Energy and Transubstantiation: The Alchemy of the Body (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 43:02

We'll be recording these Q&As. If you don't feel comfortable with your question being recorded, just say so and Mark will turn off the machine. Generally speaking, your questions will be helpful for other people and for you later on, but if you prefer privacy, simply let us know.

Question: Individual vs. Universal Energy Body

John asks about the distinction between speaking of "the energy body" versus "my energy body" or "your energy body," wondering if this points to there being just one energy body.

At one level, yes, there is one, and there are many, and there is none—they're all true. The languaging of "the energy body" rather than "my energy body" is partly a habit of speech, but it's also intended to create a little less of the self's tight grip around the experience. When we say "my energy body," there's often more self-evaluation and identification involved. Using "the energy body" allows a little more looseness in the relationship of identification with the experience, creating more space rather than the contracted sense of "me and mine."

This isn't necessarily pointing toward the mystical experience of everything being one big energy body—which is a very fine and important perception—but that's not so much what we're aiming for right now. Such variations can open up quite spontaneously, even on retreat, but that's not our primary focus at this stage.

Question: Difficulty Accessing the Energy Body in Different Environments

Chrissy shares that she finds it easy to rest in the energy body when sitting in the meditation hall with the group, but struggles when outside, especially in windy conditions, or when lying down where she feels the pressure on her back. She notices that when something makes her bodily edges or skin stand out, or when stronger sensations take over her sensing capacity, she can't access the energy body.

This is a very interesting observation. Part of this could simply be familiarity. The usual way we're conditioned to pay attention to the body isn't through the energy body—it's through sensations, especially if you've practiced mindfulness and insight meditation. There's a natural propensity for awareness to default to sensations.

The more you touch base with the energy body, the more you want to make it easy for yourself at first.

Don't struggle too much in difficult conditions. Instead, hang out where it's accessible, getting used to what I'm calling this sensibility—this particular tuning of awareness. It becomes increasingly second nature, like learning to ride a bike with all its gears. Eventually, you can shift fluidly between sensations, energy body, and other kinds of bodily awareness.

Rather than forcing it where it's difficult, look for in-between environments where it's easier. Let the capacity expand naturally to other regions.

Here are two possibilities to explore: First, try making the awareness space bigger. When we talk about energy body or energy space, we're referring to a space that's usually somewhat bigger than the physical body. Awareness can contract very small, so consciously expanding it might help.

I could pay attention to a minute area of attention in the tip of my finger, for instance, as you can, or I can go really huge. There's a whole spectrum of gradations of how big the awareness can be.

The energy body tends to be this kind of space, but it might serve to go really big for a while and just let everything be there. You'll get maybe a mix of the more usual kinds of sensations in awareness, but they're in a bigger space, so the mind is not sucked into them so much. Do you understand? It has more room, and you just stay—it'll shrink, that's fine—and you expand as big as you can. In that space, you've got sensations and things dancing around, and maybe you can have sensations and energy in that space, and then you can tune back in.

The converse possibility is maybe very gently to go into the center of the body. So if something's on your skin, just gently explore what's happening right at the core. Sometimes for some people what can be helpful is actually using the imagination a little bit. As I said, anything goes with the imagination. But one thing that's helpful when we're talking about the core is imagining a line of energy up the body. Let these sensations be—you don't have to fight these skin sensations—but just imagine that line. Maybe it's a certain color or whatever, but feel into how that vertical axis feels energetically in the middle of the body. Does that make sense?

If you just hold that—going in a little bit more with that imagination helping—then become aware of the whole space but with that central axis. That might help as well.

But generally I'd say don't worry about it too much. This thing, as I said this morning, grows more until it becomes just another dimension of life. It's just another way we can feel the body.

A student asks: "When I'm practicing and I become more concentrated, I get a sense of what I think you call pīti, and it feels like I'm wearing a helmet or a dress or something like that. It's not tingly or anything, but it feels heavy actually. It feels as though there really is physically something there. Is that the energy body? Because it doesn't go around very much—it stays mostly around the head. Is that what you call the

energy body, or is that something different?"

The sensation is described as feeling like wearing a great big hat or helmet, with a quality of pressure that's mildly pleasant.

This word pīti is a term the Buddha used quite a lot when he talked about samādhi. I would define it basically as any pleasant experience in the bodily space that arises from a non-sensual origin. In other words, I'm meditating and it arises. It's not arising out of someone touching my skin or from a taste or something like that. All these definitions have edges to them.

