such as greed, dislike, grasping, opinions, and so on. We let go of certain entrenched binaries, such as right and wrong, good and bad, is and isn't, and in doing so, sitting in this contemplative space, this non-reactive awareness, this liberates us to imagine other ways of responding to the situations in life that we confront.

In other words, greed, hatred and delusion, as Buddhists so often call these patterns, are not problematic simply because they cause grief, pain and suffering – which they often do – but the way that Gotama saw them as being an obstacle was because they very often inhibit our capacity to imagine how to respond to life, to ourselves, to others.

At the same time, our imagination is very often dulled and inhibited by received opinion: things we've taken on board from our parents, our

society, our religion. Imagination is also inhibited by standards of taste that our society or culture might value. There are ways of doing things that seem just right. We don't question it. We also find ourselves unconsciously caught up in habitual biases, preferences, habits, and all of those things serve to undermine the capacity to lead an active, imaginative life.

So what *sammā diṭṭhi* – which I translate as complete vision – frees us from is precisely these kinds of habits. Even if momentarily we settle into a quiet meditative space, we touch a much more open and fluid perspective that enables us to playfully imagine what the consequences of what we say and do, how we engage with the world, what the different outcomes of our actions might look like.

It frees us to open up possibilities that we might not even have thought of before. This capacity of the imagination is just as much a reality for a potter who's imagining the kind of pot she wants to make, or for the parent imagining what might be the best kind of education for their child. Letting go of certain fixed opinions, biases and habits, fears and desires liberates us to imagine how we might live in this world.

Imagination is as vital for our ethical life as for our creative life. Without imagination I cannot empathise. I empathise with the suffering of another person because I can imagine what it's like to be her. As I ponder what I might say to her in her dilemma, I find myself at that very moment imagining what it would be like for her to hear my words when I say them.

As we reflect on our choice of words, our decisions to behave in certain ways, we are imagining the consequences of those actions not only upon ourselves – how it would make us feel better perhaps – but also the consequences of our actions on others.

So the imagination allows me to weigh up the different options I have as I prepare myself for that decisive moment when I open my mouth and say something.

Central, therefore, to the practice of ethics is how I imagine the kind of life I wish to lead, how I imagine the kind of person I want to be, how I imagine the kind of society, the kind of world that I want to share with other living beings. All of this, once we scratch the surface, points to a central feature of the practice of the dharma as residing within our capacity to be imaginative.

CREATIVITY

Let's move onto creativity. These two notions are connected. We often talk of imagination and creativity as really part of the same process. If someone is very imaginative, we think of them as being very creative, and the other way round.

Here's an example of how we might understand creativity as part of the practice of the dharma by looking at how Gotama, the historical Buddha – but I just call him Gotama – how Gotama had observed and valued the work of artisans, and in particular goldsmiths. We find this information scattered through the canon. It's not all gathered together. For a homeless mendicant, Gotama knew an awful lot about gold.

We can find descriptions of how gold is panned, how it's refined, how to work with the metal, and he thinks also of gold as a metaphor for equanimity, a quality of mind that allows us to remain unshaken by the delights and disappointments of the world. There's something about gold that is pure, unalloyed, stable, as well as radiant and bright. He says:

Imagine a goldsmith who has prepared a furnace, heated the crucible, then taken a piece of gold with his tongs and placed it inside the crucible. Sometimes he blows on it, sometimes he sprinkles water on it and sometimes he just observes it. In this way, the gold becomes

refined, rid of impurities, wieldy and bright so that he can fashion from it whatever kind of ornament he likes.

We see here a very important shift. Purifying the mind is not just so it becomes bright, radiant and malleable. In doing this we are able to imagine how our mind could be fashioned, transformed and changed in the same way that a goldsmith could take a piece of gold and through his or her skill turn it into a beautiful object of some kind.

For this equanimity to be effective, Gotama recognises it has to be integrated with focus, concentration, and energy.

Were a goldsmith only to fan his fire, he would risk overheating the gold. Were he only to sprinkle water on it, it would risk getting too cool. Were he only to stand back and observe it, the gold would not reach the right consistency.

It's through his observation and training that a goldsmith knows intuitively how to work with fire, tools and materials to produce gold that is pliable, workable and radiant. And only then can he 'create any kind of ornament he wants, be it a bracelet, earrings or a necklace'.

In the same way, if we're practising the dharma, we too need to balance our focus, energy and equanimity, so we can imagine and then become the kind of persons we aspire to be.

