On Orientations in Practice (Live and Shortened version)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 48:03

Good morning everyone.

I want to talk a little bit about practice this morning. For now on the retreat, we want to be emphasizing the energy body. I'm not going to repeat much about the energy body because we've asked you to listen to all those talks explaining this material. I will mention that there will be a chance to ask questions about this later today, so if you feel unsure about certain experiences or how they fit together, we'll have that opportunity.

Let me say very briefly about the energy body: What are we talking about when we say energy body? It's a little bit different than the usual mindfulness of sensations that we're used to in the insight meditation tradition or in the mindfulness teachings. When I hit my knuckles on the wall and feel the sensations there, when I feel the coolness of the air on my skin, when I feel the sensations on the hands with water running from the tap—this is all what we're used to: mindfulness of sensations.

This overlaps with what we might call mindfulness of the energy body. They overlap, but I would say we're tuning with a different sensibility when we talk about energy body. It's a different kind of tuning, and that ability to tune that way grows with practice. At first, it's a strange thing—what are they on about? But as we do it more, it becomes just part of one's life, that kind of sensibility to the body.

We're really talking about this space, a little bit bigger than the physical body—that field, that field of vibration, of feeling, of texture, of energy. We're talking about a sensitivity to that, a tuning to that, to what's there. In some ways, we might say that when we use a word like "energy body," it's as much that we're talking about, or perhaps more that we're talking about, a kind of awareness, a kind of sensitivity, a sensibility. We're talking about a subtlety of attention, more than a particular experience.

We're talking about a kind of way of paying attention more than about the body per se, or a certain experience like "I remember when I had this flow of energy—that's what the energy body is." No, that's a certain experience. We're talking about paying attention in a different mode, a different way. It's a way of feeling the body, a way of attending or attuning to this field, this space here—the space of and the space around the body.

Why do we do this? There are a number of reasons. One of them is for the sake of what I would call samadhi—meaning the chance to energize the body and the mind, to nourish the body and the mind, to

rest body and mind, to let that whole field here, this space here with the awareness, become bright and calm. That serves as a real resource in our lives. There's so much that we can benefit from learning to harmonize the energy body and dwell in that and let the awareness spread in that. The energy body is an integral factor of all samadhi—it's a way of approaching samadhi.

The second reason is it's really helpful in relation to our emotional life. What reverberates, what resonates in the body, in the energy body, expresses and reflects our emotions—some of the very subtle micro-nuances of our emotional life. To have some facility with that, to have a way of approaching it and holding it via the energy body, can be really skillful, really helpful when there's difficult emotion, but also when there's lovely emotion, and also surprisingly helpful when there's very subtle emotion, not really much going on.

The third reason for emphasizing the energy body is that it can serve as a kind of navigator, a kind of indicator of when we're on the right track. It serves to help guide us in practice. Whether that's imaginal practice in the sense of soul making, or an emptiness practice, or samadhi, or metta, or whatever—insight practices—there's a way it can really serve well to tell us, to give us a sense of when we're on track, when things feel in harmony. We're on the right track when something's opening, softening, loosening, energizing, whatever it is.

For all these reasons and more, when we come to talk about imaginal practice and cosmopoiesis and the kind of things that we're talking about, we can't do that all day. Imaginal practice all day is kind of too much for the psyche really. So we want to be going back and forth between practices. This is one of the things we really want to emphasize on this retreat: this flexibility. Flexibility between different approaches at different times, sensitive to what's helpful. But whatever we do, the energy body is going to be a part of it.

We're not going to lose connection with the energy body. That's the encouragement. So whatever direction or orientation at any time in practice, the energy body is an integral part of that and is involved. We're connected with that. We're sensitive to it.

I said today we'll unfold instructions as the week goes, but today really to have more emphasis on the energy body—on being aware of that, on playing with that, and dwelling with that, whether that's just collecting in the samadhi or just being sensitive to the emotions there, or whatever. A bit more emphasis on that, but even now, starting today, you can be fluid between these different practices.

So you can move between images and an image, resonate with the energy body and come back to the energy body, or from images to feeling the energy body and then go to the samadhi. Do you get a sense of how you can move between these? Or you might be dwelling with an emotional resonance in the energy body and then that gives rise to an image. So there is flexibility, but today a bit more emphasis on just dwelling with the energy body. But there's that fluidity.

And maybe you got the sense listening to those talks that anything goes. Anything goes here. The range of creativity and ways of working with the energy body—whatever works, it's fine. Even if you think, "This is the weirdest thing that I've ever experienced," if it's working, it's fine. So really, this encouragement on this retreat from both Catherine and me, to really be creative. Let yourself be creative.

