The Movement of Devotion (Live and Shortened Version)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 42:55

Probably more than what we might say are typical or conventional approaches to practice and conceptions of the path and ways forward – more than the usual ways we might be familiar with – I think we feel that this kind of way of working and what we're opening up here, and the practices that we're involved in and what unfolds from that, unfolds more individually.

There's certainly general principles, and we draw attention to these, but there's something quite individual about what arises, what kinds of things arise, what order things unfold in, and also differences in people's propensities, what they've done, what their natural tendencies are in this or that direction. Sometimes someone needs to spend time developing this before that is available, or another person it's the other way around, or another person can move quickly through something that takes longer for someone else. All of this is just in the nature, I think, of the material that we're covering.

So again, in putting out these teachings, we're aware that it's a lot and some of it definitely – for everyone some of it will just be later: I don't quite understand, or sounds good, I get it but not right now, and some will feel very pertinent, and some will be stuff like I know that. There's quite a discernment, I think, and we could talk a lot about just discerning what to pick up, what to stay with, and what to just leave. This being recorded and so on, we're putting a lot out, and just to have that big picture sense.

With that, let me say a few things in that spirit. One thing I mentioned: we're not so much emphasizing or having the direction, the priority in this retreat of focusing or concentration, so-called, as a goal. It's not so much what this retreat is about and this way of unfolding is about. Rather, I would say openness is, or different kinds of openness is more what we'd like to emphasize and encourage and support. So openness of mind, openness of view, openness of perception, openness of heart as well.

Just to say a little bit about this. In this tradition, in our tradition, most of us are used to practicing with the eyes closed. There's an inward gaze and this can be really, really helpful. It's a little early on the retreat maybe, but what about actually, if you feel inclined, experimenting with eyes open or eyes closed? In other words, there's no hierarchy here, and as with everything else, we can experiment and find out actually what's helpful when. So you can start a sitting with the eyes open and then maybe close at a certain point, or maybe they're closed and they open again. Careful if that movement isn't a movement of restlessness, just like something needs to change because I'm a bit bored or fidgety or something. But really this question of like sensitive discernment: what actually helps? What helps? So experimentation.

When the eyes are open, we can still – many people will still be able to see purely intra-psychic images, if we use that language, intra-psychic as if the psyche is something separate. So even though the eyes are open, I can still be sensitive to and in touch with an internal image, but the eyes are open. And when the eyes are open too, there is the chance to perceive the world differently, perceive others, and what's around me in some kind of what we're calling cosmopoiesis. The eyes open may lend themselves more easily to that, and that's part of what we're wanting to explore.

So you might start sitting with the eyes open, actually notice that already there's something different in the way that I'm sensing what's around me, and then maybe dwell with that with the eyes open. Maybe then see, or can I actually have that with the eyes closed? The same sensibility, not necessarily directly visual, for instance. But similarly, with the eyes closed, we can still, as I said, have a sense of the, a different sense of the world around us. There can still be a cosmopoiesis with the eyes closed – comes through the other senses or the inner visual sense, et cetera.

Wrapped up in this, again, is this kind of experimenter's question: why does it – what makes this work or not work? If the eyes are open or eyes are closed, what makes it work sometimes and feel fruitful and other times not? To me these are really important questions for a practitioner to begin to ask these kind of questions, especially once you've done a bit of practice. It's like you want to be your own – you want to be the person finding out and researching and discovering. What happens is not just random. We're not just receiving stuff out of nowhere. Things work or don't work or unfold in certain directions for reasons that we can actually begin to understand and explore and play with.

But in relation to whether, for instance, the eyes are open or closed and whether that feels helpful or not, one of the things that makes a big difference is the relationship with what I'm seeing. Whether it's an internal image or hearing or seeing – seeing is a broad word for what I'm perceiving – but it's the relationship with the object. So if I'm reifying what I see and clinging to it as some kind of reality, or if I'm grasping in a gross way, I want that, or I really need to get rid of that – and this could be anything, something in the body, something, it could be a self-view, it could be a person – the reifying and the grasping will affect hugely what is available.