Comparing the mind to gold, the practitioner to a goldsmith, Gotama is presenting a path of integration that serves as the basis for both imagination and for creativity.

Just as a skilled potter, [*he says in another text*], can craft from clay whatever kind of pottery vessel he likes, or as a skilled ivory carver can craft from ivory any kind of ivory work he likes, or a skilled

goldsmith can craft from gold any kind of gold article he likes. In the same way, with his mind concentrated, purified, bright, pliant and steady, the practitioner directs and inclines it to forms of creativity.

So first of all the artisan has to imagine how a raw material – a lump of clay, an elephant's tusk, liquid gold in a crucible – can be transformed into something that is both functional and beautiful. Then one applies one's skills to manufacture that article.

We're very used to this. It might sound a little banal to go through all these steps, but I think at the Buddha's time this whole process is understood as being somewhat magical. There's a magic involved in this capacity to transform a substance, a raw material into a beautiful object, and an artist or a craftsperson possesses those particular skills. The Buddha based a lot of his dharma practice instructions on comparing us with such craftspeople.

I find good examples for this process in modern literature and will give you examples from novels and other sources. This is from the Hungarian novelist Sándor Márai. In his novel *Casanova in Bolzano* he wrote:

An artist is someone who can engrave an entire battle scene on a tiny piece of stone, or paint a crowded city full of people, dogs and spires on a slip of ivory. Because an artist and only an artist can shatter the laws of time and space.

When Gotama describes creativity, he also emphasises that it's a kind of magic. He says:

Having become one, he becomes many, having become many, he becomes one. He appears, he vanishes, he goes unimpeded through walls and parks and mountains as through space, he dives in and out

of the earth as if it were water. He walks on water without sinking, as if it were dry land. With his hand, he touches and strokes even the moon.

So once the mind is stabilised, radiant and integrated, a new kind of freedom dawns and this is the freedom of the imagination.

That we are sitting here able to imagine flying through the sky, walking through walls, becoming numerous, becoming one, all these possibilities open up in the imaginary space that is liberated by a non-reactive, integrated mind. One's creative potential, therefore, is unleashed.

The other day in *The Guardian* newspaper and I came across something that said exactly the same thing – a review of an exhibition in London of late drawings by Picasso. In the review, Picasso is described as:

a magician who can spin new perceptions of life from a simple sketch or turn a plate into a living thing.

The exhibition has a plate off which you would eat food. Picasso paints these before they are fired, and in doing so brings them to life by painting a simple face or an animal upon it. What's extraordinary is how he's able to evoke something that is so physically vital and real with a single line of a brush, or a pen. This to me is a kind of magic.

I found another example in a book by Ahmet Altan, a Turkish writer, a novelist and social critic. He was sentenced in 2016 to life imprisonment for alleged political crimes, and finds himself with the prospect of spending the rest of his life in jail without the possibility of parole. He wrote a number of reflections about this experience, which were smuggled out of the prison by his lawyer, and collected in a little book titled *I will never see the world again*. The concluding passage in the book I think sums this up extremely beautifully. He says:

I am writing this in a prison cell but I am not in prison. I am a writer. I am neither where I am, nor where I am not. You can imprison me but you cannot keep me here because like all writers I have magic. I can pass through your walls with ease.

Curiously, it was only really when Altan was deprived of his liberty that he seems to have been able to appreciate fully his freedom as an artist. One passage is particularly striking. It shows that he's no longer constrained by the binary, or the duality, of where I am and where I am not. One transcends that.

This is again a very telling example of how letting go of dualistic habits of thinking – right/wrong, this/that, here/there, me/you and so on – frees our imagination in a way that brings us to be able to think of our situation from a completely different perspective, offering possibilities and opportunities that we had never thought of.

Part of the problem for us moderns living in Europe and north America, is that we're so familiar with works of art – not just paintings and drawings but films and theatre, and opera, and all manner of artistic production – that we've become somehow immune to the magic of artistic creation.

The process of imagining and creating a work of art doesn't astonish us any more. We've become a little bit blasé. If we see an incredible piece of work that shows enormous technical skill, great vision, we say, 'oh yeah that's okay, it's quite nice'. I think we've become alienated from the process of the creative imagination, not just among artists but crucially within ourselves.

Imagine a travelling bard in the old days, reciting *The Iliad*. He's sitting around a fire, there's a group of farmers, illiterate people perhaps, who are spellbound by his story as he conjures up ... and he does his conjuring just with words, with oratory, with hand gestures, with pauses, with emphases,

with song, with rhythm. It's just noise, just sound. It's no different vocally than Picasso's lines are visually. Yet with those incredibly simple media he's able to conjure up a thousand ships dispatched to Troy, and the mighty battles that ensued.

