Energy, Image, Emotion (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:03:23

On other retreats and occasions, I've talked extensively about working with emotions skillfully, exploring different possibilities for meditators to engage well with their emotional life—both the lovely, beautiful, positive emotions and the more difficult ones. This seems to me a really important part of our practice in general.

Tonight I want to talk about emotions just enough, and in the context of imaginal practice, as it interfaces with our explorations for this retreat. Particularly, I want to go into the interface, the nexus of emotion, energy, and image. I want to explore this relationship between emotion, energy, image, and also view, because that's always an inescapable factor—so the nexus really of energy, emotion, image, and view.

Before we do that, because it's relevant, just a little recap from earlier. We said that there are three modes of mindfulness of the body. We're particularly interested on this retreat in developing sensitivity to what I call the third mode: the energy body. Really developing over time, gradually, the sensitivity to the energy body.

Some people—I have a close friend who knows much more about anatomy than I do—when sensitive to their energy body and the way emotions and energies are manifesting and reflected there, always tie it in with precise anatomy. "Oh, my ovaries feel this," or "my epiglottis," or whatever. I myself don't know very much about anatomy at all, but I want to say don't worry about that. It's really not necessary. It's fine if you do, but it's not necessary for what we're doing on this retreat.

So we can give attention to a quality of energy somewhere in the energy body or the breath, the feeling of the breath, energy somewhere in the energy body, or an emotion manifesting. And we're not sure: is that around my mouth or is that my chest or my throat? Sometimes things get a little amorphous and blurred, and it doesn't matter. So it's not necessary to tie it in, to correlate it with actual anatomy. A lot of the time the energy body is quite an amorphous field filled with awareness. That could be just a space—as we said, just a sort of space a little bit around the body and including that whole space—or it could have more contours similar to the physical body.

This energy body is an experience. It's not something to believe. It's not a hypothesis. We're just talking about an experience and talking about a kind of experience, a texture of experience, a way of paying attention. And we're talking about it with the term "energy body."

Why would we do that? Partly because it's a way into this quality of samadhi that we want to cultivate as a journey in our practice—just developing more and more this spectrum, this range of possibilities for the

ways that the being can feel, the mind and the body, the energy body. Cultivating the well-being, the harmonization, the energy, the restfulness there, the brightness, the alignment of the energies. Because that forms a huge resource that becomes a huge wellspring for us, not just for our practice in all kinds of ways, but for our whole life. So that's one reason for developing the sensitivity of the energy body.

The second reason, as I've alluded to, is that in developing sensitivity to the energy body, we develop naturally, we increase our sensitivity with respect to our emotions and also with respect to imaginal practice and the images that come. So the energy body forms an instrument. It becomes quite a subtle instrument and powerful instrument for working with emotions and for sensitivity and navigating through images and with images, navigating the practice.

These are some of the reasons why we want to develop this sensitivity to energy body. But notice something, because implied there is that we're not always trying, or we're not trying always to be in the samadhi mode of tending to a sort of pleasantness and openness of energy. We're not aiming to always be in some state of pleasant well-being, open, harmonized energy. First, I think that's probably relatively impossible. And second, for something to be a resource, for the samadhi and the well-being of that to be a resource—a deep, powerful, potent resource in our life—it's not that it needs to be there all the time. Absolutely not. It needs to be there often enough. Often enough that we can have access to it, dip in and out of it. Not always. It's quite different. And "often enough" will form a resource and create a very deep and nourishing resource for us in our lives. Out of that, freedom comes, and the ability to let go of what we need to let go of in life much more easily, along with many other benefits and gifts of that resource.

So in terms of practice, we have different intentions or intended directions at different times. Sometimes we're cultivating the samadhi or working gently, playfully at tending to this well-being and the pleasantness or comfort of the energy body. And other times we're doing something different. And it's conscious, and we're moving flexibly between those different intentions at different times.

We also mentioned that at times—or rather often—the awareness will shrink. So we're working with this middle size of attention, this sort of body size, a little bit bigger than the body, and it will shrink many, many times, the awareness. It will shrink when we're beset or troubled by an afflictive emotion. It will shrink when there is pain or discomfort somewhere in the body. It will shrink when we are distracted by something, caught in thought, when the mind is caught in thought. All of those—afflictive emotion, pain and discomfort, being caught in thought—all of those involve clinging or craving or aversion to a significant enough degree, relatively gross actually on the scale of things.

And that goes with the shrinking of the attention. Sometimes the awareness just shrinks out of habit. It's habitual, unfortunately, for us to have a more contracted attention. But we can change that habit through practice and have available to us different sizes of attention, like different gears in a car, which we can use at different times. They're available for us, accessible for us as part of the resource of a meditatively trained mind and heart.