This pīti arises and can take many, many different forms. What characterizes it is the non-sensuality of its origin and the pleasantness. It can be extremely intense—like blow the roof off the top of your head kind of thing—or really quite mild. But it's all pīti and it's all good.

So is that the energy body? What I want to emphasize—I think I said this morning as well—the energy body is not a certain kind of experience so much. There are a lot of different experiences that can come within what we might call the energy body. It's a way of attending to the space of the body. So pīti is a certain kind of energy.

There's a lot in your question, so let's take it apart a little bit. Someone wrote me a note this morning, and I was thinking maybe a good analogy is like harmonic overtones. When you hit a note on a musical instrument, it has multiple resonances of other notes that are sometimes less loud. Are you familiar with this?

We could say all of that is the energy body. Within that, we can tune to different wavelengths of experience, or in the analogy of sound, different tones. So pīti is one wavelength—or even there are many different kinds of pīti. They're different tones within this spectrum. In a way, they're all present at the same time. We just don't notice them, funnily enough. You could think of it like that.

Does that make sense in terms of what's the energy body and what's pīti? Just for that part of the question?

"It sounds as though you're saying that all of it is the energy body. It's just a different wavelength."

So when I wrap my knuckles on that and feel the sensation—slightly unpleasant, whatever—you could call that energy body, but actually it's more a certain frequency of sensation. Energy body is usually characterized by more subtlety of the wavelength.

Does this make sense to people? These words we use—gosh, when we get to words like soul and God, it's even more complex. What are we talking about here? But there's something—after a while you get a feel for this. We're really talking about a way of paying attention and a certain dimension of our experience as human beings that oftentimes goes unnoticed, either because of our meditative training or just because people in society don't tend to talk about it.

So the kind of pīti you're describing—which is one of many, many different kinds of pīti, many different kinds of pleasure that can come up—the energy body feels that way at a certain time. As you practice more, you realize, "Oh, that's just one type," and then there are others and loads of others.

In terms of it being up here, yeah, that's normal. What I might ask is: it sounds quite static from what you're describing. Does it have any movement in it?

"It is quite static."

I mean, I have experienced the other kinds of pīti, like tingling and showering and that kind of thing, but this feels very different.

"And it feels as though—I don't know whether this is my imagination or what—but it feels as though it almost has a sort of boundary, but it's very diffuse. Which is why I wonder whether that's more like an energy body experience."

I think it's all manifestations or experiences of energy body, everything you've described. Quite characteristic of this way of working with the energy body is a sense of some kind of boundary that is quite diffuse. I don't know where it is exactly—that's quite characteristic. But it doesn't have to be. There are lots of possibilities, but that's quite characteristic.

A rule of thumb is: if it's steady, this pleasantness, relatively steady, then your job at times—if you want to go more towards samādhi—is just to enjoy it. That's your priority. That's number one—like flashing neon: enjoy, enjoy, enjoy! And how do you do that? Well, there are lots of ways of doing that.

One is to find where it's strongest. Here's this experience that's sort of up here—maybe it's completely homogeneous over that area, maybe there's an area where it's strongest, maybe sort of around here. Just as you might pay attention to the breath at the nostrils, you dive in, you focus on where it's strongest, you just nuzzle into it and really, really find the pleasure there. That's one option.

Another option is to be a bit more open with it, as if you're just bathing in this and receiving it. The whole area that's being touched by that—enjoying it, just bathing in it like it's really—and you're opening, opening.

So one mode of attention is a bit more probing, a bit more narrowly focused, really always seeking the pleasure. It's very hedonistic. It's good. The other is more like you're sunbathing and just soaking up the sun.

Make sense?

"Isn't that going into more practicing with joy and sukha?"

What we don't know is—one possibility is that as you do that, there are actually a number of possibilities. One is it just stays the same and you just enjoy it. Another possibility is that just by doing that, it starts to

spread and fill the whole body. Now if we're talking about samādhi, that's something you want to gently encourage.

You have a second option there, which is to actually imagine it spreading. It feels like it just stops here. Just imagine that it spreads. Or just like—I mean not with your hands, but with your mind—just spread it in the body. And that can be like it's quite viscous, or it's really quite insubstantial and you're just spreading it.

You're painting your body with this essence. Sometimes just enjoying it, opening to it, getting into it, it will spread naturally. And sometimes it won't spread—it just stays localized. Fine, just enjoy that. So the size of it may or may not change.

If we're working towards samadhi, if that's the orientation, that's the intention, that's the conscious intention at any time, then that's what we're gently wanting to encourage—full body immersion. As the Buddha says, suffusing and saturating the whole body.

