Hearing All Sounds as Mantra: A Jewel-like World

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 57:03

So in a few minutes, we'd like to do a bit of an experiment—a guided meditation. But I think it's worth taking a few minutes to recap what we've been doing in terms of meditation and instructions. There's a lot we're putting out, and it's hard to discern between things or navigate or understand how it all fits together. So very briefly to recap—some of you might want to write this down because it will help you keep it clear.

You could say that there are five directions we've offered so far as meditative directions or intentions. I'm using those words deliberately—they're intentions and directions. Partly why I'm saying that is because all five are actually interrelated. They overlap; they will occur at the same time. There'll be mixtures in the moment in practice. Sometimes two of them are happening, or five of them are happening. But to help us get clear, you can think of them as: what's my actual intention here? What am I trying to do right now in practice? Where am I gently encouraging the practice to move towards? What am I emphasizing right now?

They overlap, they're interconnected, they feed each other. So we're thinking about five different directions, but they're not really different.

The first is samādhi, by which I mean tending to, caring for, gently encouraging a sense of well-being in the energy field, in the feeling of the space that my body occupies and the mind occupying that space—enjoying that well-being, whether it's intense or whether it's really quite unremarkable. Some sense of harmony, of well-being there. The intention of samādhi is not so much whether that's happening or not, or how good it feels, but more that's what I'm gently working on. I'm tending to that. I'm encouraging it. That makes it, at that time, a samādhi practice.

It might actually feel quite difficult at times, but that's still my intention. I'm working with the difficulty to smooth out the difficulties or the wonkiness in the system. But my intention is—it's not so much what's happening, it's what's my intention with what's happening. Gently nourishing, shaping the feeling of the energy body towards more well-being. We could call that samādhi.

The second is a caring for and an attention to the emotional life and the emotional unfolding in the moment, again via the energy body. Sometimes it's working with the difficult: here's this heartache, here's this grief, here's this anger, here's this contraction. Sometimes it's just a much subtler emotional state like boredom or something subtler like that. So it includes working with the difficult. It might also include

working with the lovely and opening to that, being with that, watching that in the energy body. Or perhaps something that's really quite neutral. But my focus and my intention is to be with, to watch, to care for, to hold, to be sensitive to what's happening emotionally.

As Catherine was talking about this morning, there's all kinds of skill involved—a lot of what you know from your other retreats and mindfulness practice and insight meditation you can bring to bear. And in the talks that we asked you to listen to before the retreat, there are many skillful ways of working with the emotions.

The third is the imaginal. This could be a spontaneous image that arises—you're sitting in meditation and something arises, and it feels like, oh, this is interesting, this is helpful, it feels resonating in my soul, and you go with that spontaneous image. It could also be a deliberately invoked image, something that has been meaningful and helpful to you in the past. Maybe the past is just the last sitting—it came for the first time an hour ago; fine, bring it up again if it feels helpful.

So there's the deliberate invoking, calling to mind, calling into presence and into relationship with an imaginal image. It doesn't have to be only the imaginal figure of love that we did on the first day. It can be anything, as long as it feels soul-making—it touches my soul. It doesn't have to be love. It doesn't have to be a certain kind of love. Love comes in a lot of different flavors.

But it can be spontaneous or deliberate with the imaginal.

The fourth way is what we've been calling Cosmopoiesis. Here the senses open to the world around us and to others around us. We're seeing—again, either spontaneously or deliberately—seeing others, seeing the earth, seeing the cosmos, sensing it other than we usually do, sensing it as divine in some way. On this retreat particularly, a divine that involves the imaginal. We'll say more about this.

Here there's an opening. We talked about opening the eyes, opening the senses. It's not so much just an imaginal figure inside, so to speak. We're actually sensing life through image, sensing the cosmos through image. This is cosmopoiesis—it's creative.

The fifth approach is really just to say energy body again—that all of this is to be done, as much as possible, with sensitivity to the energy body. And what do we mean by energy body? We mean a whole range. It's simply how this feels. It can be very solid—we're really talking about a sense of earthiness and solidity. That's just one range on the possible frequencies of how the energy body can be experienced. Or it can be very ethereal, very light and luminous and translucent and spacious. It's all just the range of the energy body.

Within working with the energy body, we talked yesterday about the possibility of actually listening to the energy body, feeling it and letting it manifest in movement or posture, allowing yourself to explore that. How do the hands want to be? What posture do I want to adopt? What movements do I want to adopt? Sometimes keeping the physical body still and just feeling the inner imaginal body—the energy

body—actually dancing, moving in a certain posture.