We will see that the awareness shrinks many times, and we want to recognize when it has. What does that feel like? Recognize it shrank, and over and over just stretch it again, expand it again to just a little bit bigger than the body, the physical body, then filling that space with this bright sensitivity as we talked about.

Regarding the direction, the intended direction of samatha—this was very creative of samadhi—it's very creative, very playful. Really anything goes that helps you get in touch with that energy body and just helps to shape it or open it up to something that feels comfortable, easeful, nice, relatively pleasant, maybe quite pleasant. Anything goes.

We talk about just hanging out with the more open space of the energy body. Sometimes just that, you start to realize, oh, in a very subtle way, it's actually quite pleasant. I hadn't even noticed that before. But through the style of attention and the openness, it's like, "Oh, there's some vaguely pleasant energy in that that I can tune into and just hang out in."

There are different ways of working with the breath as we went through: either tuning in to the expansion and contraction of the whole energy body space, or the sense of energization, relaxation with the in and the out breath, or imagining the breath centered and expanding from some center in the body—the heart center, throat center, head center, belly center. Could be anywhere actually. Imagining that but then really feeling the energetic quality of that and the effect of that on the energy body space.

Or imagining the breath coming in and out of certain centers—again could be anywhere: top of the head, down in the belly, perineum. If you're standing up, you can breathe up through the feet into the whole body. With that, experimenting with what kind of breath—how does this breath want to be when it's coming in and out there or when it's centered there? So imagining, but really feeling as well the energetic sense.

There's also the possibility of not necessarily using the breath, or maybe combining it with the breath, but using the imagination a little more actively. For instance, imagining certain lines of energy, perhaps up the body, up the body and out the legs, and these straight lines of energy perhaps extending further down or up. That can be very, very helpful—quite subtle, but very helpful.

Or imagining a cloud of light, the body as a cloud of light energy, or actually a contoured body of light. Then there's all the possibilities of playing with metta that we talked about, and many, many possibilities. Anything goes, but the intention for the samatha, the directionality, is really to gently cultivate, gently tend to a sense of well-being of the energy body. And eventually seeing if that sense of well-being can actually spread and permeate, as the awareness does, the whole space.

We also mentioned that sometimes there's going to be not so much a sense of well-being, but rather there's going to be pain and discomfort in the body. Then we ran through certain possibilities. Let's recap.

The awareness shrinks when there's pain and discomfort in the body—very naturally. So just opening it

out can help. Just open out that shrunken awareness. Stretch it again over the whole space. Very helpful.

We can gently direct attention, or rather center the awareness more where there's an okayness somewhere, where there's some degree of comfort, rather than getting dragged into the pain or the discomfort. The attention is often dragged in or away in distraction. What if we just put it somewhere, rest it somewhere where it feels relatively okay?

We can imagine the breath or the breath energy moving freely, unobstructedly through that place of pain, discomfort, blocked energy, or whatever. We can imagine breath or the energy coming in and out of the area of pain or discomfort—also very helpful.

We can imagine the metta originating from the very center of the area of discomfort. Very counterintuitive, but sometimes very helpful. All the metta flowing into that point. We can also imagine a light, a bright light centered at the discomfort and the pain and include the whole body. So the light is radiating through the body from that point and the whole body again is in the awareness.

We can bring a kind of light and steady attention to the discomfort, to the pain, wherever it is, within the whole body awareness, within a sort of background awareness of the whole body. Bring a light, steady attention to the discomfort and really allow it to be uncomfortable. Fully allow. The emphasis is all on the allowing. Moment to moment, allowing it to be what it is. It's this moment of unpleasantness. Then another—really opening, really welcoming the unpleasantness. A very, very skillful way of attending.

We can also use the imagination to put the discomfort in the body in connection with some sense of comfort or well-being or pleasure. For instance, we might have an area that feels uncomfortable. But we can tap in and realize the rest of the body, or around that, actually feels quite nice. There's quite a sense of softness or warmth or well-being or openness. And we can surround that discomfort with something more comfortable, almost like holding it or cradling it.

What's important here is the connection—that what is uncomfortable is placed in connection with something that's comfortable, with something that's warm and soft and has more well-being in it.

And perhaps that more comfortable energy, the softer, warmer energies can sort of lap against like gentle waves, perhaps in a lake, lapping against a jagged rock and just lapping and lapping. Perhaps that's the breath. And the breath can feel at times itself quite soft or gentle or soothing or pleasant or healing. And that energy quality of the breath perhaps is like gentle waves lapping against what's uncomfortable.

