This Fire, This Longing (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 47:24

Just as usual, if it's being recorded, but if you're not comfortable with that, just let us know and Mark will pause the recording.

Anyone, please?

Yes, Nick.

"Yeah, a question about working with imaginary figures off retreat. Because obviously there's way less time to sit and there's less samadhi in the system and less in touch with the energy body, so it just feels like a very different experience doing it off retreat than on retreat. And if I'm honest, I spend more time with images not in meditation when I'm off retreat - reflecting on images that come maybe once quite intensely and then spending more time actually reflecting or writing or thinking about them. And that feels very rich as well. But I'm wondering if that kind of flattens them, or what the difference is?"

"The difference between?"

"Well, between meditatively being with them a lot while sitting and doing it more... it just feels..."

"Yeah, thank you. That's really good. Could everyone hear that? I think the question is - it seems easier to access images meditatively on retreat when there's more stillness and time to meditate. Off retreat, Nick's saying she's spending more time reflecting on an image or writing, etc."

I go back to the soul-making sense. How is an image best brought to life in the soul? How does it best have its power in the soul? How is it best honored and revered? Because one could spend a lot of time in meditation and that's all - and that would be one extreme. But maybe that's not what it needs, and maybe there's something in the meditation that's missing. I think it might even be touched on in the talk tonight - in a way, images ask something of us. Exactly what they ask, or exactly what the responsibility to them is, there's no formula.

Sometimes it might be mental reflection, sometimes it might be some creative work, sometimes it might be doing something different, and sometimes it's much more internal, much more meditative. I don't think there's a rule for that, but it's listening and seeing where the soul-making is. I can certainly think of certain images that maybe have come up once or twice, but they're alive for me. They're woven into my life. And then one can be creative.

When Andy had the question yesterday and I said I have this jazz musician image - probably meditatively

it's come up more than once for sure, but one of the important things there, because there was a little bit of grief about leaving that world and having that opportunity for that music to come through that way, one of the things that was really helpful was bringing that in in a very subtle way to my life. I think I shared this in a talk years ago.

I might be sitting in an interview with someone, and I just remember that image. It's just really, really lightly in the back of the psyche, so to speak. But it begins coloring the interaction. Now, the other person doesn't know - I'm not suddenly... "What are you doing?" "Shh, I'm doing my thing." No, it's really, really subtle. But there's something then in the way I feel myself in response, something that is free in a particular kind of way or nuanced in a particular kind of way. What I'm doing then is bringing to life that image in a whole bunch of directions.

For me, a lot of Dharma work is about freeing us up - freedom, right? And with imaginal work, I feel there's also duty. We have duties. An image often asks something of us. It's not always clear what it's asking and how much actual physical manifestation is being asked. Some images require doing something different, changing a life direction - something really big - all the way down to something really subtle like the jazz musician thing. But it's coming in, even beyond that, to even more subtle levels. It just exists internally in my soul, but there's a reverence there. And all it's asking for is the reverence.

I may feel it in my body, it comes into my psyche, but the duty is in the reverence, in the respect, in seeing the divinity of it. Now all this can be worked with - some of it in meditation, but some of it is actually asking for life to become image, for image and life to meet. That's where the work is. It doesn't necessarily need to be purely meditative.

You know, does this... And the other thing, and I said it in response to Andrea yesterday, but I'll say it again. I feel as time goes by with imaginal practice that short periods of meditation—twenty minutes, if you're doing this kind of work, ten minutes—where the mind wanders to the day, or "I forgot to send that email," whatever it was, and then actually a little bit of contact with an image can have real power. It's this moving in and out and being able to access more. So it's not necessarily like I need to get back on retreat and have all that time. I think that's probably more available than you might imagine for you.

Does that answer what... yeah, okay, good, lovely.

Yeah, is it Dave?

"Hi. Something that particularly resonated in the talk we heard last night was the question, 'Who are you doing it for?' Is it for the self or is it for something beyond? For God or for something beyond? And it resonated partly because I think the most soulful that I have felt in my life is when there has been that devotion, a true devotion to something beyond. But certainly at the moment, my practice is very much self-driven, yearning for healing. So, for example, if a loving image approaches, I will imagine it touching the part of me that physically hurts. And then I can feel the resonance going... almost, because it's like I've

taken the autonomy away. And I just wondered what guidance you might have on how, when there is that yearning for something from the self, how to open up more to the devotion."

Thank you. So everyone could hear that, right?

