Opening, Tuning, and Relating to the Imaginal: Instructions (1)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 41:58

Good morning, everyone.

To start getting into the specifics—the nuts and bolts around imaginal practice and instructions about meditative practice with images—I want to first place this in context and make a couple more general points.

As we've discussed, there are so many possibilities regarding imaginal practice in terms of approaches, attitudes, inclinations, directions, and theories that support or help direct practice and set it in different frameworks—some slightly different, others very different.

Many modern psychotherapies and psychologies that include images in their approaches often suggest or hold to the view that it's important to make the images concrete, to actualize them or make something solid out of them. For instance, this might involve painting, sculpture, sand play, psychodrama, or mime. In gestalt psychology, practitioners sometimes set up different chairs in a room, with the individual moving between these chairs, embodying an imaginal figure or dream figure in each chair, speaking as if from that embodied imaginal figure, then dialoguing between different imaginal figures or between the ego and the imaginal figure. In these approaches, it's often postulated that by doing this, the work with images moves into greater depth—it goes deeper, is given more power, becomes more powerful, and has greater effects on the whole being, on the psyche.

Here on this retreat, this isn't quite what we're doing. I'm more interested in the meditative work with images, and particularly—as I've said and will say again and again—the tuning to the energy body and the resonances and effects on the energy body. The inclusion of the energy body, awareness and sensitivity, is very much a thread and basis of the imaginal practice.

Why? Partly because we're limited in time, partly because this more meditative approach and sensitivity to the energy body reflects my particular training and what I've spent most time developing. But I also sometimes wonder whether making images concrete through sand play or moving between chairs and having spoken dialogues, while sometimes allowing images to have more effect, sometimes actually circumscribes and limits their effect in different ways.

The advantage of more meditatively focused work, especially sensitivity to the energy body, is that it allows a degree of subtlety and nuance of awareness, work, and navigation that isn't really possible

outside of meditation. This concretizing—and I wish I had a better word, since I sometimes use that term to mean taking images too literally—may keep things at a more gross level and keep the whole imaginal practice and involved awarenesses at a grosser level than what may be allowed through meditative exploration with the subtle body, with the energy body.

Having said that, I want to reiterate that images, as we're discussing them, generally won't be separate from our life, separate from our acts and what we embody in the world, the way we move and speak, what happens in life, and also not separate from our perceptions. There isn't really a division here.

Something like ritual—that whole huge area of beautiful potential—we won't really explore on this retreat, unfortunately. It's also something where I don't consider myself an expert. But ritual would be an example of perhaps the possibility of embodiment, a making concrete in a positive sense, an acting out and transformation of perception that's somewhere between the more meditative and the more gross, or rather includes both. There are lots of possibilities. We're leaning toward the more subtle end of the spectrum in terms of awarenesses and navigation.

Secondly, and I mentioned this briefly but want to reiterate: on this course, mostly you will spend more time in your meditations with the energy body—whether in the groove of cultivating samadhi and developing well-being through the energy body, or in the groove of subtle attention to emotional manifestations in the energy body, just the energy manifestations. Generally speaking, you'll spend more time working directly with and focused on the energy body than with images, in terms of actual minutes.

Sometimes with images, even two minutes meditatively with an image can be extremely fruitful. It doesn't always need to be a long forty-five-minute stretch with an image. Sometimes that's helpful, but sometimes two minutes contains so much in terms of what it gives the being, how it transforms things, what's possible there, its richness.

Of course, there are exceptions. Sometimes a person practicing metta or compassion and using an image such as Kuan Yin or Jesus as their principal method for developing and cultivating that particular brahmavihara may require more steady bathing. Or for someone where an image of Kuan Yin or some compassion-imbued imaginal figure arises more spontaneously, this may require sustained attention. But it's very grounded, as all these images are, in the energy body, as I'll discuss more.

Generally speaking, there will be more time spent working with the energy body than with the images on this retreat. One moves back and forth, and I'll explain more about that. And of course, as always, there are exceptions.

Let me say something about possibilities for eliciting images or receiving images. I want to run through seven possibilities that can be employed to contact images.

