Wisdom, Art, Balance (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 44:44

So we're taking our time exploring the factors and the elements that contribute to creating, shaping, forging a vessel that's adequate for the material and the fire of Eros, and the transformations there and the explorations there, and also what it means to master the fire in relation to this kind of work with Eros and the imaginal.

We've talked about preliminaries, and we've talked about ethics and skill and confidence with emotions and energetics and the capacity to trust a little bit or just play with a little bit of trust. We've talked about equanimity and some other things. So let's pick that up and continue the list.

We also need to talk about samadhi, and people think of that as something that brings steadiness. But oftentimes, and I've said this before on other retreats, this word samadhi gets shortchanged. It gets contracted and shrunk to quite a narrow meaning—meaning just how steady is my focus. Even when people teach the jhanas, they imagine that it's really a question of getting more and more concentrated and focused and kind of rock-like in one's concentration, as if that's the most important thing there.

But that's just one strand of what's involved. This kind of immovability of mind—the attention being less pulled by things, by distractions—and then hoping that that will just generally be good for me or make me more equanimous. That kind of immovability of mind does happen sometimes, or relative immovability to different extents, but it's primarily a meditative thing when the concentration or focus or steadiness of mind is strong.

You've heard me say before, I would define samadhi as much more than a kind of steadiness, a focus of the mind. It really involves a juiciness, a depth, a real sense of well-being permeating the energy body primarily and the mind and the filling out of the mind in that juiciness, in that well-being, in that loveliness. To whatever degree, that encompasses all the jhanas. I'm speaking loosely now, but that's really how I define samadhi.

Samadhi is also a state of less fabrication. Again, to what degree? You can go through the eight jhanas, and they're all progressively less fabrication of perception. That's a way of thinking about what's going on in the jhana. So there's a connection here—the equanimity, samadhi has to do with less fabrication.

If we acknowledge that samadhi is important in all this, I would say primarily not just because of the steadiness of focus that it brings, or that's part of samadhi, but because of the well-being.

What happens over time—talking about months and even years—when we develop samadhi, meaning developing this sense of well-being, this pool of nourishment and well-being and joy and loveliness in the

energy body, in the mind, pervading the being with that? We develop this over time to whatever degree, dipping in and out frequently or a lot. That dipping in and out brings equanimity in general in our life and balance, and again, balance with respect to Eros and more generally.

Why? Because we grow in happiness. We actually feel ourselves that we have access to a deep happiness and nourishment, a deep nourishment. We feel more and more as we develop that kind of samadhi, the well-being there, that we have enough—that we are nourished enough, we have enough to drink of this water that we so need, at least at one dimension. Something I'll come back to.

But that sense of happiness that's available to us and nourishment that's available to us means that over time, as we get more secure in that, we feel like we don't need to—and we can actually see we don't need to—rely on the sense pleasures to give us nourishment. It's such a poor level of nourishment, trying to get nourished and happy somehow from sense pleasures or from what boosts the ego because someone says something nice to me about my appearance or about something I've done. Or just someone tells me I'm okay or communicates to me in some way that I'm okay.

This can all be important communication to a certain degree, but it's such a—relatively speaking—poor basis, such poor security it gives to try and get or secure a sense of well-being, of happiness, of deep okayness through those mechanisms. But when we have the samadhi available to us over time, dipping in and out, then we just become less dependent on these kinds of sense pleasures or ego boosts or being told we're okay. Because we're less dependent, we're less pulled by them, towards them or recoiling away from things or collapsing. And we're less thrown off balance.

So you can see how the samadhi has more to do with that kind of balance, giving us that kind of capacity of balance, rather than just this kind of immovable balance of a focused mind that is not pulled one way or another away from its object, the nostrils or whatever it is.

Why am I mentioning this? Why is understanding this important? In general, I would say that understanding why and how the elements and the factors of the path work is important. So samadhi is good for me. It's important to know why and how samadhi is good for this business of equanimity. If I have the wrong understanding—if I think it's just about being able to fix my mind on the tip of my nose or whatever it is, and that's somehow going to help me or generally help my life somehow—it's important to understand how and why elements or factors of the path are working.

Why? Because as I think I mentioned in an earlier talk on this course, understanding—our understanding of these kinds of things—informs our decisions in practice. So if I understand that it's more about well-being than about nailing my attention to the tip of my nose or the soles of my feet—not that that doesn't have a place, and I'll come back to that—but if I understand more that actually, that understanding itself gives me some wisdom in terms of making decisions at any moment in practice about where to lean, how to navigate, how to incline the mind, what to develop, what to let go of.

