Sensing Divinity

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 51:26

So we said right at the beginning of the retreat that people use these words—enchantment, imaginal, soul, divine—in lots of different ways. On this retreat we're choosing to include in our meaning of what enchantment is, or the kinds of enchantment that we're talking about, a sense of divinity. When we speak about enchantment it includes some sense of divinity, of divine dimensions.

We've already been talking quite a bit, and Catherine was talking about how we're actually interested in enchanting the world, of course, but also the self. Can we re-enchant the self? Last night and in the next couple of days we'll be circling around this and exploring what does that mean? What does it involve? What does it require to re-enchant the sense of self?

There's so much we could say about all this. Let's take a step back and talk perhaps a little bit about divinity. The range of what that could mean, the depths of what that could mean is enormous. We've been making this distinction on this retreat between what we could call a kind of divinity that is sensed as universal—everywhere and in everything equally, regardless. In insight meditation and probably most meditative traditions that are around these days, that's probably the most common kind of divinity, sense of divinity that's open to us. It can come in all kinds of ways, but in a way it's a natural unfolding of deepening in meditation.

What's characteristic of that opening to universality or universal dimension divinity is less fabrication of perception. This isn't obvious for people, but someone doing extended metta practice, loving-kindness practice, eventually what will happen is it will feel like at some point the whole world has the fabric of love. The whole world is made of love. It is love. That's its essence, its substance, as much as it's concrete or whatever it is. At another level one feels that one's whole being, that the whole world is love or the whole world is compassion. This is a natural unfolding. It has a universal quality. Everything is equally that, including myself. I am part of that oneness.

What's actually happening there is the perception is being fabricated less. Instead of solidity and separateness and contraction of this and that being different, all that fabrication of the perception of separate things is calming down a little bit and joined together in some kind of oneness. It could be a oneness of love, it could be a oneness of awareness. It could be a oneness of silence. There's beautiful poems of Thomas Merton that Catherine was reading last night. One silence pervades everything. One silence at the core of my being, of your being. We can know this. These are beautiful, available mystical perceptions coming out of more usual kinds of practice that we do—one nothingness, one peace. They're all flavors of universal oneness that we can know. It just comes in different ways from letting go of

clinging, and the perception just naturally will open out to these mystical perceptions.

Catherine was talking about desire last night. Some people have a passion, a burning desire to know that level of the universal divine. To know that silence, to taste it, to feel it at the center of the being and the center of all things. Or to know all of these kinds of oneness. Something is on fire in the being. I want to know that. And we can know it. So there's a desire for that.

Then interestingly—and this is all classical dharma teaching, what I'm talking about so far—there's a desire for that, a burning desire for these kinds of openings, these kinds of mystical universal insights of universal divinity. And then the knowing of that, the tasting of that silence, of that peace, of that love, does something to my desires in the rest of my life. It gives a context, the black around the flame that Catherine was talking about last night. That's what that black is. It's the universal peace or love or silence or whatever. The flame can burn, but it has context.

All these universal divinities give equanimity in our life in relation to the comings and goings, ups and downs, desires for this person, that person, this thing, that thing. It's all put in a different mystical context. Not, I hope, that we become anemic and bleached of all kind of engagement with life, but the whole swelling up and dying down of our desires in life is just held differently in a much vaster space, in a much vaster context.

And then the kinds of things that we've been talking about on this retreat—beginning to talk about—what is then the place of eros? What is then the place of sexuality?

How does that... We're asking a lot on this retreat, because we're not just saying, let it go—the imagination, the erotic, the sexual, the desire, the dark, the dark gods. We're not just saying, let it go, it's bad, get rid of it, iron it out. We're also not just saying, just be mindful of it.

Can we re-engage with it? Can we include it on the path? It's asking a lot. What we're setting up here as a path is really asking a lot—a lot of skill, a lot of healing, a lot of bases, a lot of development, a lot of intelligent perspective and conceptual framework.

But this black, this silence, this mystical oneness, or these mystical onenesses, as I say, give a kind of steadiness. There's a resource of steadiness in relationship to our desire. And we're freer with the desire. I'm not bowled over this way or that, because I've got this infinite, infinite resource.

So there's this universal kind of divinity and then there's the divinity that comes more through the imaginal. And a divinity that retains personhood, either of the imaginal figure or of myself or of the other, of this object, of this tree, of whatever it is. The divinity in and through the particulars and the persons, an imaginal divinity.

