Creating the Path (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 43:27

Anyone, please. Yes?

Rob, I have two questions. One you spoke about briefly in yesterday evening's talk, and I was wondering whether you could say a little more. I've been wondering about seeing the divine in different forms or shapes. Seeing Tara in an apple tree is somehow easier, and I think it makes a difference whether I meditate on Tara or Mickey Mouse—it might make a difference. What is it in the forms that makes them more transmitting or conveying?

The Mickey Mouse retreat is the next one—more advanced! This is really a good question. You're going to get different answers from different people, and this is one of those areas where I have a certain philosophical leaning, but you'll hear very different things.

On one extreme, you'll hear a kind of realism given to these deity figures. Tara is this, and she really has these particular qualities, and even she looks like this. As I think I said in one talk, what's really happening there is these things exist in an imaginal realm which has some kind of objective existence, but which has been dismissed from Western culture for centuries. Actually, it does exist in this realm. What you're doing then, if your perception is pure, is resonating with or perceiving those qualities, and they have power—they have divine power. So that's one version. To me, there's a lot of beauty in that.

I find that I can't—like I think I said at some point—I find it hard now, where I am in my whole practice and everything, to take any kind of realist metaphysics seriously, whether it's a materialist one or some other kind. So my tendency is more to say your perception, your way of looking, your mind is in a way creating that divine with certain characteristics. And that's what comes through. For different reasons, because of the cultural associations with Mickey Mouse, it's harder to do that.

So there are two different extremes. But there's also a bridge between these two, which I think I might mention at some point. If the roots of your mind, your consciousness, your citta, your soul, imagination are divine, then what comes out of your creativity of perception is also divine. So there's not "it exists over there separate from me" or "it's just my any old perception." Do you see what the bridge is?

It's saying, in a way, the imaginal realm is not separate from your mind. The roots of the imaginal realm and the roots of your mind have the same roots in the depths of the divine. So your mind and the fabrications of your mind can also be divine. You say, well, it somehow seems more or less divine at different times. Maybe that's true. Maybe it has to do partly with what's present in the citta at a certain time—the purity or the devotion or whatever, as we've talked about, the openness of heart. And partly it's

what your mind colors creatively.

Do you see how that might bridge those two? Does this make any sense at all?

Well, they do, but this is also—if you know about art theory and literary theory—most people would not nowadays, or for quite a while now, accept the idea that beauty inherently resides in the art. One of the big chunks we edited out of the talk on art perception was about the dependent arising of art. My reaction, my being moved by art, depends on something in the work, something in me at that moment. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony moves me to tears one day, and the other day it's like... you know. So there's something in the present moment. There's also something in the culture. There's something about Beethoven and the image and what he might have said about it and what someone else might have said and some other authority in the general culture. All this feeds in to give a dependent arising of what arises.

To say there's nothing in the art, in the art object, would also be too extreme to me.

Why are you asking? What's with the question?

Why don't I see it in certain things, in certain options?

Okay, so seeing Tara in a piece of litter is possible. It's just a matter of practice, actually. I was practicing this. It's harder for me with plane sounds overhead—the plane sounds. Not because they were particularly ugly sounds. I just couldn't help thinking about the carbon dioxide.

Everything else was beautiful—this particular divinity, this particular character of the divine—and yet it wasn't stretching to include that airplane sound. But then I would experiment further. Was this dependent on pleasant or unpleasant experiences?

Walking outside, if it was too cold, then it became harder to sustain this perception. But this is all just practice. And then you can play with this.

So you have that sense—you're meditating, in this case, on Tara. Then you open your eyes and look around you in your room or wherever you are. At first you might notice that it's easier with a beautiful artifact or whatever catches your eye. Then I look at some plastic object and it's harder. But really, in time, with practice, this perception can extend everywhere.

"I just think there is a difference between different options," someone offered.

Well, there is, and I wouldn't deny that. Absolutely there is. And it also applies ethically. People have been writing notes asking, "How can you say everything's perfect when there's terrorism?" Of course, of course. All I would say is that with practice, that ability to see different kinds of divinity spreads.