Sometimes we can even just imagine that there's a sort of channel between an area of discomfort and an area where it's more comfortable and more okay. So for example, I think I mentioned this morning, we could feel tight and uncomfortable in the throat, but the belly feels relatively okay. Well, just imagine that there's a channel connecting those two areas. Just don't do anything else, but just imagine that they're connected with a channel. And that's all. And just see what happens. We're putting something that's difficult in contact with something that's healing. You could view it that way.

Or, again, similar to what we said before, the pleasantness, the comfort, what is relatively okay or warm or soft can kind of wave through what's uncomfortable. But again, always the playfulness, always the experimenting. There's so many possibilities here and possibilities for creativity and playfulness.

And if there's pleasantness somewhere, if there's a sense of well-being that doesn't disappear after a second or two or is really around for some minutes, then can we focus on that, really include it, give it some attention, perhaps enter into it even with the attention, probe it with the attention, really finding the pleasure there and the enjoyment. Or can we open up to it? It's like opening the whole body to this pleasant energy. Or dissolve in it somehow, or dissolve it through the body. But really we're relishing and enjoying, and the emphasis is on allowing oneself, and really the encouragement is to allow oneself to enjoy what feels good in the energy body.

Even if it's unremarkable, even if it's subtly pleasant and doesn't seem much of a big deal. If it's more steady for some minutes, we really want to include that enjoyment and actually kind of prioritize it.

And in relation to all this, in relation to this direction, this intended direction of the samādhi, of the cultivating of the well-being in the energy body, attending to the well-being. We don't have to necessarily make it some ego thing where we're measuring how well am I doing at this thing called samādhi? Am I succeeding? Am I a great meditator or not? We don't have to kind of create an inner critic around all this. It all depends on the attitude.

You know, if you were feeling maybe not so well one day, and I think, oh, I've got backache or whatever, and I need to rest, I'm really tired, and maybe you arrange a bunch of pillows and cushions on a sofa or on your bed, and just arranging them just right so you feel comfortable, so it's restful, so it's easeful. It's unlikely that your inner critic or ego is going to make a big deal out of that. It's just a gesture of kindness. It's just arranging things, playing with the movement of pillows. That doesn't quite work. Let's move it down. Ah, that's better. It's just that movement of kindness or a similar situation.

You're feeling tired or a lot of tension or whatever, and you decide to run a bath and put all your oils or whatever you like in the bath. Similarly, it's not a big thing for the ego to get involved with. We don't tend to measure ourselves. It's purely kindness. What do I like? Oh, a little bit warmer? Okay, let's see what we can do there. A little bit more of this oil or whatever it is, you know. So it's really a movement of kindness and we can be quite creative with it and that way quite playful and kind and that way it's subverting or diverting from the whole involvement with the inner critic and the ego measurement.

So in terms of practice possibilities let's delineate a couple of things. First there is this intention of samādhi we've talked about—this intention for a direction towards cultivating a sense, tending to a sense and nourishing a sense of well-being just as much as possible in the energy body. So we're attending to the energy body and using the images, for instance, or the breath or whatever, to try very gently, playfully to create and allow a kind of opening of pleasure there. And that can increase and we're nourishing that. And that's the direction of what we call samādhi.

And part of that, sometimes, there will be difficulties that come up, energetic difficulties, emotional difficulties, within the direction of the samādhi intention, then we're responding to those difficulties, but trying to sort of smooth them out so that they become more okay, so that what's unpleasant starts to dissolve a little bit and transform into something more pleasant or more okay and comfortable. So that is this first direction or intended direction that we call samādhi, all of that.

Now let's introduce another possibility, a second possibility, which is just an attention to the emotions in the energy body as they manifest, as they express or are reflected in the energy body, whether they're difficult emotions or not difficult emotions, pleasant or unpleasant. But the intent is just the attention to the emotions in the energy body without the intention to move it towards what's pleasant, to tend towards the sense of well-being and...

comfort, ease, pleasure, and so forth.

Now this attention to the emotions in the energy body, as I mentioned earlier, is part of developing our emotional awareness in our practice and in our life. It's also part of learning to work skillfully with our emotions—with our emotional life and its richness and range.

If we place this in a bigger context, a bigger picture with respect to our emotional life, we might ask: what are we trying to do as practitioners with our emotions? Where are we going with our emotional life as practitioners?

I would say we could delineate at least five aspects—there are probably more, but let's say five for now.