If I have an idea that practice is trying to be kind and just accept whatever arises and let things come and let things go as much as I'm able, and that's my idea of sort of Dharma practice or insight meditation, or if my idea is really trying to not be distracted and judging myself about how much I was with the breath or how much thought was there—these kinds of ideas are so prevalent. Some sound a lot more attractive than others, like the kind accepting, let everything come as much as it goes.

They sound open-minded and soft, but the ideas we have about practice—the concepts, and sometimes we don't even fully realize what we're holding as a concept—are operative in consciousness and have a huge influence on what I do in practice, what I choose, where I lean, what my intention is, what gets developed and what doesn't.

These concepts also have a tremendous influence on how I regard what arises—how I regard this thought, or this image that arises, or this energy, or this emotion. Do I simply stay open to it, let it come, let it go? Or do I resist giving in to it, returning to the breath instead? Any idea I hold shapes my response.

The understanding I have of what practice is, what I'm trying to do, how it works—this has enormous influence. Sometimes this is the less popular part of dharma talks; people prefer the stories and quotes. But there's something about understanding the structuring of practice and how it fits together that will hold you and serve you better in the long run than this or that story or quote.

How I regard what arises determines what unfolds, the experience that unfolds. The samadhi, equanimity, ethics, skill with emotions and energies, this trust—we've talked about all this. We can also develop balance and strength in our lives through certain qualities and other meditations.

For example, meditating on the hara, on the energy center in the tantian or lower belly, with its connection to the earth itself and the sense of rootedness—meditating on that sense and stationing awareness almost like the center of consciousness at that point. This can be a really useful meditation for some people, changing the inclination of mind toward more strength, solidity, balance, and rootedness.

But notice that implicit in this practice is not just being at one point or being conscious of sensations at one point, though that can be useful. What's really helpful to be woven into these kinds of meditations are images of earth connection, images of the earth itself. There's already an imaginal element here—in standing meditation, walking meditation, sitting meditation—feeling or imagining that rootedness in the energy body and feeling the earth, imagining the earth as some imaginal figure. The earth is alive as image.

What is the image of earth? I don't mean necessarily personified as human, but the image of earth as something that supports, connects, roots, gives solidity, gives blessing. Think of the Buddha on the evening of his enlightenment, touching the earth—that gesture made earth an imaginal earth. The earth was alive for him as image in that moment.

This imaginal and energetic and feeling connection, weaving these all together, can be really important

for some people to dip into. For others who have done plenty of this already, doing more may not be what needs to develop. But for many people, dwelling in that energetic image and feeling and the fullness of that image, the beauty of that image, gives ballast, gives root.

On the other hand, those states of deep equanimity can also be very insubstantial. The feeling with them is of real insubstantiality of things—that's partly where the equanimity comes from. There's ethereality, and you can almost see through things. Everything becomes very, very light.

The practice of hanging out in those states—of spacious allowing, letting everything come and go, developing that deeper and deeper—practices of wide consciousness, just receiving and allowing everything to come and go, resting in awareness. People give different names to this orientation, this state of deep equanimity, of relative unfabrication. But it emphasizes the spacious quality of equanimity, which is important. It's not solid.

So yes, sometimes solidity gives balance and equanimity, and sometimes the exact opposite—an element of insubstantiality—gives us balance. Dwelling in these states of spacious insubstantiality, letting everything come and go, letting things fade, can be really helpful in the long run. But I'm talking about hours, not just one experience here and there or dipping in for a couple of minutes. I'm talking about developing the ability to hang out there for a long time, making it accessible.

So there's the imaginal connection with earth and rootedness and the belly center with its solidity. There are these more spacious states of allowing and insubstantiality—lack of solidity that still gives balance and equanimity. And there's a third element: the images of strength that are available to us—imaginal figures and images of strength, perhaps solidity, but particularly images of strength.

Now sometimes what happens is a person's imaginal practice is alive in certain directions, certain kinds of images, but not so much in others. So for example, someone might have a rich array of images of devotion—very, very beautiful images of surrender—and not notice, or ignore, or discard, or not choose to dwell in other images that arise for them that are more images of strength.

So they have an inclination or tendency or habit or pattern, an okayness or even captivation with images of surrender and softness. But images of strength—whatever they might be, and they can be many kinds—they tend to ignore, discard, not even notice sometimes, or choose not to dwell in.

Sometimes a teacher can be helpful here. This might come up in an interview. Someone might mention something and then completely ignore it—and it's exactly what they need to pay attention to. So a teacher or therapist or someone can sometimes point that out in working with someone, and that might be helpful. One could even, in some instances, I suppose, prescribe this or that kind of image for a person to develop more strength.