But when we talk about energy body, we're really talking about a kinesthetic felt feeling of energy. So you might be working with a visual image or whatever, but it's always going to be coming back to this felt sense.

I'll talk at the end about walking in the energy body, but maybe just to say some general things about practice on this retreat. Let me say two things about teachings and listening.

It's interesting how we read and listen as human beings because often we read and listen from within a certain box of what we understand. And that's sometimes really necessary because we need to build these boxes, these containers of understanding and sort of let them grow, consolidate them. The downside of that sometimes is that we don't hear what's outside of our box. So we're hearing from a certain framework and we actually don't hear what's new. We sometimes literally don't hear it or we chop a bit off it or we convert it into something so it sounds like what's already in my box. "I'm not really hearing anything new here."

So this is tricky, it's a balance. We need to consolidate structures of understanding and at the same time we need to be aware of this human tendency not to hear the new, almost not to be challenged. Does that make sense?

Holding both those poles in mind, I wonder sometimes if it's possible to listen in general on this retreat—or reading a book or whatever it is, other retreats—and actually listen in a different way. I'm listening for what doesn't fit into my box. Listening to grow, listening to stretch, listening to challenge.

Second thing, related to that and related also to the sort of dichotomy there, is sometimes we listen or we read and we really focus in on one thing, one real small detail that seems to us to be helpful or that fits in our box and resonates. And this is really important. We're listening for that richness of detail.

For most people, for most of us, it's a little harder to listen or read what I would call structurally—listening for the wider relevance. How does this fit in to the bigger picture of what's being presented, or how does all this fit together? Oftentimes we don't really listen. We just hear this bit or that bit. We don't listen in a wider way. But there's something about listening and getting a bigger picture that will help the details and will help confidence in practice and growth in practice.

So again, it's not easy for most human beings. We don't have minds that work that way naturally. But if you can, and if you're not sure why on earth I'm going on about something... I remember a talk years ago, I was saying something about quantum mechanics and someone just said, "Oh, I just thought you got lost on a tangent." And it was very relevant for the whole point. But it was obvious to me what the relationship

was—I should have made it clear.

So if you're not clear, ask. But there's something about listening structurally, listening for the greater relevance of what's being said, how it fits together.

Now I want to say something about the emphasis of practice in this retreat. This is general now. I'm not giving so much nuts and bolts instructions this morning because you should be familiar with that. So I'll say some things and hope you can remember this over the retreat, because what I'm talking about is also habits of orientation.

Generally, in the insight meditation culture and also in other spiritual traditions, there are certain attitudes or orientations or emphases, inclinations and assumptions that kind of get pretty entrenched for us, so much so that we often don't even realize that they're operating as a kind of bedrock of our practice. It's just how we think and what we do. And they become quite dominant in the culture and in our individual practices. They're very prevalent.

What Catherine and I would like to do is actually break that up a little bit, loosen these up.

One of them has to do with concentration, and I mean that in two modes. Especially if you're familiar with the insight meditation tradition, there's a lot of emphasis on continuity of mindfulness, right? Not here. I don't care about that. No, more than I don't care—I'd rather you weren't. And I'll explain what the alternative is.

Mindfulness becomes a way to live. If I could—we acknowledge that it's not possible—but if I could, it would be best if I was continually mindful. I would like to question that and disrupt that and replace it with a notion of flexibility of ways of looking. Deliberately moving in and out of, consciously in and out of, different ways of looking rather than trying to be mindful all the time. Trying to create mindfulness as a way of life as if it's an end in itself. We could say a lot about that. We may or may not come back to it on this retreat, but I don't want to dwell.

So rather than continuity—and we have to ask, why continuity? I'm not going to answer this, but why has this become so central and such an unquestioned assumption in the dharma? What's underneath that assumption? Actually, there's quite a lot underneath it. Maybe later.

The second aspect of concentration—first is continuity, second is not just the continuity of mindfulness but the continuity of focus. How many times as a teacher have I heard people really trying to just stay with one object, usually the breath, and sometimes decades of frustration at trying to do that. Now, I'm not saying that doesn't have its place, but so often it gets prioritized, this focusing, staying with one thing, keeping the attention steady.

When we use the word samadhi, we're talking more about this harmonization, well-being in the energy body, and less about focusing the mind and keeping it on one thing. Some of you can probably recognize,

hearing this, how we become wedded to certain ideas.