The first is that we want to be able to feel our emotions, to be sensitive to our emotions, including all the nuances—both the more beautiful ones and the more difficult ones. We want to be alive and in touch with the richness and range and depth of our heart, with the subtleties of our emotional heart. This sensitivity, this ability to feel, is an important aspect of practice.

The second aspect is that we want to be able to handle, to have the capacity to tolerate, to be with, to be okay with what goes on and comes through our heart and our emotionality. This means both what is difficult—we want to be able to handle what is difficult—and also what is positive or beautiful. Sometimes intense joy is actually quite difficult for people to handle; we're not used to it in this culture. So can I handle what comes through? Do I know how to handle it? Can I develop my capacity?

In our current times, I feel there are dimensions to this capacity that extend beyond the personal. Can I handle what is, so to speak, purely my personal emotional life—what's going on for me personally? But globally, we are facing such a constellation of crises—environmentally, with climate change, resource depletion, failing economic structures, and all kinds of challenges. If we're called to hold emotions that may be much larger, or rather, if developing our capacity to handle what may at times be more intense emotions can hopefully serve the planet—because if I cannot hold those kinds of emotions in the face of the increasing crises we face as a species, then I cannot offer much. I will run away, hide my head in the

sand, distract myself, or something else.

The third aspect in this big picture regarding emotions is that we are in the business, as practitioners, of cultivating beautiful qualities of heart—positive emotions like joy and compassion and love and equanimity and appreciation and gratitude, generosity, and all these beautiful qualities of heart, as the Buddha might say. This is part of the trajectory, part of the path.

Complementary to this, we're also in the business of learning to let go of emotions that are not that useful, that are not really fruitful for us—emotions that don't lead us where we want to go. This is not the same as letting go of what is unpleasant, because sometimes what's difficult to bear, what feels a little unpleasant, may be fruitful if we can find the right relationship with it. So it's not just differentiating between pleasant and unpleasant, choosing the pleasant over the unpleasant. It's really discerning what's fruitful—what, as the Buddha might say, leads onwards towards the goal—and what's not. We learn over time to defuse, like a bomb-defusal expert, what's not useful, while encouraging and cultivating what is nourishing and helpful to the being.

The fourth aspect regarding our emotions is that sensitivity to emotions forms part of imaginal practice, and actually part of all meditation. This sensitivity is particularly important when it comes to deepening certain directions in meditations.

The fifth aspect or dimension of what we want to develop with emotions is understanding. This has a couple of aspects to it. I want to understand my personal patterns, my personal habits emotionally. What are the kinds of emotions that I keep constructing, fabricating? How do I tend to react to certain situations or perceptions? How does that arise? There's a lot to explore there, but I want to understand my patterns and habits.

More broadly, I want to understand what we could call the dependent arising of emotions, including view. We'll talk more about this—how emotions arise dependent on all kinds of conditions. I want to understand what it is, apart from just my personal patterns and habits, that gives rise to an emotion. What is an emotion dependent on? Because partly it's dependent on conception and assumption and view and relationship, perhaps involving aversion or clinging. All of that is part of it.

That's the big picture we're really talking about. Here on this retreat, we're approaching emotions via the energy body, focusing on this particular gateway. This is what I want to talk about tonight.

and tomorrow. So there's the samadhi intention, the direction, the intended direction of samadhi, or there's the intention of just paying attention to the emotions as they manifest in the energy body—simply hanging out and paying attention to that ebb and flow, that swelling and decreasing, the coming and going.

This kind of attention to emotions in the energy body often needs to be quite sensitive. We're talking about quite delicate attention—not always, but often. It's asking for a refined quality of awareness. It's also

asking us to sustain our attention, at least the way I'm presenting it—sustaining attention on the emotion and the feeling of that, the energy of that in the energy body.

What I'm describing now in this mode of practice, this intended direction, includes quite a range. It encompasses difficult emotions, as we've discussed, and also the positive or beautiful, the pleasant emotions. The whole range becomes something we want to include in what we're paying attention to.

This also includes the more subtle emotions—subtle negative emotions. For example, boredom is not usually a big, strong emotion. It's quite subtle, but that's part of what I want to give attention to: that emotion, those more subtle difficult emotions, and how they manifest in the energy body. And also the more delicate or subtle positive emotions. Sometimes a sense of sacredness, for example, can be really quite subtle. Or a sense of prayerfulness can be a really delicate emotion. We want to include that as well.

So not just the extremes. We're becoming more sensitive with practice to the range of our emotional life.

I want to emphasize on this retreat paying attention to the midline—the central line of the body, somewhere from below the genitals, actually the perineum, all the way up, often up the front of the body. This is where many emotions often—though not always, absolutely not always—express themselves energetically. Later we can expand this understanding, but often much of the emotional action in terms of what's expressed in the energy body happens along this midline, somewhere from the perineum up to the head, even the top of the head.

