Healing the Imagination (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 40:30

So I can't see everyone's face just because of the light, but... anyone? Anything? Yeah, Alex.

I want to... it's been a long time since I've read Joseph Campbell so I can't remember exactly what he means by that. When Alexandra asks about what I mean when I say "follow what works"—are you asking me personally or just to elaborate on what I mean by that?

My guess is what Joseph Campbell means is more something like follow your passion in life, or follow what you really care about, or follow what brings you joy in a kind of larger trajectory in terms of work and where you are. That's my guess, remembering.

So I guess I mean that too, but usually when I say that, I imagine I'm talking mostly about meditation. It's more within the meditation itself.

Yes, I think the first answer is yes. There's this thing—one of the reasons for emphasizing the energy body is it can work as a kind of compass or barometer. So in whatever practice you're doing, let's say with imaginal practice, you might have an image come up that's dark and scary looking. Conventionally the mind goes, "Yikes, this is dark and scary and this can't be good."

But if I'm open enough and just notice—well, okay, the mind is saying that, but the energy body actually has come into some kind of alignment. It's come into some kind of openness, some kind of harmony, maybe more energy. So the energy body is telling me something different than the mind. The energy body is saying, "There's something here for me. It's a treasure." My small mind, usual habitual ways of thinking don't quite get it yet. I don't quite know what it is. It's opposite to how I usually think about what's helpful and what's not. But I would incline more to trusting the energy body there. If something's genuinely not helpful, it won't harmonize like that.

And it can be the opposite. Here's this nice frilly ballerina angel figure, and I think, "Oh, that should be really good for me because I really need that." And the energy body is just not responding—it's the mind thinking something.

So that's one example of following what works.

In other practices, like insight practices or mindfulness practice, let's say I'm just with this heartache or this pain in my knee or whatever, and I'm just trying to be with it or be mindful. Something sounds so simple. But actually I get a sense—I'm being with it and the thing is contracting more. I'm being with it and I feel more tight. And then we say, "Now I'm going deeper into it." Is that really the case? Or is it the fact

that in my so-called simple mindfulness, there's something that's actually tightening the problem?

It's tricky because it can be both, but often it's the latter. It's like, what's present in my mindfulness at that moment, or what's missing in my mindfulness that would actually be helpful? How do I tell it's helpful? Something loosens.

In terms of insight practice or mindfulness practice, I often say there are two words: release and relief. But they're felt in the energy body. Sometimes it's mental, but sometimes you just feel relief. It can be really subtle. That's my compass—it's an energy body feeling.

Now, there can be bliss and peace and freedom and well-being and joy and all of that, but at the most basic subtle level, there's some kind of release or relief, and that's telling me—whether it's mindfulness or insight practice—that's telling me I'm on track. But it's through the energy body.

Does that make sense? Is that enough?

I'd say that, because sometimes we come to all this with quite fixed ideas of what we need, and I would trust that more. That's one of the reasons why I tend to offer the energy body and put quite a lot of emphasis on it—because it does so much, there's so much available through it.

That's exactly what works in the moment. Absolutely.

Going back to Joseph Campbell—that's one extreme, one of those long-term trajectories. "Am I going to do this or that? Am I going to work in Africa?" These are great, really important questions in life. But yes, you're taking him out of context, and that's fine. This question of following one's bliss can apply on all different timescales. Mostly I'm talking about in the moment.

Julia, your question the other day about finding an imaginal figure and then, when you came to sit down with it, it no longer worked—it's like, fine, switch. Other times you have to stay with something a bit more and really see if it isn't working. But it's really about being flexible in the moment. Not too much flipping and flopping, because you need to stay with something a little bit, but generally speaking, I'm responsive in the moment without preconception of what's working.

Andrea raises her hand

*Andrea**: My question is around precision, because you used that word as opposed to mindfulness or concentration. My experience outside was similar to that man who asked a question the other day about taking in the tree, where there was appreciation. I'm noticing that something's harmonizing maybe in some respect, but the imagination flits, and what's meaningful changes from thing to thing to thing. There's a sense in me of something wrong with not being able to stay and resonate with each and every one of them.