Another possibility is that as you do this, the quality of the energy changes. So it might shift, as you mentioned, to joy, or it might transform into stillness or peacefulness, or the quality of heaviness might become very light. There are all kinds of possibilities.

Now we could map territories here, but I think for now we don't need to. What you want with this kind of practice is to become a connoisseur—you know, like wine tasters who can be very discerning. We become connoisseurs in the realm of pleasure in the body. Very subtle, very strong, different kinds, different qualities. We really get to know, get familiar with each kind. Then you can start to map them out and see how that fits onto the Buddha's map of the jhānas and all that.

Does that give you a sense of how to work with this?

*Practitioner**: Yeah, I think I'm just wondering whether I should practice with the jhānas...

Oh, sorry. What?

*Practitioner**: Staying steadily with samadhi, not intensifying the pleasure or the stillness.

Oh, thank you for raising that. We have options here. If I use the word samadhi, I really mean a big spectrum of what's possible, of which the jhānas—the really deep states—are just part of that spectrum.

What needs to be clear is: what am I actually trying to do in practice right now? That means in this stretch of this sitting or walking.

At some points my intention might be towards samadhi. In the very broad sense, what that means is just gently encouraging a sense of well-being in the energy body space and the mind getting into that and enjoying it. We could say that's my samadhi direction. I'm not forcing it, I'm not pushing it, I'm not demanding, but that encompasses a whole range—from just sitting and actually not feeling pleasant and

working with easing the unpleasant, to very mildly pleasant (nothing to write home about), all the way through all eight jhānas.

But that's all samadhi. So that's totally fine. You're working this subtle plasticine of the energy body, and if it feels like "this is good, this is really good," great—enjoy! If it goes into a jhāna, fine. It's all samadhi.

At other times, the intention and orientation with regard to the energy body is: "No, I'm just abiding here watching the emotional resonances." And it might be grief, it might be sadness, it might be boredom, it might be just peaceful, it might be joy. But I'm abiding with the sensitivity to the emotional resonances in the energy body. And if it's difficult—what's happening emotionally in the energy world—then I'm trying to work with that skillfully. What's helpful here? What does it need? Some love, some softness, some space, some image?

That's the second option.

The third option is working with images, which we did a little bit today. But as I say, always on this retreat, including the sensitivity to—whatever I do with images, I'm always in contact with my energy body. I'm trying to include that in the awareness because that's how I notice what's helpful, what's not, what's soul-making, what's not. The resonances, as we use that word.

Does that make sense? So broadly speaking, three options. And what's important is just clarity about what's happening.

*Practitioner**: And can one work with the imaginal in the full range, all through the jhānas, or just with a milder sense of samadhi?

Yeah, so the textbooks say, you know, if you're in jhāna then nothing else is going on in terms of images. What you find with a lot of jhāna practice, and what I find with teaching, is there is the possibility to be in a jhāna... See, a jhāna isn't an on-off switch. It's not black and white. When you start to get into it, you start to realize it's a territory, and there's no exact demarcation point like some people would have you believe.

But what's possible—some people find it easier than others—is to actually be in a jhāna and work with something like an image as well, or even work with a kind of skillful and reflective process. There are all kinds of possibilities. So I wouldn't exclude it.

You'll have to find out what's possible for you. If you're just learning the jhanas, generally speaking, I would say it's better to keep them more pure at first and learn the really pure version—nothing else is going on but this joy or whatever it is. And then after a while, you can realize that actually more may be possible.

Maywa's asking about the meditation we did today with the imaginal figure of love. She discerns two kinds of unfolding that happen there. One is tuning into the particulars and the character of that person. The other is a kind of movement towards dissolving together into one another and something more

universal. How would we describe what happens then?

"The personal dissolves," she says, "but then I remember Catherine talking about keeping the personal, so then I try to keep it sitting with me."

When it dissolves, there are many kinds of dissolving. Sometimes the figure is in the body, sometimes different variations occur. Let's say for now—and this is part of the reason why we did this on day one of this retreat—everything's good in the big picture of things, but I think on this retreat we're wanting to stay more with the character of the imaginal figure, like that sense of it.

What you might find is that it dissolves in a way where your person and their person just dissolves in a kind of oneness of something like love. That's a beautiful experience. It's not so much what we're interested in on this retreat. That's a more likely experience in the kinds of meditation that we might teach—metta or insight meditation.

There's another way of it dissolving, which is what I've been calling cosmopoiesis. What happens is: here I am with this character—and I'll say more about this tomorrow, but let's just say a little bit now. I'm tuned to their character. I feel their love. I'm taking that in. There are resonances. I see their beauty and I see also their divinity. What does that mean? I don't know. Let's just leave it open for now, in fact.