Now these, like we said right at the beginning, these overlap. It's not to make these little neat frames. These overlap, but there's a distinction here. Can we know and taste and develop skill in opening to both

kinds of divinity, the universal and the personal? The oneness and the particular. Yes, we can. But as I said, it's asking a lot. It's actually asking a lot. I don't know if you can get the sense of the breadth of what would be involved in such a path, because we're including the dark. We're including the desire and all of that.

So again, we can have desire for both. We long for, I long to know both, both these kinds of divinity. I long to have my life infused by them, by that knowing, by that seeing. The first, the universal, will cool the desires in and for the world. An opening to vast universal divinity will cool the desires in and for the world. The second kind of divinity will inflame them. Somehow this needs to be balanced perhaps. And there's other factors that are contrary. There's too much to say about this, so we'll be circling around it in the days.

And then we come back to this question of self and re-enchanting the self and saying included in that is seeing, sensing, knowing, feeling the divinity of the self, yourself. How does it feel right now if you consider the possibility of seeing your divinity? How does that strike you, to know that you are divine? Both because you are part of a oneness that you may have glimpsed or intuited or know well, but also that you are divine in and through the particulars of your personhood, all the darknesses, all the difficulties, all the dukkha, your desires, the events of your life.

How does that even strike you right now? How does it feel as a possibility? You, unique you, your unique life, your unique life and death. What does that stir in your being?

And we could say a lot just about that, and we will. What our responses to even that kind of possibility can be. But if I add another question: what's your sense of what would help you know your divinity? In that second sense of the particular, your personhood, every little detail, every little uniqueness, what's your sense of what would help you to know that? Where perhaps have you glimpsed that or intuited that or gotten a sense?

So I don't know about instructions. I'm not sure, it's so individual in terms of so many elements that make this journey up, this part of the journey up that is very individual in terms of what order people do things and what needs to be developed, what needs to be there to actually allow that kind of transformation of perception. So in terms of instructions, I'm actually not sure. I don't know what you need, what's needed.

But we could say some general things. The universal kind of divinity happens, as I said, just through practicing sort of standard practices like mettā and loving kindness and compassion and those kind of things, the brahmavihāras, or resting in awareness, just being aware of awareness and open to all things. And eventually that awareness will just permeate everything, will have a sense of universality, infinitude, and divinity to it. Or just seeing emptiness more and more. All of them characterized by certain degrees of unfabricating and eventually, if one really goes deep and skillfully with the emptiness practice, eventually total unfabricating. And that gives this universal, different kinds of degrees of depths and flavors of universal divinity.

But the other kind of divinity, the more personal one, may arise as a natural evolution of imaginal practice. It may simply be what emerges over time when we open to the path of the imaginal and begin to play with it.

Something happens, usually slowly, that transforms our relationship to practice itself. Instead of having an imaginal figure that we work with during our meditation period, followed by our ordinary day, then another meditation period where we engage it again, something more pervasive begins to unfold. Eventually, a whole sensibility, a whole way of feeling and sensing life becomes available to us.

Life becomes image. Image and life meet, and life becomes image. Life is imbued with the imaginal. We discover a different relationship, a different dimension available to us—what William Blake called "double vision," which we've discussed before.

You can begin to sense this because when an imaginal figure or image is truly strong and soul-making, look carefully and recognize that it already carries the flavor of divinity. It already possesses a sense of dimensionality, a sense of eternality. An image that is truly alive, that genuinely touches you and stirs soul-making, is what I would call iconic. It has this timeless quality—this is the divinity inherent in the imaginal.

Through this process, life becomes ensouled. Soul is everywhere in life; it simply awaits our modes of being, our ways of looking. This includes the self with all its foibles and follies, its crazinesses and beauties and gifts. All of this becomes enchanted, becomes divine in and through the particular.

A couple of people have asked me about something I mentioned in a talk or perhaps wrote somewhere regarding my illness and the possibility of dying soon—or as people say, very probably dying soon. I said that's perfect, or rather, that I can sense in the depths of things a perfection in all of it. "How can you say that?" they wonder. "What's happening there?"

Someone also wrote about Ram Dass's teacher, Neem Karoli Baba, who used to say, "Can't you see everything's perfect? Can't you see everything's perfect?" I can't speak for Neem Karoli Baba, but I suspect that the kind of perfection he was pointing to related to universal perfection.