I'm cautious about that—not saying it's not helpful sometimes, or possible sometimes—but I would be a little cautious about it, partly because it also kind of implies that the teacher-therapist knows best, but also

for other reasons.

Sometimes as well, when we talk about strength, sometimes there's a kind of general weakness of the being. It seems like there's just this tendency to collapse or kind of everything gets a little mushy and soggy and can't sustain or present. You kind of feel it in a person's being. Sometimes it's just a general sort of weakness.

And sometimes there's a kind of general suppression of libido, of life force. But here, if that's the case, again, we have to be careful because what is just natural to a person—and they shouldn't be told or forced to be different than they are. It's just natural for them to have that much libido or this much libido, whatever it is—a little, a lot—rather than pathologize them as being repressed or being overcharged or over-erotic or over-excitable or whatever.

But when there's this kind of general weakness or general libidinal suppression, if that's what's happening, it may be of course that inquiry and working in psychotherapy—and we'll talk about this—looking at the past and what may have contributed to that, may be helpful. But again, whether it helps or not will also depend on the conceptual framework operating in the psychotherapy. All psychotherapies and all teachings have a conceptual framework. And so if the conceptual framework again has got a certain image of what one should be like or what one's moving towards, or a concept of what's right and what's wrong and what's okay and what's not, that will determine a lot what actually gets released. But it may be that some work in psychotherapy actually helps with that.

It also might be—I mean, sometimes that kind of general libidinal suppression—it might be that finding where the libido flows easiest in that person's life and expresses the easiest, finding that and encouraging and supporting that may then just start to allow the libido to flow, and then it can begin, maybe, to move towards a kind of general strengthening and vitality, and perhaps opening the range of the libidinal expression, opening it wider than just that one area where it sort of trickled a little bit in the first place. It's complex. All that's complex.

So we should point out that when we talk about balance in practice or in life—but especially with regard to eros—this is really important: we're rarely talking about something that's static. We're not talking about a static state of balance. We're talking about something that's dynamic, fluid, responsive. Think more of a dancer, or a footballer dribbling the ball this way or that, running, or a cyclist even just riding your bike—you're actually in a state of dynamic responsive balance to the little micro-movements this way and that.

So these equanimity-giving qualities that we've been talking about—samatha, spacious awareness, equanimity itself, metta even, which I didn't mention—these equanimity-giving qualities, it's not necessary for them to be there all the time, to be there kind of as a constant, mixed in with or in the background to our passion or our eros or our energetic or psychic charge. So careful with this.

It's rather that we can learn to access these qualities to different depths. And eventually, I would say, we can learn to access them at will. This is what you learn if you practice the jhanas or these deeper states—not 100% of the time, but generally speaking, it's possible to just choose to enter certain states.

We can access them, these qualities, rest in them and kind of marinate in them, marinate in that deep well-being of stillness. Just sit there like you leave a slab of tofu to marinate in tamari and garlic and ginger or whatever it is. You just marinate. It soaks it up. It soaks up into the being. And marinate in them at times. At times.

And then that gives, slowly, gradually, it gives a confidence that that is developable, that access and those qualities are developable. And we trust—we gradually, eventually reach a point of trust that they will be accessible. If they're not accessible in this moment, or if I'm emphasizing something else in this moment, in the not-very-distant future, this quality of deep equanimity or this deep, dark space of non-fabrication, relative non-fabrication, or this...

lovely nourishment of samadhi, or whatever quality it is, will be available to me in the not distant future if I want it.

We develop a kind of trust and confidence because these states appear frequently enough. They're there. They will be there frequently enough in my life that I'll have that nourishment, that stillness, that sense of equanimity. It's this frequency of access to these qualities and states, combined with trust, that supports our equanimity in life and with regard to eros.

What this means is that we're not fixed in some kind of medium heat setting—not quite an ice block dead, but maintaining a certain amount of warmth and interest while never getting too excitable or too hot with eros. We're not trying to find the acceptable middle setting, the "middle way" thing. That's less how I would look at all this.

Rather, there's a range of being that's being opened up. Through that whole range, all kinds of beauty and nourishment and necessities are encountered—we meet with them, we are fed by them. So there's a range of being, of excitability if you like: arousal, being on fire, being impassioned. And there's a range of stillness and coolness and spaciousness. All of this opens up a big range. This is what I would regard as the vision of what practice can possibly open up for us.

In general, if there's eros—certainly if there's a lot of eros—some people are simply born with this as their natural character. They are born with a lot of eros and a lot of psyche. They just have a lot of eros and a lot of soul. Much comes through them. This needs certain factors or certain qualities to allow it to be fertile and helpful and soul-making, so that it doesn't get short-circuited or implode or explode or fall over in various ways.