There was a moment outside where all the rain fell all of a sudden, and there was a loveliness in just

staying there for it. Then there was a sort of romance of being a woman standing outside in the rain, and then that changed to a fairy tale image of the sealskin, soulskin, and then later with walking. What I'm saying is, I don't feel that in that moment I can reach in, touch the energy body, sense the resonance. It seems like there's so much to do. What I did was just enjoy the movement of it and stay with that. I know it's early days here, but...

So the question is really: a lot of images are arising quite rapidly, seemingly flitting one to another, not lasting long enough to really tune into the energy body or tune into the image so much, but getting something from each, a beauty in each. What's right or wrong? How do I navigate that?

I tend to think with all this work that there isn't so much right and wrong, but you'll get different results depending on what you do. It may be that those images are actually related to each other. The first two you mentioned—it could be that here's the beauty of the rain in the landscape, the rain as object, and then what happened (I'm not saying this is what happened, but it could be) is that always when there's an image that's meaningful, the object is alive as image, and self is alive as image as well.

So it could be that a woman in the rain, with all the resonance of that, was just the subjective part of that same image. Do you understand? So it's not really flitting between different images—it's flitting maybe between different aspects of an image, which then you can kind of hold together or focus on one or the other. What looks like flitting might actually be different aspects of the same image.

That's one possibility. The second possibility is that yes, experientially, sometimes it does that for a while. It goes to this, or that, or the same image suddenly—I remember one where this character kept taking off clothes to reveal a different character underneath, like a Russian doll kind of thing. "When are you going to finally stop?" And it did, eventually. It settled down to one.

So sometimes it's just a matter of staying and waiting, and it will settle. Other times, maybe just pick one and stay with it. Actually try to stay steady with one and see what happens. Either it will feel like this really isn't right, or it will begin to morph and change and become workable.

But I think my tendency would be to advise integrating it into something that's more settled that you can then come into resonance with. Because what we want is for the whole being to be involved. Imaginal work means body, energy, soul resonances, awareness. If it's too flitting, it can't really come into resonance and do the soul work so much.

But that is... How is that not mindfulness, or how is that not focus?

So I'm not saying don't be mindful and don't be focused. I'm not wanting to say that at all. I'm really responding to context and what tends to get prioritized and sometimes overemphasized so that it excludes other possibilities. So if you hear me say something like that, it's really in response to that.

Catherine was using the word lingering. It's not lingering for the sake of – great, today I notched up two

minutes, forty-five seconds, uninterrupted time with this object. It's not for the sake of that or because a still mind is better. The lingering is because we can come more into resonance and feel more and more can happen there.

So being steady with an image or relatively steady with an image or a vision is actually really helpful. In the larger picture of things, it tends to get a bit overemphasized, and so many people get so tight around it, and it becomes so painful, and it's a self-measurement thing about how well one, or badly, usually, one is doing. That's the sort of thing I just want to shake up a little bit.

Sometimes you'll get something that just doesn't seem to settle, and then there are different ways of responding to that.

You talked about mudras earlier, and we spoke a while back about an issue you were having. You told me you had been meditating with your hands up, and I said, "No, no, no, don't do that, hands down." I can't go into why now, but let's just say for now, hands down. So I'm wondering why...

What I see is sometimes people always meditating like that or mostly meditating like that. And what I would rather encourage is have some time not doing that. Even if you're doing just that, the opposite, the palm down, or all kinds of possibilities.

I had actually been meditating primarily like this – and then I switched to this, and that's when things started happening.

Did this come from a Zen tradition? It looked pretty Zen to me. This is a very open gesture, energetically. That's why I think it's working. And this – I can almost feel the pressure, and all the teaching that goes around it. Tightness, presence, brightness, alertness, discipline.

