Wisdom, Art, Balance (Part 5)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 25:07

A few more things here. We're talking about balance, sustainability, and fertility in the practice—ensuring, guarding, supporting, and encouraging these qualities through the art and artfulness of our practice.

One aspect of this worth mentioning is the navigation between or the emphasis of attention in imaginal practice, and noticing what captivates or captures the attention. What's my personal tendency or your personal tendency, if there is one? My personal pattern, your personal pattern or habit for the attention to keep getting captivated by this element or that aspect of the whole soul-making constellation or movement? This is really, really important, because again, what can happen is the attention gets captivated by something, and all the energy funnels along there, and all the growth funnels along there, and it can be just lopsided.

If you have an image of more like a sphere expanding, or let's put it in two dimensions, a circle wanting to expand in all directions and get bigger, and instead, for different reasons, it's only expanding in one direction, the whole thing tips. That's not sustainable. There's not balance there and it won't be fertile.

I was working with someone the other day who exemplified this pattern. For her, the attention might get funneled, captured, or receive undue emphasis—an imbalanced emphasis towards the heart or the energy around the heart, constellating in the heart with the eros and the love, at the expense of the imaginal. We've talked about the other imbalance where one is lost in the image without the awareness of the emotional resonances and the energy body resonance. Here was an example of the other direction, and I think it was her tendency.

So pointing it out and offering the possibility—what do you see happening here with the attention being captured by all the fire and heat and energy coming up into the heart area in the energy body? The very attention was intensifying that; the constriction of the attention was intensifying the energy there until the whole thing felt like it was getting overexcited—like some flame or a circuit when you blow a fuse. It was going to dissipate in that way or become way out of balance or just disperse.

One option is to open up the energy body awareness and have the whole body involved. We'll return to that. Or, and in this case, what I gently guided towards was not taking the attention off what was happening in the heart and in the whole energy body, but actually just redressing the balance a little bit, giving a little bit more attention to the image. It's almost like the image tended to get lost there with all the captivation of the attention in the heart area and the energy. So just giving a little bit more attention to the image, letting that become more alive and prominent, still aware of the heart and the energy body, and

also taking care to balance both—in this case, not just the self, what's happening with me.

I am becoming this in the image, and there was a sort of captivation with that at the expense of the other. So there was an example that was also a little bit imbalanced in an unusual way towards the self and forgetting the other a little bit. Still aware of the heart and the energy body, taking care of the balance between self and other, but giving a little more attention to the image. Then the kind of over-intensity that was gathering in the heart and feeling too uncomfortable—like it was just going to blow—could calm a little bit.

Actually, there was less intensity but more potency. This is a really important distinction: the distinction between intensity and potency. When we work that way, instead of a fuse just being blown because it was too much intensity, or instead of it just being really intense and thinking, "Wow, that was amazing," and then actually not much happening in terms from the point of view of soul-making and shifts or openings of the psyche and of the perception of the world—actually the spreading of the intensity and the opening so that all that energy could go into other domains like the imaginal made the whole experience richer, deeper and more potent. In other words, it made a difference to the soul.

Don't—this is a general point now—confuse intensity and potency. Intensity is very attention-grabbing and looks very impressive and feels very impressive. It doesn't always translate as potency. Sometimes what is intense can be potent, and sometimes what is potent is really not that intense. There's a more general point there, but there's also this question of the relative emphasis of attention. In this case, we're talking between the heart and the energy body on one hand and the image on the other. All this has to do with balancing and leaning one way, responding to what's happening.

As we're talking about energy, let's talk about sexual energy. Of course, fantasies, images that come into the mind can bring sexual energy with them—lost in a sexual daydream, even something like that, brings sexual energy, sexual arousal. The other way around, we can feel sexual arousal and it constellates some kind of fantasy or daydream or image. When that's the case, actually, one option is to give some attention to the sexual energy.

Oftentimes what happens when we're not mindful is that we get lost in the image in a not mindful way, so it's not really imaginal then, and the sexual energy is just contracted, perhaps genitally or in some area of the body. So give some emphasis of attention to the sexual energy, but in the whole energy body. Really emphasize the whole energy body and really feel what happens if I allow that sexual energy—really allow it in the body and open to it and let it open. Oftentimes it will then spread if we allow it and open to it and open the space for it. It will spread like a gas to fill that space, fill the whole energy body. Really feel it and let yourself enjoy that energy. Let yourself enjoy the sexual energy, opening to it, feeling it, mindful of it in the body.