In the universal divine, if everything is love, if everything is simply awareness—regardless of what it's aware of—if that's the fundamental nature of everything, then everything is perfect. Life and death, good and bad, pain and pleasure—it's all one, all at a deeper level one substance. So everything's perfect.

This is one kind of knowing available to us. But when someone then asks, "How can you say that about terrorist acts and terrible things that happen and your cancer and possibly dying young?" I wouldn't stretch this as merely an idea trying to fit where it doesn't belong.

What actually happens is that these perceptions gradually open the heart, the being, the consciousness. At a certain point, we recognize there's a kind of perfection at that level of universality. But to try forcing it

as an idea where it won't authentically go—no.

We must still respond with compassion, respond with wise action to these things in the world. If that response of wise seeing and wise compassion isn't present, and a person is claiming "it's all perfect," I become very suspicious. It's perfect, and yet one does everything possible to respond to suffering in the world.

When that compassionate response is absent and the heart remains untouched by the world's pain, something is off in the "everything's perfect" story. Something isn't authentic.

But when I spoke about possibly dying soon, that's not quite what I meant—or rather, I included that understanding but meant something more. This comes from imaginal practice itself. Yes, certainly emptiness and all that, but through imaginal practice, life becomes image. My life, my being, all the particular gifts and struggles and challenges, the duration of my life however long that turns out to be, the birth, the death, the things that come through me—all of this becomes ensouled.

In that soul, they are felt at times to be inseparable from what we might call world soul. All this arises naturally in the course of imaginal practice, filling out as the conceptual structure expands to hold these kinds of altered perceptions.

At one level, of course, I don't want to die. I want to live. At another level, I honestly don't know what will happen. There's something perfect in the particulars, and it's such a striking depth of seeing. There's a kind of amazement at the perfection of even the smallest details, all the little particularities.

This is the kind of thing I'm pointing toward.

It's different kinds of sense of divinity—the universal on one hand, and in and through the particular—and they're not really separate.

So in terms of instructions, in a way it's just a natural evolution of imaginal practice, that kind of seeing, that kind of availability of that kind of perception. We've been working with this imaginal figure of love, and it doesn't have to be a figure of love. It could be any imaginal figure. But there's a sense, as I said, almost in my definition of imaginal, that it includes a dimension of divinity. We sense a divinity there.

In the meditation, the imaginal figure—or any imaginal figure that feels divine in some way—is gazing at you. Maybe with love, maybe with who knows what. But the sustained gaze of that divinity on me, on you, in the meditation, eventually you become imbued with divinity. The gaze communicates all kinds of things. Not only love, but eventually I feel divine through the gaze of the divine on me. Eventually. I'm not talking about something that necessarily happens like that, but there's an evolution here.

In a way, that's part of what we talked about—the harmonizing. Here I am looking at this imaginal figure and I come into harmony with those divine qualities. And that harmony moves towards union so that I may become that figure or I become divine in these ways.

There was that beautiful quote that Catherine read—I can't remember when it was—from Thomas Merton: "None of me belongs to anyone but you, God. None of me belongs to anyone but you." Sometimes just letting these fragments of poetry arise in the mind and letting them do their soul work, letting them echo in the heart and resonate. "None of me belongs to anyone but you, God." We might not even know, what does it mean? What am I saying? But there's poetry there and the poetry works on us.

In that beautiful line of Thomas Merton, you can hear the surrender, the surrender of the being. "None of me belongs to anyone but you." And that surrender, as we talked about before, can open to a receiving, and that receiving to the harmonizing, and the harmonizing to a union. There is a sense of "I belong to you and I am divine also."

Or it might be that in a cosmopoiesis—again, the imaginer spilled over into the world—whenever an image is alive, whether that's an imaginal figure or a world seen as image in cosmopoiesis, there's always, at that point, the self being imagined at the same time. Sometimes we don't realize this. So sometimes you can just check: "Well, what's the sense of self right now?" And one might recognize there's a kind of divinity also in the sense of self at that point.

What happens, or what can happen—and some people who have been practicing with the imaginal for a while already report this—is being able to just remember the sense of divinity and just bring it into the moment and see something as divine and see oneself as divine. It gets more available. It just becomes something you can do. Just flip the perception, enter another mode of perception. That might sound like "I don't know how that works," but actually it just comes with familiarity, with practice.