Another factor would be if I lose contact with my body space, the space of the energy, and I'm leaning out there and I lose touch and sensitivity here. So all those three things, even if that's subtle, that kind of leaning and grasping – what will happen? The imaginal realm will fade and the cosmopoiesis will fade. Something will dissolve of its potential and power.

But we can be, you know, experiment with being more open with the senses if it feels okay and see what happens. There's a lot of people in the hall and sometimes we're used to, you know, just everyone shut up so I can do my meditation and my concentration can get better. And it can be quite common to hear noises from other people as disturbances and distractions from my project of meditation, et cetera.

What's happened there? There's a pushing out, a trying to close in and a pushing out of the sensorium, of

the sense realms, versus an inclusion, actually opening to include more. But more than that, there's a view. I'm viewing this person in a subtle way as a nuisance. Why don't they settle down?

Why can't they be quieter? Part of what we're interested in is playing with view.

So here's this human being who strikes me as clumsy and insensitive and too noisy, perhaps even just subtly. Can I play with the view? Here is an angel. Here is an angel. The sounds I am hearing are the sounds of an angel. I'm shifting the view deliberately.

I don't just mean angel as a metaphor—oh, they're so sweet. I mean it in more than a metaphor without a reification. Somewhere in between what that word metaphor has come to mean—a euphemism or whatever for just they're a sweet, nice person, really—somewhere in between that and this kind of solidification of the word angel.

And this shift of view is not the same as like, oh, I'm so judgmental. I should think this or I should be able to see that. We're really talking about the realm of experimentation here. Playing with views, this agility or flexibility with view. There's something you can try and see and see what happens. And this is the kind of thing that we're really emphasizing.

In the practice today then, we're allowing a little bit more flexibility between practices like we talked about and mentioned as a possibility yesterday, so energy body very much. Catherine was talking about how there are different frequencies of the experience of body. We can know the solidity, the earthiness, the soil as an important frequency. And then sometimes it's much lighter and more ethereal than that. All the spectrum is available, and ultimately where we're going with this—it's all divine. It all becomes divine.

But the energy body is connected with whether we're working with emotions, whether we're working with images, whether our direction is more in the way of samadhi. Today you can start to allow more of the imaginal in, if you feel like. And that could be very spontaneous, what arises in image, or it could be more deliberate—like following on from, for instance, Catherine's meditation yesterday with the imaginal figure of love or something that already works for you as an image and you draw it back deliberately.

But there can be a flexibility between these practices, the emotional awareness, the samadhi, and the imaginal—these directions, intentional directions. And always the sensitivity to the body and the sense of what's helpful, what's soul-making, is a central aspect, integral aspect.

Let me say a little bit more about this, particularly in relation to imaginal practice. A few months ago, I think it is now, Catherine told me she was having a conversation with a friend of hers who's a Jungian psychoanalyst. And he was talking about what they call active imagination in that tradition. So it's similar to—there's quite a lot of similarity between that and what we're doing, not completely. And he said to her, if I remember rightly, something like, "It's just a grace when that door opens, when you enter active imagination. There's nothing you can do to bring that on. It just comes."

I would say not necessarily at all. I mean, yes, it can come spontaneously, but there's this question: what is it that feeds? What is it that nourishes? What is it that opens certain doors? And what is it that closes certain doors?

So in the way that we're presenting the imaginal, we can deliberately practice opening to the imaginal, opening that door, crossing the threshold, if you like, into the imaginal realm. We can deliberately practice cosmopoiesis. And we're interested in what supports that.

So we're including both spontaneous and deliberate. And what is it that allows us to enter the territory of soul-making? What is it that helps shift the mode of being, the ways of looking, so that that opens up?