What can happen is the sexual energy transubstantiates or transforms into bliss. It just becomes rapturous energy or pīti. There's a close connection between sexual energy and pīti, and opening to it that

way, and feeling it, and really letting yourself feel it. So we're talking about really an open, skillful mindfulness of the sexual energy in the whole energy body, and it can transform to bliss, and then you can do all kinds of different things with the bliss if you want to go into samādhi or whatever.

But let's be clear: if I'm caught up in an image, whether sexual or otherwise, that's not the imaginal. And if I'm not aware of the energy body, that's also not imaginal. It's not eros then, because it won't be stimulating the soul-making. It's just craving.

Yet even if something arises as what seems like mere fantasy or sexual craving—some agitating sexual energy—there's a possibility to work with the image, to allow it to become imaginal. An image that begins in the superficial sense can actually transform. I can enter into relationship with this image in a way that makes it imaginal, allows it to become imaginal, and then the soul-making and the psyche-logos dynamic can get involved and start to expand in relation to that image.

But imaginal practice for us includes not just the dimensionality and sensitivity with the image, but also the mindfulness of the energy body and the soul-making resonances. There's always the possibility of navigating, of responding skillfully, no matter how something starts. You might just feel this agitated sexual energy, uncomfortable, or encounter an image that seems like nothing more than a sexual daydream. The possibilities of navigating—we can really develop our skill, our art here with all this.

Let me amplify something I mentioned before and draw it out again for the sake of an important point. Sometimes the image may want to, or we can incline it toward, this movement where there's an erotic beloved, some erotic object, and there's a movement or inclination toward merging, melting together into union.

One possibility is we simply allow that to go toward union—we navigate in that direction so there is this melting together into oneness. There's, technically speaking, less fabrication at that point, less fabrication in the perception of forms, and we can dissolve into that oneness to a profound degree.

But there's an alternative. We're talking about navigation, steering, inclination—choices in imaginal practice. We can actually keep the eros in the way that it constellates and retains the twoness that we've discussed several times, keeping the images alive. In other words, the images don't just melt into light or diffuse into undifferentiated love. You're actually sustaining the erotic tension, sustaining the twoness and the otherness and the particulars of the images.

I won't say that's always best, but other doorways and dimensions are opened through retaining that erotic tension—the twoness, the otherness, and the image, and the particularity of the image. Because in that erotic constellation that doesn't dissolve into oneness, we actually experience a different kind of holiness—different kinds of holiness.

We can experience and have the perception, the imaginal perception, of participation—participation in the dimensions of divinity, of the cosmos. And that's different from oneness. Not just a oneness of essence,

a melting into that, which is wonderful in its own right, but participation is something different, actually richer. There are infinite varieties and infinite depths and dimensions and facets of participation, whereas onenesses tend to be simpler and more limited.

There are dimensions and beauty to the perception—the deep, almost endlessly infinite perceptions of participation, mystical participation where this image and my participation in this image echoes something and participates through echoing or mirroring something more cosmic or divine. We'll return to this.

But for that echoing and for that participation, uniqueness is necessary. It's not just a oneness of essence, a dissolving of the particularities into one universal substance of love or awareness or light or being. Actually, my uniqueness or the uniqueness that pertains to the self and the other, and this kind of love and this kind of eros in the image—the uniquenesses in the image are necessary to participation in a way that they're not to a sense of oneness.

There's a whole different direction and dimensionality of sense of holiness. But there's always the question of balance and the possibilities here, this infinitely gradated shift of emphasis and inclination and navigation.

So an image may go toward melting, and then there's a sense of the energy body melting, and I could take that into samadhi and actually let the image go. That's possible. Or the image goes toward the melting and union, I feel that in the energy body, but I choose to modulate it. As we mentioned before, I kind of linger at some point, or stop it at some point, perhaps at the edge of where there is the imaginal form and the formless. Just lingering around that edge where things are very insubstantial. There are all kinds of possibilities here.

But there is something that we get through the retaining of the twoness—the retaining of the erotic other and the otherness and the particularities—that we don't get in more commonly described or conveyed teachings about mystical experiences and directions.

Another way of putting partly what we've just been through—another way of dividing it up—is that in everything we've talked about, we can think about or play with the shifting of the relative weight or emphasis of attention. For example, on the desire itself, on the energy of the desire, or on the inquiry into the desire: this deep questioning of what am I really wanting here?

We can put the weight of attention on the energy of the desire, or the weight of attention on the image—and this includes the image of the other, of the self, of the world, and the cosmic dimension of the eros itself—or equally between those. This opens up the sense of dimensionality and divinity. What's the relative weight with those compared with the energy body? And if it's the energy body, is it a particular center I'm working with—the heart, or the throat, or the lower belly—or the whole energy body?