The first we've talked about extensively, placing much emphasis on this track of intention, of the direction of samadhi, of cultivating well-being in the energy body and that spreading and harmonizing to whatever

degree, with the mind pervading that space of the energy body, filling it out and hanging out, marinating in the well-being. Much of samadhi practice involves this marinating—filling out and really being there, very alive, soaking it up, the mind and body soaking up whatever degree of well-being is there more steadily, learning how to play with the images.

Within this, we can delineate two possibilities for eliciting images. One is that either deliberately or spontaneously, images can be deliberately invoked or created, or may just arise in relation to the energy body itself. We've discussed many examples: lines of energy, breath energy in certain ways, clouds of light, fire, and many more possibilities.

Continue beautifying this talk (part 2/5). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

But deliberately or spontaneously, images are created or conjured, if you like, or may arise themselves in relation to the energy body itself.

In addition to this, samadhi itself is also quite fruitful territory—a realm or range of experience for the arising of other images of a much wider scope than just the energy body itself. As you move in and out of some depth of samadhi—whatever that range may be, and as I said, it's an infinite range—going in and emerging a little after a while, emerging from whatever depth of samadhi just slightly, perhaps relaxing the intensity of attention... In some cases this can be helpful: emerging a little from this kind of marination in that space of well-being, relaxing the intensity very slightly, and also relaxing the exclusive focus on the energy and texture.

That exclusive focus is really what makes it more of a samadhi state. By relaxing that exclusivity—so we're very much in touch with the energy and texture of the energy body, but we're not solely paying attention to that—this slightly emerging state is generally one of consciousness with more softness, more diffused in terms of perception and quality and feel. And this is very fertile soil for images to arise.

I can't remember if I've mentioned this on retreat already, but some of you have heard me refer to a maxim from the alchemical tradition in the West. I've forgotten who wrote it, but it says: "Do not proceed with your alchemical operation—do not proceed until everything has become liquid."

How can we translate this to the alchemy of imaginal practice? What does this mean—liquid, everything becoming liquid? In the way I would interpret this, liquid does not mean flow. We tend to think liquid flow has something to do with impermanence, being in touch with the process or flow of phenomena. No, that's not really what's meant here.

The liquidity has to do with insubstantiality—liquidity as opposed to solidity. Do not proceed until there's a sense of insubstantiality to things. States of samadhi, whatever their range, or deep metta—these are states where the perception, on emerging a little or in the state itself, is of less substantiality, less density,

less solidity. This is part of what "everything has become liquid" means. Where the perception of things—body, world—is less substantial, it's more fertile for images.

But the second aspect of this liquidity is not just insubstantiality, but the sense of not quite being real or literalized. Sometimes the perception of world and self and body, but particularly images in this case, comes with the knowing that this is not something to be literalized. We know it doesn't exist independently of mind and the way of looking. It's empty, as we've said several times.

So there's insubstantiality to things, and we know that things—particularly images—are not to be taken with the same kind of reality as tables and chairs and physical bodies. We're not literalizing an image; we recognize it as image, not independent of mind. This sense of insubstantiality combined with this attitude or view makes up this "everything becomes liquid."

This attitude that doesn't literalize or solidify images, that realizes they're not independent of mind and recognizes the insubstantiality of things—this comes out of and is implied in emptiness practices. I know I keep referring to emptiness on this retreat, but we don't actually have time to go deeply into emptiness.

Let me just say this: if you're familiar with different emptiness practices, you'll recognize that both this sense of insubstantiality and the attitude or understanding imbuing perception—that this is not independent of mind, not taking it literally, not giving it that kind of concretizing reality—these factors are always present in emptiness practices.

And like so many things, there's a range of degrees. What is the degree of insubstantiality in viewing perception? What is the depth and comprehensiveness of that deeper view and attitude that realizes everything has become liquid? This liquidity can extend to the world itself becoming liquid in this sense—not so concretized in understanding and perception as we usually hold it in our culture and in the human mind naturally.