It's not like one's right and one's wrong. It's like everything we do has an effect. Going back to Alexandra's question – what is the effect? We're complex as human beings. We're rich at different stretches of time. Even sitting to sitting, we need different things or we'll respond to different things. So it might be that this becomes one among your repertoire. But it's just clear in the gesture – one's a lot more soft, a lot more open.

It's a bit like this can get a little... there's the possibility at times that this openness with the palms up gets a little flabby, flaccid sometimes. It's not that it will or it needs to, or that you shouldn't do that—it's just that's one of the ways it can go. Just as this position can get too tight and rigid and forced, that openness can get a little loose in a way that actually doesn't allow so much depth.

But really, the answer I would give is: play and experiment. There's much more than just those two options. It's quite a subtle thing, this whole matter with the hands. It's not like a huge difference, though between those two positions is quite extreme, so that could be a deal changer. But even going from this to just turning my hands palms down can make a big difference—it will. And as I said, it's amazing: here are

the hands at the heart, and just shifting them slightly, or just a little bit higher, a little bit softer—it's different. It's really subtle, but it's different.

Not to make too big a deal out of this, but it's something we become more aware of. Mind affects body, body affects mind. And by body I mean physical, but also energy body—and then energy falls under perception and all of that.

Question from Participant

So with this kind of way of working with the imaginal—I find it very useful and it's very much like tantric practices—I have a couple of questions. One is about the relationship between soul and spirit, like when you go deeper into this kind of emptiness work and there's a kind of purity or transcendental quality sometimes. How do those two work together? And the second question is about kilesas—whether when you're working in this way, it means that it no longer has that soul resonance. Or is it that the whole traditional conception of being around at the time when the Buddha's teachings exist and awakening is possible—from what you've seen from all your students and everything you've been around—is that not so relevant anymore?

These are really important questions, and I'm really interested in them. I've talked a little about the interface with tantra in the past, and I hope to talk more about it in the future. But these are big, big questions, so let's see what we can say briefly.

Regarding the first one: kilesas refers to greed, hatred, and delusion—the three poisons in classic Buddhist language. These are the defilements that we get rid of in full awakening. The path involves dissolving these obstacles to awakening until, allegedly, they don't arise again for a fully enlightened person. This is all great and important and true.

Part of what we need to understand is that we can cut things at different levels—like chopping a tree at different heights. You can chop kilesas at different levels. The deepest level of cutting kilesas is actually seeing that the kilesa is empty. There is no one who has this greed, hatred, delusion. More than that, ultimately speaking, there is no greed, hatred, delusion.

This realization does several things. It undermines the whole mechanism of the kilesas generating. But it also frees you up in relation to how you're seeing them. Then the whole question becomes: now how am I going to live? How am I going to live in my actions? How am I going to live imaginatively, knowing that? That's complex.

As you say, most traditional tantric wisdom operates with quite a tight basis in the bodhisattva aspiration, in developing goodness and kindness, in commitments and vows of monastic orders and ethics. I think for most people, that foundation in goodness is important. Even today I was talking with someone about this—and I'll mention this maybe later in the retreat—but I think there's a danger of being too much toward the white and the sort of nice, pure white.

That will work for some people. In other words, what's alive... Souls are different, so to speak. Soul-making is different for different people at different times.

So I have a great resonance with purity and purity of heart. It's something that speaks to me so deeply. And I also recognize that I have a lot of darkness. And by darkness, I don't mean evil. I don't mean anything like that. I mean the dark gods, you know, and eros and things.

But it might be that someone—and this relates to your third question—the path of purity and the resonance with purity is soul-making for them. And the whole myth, even the classical Buddhist myth, is just what they need. Or it's what they need all their life, or it's what they need for a portion of their life. And at some point, maybe, it becomes no longer so potent, so deep, and so rich soul-making. What's missing? What's happening here?