A gentle, sustained attention to that midline and what's happening there energetically will reveal how our emotions are often expressed along that line. So that's a good place to start sustaining your attention in this mode of practice. As I said, it doesn't have to correlate precisely—we don't need to know the exact anatomical point. Sometimes in meditation everything becomes a little vague, and it doesn't matter where it actually is anatomically or physically. For our purposes right now, it doesn't matter.

So regarding any difficult emotion or energy—this could be a sense of pressure somewhere, perhaps along that middle line, or a heaviness, or a sense of contraction or tightness somewhere. As I mentioned, it could be the throat or the heart or the belly. It could also be just a strange sense that this area of energy feels kind of foggy, or this area of energy feels subtly like a swarm of bees in a way that's unpleasant. It can manifest as all kinds of things.

With any difficulty, what do we want to do? Let's be clear. We want to attend to that, keep the attention as much as we can in this mode of practice steadily focused on that feeling, on that energy, wherever it is. If attention drifts, just come back to that. So here's this pressure in my chest, or around there on the midline, and we're attending to it steadily.

Then we ask: can I find the right quality of attention? Sometimes we can actually laser-beam the sensations of pressure and really look at it with quite a lot of intensity. And sometimes what's asked for, as I said, is much more delicate attention—much more like holding those sensations delicately, lightly in the

attention. But the attention remains steady, and there's sensitivity to discern what kind of attention is needed. That's one aspect.

A second aspect, simultaneously, is making sure that there's more energy in the mindfulness than there is in the emotion. Because if there's more energy in the emotion than in the awareness, than in the mindfulness, then we're sunk. We're overwhelmed by the emotion. So somehow we want to bring a sense of presence to bear. We energize the attention, the mindfulness, so that there's more energy in that than in the emotion. Just that balance.

That the mindfulness is, if you like, stronger than the emotion—this alone is really helpful and really healing. It's something to check, because sometimes people are mindful, or think they're being mindful, but there's not enough energy in the mindfulness. They're actually sinking into an emotion, which isn't really that helpful. So that's a second aspect.

The third aspect, which we've already mentioned, is that the body space, the energy body, may at times contain a sense of resource in it. And that body space can be around what feels difficult emotionally or energetically. Again, it may lap up against what's difficult in the ways we talked about—surrounding it, bathing it, or holding it. This actually is an aspect of kindness: this holding or embracing or connecting of what's difficult with what's more healing and more lovely.

There is often the possibility of some energetic resource in the larger body space that we can use as a context and put into contact with what's difficult. So that's another aspect.

The fourth aspect is this allowing that I mentioned before. If I'm paying attention to what's difficult somewhere in the energy body on that midline, what's really significant and helpful is this attitude, this energetic stance in the attention of allowing. Moment to moment, how fully can this sensation—which is going to be unpleasant—how fully can it be allowed? The doors of the awareness are opening to it, welcoming it even. This happens moment to moment and is really, really helpful.

If you listen carefully to all that, it's quite different than just "sort of being with it"—that vague sense of being with my emotions, sort of accepting that I kind of feel crappy right now or that I'm miserable. This approach is actually much more specific. There's steadiness involved, there's sensitivity, and there are certain qualities that are brought to bear and, as much as possible, infusing the awareness.

This is what matters: the quality of the attention. The kind and quality of attention is what matters in relationship to emotional difficulty. That's one of the things that really matters. The qualities within the attention will either help or actually worsen what's going on. If there's a little bit of judgment or a little bit of aversion or pushing away—just energetically, even without the mind thinking that—it's going to have an effect, almost certainly an unhelpful one.

But if there's warmth and gentleness and allowing—a more deliberate and intense kind of allowing, not just this vague sort of acceptance—this is really what matters: the steadiness, the sensitivity, the quality of

attention, the qualities in the attention, the kind of attention.

We could actually extrapolate a larger point from this and say that mindfulness in general includes a kind of question, a sort of subliminal question at times: Is this helpful? We tend to think of mindfulness as one word, but actually we can have many different flavors of mindfulness. So really what we're asking is: Is this right now, this way of attending, these qualities of mindfulness that are being brought to bear in relationship to this difficulty—is this helpful?

It's a question, because sometimes it's not. And something needs a little bit of reshaping or tweaking or changing. So there's a kind of question being asked with mindfulness. This goes for whatever we're attending to, but we can play with it. We can play with the kind of attention, the qualities in the attention, and so on.