And again, what's the relative emphasis on the sense of love and the kinds of love? Or the emotional

difficulty that one might be feeling. It doesn't have to be at all, but any difficulty there. But it might be a sense of lack, or the desire itself is difficult, or some other emotion there.

So we can think about this kind of relative emphasis of the weights of the attention. It's all in the field, but what are we emphasizing more or less at any time in that balance there?

Another way to approach the whole question of balance, another kind of way in, a way to divide it up, is we could also ask ourselves or check, again, at any time, or just more in general: are my three centers—my belly, my heart, and my head—are all three centers involved? Here's this desire, here's this eros with the imaginal, whether it's an actual person or an intrapsychic image—are my three centers involved? Are they all open? And are they connected with each other?

So is my belly and my center of sexuality connected with my heart? Is my heart connected with my head? But really, that's fine as a way of talking, but what we're talking about there, for me, when we talk about the belly center, it's really the body, the energy body. So again, it's like saying, is my energy body involved? Is it open? Is it connected with the other dimensions of my being?

The heart has two meanings. Metaphorically, it's not just that place in the middle of your chest, although it includes that, of course. But it's also my emotion. So is my emotional awareness and sensitivity and care involved? Is it open? Are my emotions open? Are they connected, as I said, these different aspects or dimensions of our being?

Heart has a second meaning in some traditions, as I think I mentioned: as actually more equivalent to the organ of the soul's perception, the organ of imaginal perception. So in other words, is the image—have I forgotten about the image? Or is that involved, included? Is it open? Am I opening to it? Is it connecting with the energy body and all that? Is the energy body connecting with the imaginal and all that?

And then the head, for me, that really refers to the logos. Am I aware of what conceptions are operating? What's the conceptual framework that is actually in play?

This doesn't necessarily need a huge amount of cogitation and thinking and all that stuff, but there is conception operating, as I said, all the time. It's part of soul-making, it's part of imaginal practice, it's part of eros. And is that included? Is what's going on there in the mind—it's not only the brain located in the head, head center doesn't just mean the head center—but is the conceptuality included? Am I aware of it? Am I including it? Can I shape it? Can I respond with it? Is it connected? Is it open? Is it involved?

One very basic thing in relation to concept and the part that has, the conceptual framework in all this: am I clear, for instance, in relation to navigation? Am I clear about the distinction between, and am I clear in how I'm navigating between the three degrees of fabrication, if you like? Remember this from, I think it was the last retreat or the retreat before.

In other words, we can navigate towards, steer towards a lessening of fabrication into samādhi or mettā

or different kinds of oneness or towards the unfabricated. Beautiful, really important steering. We can just approach things with a kind of mindfulness or bare attention, which is just a little bit less fabrication than a usual state of consciousness. That's really helpful, really skillful at times, it's part of our practice—but heaven forbid that it become the whole of the practice. But it's an option and it's helpful for some things.

Or we're engaging in the art of fabrication, if you like, the more tantric practice of skillful fabrication, soul-making fabrication. So it's three degrees: towards the unfabricated, the so-called bare attention or mindfulness—a sort of midpoint, if you like—and there's the skillful fabrication of the imaginal soul-making.

So just be clear about that and clear what we're doing at any point and where we're headed, and is it deliberate, and is that where we want to go right now?

But just to say right now, and this is what I want to pick up in the next talk, that the conceptual framework—so I was talking about belly, heart, and head, and head really for me I'm saying is conceptual framework—just to say how important that is. Actually, the conceptual framework that's operating at any time, and there will always be one, even if you don't know what it is and if it's vague or it's unclear, even if it's confused, the conceptual framework operating at any time can potentially be really, really supportive. It can be something that supports the movement of the eros and the opening of the imaginal practice and the soul-making. It contains something. And we need—if we go back to the image of the vessel—vessel is containment.

And one of the ways this whole practice is contained in a good way that allows it to be soul-making, allows the fire to heat up the material in the alchemical analogy, is that the conceptual framework contains and creates, is part of creating a vessel.

The conceptual framework works as a map to guide us. And out of all this, it allows trust because I have a conceptual framework. I have a sense of orientation, containment, support, guidance. It brings trust, balance, stability.

Yes, there is this breaking of the vessels that can happen at certain points and the stretching of the vessels and the shattering of the vessels from the Kabbalistic mythology. And that has its important place. But generally speaking, conceptual frameworks are really, really helpful.

And this is what I want to explore in the next talk, if we're still talking about navigation and vessels—this whole aspect of things. Thank you for listening.

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