It all comes vividly alive through our imagination, through the creative skills of the storyteller. If we go further back in history still, imagine the marks and pigments traced on walls of caves which vividly spring to life as mammoths, horses and deer when a flickering torchlight is cast upon them. There's a kind of magic in this, too.

If we go to something far more recent, imagine the stories we've heard of early cinema goers who go in to see a movie and run screaming from the theatre when they see a train hurtling towards them on the cinema screen. That won't happen to us now. We've become programmed to understand these things and to no longer be amazed by them. Even the fanciest CGI graphics leave us just a bit bemused.

So, if we are to embark on a path of human flourishing, which is how I would describe the practice of the dharma, this requires the creativity to imagine another way of living in this world. For Gotama, creativity – which again is my translation of the Pali word *iddhi* – was not a quality that some gifted people or mystical types possessed, but others didn't. In fact he presents it as a fairly basic sort of practice. He describes mindfulness, effort and then creativity, when you look at the 37 limbs of awakening.

It's not even an advanced kind of specialist spiritual practice but something quite basic and ordinary, a capacity that all of us have, and he provides us with a way of understanding that too. He says that creativity is supported by four feet, or four legs, and these are desire, effort, what he calls *cita* which I would translate here as 'heart and soul', and *vīmaṃsa* which I translate as experimentation.

So the creative process is supported by a desire, an aspiration to create something. It's supported by the energy we put into that process to

achieve that result. It's supported by the intuitions of our heart, the intuitions of our soul, not governed just by our rational thinking processes, and very much brought about through experimentation.

A potter, for example, needs to be able to imagine the kind of work she seeks to create. She needs to apply her energy to actually achieving this vision. She needs to let go of her conceptual preferences, aesthetic tastes, biases, and habits and trust the aesthetic intuitions of her heart and soul for guidance in creating this work. And she has to keep on experimenting.

Whenever I've spent time with artists and potters in their studios I'm always made aware of the fact that so much of the work is the process of experimenting, trying out new ideas, seeing what happens if you do this rather than that.

A very common experience is that it's often only by making things that fall short of your vision, of your idea, when you fail to get what you want, often just by serendipity – by chance really – you stumble across an idea or a pot that you hadn't intended, but intuitively you know 'ah, this is what I want to do, this is a good idea, this is interesting'. It's often by your mistakes, or your digressions, that you end up finding the way to produce your work.

This is just as true of those of us who practise the dharma. We need to make a sustained effort to become the kind of persons we aspire to be, which is our desire, our goal. We also have to learn to trust our intuitions, our heart, our soul to guide us along the path. We can't just rely on what's written in a text, or what seems to be reasonable, or logical. We have to tap into something deeper than that within ourselves to really feel in attunement with what it is we're seeking to practice in our lives.

Likewise, as dharma practitioners, we need to experiment with different practices and approaches to discover what works for us.

I often hear from people who say, ‘well I’ve been practising this form of meditation, or I’ve been following this kind of teaching for so many years, but I don’t seem to be really getting anywhere. I do the practice regularly, I’m very committed to my teacher, but I find I’m not really getting anywhere with it.’

This indicates that you’ve lost the creative and imaginative dimension of your practice. You’ve lapsed into a routine, can produce a very good period of meditation in the way that a potter can produce an accomplished but not very interesting set of vessels, but you’re no longer in the process of discovery. You’re no longer in the process of exploring your life, going out of your comfort zone, extending your practice into what is unknown or unfamiliar, or even risky.

THE BIG PICTURE

One final point: the processes of imagination and creativity are not simply something that applies to our individual lives. This also applies to the ways we imagine the kind of society we wish to be a part of, the kind of world we wish our children to be able to live in. For us today, this is where a great deal of our imaginary work is taking place. We’re trying to picture another way in which we can live on this earth, a way in which we’re not destroying it.

This all requires the imagination, and I don’t think Buddhism or any other religion or extant philosophy, has all the answers to these questions. That we’re moving now into a world for which there are few precedents with global warming, and the coronavirus pandemic, we don’t have a lot of experience collectively or individually in dealing with these matters.

Time-honoured answers might help sometimes, but often they will keep us stuck because they are answers to dilemmas of quite a different order to those we have today. In many ways, Buddhism, Christianity and

Islam have come up with some very good ways in which we can live and work together, but they are responses to worlds that are not the world we live in now.