I don't have that much time on this retreat, but what is it to—which we've touched on a little bit—what is it to know, instead of being always suspicious of my desire, "that's a kilesa, that's a defilement, it's one of the three poisons"—what is it actually to even entertain the notion that the desire has divine roots? That there's a divinity, a treasure in my desire, in my eros?

What's the difference between eros and greed? What's the difference? What makes it open up into soul-making? What makes it contract the being, contract the soul, shrink the life and the perception? What's the difference? Do I need to throw out desire? Desire being, if you like, an aspect of self. Can I see the divinity? Can I know the divinity of desire? Discover the divinity in desire.

Or anger, rage—these things that we view as enemies, defilements. Is it just so simple?

In Buddhist Tantrism, there are practices where one deliberately considers or imagines in different ways the divinity of different aspects of the self, like desire or anger or the body or the senses. These are imagined as different deities—all kinds of exercises that one can do.

In the Jewish tradition, there are 613 commandments, like little prescriptions for things you're supposed to do: how you wash your hands, what you're supposed to do or not do on the Sabbath, all kinds of things, every little detail of life. And there are prayers often with a lot of these things. So you wash your hands,

you say a blessing. You eat, you say a blessing. You take a certain drink. Everything becomes blessed through these commandments.

So it can look like a bunch of rules, kind of lifeless and constricting. But at its root, the mystical idea there is to bless and to sense one's life and the world and one's actions as blessed. We're opening to seeing our actions as blessing and blessing God, blessing life through that.

And if that kind of practice goes deeper and deeper, this sense of ritual blessing, of blessing life, of being blessed by life, of blessing the divine in and through one's actions, in and through, including the actions of perceiving, of consciousness, of kindness. One can almost feel that one is part of God doing that. There's the divinity acting through me in this action, washing my hands, eating a piece of bread. Who's doing that?

In Buddhist teaching, there's also, who sees? Who are you? And one answer is, no one, nothing. *Anatta*, no self. Another answer, I would say, I hesitate to use the word deeper, but another level of answer, who sees? Who are you? The Buddha. Buddha nature sees. Buddha nature is conscious in your sight, in your sound, in your hearing, in your tasting, in your thinking. Buddha nature, Buddha is seeing, is knowing, is conscious, is alive through you. Buddha is acting through you. The cosmic Buddha, the *Dharmakaya*.

Sometimes the deeper one practices with emptiness and all that, the more these become available. But also sometimes they can just be poetic ideas and we can just try them on. There's a kind of concept there. But the concept is not just an intellectual thing. We can bring it in in a way that the concept becomes a percept, a perception. Not just an idea. It actually starts imbuing. I actually feel like my seeing is different now. It's the Buddha's seeing. It's some divine seeing through me.

And the body is involved. It's not just heady. Concept, percept, and body are connected, intimately woven together.

So really just, if you like, pointing out certain possibilities, how this might come, what might support it. This re-enchanting of the self and recognizing, being able to move in and out of the perception of oneself as divinity in all one's particulars. In one's personhood, not the erasing, the erasure, the blanching of one's personhood, but the inflaming of one's personhood with the divine flame, seeing that one's personhood, one's particulars, are divine fire.

I wonder about doing a little exercise now. Yeah, let's do that.

So, why don't you just turn to your neighbor and we'll do this, an exercise in that. Someone you don't know, if that's possible. So if you need to move places or whatever. Does anyone need a partner? If you haven't got anyone, just stand and... Ah, good, okay.

So first things first. Settle into the body, your body. Tomorrow's another day. Settle into your body. Feel the ground. Feel the connection with the ground underneath you, whether it's your backside, your legs,

your feet, whatever's touching the ground. Really get that solidity and your connection with the ground. And just that establishment of grounding of connection.

And from that grounding, feel the rest of your body. Feel the uprightness of the posture. Feel your body. Feel your body sitting. And feel, as we've been talking about so much, the energy body, the field of energy, of vibration, texture. Again, whatever we do, can this be something that we're just remaining in contact with, sensitive to, open to? You're just dwelling, inhabiting, filling that space with your awareness.

So any time over the next few minutes that you feel you've lost that, just keep checking in. Do I still, am I still here in this space? Do I still have some consciousness including how this space, how the energy body feels?

