Tending the Flame

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 18:56

So we're already in transition, at the end of the retreat. Catherine and I want to say a few things in closing.

Because you've all done silent retreats before, you're familiar with transitioning out of silence, out of retreat, back to different environments, the busynness of your home and work life. A lot of that you know—I don't think we need to repeat it.

This retreat, because we haven't put so much emphasis on concentration and silence, there have been these exercises and more openness of the senses as opposed to focus on sense restraint and the smallness of attention. When a retreat emphasizes concentration, smallness of attention, silence, and solitude, the transition is harder in many ways, particularly in the domain of sense contact and sense impact. That's less the case probably for this kind of retreat.

However, the heart and the soul may be very open, so there may be a sensitivity at the heart and soul level more than at the sensory level. This needs care. We need to really respect and listen and feel into what the heart, what the soul needs today, in the rest of the day, in the next few days.

In a way, it's just a continuation—noticing the energy body, noticing the emotions, noticing when the heart is maybe contracting or feels vulnerable, and then what does it need? What does it need in that moment? Just staying, letting the energy body, letting the sensitivity to the emotions kind of guide, letting the contact with that guide and give wisdom about what's appropriate here, what do I need right now?

One part of that is about sharing your experiences or enthusiasm from the retreat. This is something I think we need to be careful with after retreat, but it might be asking again for sensitivity. You might get home and before you've even put your suitcase down you've downloaded the whole thing to whoever you live with—and maybe that's not right for you and maybe it's not right for them. It really does need sensitivity and noticing: what do you need, but really also what do they want? What does this other person want?

Sometimes I think we get a sense of the preciousness or something in this week that's touched us that feels precious and we want to share that. But we need to be careful what you do with that in relationship. It may make complete sense—I'm close to this person, they're my friend, they're my spouse, of course I tell them. Well, maybe, maybe not. Because if they're not interested, or if they're even disrespectful, that really has an impact.

You can sense this in the contact. You start to say something, the eyes kind of glaze over in the other person, or they're just trying to be politely interested. Be careful what you want to do with that. Maybe it's

fine, but it's really just being sensitive to what you need, how you need to be received, and what they need. There's timing as well. They might be in the middle of a busy thing with all this other stuff going on. They've been at home dealing with that. When's the time that they're open and ready to hear if they're interested?

But we do need to share, I think. We need to share our practice. We need to hear from others who are practicing. That's fundamental to all practices—the importance of sangha, the importance of receiving, listening, communicating, having a back and forth. It's so nourishing.

In terms of this retreat and these kind of practices and maybe other related practices—emptiness and samadhi and imaginal work—Andrea has put a list together. If those are the kind of things you're interested in, you want to keep, have some contact with people, partly there'll probably be some people in London and other places who can actually meet in person, if that's what you want, or have email contact and set up other ways of contact. The importance of sangha is so crucial in nourishing and sustaining and kind of sustaining the fire under practice. I think it's easy to underestimate that. It's really easy to underestimate how important that is.

We need to talk. We need to share. We need to hear from others. We need to bounce ideas. We need to be supported. We need also, I think, to listen and to read. So easily practice just kind of... sometimes doesn't expand or grow or deepen in the ways that it could because we're actually not inputting much that's new or that's opening things or challenging things or building new ideas and things on which practice can then open to new vistas, new explorations. So we do need to be fed—whether it's dharma talks, listening, there's DharmaSeed and all that, or books, reading, et cetera.

Somehow we need to keep alive the flame of our desire. We talked about this yesterday in the Q&A. Somehow that needs to be kept alive—all the different ways that can happen. It's so easy for that to be diminished.

Part of that is also keeping what we've emphasized so much this week—keeping alive the spirit of experimentation, of play, of creativity. That's really so important to be kept alive. And with that, this question: what's working? When I say to have intelligence in the practice really means to ask, what's working?

What's opening? Where is this leading? How does it work? These kinds of creative, interested questions ensure that the practice is intelligent and actually unfolds in a fruitful way. That's part of the creativity and that's part of the desire.

Just going back to the sharing and the sangha—I think especially with the kinds of practices we've been exploring this week, even some dharma people will not be interested or respectful, or may even be disparaging. So it's really important to be sensitive about where you can find support for this kind of work, if this is what interests you.

Regarding nourishing the practice, I wanted to address something that connects to several questions that have come up recently. This concerns nourishing that attitude of experimentation around imaginal practice and cosmopoetic practice, and it brings us back to this real-unreal question and what's called in dharma the middle way—the middle way between "it is" and "it isn't," between "it exists" and "it doesn't exist," between "it's real" and "it's not real."

That's hard, generally speaking. The middle way is hard. It's a very deep insight, and it's very rare for someone to actually be able to dwell there and relate to life from that place—until the insight into emptiness gets really quite deep. Until then, there's going to be some reification of something. There's just a tendency to reify, which I want to say is really okay. It's not a problem. It's just how it is.