There's a range of degrees of depth in emptiness practice and samadhi, of how much everything becomes liquid. The more familiar you are with emptiness practices, the more you understand and develop skill with them—all the way down to really knowing that time past, time future, and time present are thoroughly empty, that space is empty, that self and all things are empty—everything, if you like, is liquid.

These emptiness practices themselves, again emerging a little from their depth, render everything insubstantial. That view of emptiness, of liquidity, is really there. And this is a very fertile space or range of consciousness for images to arise.

With a lot of practice in emptiness and samadhi, there can be very fluid movement between these practices and imaginal practices. And particularly with extensive emptiness practice, sometimes we can...

if you like, decide to go deeper into the imaginal realm, just by invoking some emptiness practice, engaging some emptiness practice or invoking the felt insight there, the memory of the insight or the

memory of that depth of emptiness, to let go in that moment of the perception of substantiality, particularly with regard to the body.

So with a lot of emptiness practice, one simply leans into letting go of the perception of substantiality, and that can take us deeper into the imaginal realm—more vividly, more alive, more stable. This comes as a fruit of, in most cases, quite a lot of emptiness practice. And then, as I said, one can play with a kind of fluid movement between different realms. It's very possible—simply a result of learning the right practices, taking the time to develop them, and cultivating skill in this way.

So that's the second pathway. There's the samādhi, then the emptiness practices.

The third possibility for eliciting or receiving images emerges when we're emotionally upset. When there's some kind of emotional disturbance present for us, it becomes possible to actually feel that emotional upset and, if you like, let it constellate an image. We allow the very emotion to take form, to constellate an image.

Now, it's not necessary that the emotion we're feeling be even clear or definable. We may not have a label for it. It might feel quite vague—completely okay. Not important. Or it might be very clear, with a definite word for it. It doesn't matter. Sometimes an image constellates or emerges from what we've alluded to before—a more nebulous, low-energy or contracted state. Strangely, this can also be fertile ground for images.

Something is, if you like, tied up in there, binding the energy in this contraction, and it's waiting to be discovered. That state of low energy or contraction may not be about anything in particular. We're not necessarily sad about this or depressed about that. It may not feel to be about anything specific. It doesn't need to be.

Or again, we might feel, for instance, beset by the inner critic, harangued and harassed by the inner critic, experiencing emotional upset around that. It might be that we let or even encourage that inner critic to take form as an image, to constellate as an image, and perhaps engage in dialogue with that image of the inner critic.

So these territories of the psyche where we're actually quite upset about something emotionally are themselves very fertile ground.

There's an important factor here that has to do with—again we've touched on this and I want to say more about it later—the importance of trusting the intelligence of the image. Perhaps even in the critic there's some kind of intelligence operating. But in images that come from other kinds of upset, there may be some kind of intelligence that the image carries and expresses—some kind of soul intelligence. We use the word *telos* as well—where is this pulling me, directing me, showing me the way to? That may not be clear, but there's something about trusting that this *telos* is operating in and through and with the image. An intelligence, a soul intelligence, a psychic intelligence is operating in and through and with the image.

This remains true even though it might seem that what's going on for us is egoic, or this image appears to be what we would tend to think of as not very noble—egoic, maybe what Buddhists would call a defilement, or something that looks strangely antisocial in its behavior within the image. Something so crucial about this: it might not fit my picture. I'm going to come back to this. It might not fit my picture in terms of the smaller frames that the mind has arrived at for deciding what's good and bad. We'll return to that.

But it's interesting here, because we have on one side, so to speak, these states of samādhi and that whole range, and states that come through emptiness practices—what we might call "states of emptiness"—on one side being quite fertile territory. Sometimes it doesn't have to be deep samādhi or really profound emptiness practices, but that whole range. And on the other side, we could say there's the whole territory of upset, feeling emotionally upset.

These two ends of the spectrum are quite fertile. Sometimes what's a little more challenging in terms of images arising—where it seems harder for images to constellate, a little less fertile—is that mid-range between the two, between these more lovely deep states of samādhi or emptiness or *mettā* going deep on one hand, and on the other hand, the more upset states. Sometimes the mid-range is a little more difficult in terms of spontaneous images arising.