Now that doesn't mean—as Andy asked—that we don't care about climate change or we don't do everything we can to address terrorism, including examining the effects of what we do that inadvertently feeds that terrorism. But there are still different kinds of divinity that can be perceived there with

practice. Yes, they're different. What exactly makes them so, I'm not sure I could say—or rather, I'd hesitate to say.

Another question arose: "I just noticed at some point, okay, now that's just sensual pleasure. Just indulging. Although I tried to somehow keep it alive, some kind of vision—I don't know if that's right. But then I backed off because I felt this is not what I want."

The question becomes: what makes something imaginal is a sense of sacredness in it. To me, that's part of how we're defining imaginal—it has some sense of divinity.

But there are several things I want to say about that. First, the divinity is not separate from the sensuality. That doesn't necessarily mean sexuality, but it's embedded in—it's not something separate from—the appearance or the sensuality or the sensual connection with that being or experience.

Second, the divinity can have an enormous range. We tend to think that sexuality has to be of a particular kind—maybe something all about merging in some white, lovey-dovey, blissful way. But there are other kinds of sexuality, and one can discover different styles of divinity within those expressions as well.

However, if it feels like you're practicing and what's actually happening is there are contractions, or something closing down, or something shutting off from the divine, then leave it.

This is difficult territory because for most people in our tradition, this is a stretch. We tend to either ignore sexuality or simply notice it and breathe with it. It's not really included much in our contemplative framework.

What we're interested in doing—one way of summarizing how we conceive this retreat—is expanding the sense of the sacred. Why is it only here and not there? Why is this included and not that? And this includes, as has come up in previous Q&As, things that traditional Buddhism would call kilesas—defilements, impurities, and so forth.

In other kinds of Buddhism, this understanding is expanded further. Now, you can simply call something sacred and actually just be involved in greed. But this is why I return again to the practice of feeling in. Feel the energy body. Feel what's happening in the soul resonance. If there's beauty there, if there's sacredness there, if there's mindfulness there—which means sensitivity to all of this, to all the emotions and the body and the energy—you can trust it.

I was talking to someone this morning about what Jesus said: "By their fruits you shall know them"—by the fruits. And the fruits you can actually feel in the moment through these practices. It's not as though something will feel really sacred and then you get up from meditation and turn into an ogre. It's not going to work that way. You can trust what you feel in the moment.

Now, I know that because sexuality is... we get confused messages in the broader culture. In Dharma culture it tends not to be so included, not so integrated. There are all kinds of personal histories we carry

with this. It can be loaded for people to even think about allowing themselves to approach it. So you don't have to push anything. But if and when you feel a little bit ready, you might explore. I could say much more, but perhaps that's enough for now.

*Student:** I'm a little confused about the cosmopoiesis aspect. This afternoon I had some really blissful experiences—nature being in me and me in nature, almost my body coming apart and becoming part of nature. They were very beautiful experiences. I'm not sure what the cosmopoiesis is. There was a sense of prayer with it, something sacred there. I don't understand... when you say spilling over and it becoming the actual enchanting of the cosmos, I don't really understand that.

*Rob:** Yes, thank you. So what do we mean when we say cosmopoiesis? Let me step back and explain this in contrast to a few different things.

There's imaginal work where you have an imaginal figure, and—maybe with your eyes closed or open—you're relating to that imaginal figure and experiencing different feelings and energies in that relationship. That's imaginal practice.

But sometimes what happens is... the key that often makes the difference for an imaginal figure to spill over into affecting the perception of the world... In our culture, there's a certain accepted cosmology—this is what the world is, this is what matter is, this is where we are.

Cosmopoiesis means that through the creativity of imaginal perception, we can see the world differently. It becomes a different kind of cosmos. A world of light, or a world of fire, or a world made of music. As Yuko was saying, somehow that tree is Tara, or Tara's energy is everywhere. There are many possibilities, but the world actually is—we're perceiving the world as transubstantiated. It's a different kind of structure to the world and our perception of it, which involves sacredness and imagination and beauty.

*Student:** Well, what was happening this afternoon was different.