All of that implies that the relationship with—in this case, an emotional difficulty, an emotion somewhere in the body—the relationship with it and the view of it (which I'll come back to much more later) are crucially important. That's what makes the difference. We could even say that the relationship with what's going on in terms of an emotion, the relationship with the emotion itself, and the view of the emotion itself are actually included in what we mean by emotion. These things—emotion, relationship with emotion, view of emotion—make one package, one gestalt.

Still with difficulties and working with difficulties that come up emotionally, we can include hindrances in what we work with. I'm talking especially about the hindrances of restlessness and dullness. Both dullness and drowsiness and restlessness are really helped by opening the space of the awareness. The awareness will shrink when there's a hindrance, and just opening it up wider again can be really helpful, just that alone.

Sometimes even the vast space—that third size of attention we talked about—opening up the space really large, looking at the sky or having a sense of the whole space of the room you're in, taking that in, imagining a space, can be really, really helpful. Both restlessness and dullness include this contraction of the attention, contraction of the awareness. So being aware of space, opening up a wider or much wider awareness, can be really helpful.

With restlessness, sometimes attention to the out-breath is really helpful because there's this organic kind of relaxation happening with the out-breath. Just attending to that quality of relaxation can soothe and calm restlessness. Conversely, when there's dullness and drowsiness, attention to the energizing quality of the in-breath can be really helpful, as can breathing a little longer to energize. If there's dullness and drowsiness, sometimes imagining a bright light—perhaps in the middle of your head, perhaps in your heart center—surrounding and permeating the whole body, and just staying with that bright white or golden light can be really helpful.

There are a lot of instructions here. As I mentioned, I'll repeat some of these things tomorrow morning to

recapitulate. But let's add a piece here because we're on an imaginal practice retreat. Deliberately calling and engaging with an image that's helpful when there's a difficult emotion going on can be really helpful.

For example, when some afflictive emotion arises, just bring the image of whoever feels helpful—Kuan Yin or Avalokiteshvara or Tara, or maybe a teacher who you feel really embodies a lot of love or support for you. Deliberately bring that image into the awareness and sustain it. Again, put yourself in contact with that beneficent, benevolent image, and put also the pain, the emotional pain in the body, in the energy body, in relationship to that image. Maybe there's a kind of light being beamed towards you, towards the pain—all kinds of possibilities. But really deliberately invoke and engage with and stay with, sustaining, a helpful image.

Sometimes what can happen when there's a difficult emotion is that an image arises spontaneously and ends up being very helpful. This can be very significant for our purposes and can be surprisingly helpful. It's interesting to explore a little bit how these images—whether they're deliberate or spontaneous—help when there's a difficult emotion.

One of the ways they help, perhaps what some people would think would be the most obvious, is that there can be love from the image. Sometimes it's not a classical imaginal figure of love—not Jesus or Kuan Yin or something like that, but some other image that we don't tend to understand in that way.

immediately associate with love, but yet there is love from that image that we feel imbuing us, imbuing the body, touching the emotional pain, somehow healing us. And this love has a very gradual effect and can address, heal, dissolve the emotional difficulty. That's very, very possible and very healing.

And yet, sometimes what happens is an image appears and it has an immediate effect. It's sudden. And what's happening there is the healing effect or the dissolving of the difficult emotion is not coming because of love. Something else is going on. And this is very, very interesting in terms of imaginal practice.

There are all kinds of examples one can give. Actually, to give one example of a spontaneous image, I'm going to read you a letter that some months ago was written to me—a note really, a long note from someone who was on a personal retreat here. And I'm going to read the whole letter just because almost every word is relevant to everything that we're talking about through the course of this retreat.

"Hi Rob. I wouldn't normally write such a long note, but I'm not sure I could share this new image in an interview and still look you in the eye."

So even that's relevant because sometimes images like this, we feel, oh, this is so weird. Well, I'll explain what she's going to say. And we feel this is so weird and I just want to normalize it partly and normalize also the sense of reticence there.

"I have been noticing at points when I'm walking through the house and even in the garden, a sensation of being kissed hard on the mouth. Seemed a bit strange, but I didn't really think any more about it. Then

yesterday, after you said that the samadhi practice has a different intention of following and building pleasure in the body, as we've talked about today and yesterday, I decided to do a few sets to see what happened. I was doing all the normal breathing with the body when I had the sensation of being licked from the hara, the lower belly center, all the way up the front of the body. To say that my entire body split in half with pleasure would be a huge understatement. My body started to shake. I sat for an hour and a half and there were many images of skin on skin but not a full image"—by which she means either full body or full visual image, I suspect.