I think there's quite a lot in the question. It sounds like there are a few strands there. So let's see.

Like a lot of these distinctions that we've been making, they serve a purpose in that they highlight something that often isn't highlighted if you don't make the distinction. And I think I said yesterday—I think a whole talk was on this distinction that we didn't give on the retreat—but what often happens I find is that people feel they're doing it for one purpose and actually, it has the language of divine and all that, but actually it's just for the self. Or more, it's a spectrum. Potentially even the other way around, you know, that one is talking in terms of that, but actually somewhere in one's soul, so to speak, one is doing it for a greater purpose that maybe one can't quite articulate clearly. So just be cautious about too much dichotomy there. That's one thing.

The second thing is, and we've been stressing really, souls are different, needs are different, past experience is different, and the needs that come out of past experience or wounding or imbalances—and the order in which things happen—is different. And so it's not like first you do this and then the rest of the path is all about that. I mean, it might be, but it might also be you have periods where it comes back and forth, and there are periods, sort of levels of healing the self or the body or whatever. And so you have periods of that and then it opens up and then it's mixed and then it comes... All of that's good. So I wouldn't actually be too suspicious of that at all.

And if you are, if a part of you really wants it to be for something bigger, you can always hold this healing in the context of serving something bigger. But that's more in the back of your mind. Right now, this needs healing.

And sometimes people come here on retreat, for example, and often say other people in their life might say, "Oh, so selfish." Because they wouldn't say that if the person was going to lie on a beach in Bermuda for six months for some reason. I don't know why. Anyway. But a person can be on retreat here and really have the idea that "I am doing this. I recognize I need to build my strength, my equanimity, my capacity, my steadiness, my heart, all of that. Yes, I need to heal, and it's for something bigger." So the long periods of time I've spent on retreat have been with that always in the back of my mind. So there's a mixture.

About the autonomy, I don't know why... These words we've been using—otherness, autonomy, etc.—I'm not sure... The image is healing me and it's for my healing. That doesn't mean that it doesn't have autonomy, the image. This image is other.

But the healing is through the perception. So again, there's a kind of natural—let's call it evolution, but things can happen in different orders—that we can trust here that integrates these things and melts the dichotomies a little bit.

So there's quite a lot there. Ramira, can you clarify the distinction between image and idea? Not idea in the sense of thought useful to solve a problem, but in a deeper meaning.

And another question—about the role of faith in this process of re-enchanting the cosmos. Yesterday, listening to the talk, we were speaking about the longing for the Divine. I have experienced that very deeply, and it aches, that longing. But something very painful was added to that: not finding resonance in the culture. The longing not being legitimized by the culture, by the people I related to—friends, family. The stories around it.

So it's strange to me why I had that sense that didn't have support at all around, or resonance. Why that sense? Why follow that sense when everything around is either indifferent to it or hostile, or tries to squash it? Part of your second question is why that was arising for you—how it could stay and sustain itself despite all this? It's a general question.

Why, for some people, does this longing for the sacred come to life despite not being supported or even fought against by the environment? And what role do you give this in the whole process of re-enchanting the cosmos?

I don't know the complete answer. One possibility is that souls are different—they want different things. Some people, no matter what's around them, carry a fire of longing for divinity that burns clear and bright. They feel it, they feel the vulnerability and pain of that longing, but it doesn't diminish. It's simply their soul's nature.

I think fire, eros, desire burns with different qualities in different souls. For some people, it's their character to have this longing be very visible and fiery. For others, their fire is more like an even, sustained flame—harder to extinguish. Fire manifests differently in different characters, different souls.

But a second answer could be that everyone has that fire, that longing. What varies is how vulnerable different souls are to having it blown out, smothered, hidden, or dampened by what's around them. There are wounds from the past, cultural conditioning that feels forced, or threats that feel overwhelming. It's all related to the confidence one has in oneself and one's ideas.

In some circles, there's quite an aggressive dismissal and ridiculing of these sacred longings. Part of this becomes about how self-confident a soul is, how resilient, how tough, how independent a thinker. It's not just about faith—all these things feed each other.

Basically, I don't know. It's clearly the case that what you're describing happens, and in other situations it doesn't. Some people don't seem to have this longing at all. What's exactly going on, I don't know. As a teacher, I think about this a lot, but right now I'm cautious about claiming one explanation or the other.