Part of this is balance—strength of the citta. So all these factors we've been discussing, and we could add a few more. I would add solidity and firmness: the ability of the mind or attention to stay steady with

something. If I'm investigating eros, if I'm working with an image and there's something quite subtle and complex happening, the ability to keep the attention steady with that is important.

And there's general mindfulness—general awareness, the ability to notice, to observe. This might be close, detailed, intimate noticing, but it's an ability to notice and observe that, even if it is close and detailed and intimate, is not entangled. This quality we call mindfulness is important.

I would also add inquiry. The factor of inquiry and investigation is really important—the questioning, bringing questions to bear in the moment on my experience. All kinds of questions at different levels, with specificity and subtlety of questioning, and the specificity of intention that needs to be involved at times in inquiry.

These three things—the firmness of mind in terms of steadiness of attention, the capacity to observe and notice what we call mindfulness, and the capacity to inquire—are all part of what's necessary for this whole investigation.

I'm aware that recently I've said things that really lean away from or de-emphasize mindfulness and equanimity. So I seem to be contradicting myself. I am, in a way, contradicting myself. I'm not really—it has to do with context.

If I said that in the past, it was really in the context of what sometimes happens: a shrinking of the path, a shrinking of what practice means to people, a shrinking of what awakening means. It gets reduced to just mindfulness, or just a vision of equanimity. I was really wanting to open that up, partly by de-emphasizing mindfulness or even critiquing it.

But also, for myself, I've spent years training in mindfulness, developing it extensively and intensively, developing mindfulness and equanimity to a really high or deep degree. Maybe in my case too—I don't know if one can say this—certain people have a more natural disposition to equanimity, and also to mindfulness. I would say that's part of my natural disposition, perhaps.

Sometimes what I'm saying is in the context both of that perhaps natural disposition and also in the context of the general scope of teachings, or how people are thinking about what practice is right now. Given that I spent a lot of time and effort and years developing that, and perhaps there's a natural disposition toward mindfulness and equanimity, it may be easier for me to let go of that emphasis or develop something that seems to be its opposite.

But it's tricky. Sometimes things need to get stirred up a bit. The question is: What do you need? Can that be an inquiry? The question is also: What leads to what? What kind of concepts, what kind of emphases, what kind of explorations, what kind of fantasies lead to what, generally speaking? What am I assuming? What are you assuming to be true just because a teacher, or lots of teachers, seem to be saying the same thing?

There's a lot of questioning involved, or necessary, for all this. If I am contradicting myself—which I admit I am, in a way—maybe a way of thinking about it is that in the very contradictions, of which there are many in what I'm saying, I'm really presenting both sides. There's this, and there's that. There's this, and the opposite is somehow true as well.

So it's really a matter of balance. The contradiction itself is reflecting a kind of meta-level balance that I'm trying to communicate in relation to all this. The responses of balance and wisdom to all this are complex questions. There's complexity to them.

I'll mention one more possibility for developing some of these qualities.

Psychological balance, if you like, is implicitly or explicitly conveyed in mandalas and developable through meditating on a mandala. Some of you already do this, some of you will be not familiar with this at all. Meditating on the mandala as a whole or on some elements of the mandala in combination—I don't mean so much as a visual pattern, but actually what the elements represent or the imaginal figures represent within certain mandalas.

For example, in one mandala, Akshobhya is a Buddha that represents wisdom into emptiness—the vajra, which means diamond, something that's indestructible, some indestructible element of being which is related to emptiness. Meditating on Akshobhya, if you like, and what that means as an imaginal figure, as an icon, one can balance that with another Buddha in the same mandala—for instance, Amitabha, who might be regarded, in some ways of seeing it, as the Buddha of the imaginal.

So right there you have this balance: there's the imaginal, but there's the knowing of the emptiness, and just putting those two in relationship to each other as images—images that are pregnant with idea as well—and putting them in some kind of counterpoint and balance. There's the imaginal, and there's also the knowing of the emptiness. There's the form of the imaginal, and there's the lack of form in the emptiness. There's the imaginal with the eros implicit in it, and there's the coolness of the knowing of emptiness and knowing of image as image. Sometimes putting those two and meditating them and perhaps placing them in your heart or along a certain axis—if these images are alive for you or can become alive—can be really powerful as a way of developing balance generally in relation to all this.