So for this week at least, I'd like to shake a little bit of this up, loosen it.

The second thing is what we might call atomism, related to what we just talked about, but this kind of shrinking the mind to smallness, as if seeing small details, the moment-to-moment process, or how finally this or that sensation can be revealed to consciousness. Fine, it has its place, but it's also limited. It's not something on this retreat that we're particularly interested in, both in terms of attention and also in terms of understanding, as if the atomistic process is something real, that there really are moments, that there really are all that.

Third, we'll come back to this in the retreat, is a kind of realism or reificationism. Everything that we're doing is not based on reality claims or truth claims. Maybe this sounds abstract, but once you start questioning, one realizes just how much of most teachings and most practice orientations, most psychotherapies, is all based on some kind of reality claim. What is it to just take that away? What does that free up? What does that allow? Extremely radical.

Another one—we touched on it last night a little bit—is just the emphasis on solitude and self-sufficiency. If we can open that out, as Catherine mentioned last night. Yes, there is a place for solitude, but what is it to open up more to the togetherness and the relationships? Again, insight meditation, Theravada Buddhism has a lot of focus on solitude and self-sufficiency. And it can become, for us, "it would be better if I could be more self-sufficient and solitary."

And just generally, how much we absorb ideas from the cultures that we're in—the wider culture, but also the dharma culture—and we don't quite realize how much power they have. A tremendous amount of power. All kinds of ideas about where we're going, how we should be, "it would be better if this." So much power, and prison, really, from these kinds of things.

Part of what we're doing is wanting to question these kinds of things. None of them are bad, none of them are wrong, these things that I've mentioned. It's just they tend to get over-emphasized and dominant, even to the point of exclusion.

The opposite doesn't have a place, and in that, our practice becomes limited. As much as some of these ideas are helpful, they are also limiting.

Rather than being caught in these constraints, I want to offer something different: the idea of flexibility of ways of looking, deliberately moving in and out consciously of different modes of being, perception, ways of looking. Why do this? Because this is what reveals to us the dependent arising of things. This is what reveals to us the emptiness of things.

If I'm just mindful, I will not know that. It will not come. I will not have that depth of insight. I need to move flexibly in and out. And I see—when I look this way, this is what the world looks like. This is what

appears. When I look another way, that's what appears. Dependent arising. Emptiness.

What we want is to really develop this flexibility and this availability of different ways of looking. This, to me, is really what this retreat is about, but in general also what we're interested in developing. So sometimes, you know, in the week, it's really fine. It's okay to not practice—to have periods where there's some basic mindfulness, but you're actually not practicing. What's more important is the deliberate moving in and out at times and noticing what happens. And we'll talk more about this.

Sometimes people wonder about precision. Where's the precision if I'm not practicing in my usual way of close, mindful scrutiny to the details of my experience? What happens to precision in practice?

Precision is not in the microscopic consciousness or the microscopic understanding of things. What I'd like to say is the precision is more in a kind of subtlety and clarity of differentiation, discerning between different ways of looking. What exactly is involved in this way of looking that I'm engaging in right now? What exactly is involved? How is this way of looking—that I'm looking, that I'm sensing in, knowing in right now—how is it subtly different from one that sounds quite similar?

This is not easy—it's a different orientation of thinking about practice. What exactly are the effects in this moment of this way of looking? On my emotions, on the energy body, on my sense of freedom, on my sense of self, on my sense of another, on my perception of the world. This is where the precision is—noticing these subtleties. And why? Why is it that when I look this way, I see like this? There's a lot of insight here—I'm talking about just a different way of approaching practice, a different core idea underneath practice.

So that's where the precision is, rather than in the microscopic detail or the microscopic concepts.

One of the things I would say we're interested in opening the door to is the possibility of subtlety—the possibility of a subtlety of awareness, a subtlety of sensibility. Now we're not making a hierarchy here. It's not like, "Okay, not focus but subtlety is what we're going for." Rather, we don't want to prevent subtlety. So we want to keep the door open to subtlety. And gross is good too. So it's not always about being subtle.

But there's something about deepening more generally in meditation—generally speaking, I would say deepening involves and to some degree corresponds to an increase in subtlety. Again, this is not something we usually think about. How long can I stay with the breath or whatever? I'm just introducing another domain or dimension of experience that we tend not to think about so much.