So I would say, in part of that, four factors or aspects that are actually interrelated and kind of mutually dependent. And the first is, if this sounds a little technical right now, it will make more sense as practice goes on and some of it will definitely make sense right now.

The first is a lessening of fabrication. The fabrication of perception is less in the moments when there is less creation of solidity and separateness and thingness to the things of perception—that's an important contributing factor to opening the door of the imaginal. And so that's one factor.

Now, how do we fabricate less? That's a whole thing, you know.

But basically, in a nutshell, it's when there's less clinging. When there's less clinging and craving, rejection, aversion, and so forth, there is less fabrication of self and perception. So all this practice has to do with—or an integral part of it is—the lessening of clinging, because that lessens fabrication, and that loosens things. We're in the realm of the loose and the alchemical solution.

So that's the first factor: lessening of fabrication.

The second is what I want to call, for want of a better word right now, synesthesia. Some of you will know this word. It's when people's senses get mixed—psychologists make it a clinically pathological condition, but I'm just talking about a mixing of the senses. Sometimes it feels like I see sounds, or I feel colors in the body, this kind of thing.

As fabrication gets less in practice, the six senses tend toward one sense. Some of you will be familiar with this. As the mind calms and gets deeper, what feel like six separate senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind—actually seem to coalesce. Everything is received, if you like, in the same sense field. But there's a continuum there to how separate the senses feel or how they join together. This happens as fabrication gets less anyway. As we let go of more clinging, the senses tend to go more toward oneness. Eventually we go beyond the senses—there's a dissolution, a non-appearance of all sensory perception. But basically there's a spectrum there.

Part of the opening of the imaginal realm is actually—not always, but sometimes—this mixing of the senses. There's more fluidity or blending of the senses that's quite characteristic.

That's the second factor.

The third has to do with the heart and the stance or position or posture of the heart. Receptivity, surrender, humility seem to me to be really important aspects—really necessary aspects for the heart to open this door of the imaginal realm. What is the posture, the attitude of the heart that makes a big difference? I'm going to come back to this in a moment.

The fourth factor is the imaginal itself and the way we're tuning and relating to the imaginal.

So these are all interdependent, but of those four, the first and the third are things we can actually do. We can actually learn with practice, with skill, to cling less so that there's less fabrication and the whole realm of perception gets less solid, more amorphous, more insubstantial, if you like. We learn to do that, and we learn to do it more easily as practice goes on.

And also the opening of the heart—this moving into an attitude of heart that is receptive and has humility in it. Sometimes it feels like, "God, that's such a stretch. I don't know. I'm just locked into this tightness of heart." But as practice goes on, we get better at just shifting to an attitude of humility. It's something that comes and becomes more easy with practice.

These movements—the things that we can do, the lessening of fabrication, this receptivity or humility of the heart—they're things we can actually do. And they allow the opening of the imaginal in ways that affect the soul more deeply, that actually really go deep and are more soul-making. They allow a degree of synesthesia, of this mixing.

As Catherine was saying this morning, it's like different ways of knowing. We tend to only know through the mind or thinking or information, or through "I see it" or "I hear it." But actually other modes of knowing that don't really fit so well into the usual way we think of how the senses work—other modes of knowing become available through all this. That's part of the cosmopoiesis, that's part of the re-enchantment of both what the human being is and what the world is.

So, for example, to just illustrate all this in relation to my illness right now over the last year, and the possibility of dying and all that—sometimes if I'm practicing and I'm using the imaginal in relation to that, and I want to experiment a little bit, what seems important to unlock something, or not to unlock so much as to bring it alive—maybe both, unlock and bring it alive—is the first thing: this humility.

I cannot cure myself. It's not in my power. Maybe the doctors can't. I don't know. But knowing that, or just that recognition—if there's a humility: It's not in my power. I cannot do this on my own. It may or may not happen.

From that humility then another step—if you like, maybe it's a short step—is from that humility, an openness and a surrender to something bigger than me. Let's call it God.