So those are the five approaches, and they all overlap. Sometimes what you'll get is an emotion that's difficult, you're working with it, and then at some point it gives birth to an image. Then you come into relationship with the image and the image affects the emotion. Maybe from the image actually comes some well-being. Everything is going to affect everything else.

What matters, I think, for clarity is just being clear what's going on, but also: what am I emphasizing right now? Because I could be working with an image—a couple of people wrote this in notes—working with an image and then out of the image a very nice feeling comes. There I have a choice. I can stay with the relationship with the image, resonating with all the soul-making, beautiful fecundity and complexity of the image, aware of it and enjoying that it feels nice. Great. Or I can almost emphasize more the well-being in the body and let the image perhaps fade or go to the background, and then I'm leaning more in a samadhi direction.

Do you understand? There's just about taking control of my glider a little bit. What currents are here? Ah, I'll ride that one. Okay, now this one.

An image can spill over into cosmopoiesis—all of this, they're all connected. It's just to be aware of what's happening and actually at some point: okay, if this is happening, do I want to shift gears or shift direction and make an intentional shift to emphasize this or that?

Good. Very good.

Let's do this experiment. We're going to start with a mantra—a mantra that probably many of you would be familiar with—the syllables om mani padme hum. It's the mantra of Avalokiteshvara, who from the Buddhist pantheon is the bodhisattva of compassion.

There are many different ways to work with mantras. Many different ways. And many different meanings associated with them. Some people when they start working with Om Mani Padme Hum ask: what does it mean? Each syllable has a kind of very specific resonance in certain tantric teachings. So Om is the opening to the universal, some people say, and Hum of the Om Mani Padme Hum is the embodiment.

We could do all that, but actually what you find is different interpretations, often completely contradictory—which is interesting, again, given what we've emphasized on this retreat.

And it reinforces the idea that all this is creative. They're just ways of looking. We can adopt and shape this however we want. But rather than be very specific about what this means or that means or what it should do, again, we would like to emphasize more of a kind of looser, more poetic, creative approach to this. So this mantra can unfold in all kinds of ways. It can have all kinds of meanings. It can be different from one person to the next.

Now some of you are familiar with this mantra and you've probably heard different melodies for it. And

this relates to what I was talking about yesterday with compassion and love. So it's the mantra of compassion, and we could use a melody and sing it in a way that's full of yearning and full of the pathos and the tearful resonances with the pain of the world. That would be one flavor of orienting the thing—or a certain tenderness, a beautiful tenderness, or just a spaciousness, or a kind of healing quality. All this is possible as characteristics of compassion which can be translated musically into the melody and the way that it's sung.

Partly why this is an experiment is what I want to get at today is, funny enough, not so much emphasizing the obvious aspect of compassion. I want to use the mantra, see if it's possible to use the mantra to open some kind of cosmopoiesis for us. So the interest is more in the transformation of the sense of the world, of the sense of what the world is, than so much in invoking compassion. But again, overlapped, overlapped. And it's all subjective as to what musical character gives rise to what. So let's just do this and see what happens.

If you want to come into a meditative posture that feels comfortable... Catherine and I will chant a little bit till you get the melody, and then join in. But let's come into your posture first and, as always, settle into the posture.

Is it possible to let the center of the awareness be in the heart center rather than the head center or anywhere else? So that the center of your awareness is in the middle of the chest, in the heart. Just letting the awareness be centered there and move outward to the whole energy body, the whole space. From that center... sitting in the heart, in the energy body, open, opening that space, filling it with awareness.

So there is, although we're not emphasizing it so much, there is compassion being intended and radiated through this chanting. So let that be part of it, that there's blessings coming forth from your heart. There's at least the intention for compassion, for care, for love, for healing and tenderness to yourself, to all beings, and actually to the whole world. Part of what's happening here is there's this radiating out of that. It doesn't mean you feel it all the time. It just means that that's the intention. That's included in the intention.

So Catherine will start the chant and we'll join in. And then when you feel like you kind of get the melody, please join in. Let yourself sing it, but connect it to the energy body. And then I will guide us as we go.

[Chanting begins: Om Mani Padme Hum...]

As you keep chanting, see if you can feel your throat and your chest open... And listen, listen as well...

So the chanting, the air, and the intention open you up. Let it open up the whole energy body. Just radiating to expand the energy body and fill out, radiate out from the energy body.

The intention, the sound comes from the whole of you pouring outwards in all directions. Opening, trusting the goodness of your intention.