There is a sense that they're more than the usual way our culture tends to think about the human being, or if they're even a human form at all. There's a divinity here, and I'm seeing the beauty of that. Something in my soul is touched by that sense of divinity. They're not losing the human. It's almost like extending the range—if there's a human figure or an animal figure—extending the range of what's there.

And then sometimes what can happen is, in being with that and the soul being touched by that beauty, by that love, by that divinity, it's as if the character of that soul starts to spread. So it's not just universal love; it's their love with their character. And somehow the whole of nature or cosmos is imbued with that particular character of that being. Does that make sense?

So something's gone from a singular, particular imaginal figure to what I would call a particular cosmopoiesis that's characterized with the same personality. Here are the trees, the sky, the earth, and somehow it's that figure and their divinity and their love writ large, imbued into the fabric of the cosmos. Cosmopoiesis—enchanting the cosmos in a very particular way.

That's the distinction that I think we're trying to lean more toward—it's the rarer variety in the kind of circles we tend to move in. The other one of just universal love or universal awareness is more normal as practice deepens in insight meditation and metta and those kinds of things. But we'll touch base about that again tomorrow.

I really like what you just said, but it feels quite a long way away. It sounds very interesting, that idea. My experience with the love figure was that at the beginning a lot of grief came up with the particular person

that I'd chosen, and so I chose somebody else. And then I found that kind of opening happening. I just wondered if that was...

Yeah, absolutely. And go with the simpler one. All this is flexible. You know this anyway when you do the metta categories—someone's your benefactor, then they look at you the wrong way one day for half a second and hey, down to division four, you know? So it's all... go with... This is part of what we talk about—the sensitivity to the energy, what it's like. Okay, an hour ago it was her or him or whatever, and now this is just too complex. Go with what actually opens in the moment and trust that. So it's not so fixed.

A lot of the questions are quite advanced, if you like. I just want to make sure—the nuts and bolts of the energy body—if there's anyone feeling like, "yikes," or... Yeah, Lauren?

This kind of leads on from Chris's question about being outside and getting a sense of energy. It's very similar to Rowan's experience as well—piti in the hands, dropping, spreading a sense of pleasure, and kind of feeling like it's a little bit outside of the boundary of the skin. Outside, noticing very much a sense of appreciation, which feels good—flowers, birds, everything. Just wondering where to take that. It's not much of a sense of any energy body, just maybe a lightness to the body. Just wondering what avenue to take with that.

Keep the appreciation going. Open up to look for sensations. Maybe use the imagination within the sense of the energy body.

Okay, so I think maybe this goes back to "no right and wrong." Today we said emphasize the energy body, but as the retreat goes on, we're going to open up more the possibility. You say, "Okay, there's not much of a sense of the piti, but the lightness is there. The body feels light." That's energy body. If we go back to the musical analogy, that's a certain wavelength. Great.

So one option you have is: okay, just be with the lightness. That's tuning into the energy body. And let that... the lightness may not be obviously pleasant at first. When I start to pay attention to it and let it fill, I start to see, "Oh, actually lightness—we like the body feeling, generally speaking. It's nice, it's a pleasant feeling." It's more subtly pleasant.

So one option you have is—we have to be careful here. Energy body is not a certain experience. So if I had this piti, now I'm trying to get that back because that's the energy body. No. The energy body is a way of paying attention. And so lightness is also fine. It's good. So that's one option.

The appreciation—you've got appreciation as well. It's a really, really important part. I think hopefully this will get clearer. Sometimes it's just appreciate and don't... it's just let the heart appreciate, let the being, the senses appreciate. You don't have to try and do anything with that.

But there is... there's a third option that we're going to emphasize a little more, which is... I can't remember whose question it was now. But in response to Miwa... so...

Appreciation, like everything else, comes with a whole scale to it. It can be mild appreciation, it can be something that touches us so deeply that the soul is moved. And I think what we want to say is when the soul is moved...

What's happening there? Now there's something occurring in the energy body, there's something happening in the heart. There's also something happening in the perception.

When I'm moved, when the soul is deeply touched, when there's what I call soul making, when there's soulfulness there, the perception of whether it's a tree or nature or another human being or some image—the perception has got more dimensionality to it.

This tree is a bunch of atoms, and I can appreciate that—wonderful! I can go to the molecular structure and photosynthesis—fantastic! Other more soul-making appreciations have other dimensions. It's not obvious because we don't talk about it in our culture. We don't have a language for it, and we want to emphasize a lot on this retreat.