And again, the subtlety is not in the microscopicness of attention or "this moment" and how fast I can speed up a second or whatever. But when we use words like subtlety, it's really subtlety of the vibrations, for instance, in the energy body that we're aware of, or the tones—the emotional tones—or the wavelengths. We become more sensitive to more subtlety there, to the subtlety of resonances, the subtleties of emotional movements and states, shades of emotion, refinements of perception in general.

So this is actually, I would say, quite important to be able to open to gradually—gradually more and more over the months and years of practice.

I'm going to leave a bit out. I don't want to overload you. There'll be a chance for questions.

As we journey through this retreat together, you'll find there's going to be a wealth of practice suggestions, instructions, and explorations offered. The unfolding won't be particularly linear - apart from our initial emphasis on the energy body, this isn't structured as a progression where we master one level before advancing to the next. Sometimes you might find yourself on day five thinking, "I wish they'd mentioned that at the beginning," or conversely, feeling ready for something introduced earlier. This is simply the nature of how understanding must unfold in time.

Please don't feel overwhelmed by the abundance we're offering. Sessions are being recorded, so you can always return to what resonates. Take what feels alive for you and let the rest go. Don't worry if certain practices feel too complex or if you feel you've missed something important. In truth, everything we're exploring is interconnected and inseparable - we only separate it to communicate in chunks through time, since we can't download it all instantaneously. This is just how teachings must be shared, so I encourage you to remain flexible with this process.

What we're engaging in may differ from how many people typically approach practice - that familiar mode of simply being with the body, waiting receptively for whatever arises, then staying present with that experience as it comes and goes. This receptive, passive approach is certainly beautiful and valid, but I believe it becomes quite limiting if it's our only mode of practice.

Instead, we'll be offering many suggestions and practices that actually ask you to deliberately engage specific ways of looking, rather than just "hanging out and being with what is." We'll be moving in and out of these deliberate ways of seeing. This usually isn't our habit, particularly when we come to imaginal practice and what we might call practices of enchantment or cosmopoiesis. For many people, deliberately entering these cosmopoetic ways of looking represents unfamiliar territory.

While these images and cosmic ways of seeing can certainly arise spontaneously - and that's wonderful - we're also working with them deliberately. With everything we offer, you might try something and find it doesn't quite work, then refine your approach. Here's what's crucial: be careful to use your energy body and your sense of soulfulness as your compass. If a practice resonates something in your soul, even if it needs refinement, let that be your guide rather than mechanically persisting with something that doesn't stimulate genuine soul-making.

In classical Tantric teachings, you might receive a prescribed deity to work with, a specific image given to you. But our encouragement is different - pursue and stay with only those practices that truly resonate in and for your soul, even if the practice initially seemed contrived or externally suggested. What matters isn't the origin but the soul resonance and your sensitivity to recognizing it. When you feel that resonance,

you're onto something precious.

Let this sense of soulfulness guide you completely. Without it, there's a real danger that any kind of practice - not just these approaches we're exploring - can become lifeless, soulless, ultimately pointless except perhaps as an exercise in concentration or visualization. Nothing deep or significant for the soul gets touched, stirred, moved in both senses of the word - brought alive, enriched, deepened.

This sense of soulfulness tells you when you've struck gold, when you've found treasure. The practice might still feel difficult or confusing, but there's gold present. You can sense it.

So throughout this retreat, I really encourage you to play with these practices, to experiment freely. Let yourself be creative. We'll be offering much, but think of it like stepping into a vast artist's studio where we've just opened all the doors. There are paints and canvases, materials for sculpture, video equipment - you can simply play. You can decide what calls to you, work systematically if you prefer, or stay with one approach. Can we bring this spirit of creative exploration to our practice?

But this raises a crucial question: What's the point? What is the actual point of practice? Sometimes, especially as long-term practitioners, we lose track of why we're doing this. Or perhaps our original motivation has hardened into something that part of us no longer truly believes in, something that's no longer alive for our soul. We might find ourselves borrowing Buddhist language or repeating concepts we've heard in countless talks and books, but we must ask: Is this truly my point? Is this the point for my soul? Or has my sense of purpose become half-dead?

This is profoundly human, this questioning of motivation and meaning. We'll likely revisit this throughout the retreat, but let me be clear about the point of all these practices we'll be offering.

It's certainly not to make you believe this or that, or to convert you to some new religion. Catherine and I aren't trying to convince you of particular beliefs about the self, about life, or about the world. Nor is the goal to achieve any specific perception - getting a vision of your body as red energy or any particular experience. Those might arise and be wonderful, but they're not the point.