*Rob:** It may or may not be. I'd have to ask you more about it. If I asked you: How did the world appear different to you then? How did the trees and the garden around you appear different than they usually do? What was the difference?

*Student:** Well, there was a sense of connection. No division.

*Rob:** Yes, beautiful.

So that's what distinguishes the imaginal realm from more conventional spiritual experiences. While the sense of oneness, the dissolution of boundaries with nature that you described is profoundly beautiful and occurs naturally in sustained practice, what we're exploring here has a different quality altogether.

In most spiritual traditions, including our own insight meditation and metta practices, practitioners commonly experience various forms of unity consciousness—everything is matter, everything is

awareness, everything is love. These are genuine openings, natural flowerings of contemplative practice that I deeply encourage.

What's far less common, and what we're specifically cultivating on this retreat, is when a particular character, a specific imaginal figure, suffuses the entire cosmos. As Yuka mentioned, Tara isn't merely love in the abstract—Tara possesses distinct personality, unique qualities, particular presence. The remarkable possibility we're exploring is when everything becomes permeated with that imaginal figure's essence.

I'm theorizing—and this remains somewhat theoretical for me—that what catalyzes this transformation is erotic connection. By erotic, I don't mean exclusively sexual, though that's included. I mean the magnetic attraction between characters, the alive and juicy richness that emerges when two distinct beings encounter each other without merging into undifferentiated oneness.

This otherness is crucial. When you recognize the difference, feel the connection across that difference—that's where eros awakens. The imaginal figure isn't merely a projection of your psyche, not just your childhood memory or your compassion personified. It possesses genuine otherness, autonomous existence beyond your usual self-conception.

This autonomy actually helps define what makes something truly imaginal. When I contemplate an image that proves soul-making, I notice it carries certain unmistakable dimensions: a sense of otherness, autonomous presence, layers of meaning, beauty, sacredness. Though this beauty might not conform to conventional aesthetic categories—it operates by its own mysterious logic.

And it has a sense of other-dimensionality and divinity to it. These are the qualities we notice in an image when it's truly alive for us.

When there's an erotic connection present, I wonder if that's what allows the image, when I stay with it, to spill over into the second kind of cosmopoiesis when I then open my senses more to the world. There's something very retaining of the particulars—connecting, intimate, open, fluid—but retaining the particulars rather than merging into oneness and losing my personhood and the personhood of the image. It's retained there, and that spreads in a different way.

This isn't a big deal whether it happens or not. We're simply exploring possibilities. Catherine and I were discussing last night whether it's the erotic dimension that, when present and alive, encourages this kind of cosmopoiesis. The erotic is this connection—the desire for connection—but not the kind that moves into merging and the loss of particular personhood of self or image.

I'm just talking about possibilities here. None of this has to happen.

In a way, how we're approaching things on this retreat steers more toward this direction, and not so much toward the kind of experience you had in the garden. But if those experiences happen, I say absolutely

fantastic. Enjoy them. They're so wonderful and nourishing and healing in so many ways. But we're steering slightly away from that direction.

Student asks: So that experience can then lead into this one?

It might lead into it, but probably what would happen in that experience is it would stay more in the undifferentiated oneness rather than moving from there into particular connection. In terms of what you described, I doubt it would move from that to the other kind. But anything can happen—this is absolutely brilliant, and you don't have to force anything. We're partly emphasizing this certain direction because it doesn't get emphasized, and there's a whole avenue there that isn't really often talked about.

Student clarifies: The images are still there with that oneness experience, but it is different.

Yes, exactly.

A Question About Kinesthetic Experience

Student (Zazie): One way my experiences tend to differ from much of what you talk about—though still within that range—is they fit much more in the kinesthetic realm. But then sometimes I've been wondering whether I've been getting the otherness aspect, because I feel the divinity of it and I think I get a sense of it, but it's not so much a sense of self and...

A few things here. First, for everyone: image doesn't have to be visual. It sounds like you understand this. It can be primarily kinesthetic, or sometimes you can't say exactly which sense it is—just a very particular felt sense. This is really important.