Regarding your first question about ideas and images—I'm hoping to give some teaching exactly on that at some point, because I feel that implicit in an image are certain ideas. We tend to think of them as separate,

but they're actually interrelated. Always when there's an image, there are ideas wrapped up within it. Even in insight meditation, you're playing with subtle ideation, subtle conceiving as part of the way of looking, and that's really important. These things are mixed up together—there's not such a clear division between the two.

Sometimes images don't come visually, and this is why I sometimes use the word fantasy instead. The amount of sensual content in an image—which doesn't necessarily mean visual, it could be sonic or bodily—compared with the obviousness of the ideational content can vary greatly.

As you say, certain ideas live as fantasies. Liberation is an idea. The Buddha is a historical image. The path—it's lived, it's felt, we feel it, but it's also an idea. Anything meaningful to us, that's alive, that we love, that moves us, has an idea wrapped up in it that comes alive to us as image. But that image might have very little sensual content or it might have a lot.

You can tell that there's soul in the image or idea—the corona of fantasy around that idea—by all the same ways: I'm moved, I'm drawn, I love it. It gives me beauty, a sense of depth, sacredness. All of this tells me something is alive as image. But what might be alive as image could be an idea, or just the sense of the body coming alive in a certain way.

This word 'image' is very broad and overlaps with idea. The boundaries are fluid, and we'll explore this more deeply later.

And how they actually may constrain someone in certain ways.

I realized that for me, I actually like working on something for months or years. I like the precision. I like—there's a word the Greeks had called philoponos, which means "work-loving." And I like—love is too strong a word, but I like the struggle with something, wrestling with an idea or a creative challenge over time. I like the discipline involved. I like having to show up to it again and again, even when I don't feel like it.

And all of that goes completely against the dominant Dharma ideas about flow and spontaneity and being in the moment. But for me, there's something deeply soul-making about that longer process. There's something about the relationship that develops with the work over time, the way it changes you and you change it. The way you have to keep coming back to it with fresh eyes. The way problems reveal themselves slowly and solutions emerge gradually.

Now, I'm not saying that's better than the quick, spontaneous approach. I'm saying we need to be very careful about our Dharma ideas and whether they're actually serving our fullest expression or constraining it.

So going back to the dukkha question—if your dukkha around being an artist is coming from ideas like "I should be more spontaneous" or "I shouldn't be attached to outcomes" or "this struggle means I'm doing it

wrong"—those are ideas that are probably making that dukkha not soul-making. They're flattening it, making it just suffering instead of something that could be fertilizing your soul.

But if you can hold your artistic process—including the struggle, the precision, the long commitment—if you can hold that as sacred, as a form of devotion, as a way of deepening relationship with beauty or truth or whatever it is you're reaching for, then that dukkha becomes very different. It becomes meaningful struggle rather than meaningless suffering.

The question isn't whether you should or shouldn't paint. The question is: what ideas are you bringing to your painting? And are those ideas opening up the sacredness of what you're doing, or are they closing it down?

You know, it's because Dharma is rooted in the Four Noble Truths. It's about less stress, less suffering. But here's the personal bit I'll share, and it's just me—everyone's different on this, and again, you need to find what works for you.

When I first started, I was playing music and then began wanting to compose. I read a book by Natalie Goldberg called *Writing Down the Bones*. Some of you will know it. Her idea was simply to play, to do a piece on this and do a piece on that. I started doing that, but the idea was really not to care about the result at all. What happened was really liberating for me. And what happened quite quickly, though, is that I felt what came out was really something I liked, and it was really important.

Then quickly from that, I started—it became very intense. What's the word? It wasn't like a free, light process, composing and writing. If you saw me at the piano writing—"Where's the damn pencil?"—it doesn't look mindful and calm at all. I don't care. I honestly don't care. Why would I care about something like that?

But that goes back to the other question: What do you really want? Some people, there are other kinds of suffering involved in that. You have to look at what are the sufferings, because when you put something out into the world creatively, a lot is about what will people think. I'm not saying that's the case with you, but that's a certain level of ego-suffering, you know.

Some people want a peaceful, unruffled, stress-free life, and that's why they practice. Great, go for it. But that's not what I want, personally. And I'm not saying anyone should be like me. But I think I said in one talk, some people will care more about the art than about anything else. And that includes how stressed they are or whatever, or the cost it takes to do something like a long-term artistic project.