And put that, if you like, in inverted commas, to a God. Whatever language we want to use—something

that is numinous, something other, larger than me.

This stance, this posture of the heart needs to happen first before any other. It opens the door to the imaginal. Or rather, as I said, it's what allows the imaginal to then come alive. So then this figure of divinity comes alive because the humility and the openness and the surrender of the heart allow it to come alive. Without that, it does not come alive. It can still be there as an image, but something's not penetrating so deep.

For example, some time ago I was working with this. This movement happened—the opening, the receptivity, the surrender to the divine. And I heard the birdsong outside, a beautiful birdsong. That birdsong was felt as blessing, felt with my whole soul. The birds were a blessing. Their song was a blessing, and in the blessing was a kind of healing.

The birdsong itself was felt in my body and through the listening, but also in the energy body, as if the birdsong, the sound, the fragments of melody were reweaving my energy body, restructuring. And it was all one—the body and the reweaving and the sound, heard, felt. The synesthesia was there. Through sound, in sound, the energy body was being rewoven. Very, very beautiful. There's a synesthesia between the sound and the body sense, with the sense of blessing, with the sense of the divine, with the sense of the humility, the surrender.

These are sometimes very little, very subtle movements. Sometimes they're a big step, but sometimes they're just subtle movements. Something just—oh yeah—and something is allowed.

Some of you will be familiar with different tantric practices, Vajrayana practices, where you have a sort of prescribed deity. It's Tara or this deity or that deity. It's called a yidam in the tradition. And again, for those of you familiar with this, I would say the devotion to this deity, the surrender, the openness, the humility are really vital and indispensable parts of that practice. They might need to be first—those things first.

In the Tibetan tradition, in the tantric tradition, they talk about preliminaries and prerequisites. It's working on the heart and the heart's relationship with all this—the heart's relationship with being on the path and divinity and all that. And then that allows an opening. So there's reason for all that in the Tibetan tradition.

But this heart surrender or devotion or openness, humility—again, felt in the energy body, brought alive as experience in the heart, in the energy body—can unlock or bring alive. It opens a door, if you like. Otherwise these things are just exercises in visualization or concentration. The heart and its attitude, its posture—the posture of the heart in any moment—is crucial to imaginal practice. Absolutely crucial.

There's quite a lot to say about working with imaginal figures and building on what we did yesterday. Just a reminder: the imaginal figure may feel like it has an ethereal body of light, or it may be very solid. It may be a human being. It may have a certain color, or it may be an animal. There's a real range there. It

may be someone I know, maybe someone I don't know, maybe a historical figure. All kinds of possibilities. Maybe the features are clear of the image, maybe they're not. Maybe it's visual, maybe it's not.

But the character, the personality, the qualities of the presence of the imaginal figure—that's what we want to have clear. The visuals might not be clear, but it's the sense that this is a particular character. And I somehow feel that character.

So there's a place for this stance of the heart, and some of it at different times might involve supplication, asking. If this other is some kind of divine, then one kind of relationship with that is asking. That's how usually people think about prayer, which I'll speak about in a minute. It's asking for something. In my humility, I'm asking for something.

And there can also be this receiving, receiving of the love, for instance. Or just harmonizing. The being in gazing at the imaginal figure and being gazed at—there's a harmonizing of the qualities.

We are absorbing, if you like, almost by osmosis, just by being in contact with this imaginal figure, we're absorbing what it radiates—whether love or compassion or power or whatever quality emanates from it. So there's receiving and there's also a kind of harmonizing.

And then sometimes there can be a kind of union. One actually—I think Mayweather mentioned yesterday—there can actually be a union where me and the imaginal figure become one. There's a communion there, where I and this deity become one. Several people have already shared this kind of thing. It's just a very natural part of the way these practices can open up.

We don't need to make a hierarchy between all that: supplication, receiving, harmonizing, union. They're just different dimensions of experience that can open up.