But that's three pathways so far: the samādhi in both ways we've discussed, the emptiness practices if you're familiar with them, and thirdly, the emotions themselves when they are quite strong and perhaps there's some upset.

A fourth pathway is simply choosing an image or opening that doorway deliberately. As we've said, but just to spell it out clearly: it could be a deity, perhaps a tantric deity or Jesus or whatever, that one deliberately imagines, conjures, and then meditates on. It could be a previous image that has come spontaneously that we want to deliberately revisit, deliberately dwell with and meditate on again. It could be a dream figure or a fragment of a dream that has made quite an impression on the psyche—perhaps from the night before or even long ago—and we deliberately recall, summon up that dream figure and meditate on it as an imaginal figure.

It could be a memory that, through the way we relate to it and meditate on it, we turn into an image. And it could be a person we're meditating on—someone we know or don't know, alive or dead—where again, the way we're relating to them, the way we're meditating on them, deliberately bringing them to mind, deliberately imagining them, we're making an image out of that, or letting them become an image for the psyche.

So as I say, it could be Jesus, could be Quan Yin, could be someone like John Coltrane, who comes to me quite often. Could be Nelson Mandela, could be the beautiful Etty Hillesum, who left diaries from Nazi-occupied Holland during the Second World War and was murdered at Auschwitz. Beautiful chronicles—I know I've felt very moved reading and rereading, going back so often to her diaries.

Reading her words, one feels she is a friend—alive for me in the psyche, close, as if I had known her personally. She has become a person for me through her imaginal figure.

When we engage in deliberate imagining, in the deliberate constellating of an imaginal figure, the question of intention naturally arises—as we have touched upon several times. Why am I doing this? Is it for the cultivation of metta? Is it to seek advice from this person about a particular choice? Or is it simply because there is such profound soul resonance that we want to be with this image and discover what unfolds? There is a whole range of reasons we might engage in such practice, and this connects to our broader conceptual framework—something we have discussed and will return to again.

In terms of practice, there is the possibility of deliberately imagining and then staying with that image. This constitutes our fourth approach.

The fifth possibility involves using imagination to enter or go to a certain place where one receives images. This might mean going down a stairwell and through a door at its base into some kind of basement. This approach works powerfully for many people, though some find it uncomfortable. It could be a monastery cell—that contained space of intense practice, like an alchemical vessel for transformation. Sometimes entering such a space in the imagination becomes a place for receiving all kinds of images.

It might be a clearing in a forest, where one emerges from dense woodland into an open space, and in that clearing, perhaps other figures emerge from the forest to meet you. Maybe it's a beach—a much more open space under vast sky. It could even be an open-air corridor that one walks down, with other corridors joining at right angles, and perhaps from these side passages imaginal figures appear as you walk the central path.

The possibilities are infinite. Sometimes people cross a bridge into the realm of the imaginal.

Here I would offer not so much a caution as a differentiation, along with a stated inclination. There is a difference between entering an imaginal realm and then, within that realm, going on a shamanic journey that involves moving across great expanses of territory and meeting different figures at various points. Such an approach involves a narrative journey that tends toward the narrative image simply by virtue of moving through time over extended periods or across vast spaces.

The potential downside is that this can sometimes solidify—or has the danger of solidifying—the ego that is making the journey, the self that is undertaking this shamanic voyage. It becomes the journey of the self, versus actually being in a much smaller, contained space—a room, a clearing in a forest—with an image, and simply staying there with that image in that smaller space.

There is often less narrative structure in this approach, which allows the image to be more iconic, more poetic. There is more potential for relativizing or equalizing the relationship between self and imaginal figure. It is not so much the self's journey.

So that is the fifth approach: imaginatively entering a place of receiving images.

The sixth one—and this might sound surprising—is actually catching yourself daydreaming in meditation or at another time. Daydreaming has a way into meditative practice, paradoxically. You find yourself daydreaming, and then you notice that at a certain point in the daydream, the resonances become more pregnant, more soulful, much more meaningful than a usual daydream—which is often quite contracted, disconnected, or lacking in meaning and soulfulness.