Because there's something in the soul about being creative, about embodying that. And there's something in the soul of the product—the artistic painting or whatever it is, sculpture, composition—that has soul too. The soul of the artist making and the struggle involved. Now, I can reify that and cling to it too tightly, just as we talked about with too much realism. But for some people, it's the soul-making and it's the art that matters more than being peaceful. And if it costs me, it costs me.

There was a time in my life where I said, "I don't care if I die painting. I just love this so much." And then I got really sick, and I could have died. I was like, "It's not that important." But I really hear you. Again, I would still say some people, when that same thing happens—when death looks at them—they say, "It *is* that important."

But it's up to you. Why am I doing this? And maybe something—this is a bit related to Dave's question—something starts with a purity of intention, and over years of being an artist (and this is really the case with Dharma too), either the original intention gets lost. We've lost track of it. We've lost even recognition or being in touch with why I'm doing something, whether it's practice or whether it's art. Or it gets infected with some other intention, which is self-aggrandizing in some way, even subtly. And this will make the process less soul-making, less beautiful, less all of that.

I just don't buy the Dharma—there's a lot of personal opinion here—but a lot of the art that is made with that ethos about being stress-free and quick, it's like... I know. Yeah, it's kind of—I don't want to make any judgmental statements, but there's something more possible.

So again, I'm sitting up here, the microphone is here. I'm being very cautious.

There was something else about the realism thing...

I'm deeply cautious about speaking from this position when my statements might carry undue authority. I really want to distinguish between my personal inclinations and more universal principles. I have a certain soul, a particular personality, specific inclinations—that's my business. What interests me more is drawing attention to ideas and ways we become indoctrinated without realizing it. Please understand that this is everyone's soul journey. You could make very different decisions or directions from me, and that's truly important. I must be careful, especially with things I feel passionate about, to discern what's merely opinion and personal style versus what's actually more universal.

In the past, I probably imposed too many shoulds because I couldn't reconcile these different approaches. How can I pursue artistic excellence when the philosophy I believe in seems to say that such striving goes against non-attachment? It felt like a fundamental contradiction.

Let me add something about striving. If you read the Pali Canon, there's abundant striving there and much encouragement to strive. There's a sutta where the Buddha discusses different kinds of equanimity and different pains that arise for practitioners, along with various ways of letting go. One type he describes is the pain of the practitioner who isn't yet realized but yearns for realization. For all the other pains, he prescribes letting go in specific ways, but for this yearning, he essentially says it goes with the territory.

The modern interpretation of "don't strive, let it go" belongs particularly to Western culture, where we have such a painful relationship with self. It's not written in the original teachings. There's tremendous emphasis on striving and acknowledgment that yes, it's going to rub, it's going to hurt at times. The Buddha simply says to accept the pain, knowing that when you realize your goal, it will be better because

you'll have what you're longing for. He doesn't say to let go or stop striving. It's complex—our relationship with striving, what ideation and self-image we bring to it. It's not so simple, especially in our culture and with our divergent personalities.

In Dzogchen and Mahamudra traditions within Tibetan Buddhism, there's significant emphasis on non-striving. In Advaita Vedanta too, and in many traditions. But this whole question of striving versus non-striving isn't about right or wrong—it's always about what's helpful, what's skillful.

When someone says, "Just rest in the natural state"—a classic Mahamudra or Dzogchen teaching—how able is a person even to follow such an instruction? There will be vastly different levels of capacity for that. These teachings have their place, but the question remains: is it helpful to me, and what's arising from it?

Historically, Dzogchen and Mahamudra are presented very differently from their surrounding context. In the classical presentation, there would be extensive striving, numerous preliminaries, countless prostrations, with only brief periods spent in Dzogchen practice. It's not a complete teaching system. It's a gear they shift into perhaps ten percent of the time, if that. The rest involves considerable striving and devotion.

I think in the West we hunger for teachings that simply affirm we're okay as we are. That's important, but the question remains what's truly helpful, and that varies. It's genuinely complex.

Even on a micro level, it's about modulating effort in practice—knowing when to back off and become more receptive and open, when to bring greater ardency, diligence, and fire. In alchemy, there's a phrase: "He who masters the fire, masters the work." This intensity and effort—in alchemical times they didn't have temperature controls, did they? You're learning what kind of fire is needed right now.

Sometimes it means backing right off, simply being open and letting things come, dropping striving as much as possible. But there's always striving at subtle levels we don't actually recognize. Learning to modulate this appropriately, in a caring way—there's so much that could be said about this on all different levels of practice, in terms of both long trajectories and moment-to-moment awareness. It's truly complex.