Sometimes that union or that movement towards union can be erotic, can be sexual. And that's completely within what we would expect for these practices. We don't usually include that in practice, but yes—it's there. It's very normal. It doesn't need to happen, but it can be a very natural part of what happens here in working with these things.

I mentioned the word prayer, and I think for a lot of people—wherever they stand on religion or religions—they think of prayer as supplication, as asking. I'm asking God for a favor, help me out here. I want to say that's really fine as one dimension of what prayer can be. If that's part of it, what I would just say is like so much of this: it's about delicate balance and sensitivity.

Be careful when one is in a supplicatory relationship that it doesn't too much come out of or end up feeding actually a quite contracted sense of self—a smaller, harder sense of self that wants something and is kind of pushing for that. The actual supplication may sometimes contract and make hard the self. It doesn't have to. There's a subtle difference between that and what's a humble opening, opening out of the being to receive from something, someone that's bigger. There's a subtle difference there, but always it's

like noticing what the effect is. Is it contracting more or is it opening or softening more?

When we use words like prayer, that's such a big word with such a range. So yes, there is prayer as supplication. There's prayer as praise. Prayer as blessing. And even what those words mean—what does blessing mean? We say, "may you be peaceful, may you this or that," and there's that level of blessing which is beautiful.

And there's also—it's almost like the word itself has no end to it in what it can open to and what it can mean—to bless and to feel blessing. It's almost like the word itself dissolves or goes into realms where it dissolves, and it's still palpable and powerful. Blessing. And prayer as blessing.

So all these dimensions are open. But all these things—prayerfulness, devotion, surrender, love, compassion—there's such a range of flavors and intensities that are available to us as human beings with all of that. Such a range.

You know, with compassion it can be very quivering in response, very tearful. We're really resonating with the suffering of whoever it is we're giving compassion to. That's one flavor of compassion. Other flavors of compassion are very soothing and they're much more buoyant or bright or quite spacious. There's all these different flavors and they're all good. They're all available to us.

And all these qualities—prayerfulness, compassion—they're always composites. They're mixtures. There's never one thing. So as practice grows, we can know and experience all these ranges and actually discern the differences and the qualities differently. We don't always need to insist on intensity.

of experience. Intensity is not always better or deeper necessarily. But intensity of experience of emotion can be something that we're more and more able to accommodate. We have more and more capacity for intense deep feelings. That grows. We can develop that slowly over time.

So again, openness, openness of mind here, trying to discern what's helpful.

Let me say one more thing about all this—it involves the body. We've been emphasizing that right from the beginning. And you get a sense of how much the heart and the mind, the citta, affect the body and how much the body affects the heart and the mind. So it's two ways.

Now some of you will notice, or in the course of practice whether it's today or on this retreat or another time, sometimes you're sitting with the energy body and especially when the energy body starts to feel quite nice or harmonized, when there's a bit more well-being, sometimes you get the sense that the energy body wants to move in certain ways or adopt a certain posture, or actually that it already is doing that. I'm sitting here still, the physical body's sitting here still, and inside the energy body is dancing. Or it's adopted a certain posture, or it's moving in a certain way, or wants to move in a certain way.

So this is different than restlessness. It's just fidgety or just a bit bored. Something is actually quite harmonized and the energy body is moving or wanting to move. So this is something—don't need to make

it happen, it's not better or worse, it's just something that can happen. If it happens, it's something you can feel into. What does that feel like, this movement or this impulse to move?

And sometimes we can actually deliberately, actively explore the movement. So let the body do what it has the impulse to do. Actually enact it. So there might be spontaneous movements, or usually they tend to be quite slow with this, usually, but anything can happen. Or it might look a bit like Tai Chi or some kind of dancing or something. But actually it could be anything. Sometimes it's just in the hands.