You might be daydreaming even while sitting in meditation, and then realize that this has a different quality—there is real meaningfulness and soulfulness here. You can feel the energy opened, the energy body opened. Rather than simply cutting it off, you bring a different quality of attention to what is happening right there in that daydream, and stay with it. We transform a daydream into a meditation.

I will say more about this later, but it is indeed a possibility. I would not recommend it as your primary way of working, but rather as something to recognize opportunistically. Sometimes this will happen, and we realize that something quite important is occurring, even though for the past several minutes it was just daydreaming without any meaningfulness. Somehow a corner has been turned in the daydream, and now something is coming through it that is quite soulful and important. It feels different, and we notice the resonance and stay with that.

That would be the sixth approach.

Lastly, I want to reiterate something we mentioned—because the seventh possibility is actually to open your eyes in meditation. As I am using the word "image" on this retreat, as I said last night, the image can be the world itself, or rather, it comes wrapped up in the very sense perception of the world. It is not so much that an image is present as some inner, separate visual object—or even any kind of separate sense object—but rather something inseparable from the world we are perceiving right now.

So opening the eyes and actually seeing the world as image, imbued with everything that word means as I discussed the other night—this may or may not lead to an inner, separate imaginal object. It may do that, and that is fine if it does. But it may not. It may simply be staying with that sense of perception, the sense of the world as image. Either way is perfectly valid.

Both of them are good. So really, as I said, in a way this seventh possibility becomes one of the most important openings and dimensions of imaginal practice. Whether it leads to a separate inner image or whether it doesn't, both are good.

So that's seven possibilities there.

One last thing, more generally, and again to reiterate: probably most people on this course will be spending more time with the samadhi, with the energy body, cultivating that, attending to either developing the well-being or just tuning to what's going on in the emotional and energetic manifestation

in the energy body. There'll be more time doing that.

But also, with imaginal practice, there's this sense of waiting for images to arise, and it's just really important to be patient. Once you do this a little bit, you realize that actually images can arise really suddenly in any moment. So it may seem like nothing's happening, nothing's happening, or nothing's coming if I'm waiting for some kind of image—and then it suddenly arises. Or something arises. Or it might seem like nothing is staying. There's little flotsam and jetsam in the mind. None of it really seems right or important. And then something comes, you know.

So really what I'm saying is to be patient. You're spending more time with the samadhi and the energy body and that kind of attunement anyway. But within that, within the context of imaginal practice, be patient.

And again, just a few minutes with an image—two, three minutes—can be very rich and very fruitful, and it will feel like you actually don't need or even want too much more because there's so much to resonate with and so many echoes left over from this image that you don't necessarily want this two-hour imaginal thing going on necessarily.

Again, the images may, as we said last night, come outside of the formal meditation—sitting in the lounge or the library or standing on the lawn or having a cup of tea or whatever. Just recognize and know that they can come at any time and in any place, whether that's formal or informal meditation.

And then the last thing for now, I think, is just to also sometimes not get so locked into this idea of an image as an object—as some kind of separate, discrete object. Rather, we can practice by recognizing and noticing and beginning to be interested in, even inquire a little bit or feel into: Where is image, mythos, fantasy alive for me in my life? In what dimension, in what realm of experience and perception?

And in that sense, the image is not necessarily an object—not some kind of separate object that we then perceive. So it's recognizing: in my love for this person, in my different kind of love for that person, different image, different fantasy, different mythos alive there, and entering into that, feeling that, recognizing it, and sensitizing oneself to it.

Or in my relationship to Dharma and practice, and the self on that journey, and in relationship to that tradition, and the Buddha, and whatever it is. Or a particular place. All kinds of possibilities there.

And again, this is the more deeper and subtler end of imaginal practice. And I think, in many ways, one of the more important aspects of it.

Okay, let's stop there for now. I'm going to add a little bit more later on—quite a bit more actually in terms of practice. Let's stop there for now.

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