If the dharma is going to help us prepare for the difficult to foresee future unfolding ahead of us, we have to be able to let go of certain fixed beliefs and ideas that we get from our traditions, and have the courage to investigate more deeply the intuitions of our own soul and heart, and experiment and explore ways in which we might be able to imagine a dharma, a philosophy, a meditation practice, that is that much more adapted and suited to the kinds of crises facing humanity on Earth today.

Q+A SESSION

Question When you were speaking about the creativity of the goldsmith using his imagination, his creativity to transform a lump of gold into something beautiful I was thinking how often in the canon Gotama speaks about the training of animals, kind of metaphorically in the same way, the goatherd, shepherd, trainer of wild horses and elephants, so they become tame and useful, as he speaks about the beauty and the usefulness of the training of the mind. It seemed to me the same idea as you said.

Stephen Batchelor Yes, it's exactly the same idea. Thank you for bringing that up. So many of Gotama's examples are drawn from the world of people involved in practical tasks. I've selected artisans, potters, goldsmiths, ivory workers, but you are absolutely right. He talks a lot about elephant training, horse training. These are the skills of people who I presume to have been his community. I don't think he was some detached royal prince who would look at a distance on these different activities that didn't interest him really. He was a man who was probably brought up in these kinds of worlds.

It also shows a man who's acutely attentive to how people exercised their skills, and points also to the fact that the dharma is in many ways a kind of know how, a *savoir faire*. Think, for example, of the Satipaṭṭhāna sutta, the discourse on the foundations of mindfulness. When he gives an example of paying attention to the breath, he talks of a woodturner, somebody who operates a lathe. He takes a piece of wood and turns it slowly – a long turn, a short turn – which he compares with a long breath, a short breath. It's a very odd image, if you think of it.

What I think this points to is that the practice of the dharma is not about knowing *what*, in other words getting insight into the nature of reality and truth, although that might be there too. The kind of knowing that Gotama most values is the knowing of the artisan, the elephant trainer or the doctor. There's a lot of examples with medical treatment as well, and these are people who interface with the world with their bodies, not just their minds, and through doing so are able to effect transformation. They can tame the elephant, they can produce the beautiful piece of gold, they can remove a poisoned arrow from somebody's body.

All of this points to the same kind of thing, that all of these skills require imagination and creativity.

Question Do you have hope that our society can recapture our astonishment in the magic of the arts, much as you suggest we can we do with the dharma with experimentation and sustained effort, trust and more?

Stephen Batchelor I feel we are at a point in our history as human beings where we have to really start thinking deeply and imaginatively as how we might live together. I think the arts provide us with examples, and the examples the Buddha uses too give us other possibilities. Yes. I feel it's

important to stress the importance of imagination and creativity in confronting the kinds of dilemmas we face in our world today.

Question For those of us who manage others, or those who impact others, which is everyone, how can we foster imagination and creativity in everyday conversations?

Stephen Batchelor Everyday conversations in the course of caring for somebody, let's say. You're a therapist or a counsellor or a carer with an elderly parent. First of all, I would suggest becoming more aware of how often we just lapse into repeating what we've said before, and how often our behaviours are just a series of repetitive loops. We find a particularly good way of doing something, and just keep on doing it. We find particular habits of speech that seem to work, so we just keep repeating them.

To start noticing how quickly you can get stuck in a pattern or a rut in which things continue in a tolerable fashion, but you perhaps even feel in yourself that you're not really rising to the challenge of engaging with this person's real and deeper needs.

That is something meditation can help with. When we replay our day in an evening meditation, or when we sit quietly with a cup of tea and think about how our day has gone, just reflect upon those moments in which you surprised yourself with what you said or what you did, rather than simply repeating what you've always done, and it kind of gets nods and people seem happy.

These are the moments when the practice comes alive, moments when I actually become surprised or astonished by what's coming out of my mouth, or how I'm engaging with another person. So, start paying attention on the one hand to how you get stuck in patterns of repetition, and pay attention on the other hand to those moments in which you surprise yourself, in which you astonish yourself by doing or saying

something that makes you wonder, 'Who said that? Was that me? Was that someone else?'. There is magic in this, something going on that's not reducible to a strictly rational explanation.

Question We say we are works in progress all the time, but I don't make the conceptual shift to seeing that as creative work. What are your views on this?

Stephen Batchelor Part of the problem here is that we tend to think of creative work as being the domain of that privileged subset of human beings called artists, writers, and so on. I recall Ananda Coomaraswami in the '60s writing a book about the imagination. One of the things he wrote was that we must get out of the habit of thinking that the artist is a special kind of person, turning that round to think of every person as being a special kind of artist.