It's not something separate from the tree or the materiality of the tree or the nature of the tree or the evolution of the tree. But in and through the appearance is something that we might call a divinity or other dimensions. That might come into your appreciation. Partly what we're interested in is opening the sensibility to that.

Because the way that we're talking about, the way that we're defining imaginal, the way that we're defining cosmic oasis, and the way that we're defining enchantment—we could define all those in different ways. As we're talking about, that's a key aspect. So it might be that you start to pick up on that more.

Is this making sense?

If that's there, then as the retreat goes on, that's the kind of thing where we're still in touch with the lightness in the body or how that feels, but, ooh, what is that? Can I see the beauty of the divinity, or the divinity of the beauty in what I'm appreciating? Could be purely intra-psychic image, could be something in nature, could be another person, could be a memory of a friend.

Does this make sense? So this is the kind of thing we're going to be talking about. Our culture doesn't have a language for this, unfortunately. But if that makes sense, then you've got different options.

"My energy body, my experience today—sun's been present but also for all sorts of reasons that I'm likely going to—there's quite a lot of agitation out there."

Absolutely. It's totally okay. I'm thankful someone actually says that because you're not going to be alone. So thank you. What's your name?

"Jen."

Look, when we talk about energy body, we're definitely not talking about just a pleasant experience. If anyone comes to me and says, "My energy body is always pleasant," I just say, "You're not paying attention. Pay attention." It contracts, it opens, it softens, it hardens, it gets pleasant, it gets unpleasant. Sometimes across quite a narrow spectrum, sometimes a really big spectrum. That's the deal.

Again, going back to what's the intention at any time in practice. When it's difficult, contracted or tight or agitated, as you say, the question is: What does it need right now? What does it need?

Agitation might need a kind of soothing. Maybe you can soothe in lots of different ways. I'm not forcing it to be different. I'm responding with care to something. That's really important. There's a caring response to how this feels.

Sometimes it's just in the kind of attention we pay attention with. So again, like we said with Chrissy, one option is just going to a much bigger space and letting the agitation kind of rumble around, but it's rumbling around in a much bigger space, and that can tend to help.

Sometimes it's about almost imagining an energy of warmth, for instance, around the agitation and something soothing. Now it could be a full-blown imaginal figure doing something with love, or it could just be kind of energetic imagining—if that makes sense—partly visual, but something soothing.

You can use your breath to soothe the agitation. So you can really play with it. Again, you're not forcing something, rejecting something to be different. You're caring, like you would if a baby's agitated.

I mean, sometimes, of course, parents in the midst of exhaustion do get frustrated—"Just stop crying!"—but that's life. Generally though, the instinct is to wonder, "Oh, what can I do to soothe this little one?" And there are countless possibilities.

Sometimes what's needed is recognizing that there's an emotion creating the disturbance in the energy body, and we want to tune more toward that emotional aspect. It becomes a question of what does this emotion need? So our attention isn't purely physical—it can be deeply emotional as well.

Just in terms of how we pay attention: when there's something difficult—agitation or contraction or grief or whatever—the normal human reaction includes some aversion to it. Rather than judging that aversion, one skillful option is to become more interested in the aversion itself rather than going straight to the underlying feeling. Can I relax around this resistance? Can I soften around that secondary layer? Sometimes dealing with our reactivity to the reactivity can be tremendously helpful.

And thank you for bringing this up, because it's crucial to understand—anyone paying attention will notice this is simply the nature of the beast. What we want is for our range to expand, to be okay with all of that—all the coming and going. We want to be skillful when experience is pleasant, skillful when it's difficult, and also skillful when it's neutral, because there's real art in recognizing that "nothing much is happening here" can actually open into something profound.

We should stop for tea, but let me address this beautiful question about re-enchantment. You're asking if it means putting song back into the cosmos, connecting it to cosmopoiesis—the making of worlds through something like music. There's another meaning of enchantment that involves being trapped, captivated in an unskillful way, losing our center to some compulsive idea or craving.

But there are different kinds of skillful enchantment, beautiful enchantment. It relates to the French enchanté—to spell, to magic. Re-enchanting the cosmos, "the poetry of perception"—which I think was this retreat's title—recognizes that we are the poets. We create poetry through our perceiving, through our sensing of the world.

The poet sings, and I mean this in the broadest sense. Through our ways of looking, we sing beings into existence. We chant into being something that re-enchants the world. It's a deliberate use of these words, recognizing that perception itself is fundamentally creative. Through understanding this, we can open up divinity and beauty.

Should we have just one minute of silence together before we end?

[One minute of silence]

Thank you for listening.

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