Regarding otherness—before I address that, one thing I'd say is that the sense of self arises very differently and to different degrees of obviousness at any moment. What could be happening in your experience is that the familiar sense of self isn't arising, but there's still some sense of self. It could be a much more subtle sense of self—not problematically, just much more diaphanous and light, less contracted, less solid, less personality-laden.

So you could pay attention to that. In a way, I'd say there's always a sense of self until the moment when everything disappears—and that's not what you're describing because you still have texture. Within that experience, you could gently feel out and notice: what kind of sense of self is around now? Part of the image, whenever there's an image, is that the self is imaged with the image. This is something you could include in what you're exploring.

As for otherness—it's an interesting word because it doesn't necessarily mean separate from me. What we want to mean by otherness is that it has autonomy. It's not something I can regard as totally under my control or totally part of me. If I do view it that way, something collapses and I lose what I'd call the imaginal dimension. Something loses vitality and power and depth in the image.

So there's some sense of it having autonomy, having power of its own, having its own voice. It's visiting me, and yet it's also part of me. Sometimes I become it, I change places with it—all of this—but still it has a kind of beyondness to it.

Student asks: In that autonomy of otherness, is that where, if there's the sense of autonomy of our image of the self, the way that shifts—sometimes I seem to have autonomy and sometimes I...

Compare that with some versions of modern psychotherapy. It's all me. I am just creating. It's just a part of me. There's two kinds of extreme... It's an aspect of me, or I'm just imagining this.

There are two quite extreme positions. For me, there's a kind of balance here between really understanding that, of course, it's a dependent arising. Do you understand what I mean when I say that? It depends on my mind and the way of looking. I cannot go outside of that understanding, because that's total Dharma understanding. I always understand that what arises depends on my relationship with it in the moment, depends on past conditions, but really in the moment, my way of looking, my conception, my energetic relationship. So it's fabricated in the moment with the mind.

And this thing about autonomy is almost something like... at the same time as I'm holding that understanding of dependent arising, I'm entertaining the idea. I'm just being generous in my mind and granting this thing some autonomy. Believing it, entering into a lightly held view that it has autonomy. And other times it's more like I sense a certain level of autonomy. But all of those kinds of ideas are held together.

Does that make sense?

Yeah.

Does that sound too much of a stretch, or does it sound like...

No, it's not what you were talking about. It's not quite...

Okay. Try again.

I think the nature of self is that it has no inherent existence. The nature of image is that it has no inherent existence. Rather than shutting things down, what that opens up is that all of this will feel different at different times. Sometimes I feel like, "Well, this is part of me that I'm in control of." Sometimes it has more autonomy. Sometimes I'm merging. Sometimes I become that. Now I'm here and that's there.

It's like the very emptiness of it all allows this complete movement between different conceptual views but also experiences of the relationship and of what's here and what's there and who's where and all that. So that's actually part of the whole deal – there's a real fluidity. For me, there's no real formula other than these things about divinity, which are more general principles, but the actual experience of what belongs where – to me that's open and there's plenty of room for movement and it's all good to explore.

Does that... you're just being polite.

Okay, good. But we have a little time if there are more questions.

Yeah, Lawrence.

So my question is... does Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu buy into the metaphysics presented at the time of the Buddha – that rebirth and all that – in the same way?

Yeah, I just kind of have this sense... I wonder... you know, in a way, underneath the question is some fear or anxiety, right? About, you know, what will be the outcome of this? And how would you know? How would you...

So Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu would say – I can't speak for him, obviously – but I think he would just say that he's very much in the Theravada tradition. He's staunchly Theravada, you know. But underneath your question, it's a question about what will happen. Is it, you know...

I suppose there is a personal element to it.

Yeah.

You know, there's all this soulfulness and deep meaningfulness, and it's kind of like, where do we go with this? Is it... you know, all of these divine images that want to come through us, and you talk of them having...

But that could be very soulful for him.

Sure, sure. Yeah, I think one of the key words there was "swept away."

There's a lot I could say here. I'm just aware of time, but let me share some brief thoughts and perhaps we can check in at some point.