Or perhaps some other perception altogether. But rather, through all these practices, through this exercising of the flexibility of ways of looking, through exploring an attitude, a relationship with practice that's more like art, more like poetry in relation to perception—through these things, loosening happens.

Actually many kinds of loosening happen. And that to me is a big point: many kinds of loosening. What are the different kinds of loosening that happen? This is of fundamental importance, these different kinds of loosening that occur.

But even more than that, a sense, a perception, a knowing comes through all these practices—something, if you like, maybe vague, maybe undefined, unarticulated, maybe with a lot of variation in your experience or others' experience because of the ways of looking—but a sense, a perception, an opening, a

knowing, a deepening of the sense of beauty, of sacredness. This is more, if you like, the central point. Not a particular thing—it can happen in all kinds of ways.

And even more, a knowing of eternity. A knowing of the eternal, of the timeless. Many possibilities here. And these possibilities—they open, they deepen, they widen. They become more and more accessible in our lives, more and more available to the being, more and more frequent. So I would say at the bottom of it, that's the main point of all the practices.

So today this dwelling in, being with, emphasizing the abiding in the energy body as the primary thing—that would be the main emphasis today as much as possible. And within that there are different orientations.

So it can orient towards the cultivation of the harmony and the sense of harmonization, well-being in that field, and the mind dwelling in that and enjoying that and moving towards that, gently encouraging that—this is one orientation.

At other times it might be just sensitive to the energy body and maybe there's some difficulty there or emotional resonances. Maybe difficult, maybe lovely, maybe actually neither—just subtle. And there's a way of being with the energy body, just paying attention or working skillfully, gently, helpfully with whatever's going on emotionally as it's playing out in the energy body. And if images feel like they are coming, arising in relation to that, or they feel helpful in relation to that, let that come and go too.

Let yourself be flexible, but the energy body is always involved. We're not losing connection with that. We're not losing the sensitivity to that. Or rather we're encouraging the sensitivity to that as part of what's going on.

Opening, opening—there's such a tendency for the awareness to shrink, so just opening again. It's really about tuning, tuning the attention. Not so much in terms of location as in terms of wavelength or vibration, if you like, resonance in the space. Maybe at times about location, but it's more about the tuning, the kind of awareness.

What we're going to try on this retreat is to have an open schedule, just to see how that goes. Which means you can come and go in terms of this space here, the main hall, as you like. You can come and sit for three hours straight. You can come and sit for ten minutes, any time. And obviously just try and be relatively quiet. But basically it's an open space. So you find your rhythm with the sitting and the walking and the standing meditation and so forth. Is that clear enough?

Be careful if you prioritize sitting. You're not just sitting. Those of you who are sitting a lot—it may be that the action really, the fruit is in the walking or in the standing or whatever. So don't be so much about "I should be sitting." Just find what's really helpful for you.

But there's an open schedule; let's see how that goes.

With the walking meditation for today, can we do the walking meditation again emphasizing the energy body? So many of you are familiar with what does it feel like in the soles of the feet or in the legs, the mindfulness, the sensations. Let's do it differently and see: can I walk up and down on my walking path sensitive to this field, the energy body?

Or some of you may be walking and there's a sort of vast panoramic awareness of the whole space and the sky. All of these are wonderful.

I think for us today, let's see if we can do the walking and walk up and down with the sensitivity of the energy body. Just the same with the sitting.

As in all practice, you might need to experiment a little bit. What's helpful? Do I need to walk slower to allow that at this time? And maybe half an hour later it's faster? Or do I need to walk really fast? So play with, for instance, the pace of the walking that allows you to get the sensitivity to the energy body.

You can stop and stand at any point. So halfway through your walking path, you might stop and actually feel, "Oh, when I'm still now, actually this feels good and that's helpful, the energy body." Really explore the rhythm of the walking, the pace, and when you stop and stand. You might end up standing most of the walking period—no problem. Just really what's helping this awareness of the energy body.

Now there's formal walking, walking up and down between two points, which you're all very familiar with. And there's informal walking. I'm going to lunch, I'm going to a group or whatever it is, I'm going to get a cup of tea. See if you can take some of those opportunities too. Just what is it to walk from here to get my cup of tea and be in the energy body, or back to the hermitage wing or wherever you're staying, and actually just walk in the corridor in the energy body? Just for a little bit, play with this.

In general, probably for most people, as you're walking around the house, it's good to slow down. That will help this energy body awareness. Again, not because we're aiming for microscopic awareness and that we're going really slow, but just the slowness will help the energy body awareness for most people.

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