If you know this word mudra, one of the meanings is hand posture. And again, it might happen spontaneously or you allow the body, the hands, to adopt a certain posture. Some people sit like this and that's a very open posture. There's all kinds of other things you can just feel into. You know, this is a mudra—this Anjali prayer. And there's subtle differences. Actually, that feels different emotionally and energetically to the hands being at the heart center, to being at the head center, or even at the mouth. Even just a little bit up and down, this with the hands forward feels different. It's very subtle how it affects the energy body and how it affects the heart.

But these are the sort of things, if you want to, you can let the body experiment with and feel. What is it to touch the earth, the mudra of the hand touching the earth? And what's alive for that imaginatively and in the soul, in the heart? It's a famous Buddha posture. I can't quite see from here—is he doing that? So there's a whole archetypal resonance of that. What is it to bow on the earth and let the forehead touch the earth? So how does it feel? How does it feel to let the body do some of this stuff? And how does it feel to just keep the physical body still and allow the imaginal energetic body to do it? There's two different avenues there.

Sometimes meditation feels stuck. And say, for instance, with this mudra, with the hand posture, it's quite interesting—sometimes just a little shift of the mudra, of the hand posture, and something unsticks. And because the citta and the body are that connected, sometimes just a shift of the body, even the hands into some different thing like that, and something unsticks. The emotional, the heart opens, the energy body opens, the perception opens, the possibilities open. Really quite subtle can be.

So you don't need to get sort of obsessed with all this or whatever, but if it's something that feels like it's fruitful to explore, let yourself explore it a little bit. There's quite some richness here. Sometimes very subtle changes can actually have a lot of effect.

Okay, so practice-wise, if you want to, you can include this today. And so in the walking meditation, again, energy body. And sometimes, as Catherine was saying this morning, it's just about solidity and the contact. But energy body.

And if you want, the walking meditation can start to include some of this more subtle exploration—how does the energy body want to move? Maybe it's not walking. Maybe I'm standing there and doing what looks like Tai Chi or some kind of dance, or I just want to adopt a particular posture and remain still.

Again, it could be actual physical enactment that the body is doing, and it could be that I actually look stock still—the physical body appearing motionless—but inside there's this movement going on, or this certain posture. So let yourself explore if you want to. You can explore that at times, if it calls to you.

Everything affects everything else. Like I said, the energy body, the heart, the emotions, the physical body—it's all this mutually dependent web, this beautiful web. Everything touches and shapeshifts everything else.

When there's this energy body movement, either the inner imaginal movement or the actual movement, sometimes that in itself will open up, as I said, the perception. It will bring an image or it will open up a cosmopoiesis or a shift in way of looking. And sometimes it works the other way around. You're working with an image and it seems like because of this working with the image, or because of this cosmopoiesis, the body wants to adopt a certain posture or move, or the hands want to gesture in a particular way. So often the causality flows both ways. This causes that and that causes this.

What that means for practice is to notice, if you play with this material, and as you do—or as much as you do—can we notice the energy body, the emotion, the feeling and all that, but also what's happening in perception, in the sense of self, the sense of the world, the way of looking, the sense of the body, of other, of environment.

So the last thing—with all this, sometimes it's more helpful to enact things. For instance, prostrations or actual chanting, actual sounds, and it brings the being alive. It moves the energy and something comes alive and we get more sensitive. And sometimes the being wants not to do that. It's actually stock still and I'm just letting it—the bowing is happening. No one can see it, but inside I'm bowing.

Sometimes the being needs that kind of more subtle manifestation, and sometimes it needs the actual physical expression—no, actually bend the body and do that prostration, chant, vocalize. So again, this is part of this complexity and discernment in all this. When does one bring me alive and when, curiously, does one actually just shut me off and not bring the sensitivity? There's not a rule. It's not always one or the other.

Part of the play of all this is to be sensitive to these nuances. Do you get that? Good.

Let's have just a little bit of silence together.

Really, this encouragement—just take what's useful. If something just doesn't feel relevant right now, leave it. Just leave it.

Thank you for listening.

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