But this notion of being swept away—I actually want to step back. I feel very strongly, and I think this is important maturity for everyone to realize: whatever path we choose—Theravada, Mahayana, this tradition, that tradition, secular mindfulness, whatever—it's going to have a danger. There is no path, there is no practice without a particular danger. If I think there is, I'm just missing something.

Some people think secular mindfulness is really safe. Well, it may not drive you crazy, but it'll do something else. Or rather, the danger in it is something else—a potential danger. Every path has a potential danger. Part of maturity in practice is knowing what is the potential danger with this path that I'm on.

So one of the things with purely secular mindfulness is that it's not very soulful. One of the things with Theravada Buddhism is it's cutting off the world. Its aim is actually not to be reborn. The world is not

sacred—it's a place to escape from and never to come back to. The danger with this path, as you say, is one could get swept away or could over-reify these things.

Every path has its particular danger of reification—what it reifies—and then its particular effect on the soul, if you like. So that's just something to really be aware of. And if I've chosen a certain path, if a certain path attracts me, then I really need to know what are the potential pitfalls of that path.

So you put your finger on one—getting swept away—and you know that. This is why I say: sensitive to the energy body, mindful of the resonances and all that, but also seeing image as image, like we talked about the other day. That's one of the things that prevents getting swept away, as well as a whole bunch of other factors—cultivation of good qualities, awareness of one's emotions, knowing when to back off, all this stuff.

When that's all in place, then the path becomes less dangerous, because I'm aware and part of my path is a sensitivity to all that. Does this make sense? So that's part of the path. Whatever path I do, it's a maturity to know that and to be on the lookout for it.

And I can't remember if I said this to you, but this kind of thing has come up with several people—the fact that you're asking the question reassures me. It's showing that your mind is alive to the potential pitfalls, interested, curious, alert, sensitive, healthy doubting, all of that. If you weren't, and you were just gung-ho—yeah, blah, blah, blah, and I believe this, and this is the reality now, and everyone should be, you know—then I'd be concerned. So the question shows something already.

I'm moving quite quickly here because we have to end. I'll say one last thing, which I actually addressed in a talk for this retreat, but it's not part of this retreat format: you have to decide, or your soul decides or feels what it really wants.

Dharma—classical dharma—is premised on the Four Noble Truths, which originally contextualize it as an escape from the world, not being reborn again. But we could say more loosely it's about freedom and suffering less. There are some souls for whom that is not the most important thing in their life. That is not the most important thing.

Because we're surrounded by a dharma that we just, day and night, hear about freedom from suffering, release, peace, equanimity, da-da-da, sometimes what happens is a person takes on that and is almost indoctrinated a little bit to think "that's what I really want." And I would say: ask what you really want. Find out.

If that is it, go for it. And what does that mean to you? Because freedom has a whole range of meanings and depths and extents and breadths. What kind of freedom? What level of freedom are you talking about? What range of freedom are you talking about? What areas of freedom?

But it also might be that you really look inside, and it's not freedom that's... Freedom is important, but it's

not the thing that's most important. For some people, sense of sacredness is more important. For some people, artistic expression is more important. For some people, it's the sense of beauty—the infinite ranges of beauty.

And in the depths of their soul, that's actually what they care about more. Is that Dharma still or not? There's a whole soul relationship with that question. How am I conceiving how I stand in relation to what the dharma is? Am I a soul that just steps right out of that? Dares to step out of it or not? Or do I create a dharma that actually incorporates... There are whole levels and dimensions to this whole thing.

But I think more important is: what do you really want? You know? Beauty and sacredness don't mean being swept away, being completely crazy. So it's not like black or white, one or the other. But there's something here really important about being truly authentic and just clearing away a lot of what we've simply been told.

Here, over and over, every book you read, every Dharma talk, it's like—great, wonderful. And how much there is to discover about freedom and the depths of freedom and the range of freedom. And either at some point, or always from the beginning, something else was actually more important or becomes more important.

So that's quite a radical question. But basically, you know, am I going to live my life in contact with what I most want, or not in contact? Authentic or inauthentic? In touch? From that root or not? You know?

There's a lot more we could explore here, but there's much in what you're bringing forward that deserves our attention.

Let's have just a minute of silence.

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