I have to also say that when the Buddha was alive, they lived in a different cosmos. They did not live in a flat, scientific, materialist cosmos. The whole thing was ensouled anyway in ways that—I mean, don't get me started—but we approach the Buddhist myth in a much truncated form nowadays. And for some people, even that truncated form is alive for them as myth. It's soul-making. It fits very beautifully. And like I said, that might last a person's whole life, or it might just last a part of their life, or it might never really do it for them.

And some people need a path that allows and invites more of the erotic, more of a place for desire and the beauty of desire, more passion, more darkness, more eros. How that relates to ethics, you know, that's complicated. For me, ethics are very important, but they're also not simple. They're not simple from a soul point of view. They're also not just simple even from an ethical point of view.

One of the functions of Buddhist ethics is actually to simplify things. So in the original Buddhist teachings, the movement is out of the world, simplify, go both the path of mindfulness and the path of non-fabrication, of letting go of appearances and actually transcending appearances. You could say they're not soul-making. The path of deliberate fabrication, deliberately engaging in images, is more soul-making.

So you've got kind of three avenues, which ultimately we can be skillful in all of them: mindfulness or bare attention, deeper and deeper into non-fabricating, and then skillful playing with fabrication, which we'll be emphasizing on this retreat. Two of those cut soul-making because they cut imagery. You understand? They have their place. And for some people, even that whole thing is enough. They don't have a lot of need for imagery and eros. They're just a different soul. Other people, it's not going to fly. It might have its place, but it's not going to be the full picture.

So it's almost like, as I said this afternoon, souls are different, paths are different, we have different needs, and that changes over time. If I do have a lot of eros, if I do have a lot of image, if I do have a lot of passion, there's a huge gift in that, and there's a challenge in that. So with every gift, I'm given challenge. Do you understand?

I'm asked to integrate more. I'm asked to work with more. It's more complicated. It's richer. It's like, how does this fit with that? How do I get skill in this? And then there's this, and then there's this. In a way, it's easier to just not have any of that. And it's all kind of simple, and there isn't a lot of complexity. But the question is...

And this is more of a long-term trajectory as well. It's like, what's my soul and what are the needs of my soul? I think from teaching so much and hearing from so many people—someone said to me, what was the word she used?—"I feel neutered," or "something's amputated. I've been doing mindfulness, I've been doing..." For another person, it's not at all like that—it's enough for them. But this person said it's only when we raise it as something that they realize, oh, that's been missing. Or someone else saying to me how years of practice, actually trying to fit into a certain box without even realizing, and then feeling something's not right.

So there has to be a kind of honesty and a sensitivity in asking, but it is more to ask.

One very last thing. In terms of what you're referring to—something which maybe people don't understand, but Hillman talks about the dichotomy between soul and spirit. Soul being more this dark, labyrinthine, complicated, passionate, involved. Spirit being more spacious, transcendent, long views, peaceful, calm, equanimous, removed, detached.

Most spiritual teachings, classical Buddhism included, are more of the spirit. But I think there's a lot of skill in making that distinction. I also, more recently, would kind of call it all soul and not make that distinction. It's like, if we say our soul has different needs or different levels, so I love the transcendent. I have a pull there and I can't tell you how grateful I am that I devoted so many years towards that and to opening towards that. And it's not everything.

So there's that, if you like, level of soul and level of soul need, and there's other stuff that's not about that—more this darker stuff, or more towards fabrication. I'm more interested now in what way of holding all this actually just allows it to integrate without causing dichotomies or polarities or either-ors, and actually, again, recognizing that not everyone, but a lot of us are complicated beings.

I'm a complicated person, and it's like that complexity does not need to get ironed out. It needs to be respected and opened to and navigated and sensitized to, so that my makeup is bowed to rather than, let's blanch it all out and paint it like everyone else's—nice and white and square and clean and all that. So yeah, I'm more interested in ways of thinking that can actually accommodate all of it in a way of thinking that's useful.

That's the short answer.

Okay. So, Tam, you had a question. Do you want to? Well, we can take time. Some people will need to go, but I'm happy to... Unless you feel like it's a really long one or...