"Since then, I've had the same visits of this intense sexual body energy on three other sits. Last night for an hour and a half, at four o'clock in the morning for another hour, and just now. On this last sit, the image seemed to coalesce. I was having some very intense back pain and was working with the allowing practice, but didn't seem to have the strength to welcome it, at which point a woman started to kiss the area of pain like it was a mouth, and any pain in my body seemed to give her and me ecstatic pleasure. There are visual elements of this image, but it is largely kinesthetic, and it feels like the body in these encounters becomes a sexual organ, the whole thing, and the image is wrapped up in the breath energy that rubs against the body.

"So many of the images you describe in your talks are functioning in a healing capacity. I definitely feel intensely nourished by this energy, but wondered if there was quite a large danger of becoming attached to this in a negative way."

So part of my response to her in a note was that, no, there isn't really a danger and she should keep opening to it and enjoying it. Well, there's not much of a danger, put it that way.

She goes on: "I just want to make it clear that this wasn't a head fantasy. It is completely in the body. Is it okay to keep working with it? And if so, are there dangers or directions you wouldn't go in? If you are busy at the moment, feel free to respond to this at a later time in an email. It definitely isn't distressing me, but since I've never had an experience like this, I'm having trouble integrating it."

But really the integration that she felt she was having trouble with was really just having permission, recognizing that it wasn't crazy, and having permission to open to it, to allow it, to call on it more deliberately at times. And naturally integrated into the body and the experience, the energy body, and the samadhi, the sense of harmonization, alignment, energization, pleasure—in this case quite strong pleasure—arose naturally and organically from the image. And this kind of thing is a lot less rare than many people might expect.

A different example: another person who has a chronic liver condition, ailment, inflammation of the liver. And so we're sitting again on a retreat one day in meditation, and there was this pain in the liver area, and the image of a lion. Now, this image of a lion was an image that she'd had before quite a few times, so this imaginal figure was quite a friend to her. And this lion came—usually it had a lot of power to it, as lions sometimes do—and started to lick her liver, to lick that area of the body with a lot of tenderness, but it was

also, in her words, there was something awesome and majestic about this image. This huge lion licking her liver.

And this went on, she said, in the meditation. She was just with this for twenty minutes and it felt incredibly healing. And as that went on, the whole energy body began to align and open. And again, the well-being started to open, the samadhi started to open, the harmonization of the energy body came more and more. So what started with quite a difficult—in this case not so much an emotion, but a physical affliction—through the image was transformed gradually, gradually, through the love and through the tangibility, energetic tangibility of the image, transformed and samadhi came out of that.

Sometimes the love that comes through an image may feel bigger than the body, bigger than our body. It's as if an imaginal figure or some image creates or opens up a huge space of love, bigger than the body. And then we can literally allow ourselves to feel in love, literally in love, in a space of love. And perhaps then open to that space or feel the whole body, the whole energy body bathed in that love.

that love.

So images can transform emotions that are occurring, can transform the energy, and this happens a lot. And it can also arise when there's no difficulty. Those examples are when people were struggling with this or that, but also when there's no difficulty.

Some time ago I was teaching a weekend retreat—actually, samadhi was the theme—and people were working with the breath and the energy body that we were talking about. A person reported to me that she was really enjoying it, was feeling very calm. She said it was a delicious sense of divinity permeating the energy body and the whole space through the practice. She was just with that.

And then, actually, it felt like this feeling, this delicious sense of divinity, in her words, became personified in the figure of Ramana Maharshi, a great Indian sage and saint from the twentieth century. I think he died in the fifties. For her, she had a very strong heart connection with this teacher. So this delicious sense of divinity became personified as an image of Ramana Maharshi, and the top of her head felt like it opened. The figure of Ramana descended and was absorbed into her body, into her being through the top of the head. With that came a great raising of the energy levels.

So he, so to speak, entered into the body and the being, and much more energy became available. But interestingly, the energy felt, she said, quite "lumpy" was the word she used. It was actually a bit uncomfortable. So there was a big quantum leap in the energy levels, but it didn't feel that comfortable. It was still kind of lumpy throughout the energy body.

So I said, "Okay, let's see if we can smooth this energy out and just work with imagining the flows of the energies. Don't jump to conclusions that it's a bad thing or that I'm going to be stuck here or something like that." She said then the awareness—she just allowed her awareness to drop to her belly and really allow the different energies to flow, very gently working at smoothing them out. Very, very skillful

working in practice there.

So regarding difficult energy in the energy body, we have some options. And again, options is a key word. We are complex, and we're encouraging flexibility, not just one way of doing things. So one option is, as we mentioned, to gently emphasize or place the attention, sit the awareness more where there is the comfort, the sense of comfort and pleasure, if that's available.