Letting it take form, take embodiment through sound.
Om Mani Padme Hum.
Through the expressions of your body.
Om Mani Padme Hum.

Om Mani Padme Hum Li Om Mani Padme Hum Li Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum Hri Om Mani Padme Hum Hri

OM MANI PADME HUM

Now Catherine will continue the chant and you fall silent, but listen—listen. Let it echo in your being. The resonances of sound and of soul and of love. Of beauty, of sacredness.

OM MANI PADME HUM OM MANI PADME HUM

In chanting we are enchanting, enchanting. A spell, an invocation, magic.

Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum

In a way, the mantra, the sounds, are actually echoing something that is already present, something woven into the cosmos, part of the fabric of the cosmos. These sounds that are more than sounds—mantra, divine speech. In the incantation, in the chanting, we're joining in, we're adding to something that's already here, already everywhere. The dimension of the cosmos.

Om Nipani

Just very loosely, lightly, without pressure in the opening. You get a sense—the syllables, each syllable is a jewel. These jewels, infinite jewels spread throughout the cosmos. Everywhere already existing, this divine speech. Jewels that are creative elements, cosmic powers, part of the magical fabric of things. They are prayer, these jewels woven in. Woven into the fabric of things is prayer, blessing, praise. Jewels of many colors, beauty, holiness. Divinity.

And now, let it go silent for a bit. Can you have that mantra internally? Very lightly, very spaciously, very delicately. But it's still this more cosmic sense. It's the echoes in your mind, the roots of which are divine. The roots of your mind, of your consciousness, echoing, resonating with the mantra that is everywhere.

Maybe it's the whole melody, maybe just very faint echoes, filaments. Maybe it gets fainter. But the sense of the jewels, the mantra as jewels—that can stay. Just open, open.

So maybe it has the internal mantra, maybe very faintly, maybe it's faded. But these jewels of the imaginal realm that pervade the cosmos, the beauty of that everywhere—within, without, all around.

Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Om Mani Padme

Actually, can we hear all sounds as mantra, all sounds as divine speech? So it's in Catherine's voice, it's in my voice. It's in the coughing and the sneezing and the shuffling. It's in the birdsong, it's in the wind. Open, hearing all sounds as mantra.

Through these jewels, the divine is blessing all of creation. Creation is not other than the divine. The divine is blessing itself. Blessing its blessing. So no need to get tight—we're opening to something, we're opening to a poetic, artistic possibility. Very delicate.

And maybe you get a sense—not just sounds, but everything. Body sensations, sights. All things are these jewels. All things, all appearances, all phenomena, all experiences—divine speech, beautiful jewels.

And again, if we just go into silence for a bit. It's not so much about sound, inner sound or outer sound. Perhaps that fades, even the echoes in the mind fade. But this more pervasive sense in all the senses, something more subtle, more magical—a cosmopoiesis.

This encompassing awareness—involving and including all of the senses—is actually what we're tuning into. This is, if you like, the object, so to speak, of the meditation. It's not necessarily in one place spatially; it's everywhere. No need to push anything, just gently opening and encouraging something subtle.

When you're ready, still in this awareness—if you can keep this awareness—and when you're ready, open your eyes and let it come into the sight as well, just a little bit. All things: sights, sounds, the plane overhead, the bird outside.

Now we could try one more thing. See if we can transition to standing up and putting the mats to the side of the room, but seeing if you can do that with awareness of the energy body. Just paying attention to the energy body in the transition of the movement. We're going to do one last thing with this chant. Just see, without pressure, if you can feel the body space as you're moving. So there's the mindfulness there of the body.

And then let's sort of homogeneously fill the room.

Again, in the standing posture, just connecting with the energy body. Letting that space a bit bigger than you, filling it out with awareness. But again, seeing if you can let that awareness center in the heart center, in the middle of the chest. And allowing and including what's moving through emotionally right now, whatever that is. It has a place. It's welcome.

So aware of the heart, aware of the space of the energy body, aware too of the sensations with the feet. But you're in that energy body space. You're filling that with awareness.

Catherine will start chanting again, and the same cosmopoiesis, the same encouragement to that art, that poetry.

Om Mani Padme Hum

So there's openness in the listening, receptivity. There's also poetry. It's a creative listening, creatively allowing the ripples, the radiation. Creative sensing of yourself, of the world around you. Creative receptivity.

Let the eyes open if they're not already. Stay connected to your heart, to your soul, to the energy body, the resonances. Opening the senses.