Energy body and states of samadhi—if you want to explore this, I wonder if you would say that there's a limit to the skillful use of the concept of energy body when the perception of space is falling away. What happens with the energy body at these stages? Would you still see the idea, the concept of energy body as a skillful one, or would you say...

So Ava's asking about the idea of energy body when you get very deep in meditation and the actual experience of the body dissolves—and then even beyond, when there's nothing but space, and then even beyond that when the space dissolves.

Formulaically, the Buddha said the first four jhānas are what's called rūpa jhānas—form jhānas. They're

actual experiences of the energy body. That's a way of thinking about it. That's part of the reason why I tend to emphasize energy body right from the start. Where we're heading towards is actually different frequencies of experience of the energy body, or different qualities within the energy body, and they correspond with different jhānas. Even before that—so the whole of samādhi can be approached differently. Instead of focusing on a small point and then somehow getting to this energy body thing, you could start right from the beginning with energy body.

As you move through the jhānas, the body becomes rapture, if you like. That's the energy body flavor, and the grossness of the body is dissolved—there is rapture in this space. Then this body becomes joy and it's drinking joy, or it becomes peacefulness, or it becomes stillness.

Then you get—if you're doing classical jhāna—the realm of infinite space, the jhāna of infinite space. One way of looking at this is that in the first four jhānas, as you go through them, the vibration (we're back to the spectrum of the energy body, very solid or very subtle) gets more and more refined. The quality of the energy body gets more and more refined so that the stillness of the fourth jhāna is an extremely refined state, an extremely refined perception. The vibration here is very, very subtle.

It becomes so subtle that there's no body there at all—it's just space. I could look at that two ways. I could see that as the end of the energy body; now we're talking about just mental perceptions, and that tends to be how the Buddha looks at it. Or you could say that at that point, the perception of the energy body or the characteristic of the energy body is one of space. What does it feel like here? It feels like space. It's characterized by spaciousness—I could put my hand through it. There's the absence of any kind of sense of substance.

Beyond that, I wouldn't really call it energy body because you're not even talking about spatial dimensions anymore. Although maybe the sixth one, with awareness, can have a very subtle sense of a body of awareness, but not in any solidified sense. But definitely after that, no way.

We need to end, so let's just have a little quiet together.

I just want to say one more thing—it's partly in response to something that came up, and partly in response to a note that I can't quite read or understand fully. It's about responsibility—the responsibility that we have to the soul, if you like.

Sometimes with imaginal figures or with the sense of devotion we have or longing we have, these are movements of the soul. They come, they knock on our door, they ask of us something. It's not always clear what they're asking, and we don't know: what is my responsibility? Sometimes we get a sense of what it is.

Two things: one is holding it lightly. That doesn't mean not engaging or not following through on that responsibility, but holding it lightly in terms of self-reification, realism.

The other thing is using the sense of soul-making as one's guide. What is my responsibility? How do I feel

that? How do I follow through on that? When I'm trying to follow through on my sense of duty, am I on the right track? Again, it's energy body and sense of soul-making that we can trust. If something gets too tight or feels dead, we get the sense that we're not on the right track—something's a bit off.

So always part of the principle is: am I clinging too tightly? Is it becoming a realism? And also, how is my soul with this? How is this stirring the soul?

And we can trust that when it feels soulful, when it feels soul-making, we are moving in a direction that serves not only our own deepest flourishing but the flourishing of the whole web of existence of which we are part.

This capacity to sense what is truly nourishing to the soul, what opens and expands our being rather than contracts it, becomes one of our most reliable guides on the spiritual path. It is a wisdom that emerges from the integration of body, heart, and mind—a knowing that goes beyond mere intellectual understanding to touch the very core of our being.

When we learn to trust this deeper sensing, this soul-compass, we find ourselves naturally drawn toward what serves awakening and naturally moving away from what perpetuates suffering. We begin to live from a place of authentic responsiveness rather than unconscious reactivity, and our actions become expressions of wisdom and compassion rather than mere habit or conditioning.

This is the art of dharmic living—allowing the teachings to penetrate so deeply that they transform not just how we think, but how we sense, how we feel, and how we move through the world. It is a path that honors both the transcendent dimensions of spiritual realization and the very human, embodied nature of our existence.

May this exploration serve your own deepening practice and your capacity to live with ever greater freedom, wisdom, and love.

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