And if you don't, then can that be retained? Not at the exclusion of the other necessarily—hopefully—but retained alongside or in the envelope of the awareness of the other. So that you have your experience and your experience of the other. Not losing myself, my sensitivity to myself in the awareness of other, nor am I losing the other because I'm just with myself.

With this, staying in contact with the energy body, let yourself just become aware of the other. You don't need to make direct eye contact at this point if you don't want to—no problem. But you're just aware of the being in front of you and aware of your own being at the same time. Body and being here, body and being there. Just awareness of self, of other.

Now this person who you may not know very well at all—you probably don't—just offering them metta, well-wishing. I don't know exactly what your struggles are, I don't know exactly what your joys are, but I wish you well. I wish your body well. I wish you well in your being, in your mind, in your heart. Just very gentle, just offering them that well-wishing, radiating it out towards them. Pure and simple. Doesn't depend on anything—what they look like or what you think they might be like. Just wishing well. And just having the intention to wish well. Again and again, the intention repeating gently, gently.

Now, as you're giving the metta—and you can just gently sustain that gentle intention, you're with your body and your energy body—can you also include an awareness that you are at this moment receiving the metta of the other? So you're giving and you're also receiving. And just lightly, spaciously holding or feeling both of those elements, aspects. There's the giving and the receiving of the well-wishing of the other. This other is wishing you well. This other has the intention to wish you well over and over, just as you are engaging in towards them.

And now when you feel ready, if your eyes are not already open, allow them to open and allow yourself to make eye contact with each other as you sustain this giving and receiving of metta towards each other. So metta means implicitly a letting go of judgment. So you're receiving gaze that has the intention for no judgment, only well-wishing. You're receiving that right now and you're over and over giving that. So let yourself make the contact, giving and receiving, caring.

And then we try to add one more piece. If you look into the other's eyes, can you see the life in the eyes? Can you see and feel and sense the presence that shines out of the eyes? Feel and sense the consciousness, the awareness, the brightness and the aliveness of that. This is consciousness that is visible, is palpable, sensible in the eyes of the other, through the eyes of the other. Is that possible? Get that tuning to that, the sense of the bright presence, the consciousness as it is radiating from the other's eyes.

There is this mystery there, this mystery of being, mystery of consciousness, amazing aliveness of that, the brightness, the illumination, the radiance of that, the presence. Sometimes you get a sense of the mystery of it and the depth of it and the almost surprise of it, the divinity of it. Very human and so much in it—the human has divine dimensions. The divinity of this consciousness, the blessing of the consciousness. It's a miracle of it.

And if you feel okay staying with that, or again you might want to return to the metta and the well-wishing—so you can include that awareness of the consciousness or the divinity, but then include now again the metta, the giving and the receiving, offering of these intentions of kindness, of well-wishing. Feeling your body, feeling the energy body, including self, including other in the awareness, in the metta.

And then just taking a moment to thank your partner, to thank yourself. And if you can, pry yourself away from that and return to sitting.

So just to reiterate something I think we said right at the beginning of the retreat: distinctions are useful and categorizations are useful, but they're also limited. So it's helpful to differentiate, I think, between universal kinds of perceptions—perceptions of a kind of universal divinity—and perceptions of more particular personified or personhood divinity. But they overlap. They totally overlap. But if we don't make a distinction, it's almost like sometimes the experience just goes in a certain direction and misses other possibilities. So distinctions are a skillful means, but they're not really real. All these things overlap.

It may be that as you go to walking—which, if you have a raincoat or don't mind the blessings of the rain, if you're happy to soak them in—be outside or be inside.

It may be that these effects or resonances linger after making contact in this way. Really take very good care to keep any inner critic out of the picture. "Oh, I blew it. I had my one chance at seeing divinity and I didn't do it right," or "The other one was more divine than me." All of those places where the better than, worse than, same as story starts to emerge—really take care with that.

We're allowed to practice here in the sacred boundary of the temple. We keep those kinds of assessments outside the gate. So you're really allowed to settle. Let your feet both give and receive blessing as you walk. Hold your heart.

This is a precious day. Every day is a precious day—we don't always realize it. You've put a lot of groundwork in. You have a lot of resource in each of your souls, even if sometimes we're working with feeling like we don't have enough resource. So really use the day. Really let it use you, actually. Let the day

use you.

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