Another option, though, is to deliberately bring to mind and engage with a helpful image. And one can also do that deliberately when there is no difficulty. So the woman whose letter I read you—now that's become part of her practice and it's a way in for her to samadhi and to the energy opening that way. And other people say a teacher that they have a connection to also seems to come as a presence imaginatively and perhaps fill their body, and it helps everything to open and energize and calm and feel good, or just comes nearby or something like that, and there's a kind of resonance.

So even when there's no difficulty or strong sense of difficulty, we can deliberately use a helpful image as part of what helps. But certainly when there is a difficulty, we can deliberately engage a helpful imaginal figure.

Okay, so that's the second possibility. The third possibility with difficult energy, difficult emotion, is to focus on or to work with the difficulty of the emotion as we explained earlier—just now—in the different ways.

Now, doing that may be—as I attend, as I take care of the quality of the attention and the steadiness and the sensitivity and the ways of paying attention—it may be that the difficulty dissolves gradually as I pay attention in these skillful ways. And it may be that it gets less and it becomes really quite subtle. So maybe it's still there, but it's really, really quite subtle.

Now, one option is to actually stay with it as it gets more and more subtle. And it might be—this is really, really good practice—keep the steadiness, the sensitivity, the qualities of the attention, and let the whole difficulty become more and more subtle as an experience. And stay, track it with that subtlety, stay there. And sometimes it gets more and more subtle and it actually becomes pleasant. So funnily enough, that can also be a way into samadhi. Then that pleasantness can spread. Very interesting.

And it's certainly okay if it doesn't disappear, the difficulty, or if it doesn't become pleasant. No problem. We're just focusing on it and working with it in these more skillful ways. That's the third option.

And sometimes, especially when the focus on the difficulty and the emotional energy that feels difficult is a little lighter—it's not so intense, it's just kind of letting it be there, we're in touch with it, we're not so much focusing in on it—sometimes, just being with it in that way, an image constellates out of the difficulty, you could say, the emotional difficulty. And the difficulty subsides when the image comes, or the energy is transformed, perhaps the energy in the energy body is opened or it aligns or harmonizes, or we just have more energy. I'm going to talk more about all these possibilities tomorrow. Or the emotion is

transformed—very, very possible.

So I remember one time I was—actually, there was something going on in terms of wider dharma politics. I'd just read an email and felt a bit frustrated with this sort of wider political situation in a certain sangha. Something was going on with someone. And I was with that feeling of frustration, but something felt a little bit—I felt a little bit stuck in relationship to it, or the energies, let's say, were stuck. The energies were stuck. And there wasn't a lot of clarity as to what to do or what to respond. So the whole energy body felt a bit stuck. The emotion was frustration. It wasn't very clear.

Even the energy itself was not very clear. And it definitely wasn't pleasant. It was subtly unpleasant. As I was with this, just gently, without so much focusing in on it, just kind of holding it and aware of it, an image suddenly coalesced.

It was liquid, some kind of liquid being poured in through the crown, through the top of my head. What was quite interesting was that I found myself asking, "What color does that liquid want to be?" But there wasn't a right color. The color of the liquid wasn't a significant aspect of the image. I'm mentioning this because it relates to some things we're going to explore another day.

This liquid was being poured into my energy body in the imagination, just by itself. It arose spontaneously. And as it was poured in, clarity came and strength came regarding, if you like, my sense of what's my duty here in relation to this situation that I had felt frustrated by. What am I asked to perhaps continue expressing, or not be daunted because my expression doesn't seem understood or accepted or whatever?

So there was clarity that came as strength. And this feeling pervaded the whole body. The liquid pervaded the whole body in the image, and a sense of strength came out. Energetically, strength, fortitude, resolve. I felt much, much better. It's quite a subtle example, but quite telling in a lot of ways.

One thing I want to mention is something we've returned to before, but I'll mention it now about that image: it wasn't clear who was pouring this liquid in. It wasn't me pouring liquid into the top of my head. And it wasn't, so to speak, in dharma language, just pouring or just being poured. There was some sense of an other, and actually a somehow divine other in some vague way. Some vague sense of an other, a somehow divine other was pouring this liquid into me and down into me.

I want to make a general point that I will return to: With imaginal practice, the sense of otherness, the otherness of the imaginal figure, is quite key. It's a key ingredient, this sense of otherness, that in other words, it's not me. This otherness gives vitality to images. It gives a sense of depth to images and potency, power—a sense of otherness. And something we'll come back to.

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