"I've been burning for like three years or something, so I'd really like to ask it."

"Hello Rob."

"Hello Tam."

"Hello. I'm a metta practitioner. That's what I do. I do walking metta and breathing body metta. Well, when I practice metta, I purr like a cat. And it goes vroom, vroom, vroom. And I can feel a sensation and I can kind of hear it. It's not me—I'm being purred. I can move it around."

"Is it nice?"

"And I can move it. Yeah. Good. Wonderful. And I can do all sorts of weird extraordinary things with it. And sometimes it's stronger than others, and as it goes away for a few minutes, then it feels particularly attached. Yesterday was the first time I found it quite boring. I can do it when I'm not meditating, if I choose to do it. Sometimes I can turn it on and off. I can bring it into my daily life. It's transforming how I'm being in the world. That's what it's doing. I need your help and your guidance because sometimes it's a bit too much to handle and it's a lot and I know that it's more than pīti—it has different qualities, different flavors..."

I've never really read the journals, don't really know much about this territory. I sat with Lily years ago, but I need your help. Sometimes it's overwhelming, sometimes it's boring. What's happening to me when I'm trying to work with this?

To me it sounds really good, actually quite wonderful. Let me offer you three possibilities, three ways of working with what you're describing.

The first is about managing the energetic intensity. If it feels too much energetically, use the imagination a little bit to let it out, like letting steam off. You mentioned it makes you stand up and grows around you—that's fine. Allow it to move how it wants to move, outside of the body, radiating towards other people. When it feels too overwhelming, we ease it by opening the channel so it flows out. This becomes really skillful—it's healing you on the way out as well, but it has more space rather than creating too much pressure inside. There's not enough space for the amount of energy and purring that's going on, so create more space.

The second thing—and you've already touched on this—sometimes it doesn't feel like "me." You said, "I'm being purred." Especially in the context of this retreat, that's exactly what you want to open to more. This has divine dimensions. If it gets boring, that divine quality might be what needs to come alive in how you're seeing it. You can play with that—does that make sense?

Even when it's not boring, I wonder whether this divine dimension, which has everything to do with this retreat, is what's already there. There isn't a prescription for this, but it's about allowing it to have its divine dimensions—plural. Something bigger than you is coming through, as you said. You are being

purred, probably for all kinds of reasons. This is part of the imaginal sensibility—allowing that experience to have more than purely physiological or human resonances. I'm allowing myself to feel all the different kinds of divinity that are potentially wrapped up in that perception.

The third thing, which may or may not include the second, is sometimes you want to put the purring in contact with suffering. Cats purr, and sometimes when they sense that a person is unwell, they'll come sit on your belly and purr away. The purring, the healing energy, comes into contact with the pain—psychic pain, heart pain, whatever it is. You can deliberately bring these elements into contact.

So you might be purring and feeling good, and wonder why you'd want to bring up pain now. But it's about bringing it up just a little and letting the purring surround and lap against and hold just a small amount of pain so that those two come into contact. Or you might be in some pain and ask, can there be purring that comes to touch this? What's important is the contact between the purring and the pain, so they don't occupy different realms of our being without touching each other.

Sometimes that contact also happens within the contact of divinity, which casts a different light on everything. Catherine will be talking about this tonight—about dukkha, pain, and divinity, and how they meet.

Yes? So these are three possibilities for working with pain and pleasure, with dukkha and sukha, in our practice.

Does this approach feel workable for now?

The invitation is to explore these different ways of relating to our experience—allowing the purring and the pain to meet, to touch, to inform each other. Sometimes in this meeting, we discover something larger that holds both: that sense of the sacred, the divine quality that Catherine will be exploring tonight in her talk on dukkha and divinity.

These are not techniques to master, but rather gentle experiments in opening to the fullness of what we are. Each moment offers us a fresh opportunity to practice this kind of tender, aware engagement with whatever arises.

Thank you for your attention and your practice.

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