Now is it possible to walk slowly around the room, walking between each other, keeping this sensibility, this openness, this creative receptivity? It doesn't have to be super slow, but whatever feels like it works for you. You don't have to make eye contact, but you can if you want. But open to these beings around you here in this room.

Who are these beings? What are these bodies? Are they not also jewels? Is not each one a thousand jewels? Sensitive to the energy body, sensitive to the heart, the soul, but open. The senses open. Open to the mysterious depths of otherness. The divinity of these bodies, of these beings.

Om Mani Padme Hum.

And then just wherever you are, coming to stillness.

Om Mani Padme Hum.

Open to your experience, allowing the fullness of whatever's here—energy, soul resonances, heart resonances.

Om Mani Padme Hum.

And then just dwelling together in the silence with that awareness. Eyes might be open or closed if you prefer right now.

There's a mandala here. Maybe as we were moving it was a fluid mandala.

As we settled back into sitting posture, maintaining that same awareness of the energy body, I noticed how these transition times become fascinating opportunities for staying connected. In what we had just experienced together, I could sense countless possibilities opening—so many different ways this practice might unfold for each person.

This movement we're exploring, what we're calling cosmopoiesis, has a particular direction. It moves outward, always toward inclusion. Eventually, everything is embraced—nothing excluded. When we speak of hearing all sounds as mantra, we're not being selective. All sounds means truly all sounds: the sounds that aren't conventionally beautiful, the sounds of tears, even the sounds of pain and dukkha. As we explored last night, this is about re-enchanting even our suffering. The sound of an airplane overhead, the less-than-melodious urban cacophony—the movement of cosmopoiesis reaches toward everything, embracing all phenomena.

This practice is wonderfully creative and flexible. You might enter through various doorways. We began with actively chanting the mantra, but you could just as easily start with pure listening. Remember my story about the birdsong becoming imaginal birdsong through deep connection? Rather than beginning with vocalized mantra, you simply listen with complete openness, allowing sounds to become imbued with imaginal significance until cosmopoiesis naturally arises.

You might set an intention to hear all sounds as divine speech without any specific mantra at all. Or perhaps you're simply listening with radical openness, and through this very openness, something transforms in the hearing itself—in the art of perception, the poetry of perception.

Sometimes we can deliberately recall a cosmopoiesis—a particular way of sensing existence that we've experienced before. Just as we discussed earlier about intentionally recalling an image, you can bring back a remembered way of perceiving the cosmos, not forcing it but gently re-engaging with what has already unfolded naturally.

But ultimately, this practice expands beyond sound to encompass everything—all appearances, all phenomena, all experiences across all senses.

Let me say something about the miracle of speech itself. Right now, as I speak and you listen, we're witnessing something extraordinary. I have an idea, and through this complex orchestra of muscles, larynx, tongue, and breath, I vibrate the air. These vibrations enter your ears, and somehow you understand what I'm attempting to convey. Communication happens between two beings—how remarkable is this?

Consider the subtlety involved—emotion, nuance, even humor. A joke is particularly amazing: some quality of humor somehow crosses the space between us, and we find ourselves laughing together at the same thing. It's truly miraculous.

Speech carries both the miracle of semantic communication—what I'm trying to convey, what you're receiving, our mutual understanding—and the pure phenomenon of sound itself. Even as you're understanding my meaning, you can simultaneously hear this very speaking as divine speech, as mantra, experiencing the sacred in the music of sound rather than just the content.

There's the meaning level and the music level, and the divine permeates both. Can you hear just the sounds of this voice right now? It's the babble of the divine, the spell and magic of divine speech residing not in meaning but in pure sound. While one part of you receives and understands the words, another part can cosmopoetically hear the sound of this human voice—or birdsong, or any sound—in an entirely different way.

This operates on a different level altogether. It's easier with conventionally pleasant sounds, but remember: this sense of the divine isn't about pleasantness or aesthetic beauty. We're not talking about pretty sensations. We're touching something deeper—another level of experience we can cultivate

awareness of.

In a way, it doesn't really matter. Again, this emphasis on playing, experimenting, finding what works for you. In a way, what Catherine and I are doing is simply putting out different ideas, different possibilities. Maybe you take them as they are. Maybe you alter them with your own creative variations. Maybe it's something completely different that emerges.

Play, discover, experiment. Find your own way. There's no formula here in terms of specifics, as we said before. The invitation is to discover what resonates, what opens doorways for you into this quality of divine listening, of receiving the world with sacred attention.

Thank you for listening.

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