If we think of creativity as the domain of the privileged, gifted person, then of course we've automatically somehow denied that we can have much of a role in it. We're just amateurs, we just do things for fun. It also tends to suggest that creativity is about producing works that can be displayed, or listened to. But if we take to heart the Buddha's examples of craftspeople, animal trainers, doctors, as exemplars of the practitioner, then we need to think of our own practice as an art work, a creative process.

In other words the raw materials for our art practice are our bodily sensations, our feelings, our emotions, our mind states, our thoughts, our ideas. That is the clay of our practice. That's what we work with, that's what we form, that's what we mould, that's what we use to create.

The process of practice is basically a creative process. Quite literally. It creates, it brings into being something new. This might take time, but the process is one which gives much greater sense to the idea of your life

being a work in progress. You begin to think of your practice, your meditation, all of these activities that are part of the path, as a process of bringing something into being that previously wasn't there – bringing into being a more mindful attention to a situation, rather than a distracted one.

Each time we realise one of these values, we are creating it, and if we think of the word practice itself – particularly if we use this as a translation of *bhāvana* – the Buddha encouraged us in the fourth of the four tasks to cultivate the path. Cultivate, *bhāvana*, means to bring it into being, and bringing into being is a rather clumsy way of saying 'create'.

In other words, it's there in the injunction of Gotama himself that each person becomes on the one hand autonomous, independent of others, and on the other goes about creating their path in life, not just copying and following what others have done over the centuries.

All of these point to a much more explicit understanding of how our practice is a creative process.

Question Can you comment on how our meditation practice might support complexity or even chaos situations to help us evolve?

Stephen Batchelor Let's go back to the idea of equanimity. Equanimity seems to be a very central, grounding quality of the middle way, and as we meditate we often find that we experience moments in which we feel a much greater balance. That balance is when we're not endlessly being pulled one way and another. But even if we are being distracted, there's something constant within us that we have cultivated and refined over time that's less and less distractible, that's more and more equanimous. This is what provides us with the inner strength needed to confront situations of complexity and chaos.

The difficulty in confronting such situations often comes because we don't have the internal stability to not be drawn into the chaos ourselves,

to not be bewildered by the complexity of a situation. I think the practice of the middle way is really about constantly refining a sense of judgement as to what is the appropriate way to rest in this particular situation in life.

It could be that the chaos needs to be avoided. So maybe you don't have what's needed to be able to engage effectively with the chaos, so you need to be able to recognise that you'll leave that for the time being. Step back. That's a middle way type judgement. These judgements are not always going to be something that you think they should be. Often, we may take a meandering path through some of these more difficult situations.

If we don't have an internally integrated stillness and the clarity that we gain through this sort of meditation, it's difficult to imagine how we'll have the resources to deal with situations of great complexity, of pain and bewilderment.

Question Some see creativity as being both divergent and generative. Where else do we see these qualities in Buddhism?

Stephen Batchelor I'm not quite sure what's meant by divergent here. Possibly the questioner is suggesting that creativity can go in good ways and bad ways, that it can take us away from our focus and it can at other times bring us much more closely into focus with what we aspire to do.

A good point to bring in may be to ask the question, 'why are creativity and imagination not spoken of positively in ancestral Buddhist traditions?'. Why are art, theatre, cinema and music largely discouraged in Buddhism, particularly for monks? Monks and nuns are simply not allowed to participate in artistic performances.

The reason might be because the imagination and creativity can be disruptive. Imagination and creativity can be dangerous. Religious institutions and authorities do not encourage people to think for themselves, and certainly not to think outside the box of the tradition.

They're dangerous, potentially subversive. You can see why a conservative tradition will treat these qualities of our humanity with a certain degree of wariness, and I think this has happened in Buddhism. The arts are often marginalised. The artist is a person who makes religious icons, perhaps for worship in temples. The idea is that they're exactly the same as the generation before, and the generation before. There's something static in a lot of contemporary Buddhist art and architecture. It's remained the same for hundreds of years.

For this reason, we have to seriously consider imagination and creativity as not just about our own personal fulfilment, but also as qualities that are needed to wake up the whole Buddhist community to think more critically, more carefully, more imaginatively, not only about doctrines but about power structures, and injustices within the community. That, I feel, is probably why imagination and creativity got buried, hidden, replaced by something else, because they don't sit comfortably with orthodoxies. **

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