Or it could be putting those two or one of them in counterpoint, in balance, in relationship with, in opposition to, in co-constellation with another Buddha of the same mandala—Ratnasambhava, who might represent the emotions, the actual feelings of compassion or metta or whatever, or we might say more generally the emotional life. Again, putting them in relationship and actually having them as iconic figures and letting the imaginal work, imbued with a little bit of concept as it always is anyway, imaginal work—actually let that do its work on you by bringing the energy body and the whole consciousness into that, or bringing that into the whole consciousness and the energy body, either way.

Or a fourth Buddha of that mandala, Amoghasiddhi, is the Buddha related to action in the world. So you

can see how these things, just psychologically—can I balance the imaginal with the emptiness? Can I balance the emotions with the action or the emotions with the emptiness or the action with the emptiness? In activism and in engagement, how many people have come to me with that kind of question about burnout, about over-involvement, of being over-passionate, or it needs to be balanced more. This is one way of actually playing with all this.

But again, what would it be to balance Akshobhya, the emptiness, the Buddha of emptiness, the vajra being, the diamond quality, indestructible quality of the transcendent—balance that with the Buddha of action, of engagement, Amoghasiddhi? We can play with these figures, these icons, these images in meditation, place them in relationship, in counterpoint, in balance. And it will bring balance. And it's possible with other imaginal figures as well, even erotic imaginal figures. See, play, see what's possible.

One thing I would say about all this in relation to that mandala and the emptiness thing is emptiness, or the realization of emptiness here, is really at whatever depth or whatever fullness you understand it at present, or that is evoked by that image or concept. I know I put a lot of stress on saying emptiness means more than this, and it's more than that experience, and it's more than this—this is what we really mean by emptiness. But at the same time, in this kind of meditation, you might have a sense, some intuitive sense, or even a direct experience of the unfabricated, or the big mind, big awareness, cosmic consciousness, or emptiness as ground of being. These are all things where you may have heard me say that this isn't emptiness in the way that we mean it—there's more to understand, there's a deeper emptiness. But still, they can be really valuable.

So emptiness at whatever level and depth, fullness you understand it, can be really valuable to bring that in the meditation so it's alive and it's personal and it's relevant to you right now. You don't have to wait until necessarily—I mean it's better if you have a deeper understanding or it will be better when you have a deeper understanding—but you can bring in any level of what these images and ideas bring, whatever level is alive for you and that you can bring in. It will still have a lot of power here.

Or that Akshobhya might be the dharmakaya, the non-dual Buddha's gnosis that includes all appearances. In a way, it's not important. What we want is something that's relevant and that has a certain potency and power to bring into the meditation and let it do its work, let it do its alchemy.

Because it is interesting to me as a teacher how sometimes vague concepts or a certain level of understanding and images can open experiences that bring deeper understandings or open understandings that are deeper than a person knew that they even had—knew that they were even conscious of until they played with it in a certain way or until they entered it a certain way. You think, what's going on here? Is it magic? Is it a kind of invocation? Is it just intuitive wisdom that something in us knows emptiness, for example, at this deep level, knows the co-constellation and the balance and necessity of these things, and what we're really doing through the mandala is contacting and allowing to emerge that level of deep intuitive wisdom? Is it the power of the imaginal, the power of image and poetry?

It's interesting that the alchemy here is not entirely linear or expected. So what I'm really saying is trust whatever level of understanding of emptiness you have, if you're going to play with this kind of thing, and trust the imaginal to do a certain work here that's got a certain autonomy to it. It's beyond what we might have imagined in the narrow sense, what we might have expected or thought beforehand.

Okay, so we've just in this talk talked a lot about strength, balance, space, vessel, mostly as a kind of collateral, as how we develop these qualities.

qualities in our life that can then shape and inform and give us balance generally, which will affect our relationship with eros when it arises. In the next part of this series, we want to explore what balance actually means as you're doing imaginal practice, as the eros is alive with this beloved other, with this erotic object. What does mastery and balance and response mean in the moment there, in the actual practice?

What we've discussed today has been mostly around that practice—the development of what I call collateral qualities. The next talk will address what happens within the practice itself.

I want to say one more time: sometimes, for some people, there comes a time to question even the whole ideal of balance and equanimity. Or to question one's clinging to the opposite—to being passionate and up and down, to identifying as "I'm like this" or "I'm like that."

So while I'm genuinely interested in developing the skills and art of balance and equanimity with respect to eros, I also recognize there's a place for questioning these very ideals. Balance is, after all, an ideal. I'll say more about this in the next talk. But there's sometimes a place for simply questioning this whole framework: Where did it come from? Do I have to buy into it? And what does it actually look like in practice?

These questions themselves become part of the deeper inquiry, part of the very balance we seek to cultivate.

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