I said yesterday in the Q&A that Catherine and I, just by virtue of sitting up here and by history, are placed in a position of authority. And so we might emphasize this thing of "realism is a problem, drop the realism, don't grasp things as true," and so forth. I'm just cautious about the weight of that authority—that giving of authority, if that makes sense.

In addition to that, a person might feel—and several people have expressed this, and it's very common now in our society—all the damage and danger that has come from religious realism, from people clinging to "this is truth" and fighting with someone else who says, "No, that's not true, this is true," and the identification with that. So we're hyperaware in our culture of the dangers of fundamentalist religious thinking and realism. That may also create hesitation around entering into more belief in some kind of reality of the imaginal realm or of the divine.

There are different forces at play here. It's more recent in human history—and rarer—to see the dangers of secularism, which is actually just a belief in the reality of something else, as opposed to a belief in the reality of the divine. It's the same realism, misplaced somewhere else as the only reality. And there's just as much—well, you can have aggressive secularism as well. And you can be on the receiving end of that. That's another reason I caution about where to share this, because even some dharma people are going to look down on you and disparage it.

But in the bigger cultural and human history picture, realism both ways has caused damage. Don't forget that. It's only more recent—and it's hard to see what's more recent—but the damage of the flat view of physicalism, of secularism, of secular humanism, is not so obvious to us. For millennia, humans have believed in the reality of divinities, granted them reality and functioned that way, and despite all the problems in history and all the terrors, there was also a lot of beauty, a lot of opening, a lot of sacredness, a lot of meaningfulness.

So I'd like to say now: go back to what's helpful. If this middle way is hard—and it's not simple, it's a deep insight—but if it's helpful for you and where you are to lean toward granting a reality to the imaginal realm, believing in the reality of this or that divinity in some kind of way, if that feels helpful, then lean that way. There's a journey here, a journey of evolution of understanding.

We partly wanted to lay out something with quite a sophisticated philosophical framework because I think that's what we need now in our contemporary society, also because of the assumptions of secularism. It needs a response that's quite robust, that's not easily dismissed, that's philosophically quite deep and sound. And that's also contemporary—we can't really go back in time. We need something beyond modernism, incorporating scientific insight, incorporating modern philosophy and all of that. That's the reason I tend to emphasize, we tend to emphasize, that framework quite a lot.

But really, go back to this thing about trust: check the soulmaking, check the soulfulness. If I'm believing something, is the soul alive with that? Is it bringing something alive? Is it helpful? Is it freeing?

Is there beauty that's coming from that? These are the things to check in with, as opposed to allegiance to a position of authority, which might be Catherine or me, or both of us. "Well, Rob says this, so that's what I'm supposed to be doing." Check the heart, check the soul, check what's working. And there really is a journey with this stuff, so please trust that.

Just two more brief points. In relation to imaginal practice and cosmopoietic practice, I don't think necessarily that long retreats are really what's needed. I mean, they're great and they're wonderful, but there's a lot of potential in these kinds of practices for short periods of practice, practice off retreat, practice when there isn't that much samadhi. It can be really fruitful.

We're interested in this flexibility, this agility of the ways of looking, and these quick, agile shifts of the perception of the mode of being. With practice and in time, they can become something you can enter into and out of quite quickly, and this imbues the days and actually changes what's possible in our sense of existence. It's not necessarily "I should go on retreat for three years or whatever."

And last, which has come up indirectly—what we've been doing this week, actually we've been doing quite a few practices, haven't we? We talked about the energy body, we talked about samadhi, we talked about emotional sensitivity and skillful work with one's emotions, whether they're difficult or lovely or neutral. We've talked about imaginal practice and we've extended that to cosmopoiesis. There are a lot of things there, and we mentioned emptiness.

So just to put the imaginal and the cosmopoietic practices in the context of a wider buffet, if you like, of what's available and what's mutually enhancing, mutually enriching, mutually deepening. There will be periods in your life when you're maybe more into imaginal practice, or periods where you're really exploring mindfulness, or periods where you're really going deeper into the whole samadhi thing or metta or whatever. And just as on this retreat we say, "What's the intention right now for practice?"—sometimes out of retreat you can have an intention or a thread of practice that's really going for a few weeks or a few months. "That's what I'm interested in and that's really where I'm devoting myself to." Sometimes that's really fruitful, to just kind of go with something for a while, but know that it's part of a bigger tapestry, a bigger jigsaw of how things might fit together and be mutually nourished.

The path goes very deep. So much more is possible than I think most people tend to think. It goes back to keeping that flame of desire alive, keeping the intelligence alive, asking "What's working? What's helpful? Is this going where I want?" and keeping that spirit of play alive. When those things are there, an enormous amount is possible.

So the path is deep, but it's also very wide. All these beautiful practices and aspects and how they feed each other—it's there for you. It's totally there. It just takes this spirit of play, of questioning, staying true to what my soul longs for. It's all actually available. It really is available.

So thank you for your practice this week. It's been really lovely, really beautiful. Thank you very much.

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