Faith in Soulmaking (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 30:09

Before tea, we have half an hour for questions. We have a couple of remote microphones, so we'll pass them to whoever would like to ask something.

Bridget asked about confusion during the guided practice. She had been developing a relationship with one particular image that was proving very fruitful, and wondered whether to take the opportunity to see if something else might arise. At the same time, she felt this would be unfaithful to the evolving relationship.

This is a beautiful question. When you say being open to something else coming up, do you mean another image or character, or something different happening with the same image?

Another image. In a way, there's no right and wrong to all this—we're exploring soul. Let me offer a few perspectives.

First, it's not necessary to change images in terms of what we want to explore. Anytime there's an image, there's eros. That might feel questionable—you might think, "I don't think there is eros here." But there is, in the way we mean by eros. It might not be so noticeable. The guided meditation implies that eros may be really obvious, quite unsubtle, and sexual, but any imaginal relationship I would call erotic. I'll unfold what this means more as we go on.

So there are two aspects to staying with the same image: becoming more attuned and sensitive, and noticing what's actually involved in that relationship. It's absolutely fine and wonderful to stay with it. You might notice more and more about the texture and qualities in that relationship.

It might also be that with an image that's regular for you, the nature of the relationship changes. It's the same image, but the relationship evolves, sometimes in quite surprising ways—like relationships do. So you stay with the image and see what happens. It could be that on the face of it, nothing much new happens, but you're actually noticing more than before. That's option one.

Option two: you stay with the same image and remain faithful to it. This is really beautiful language—we're faithful to that image. In being faithful, you're truly open to that image, open to what you put in and get back, and what the image gives to you. So it evolves; it's dynamic; we don't know what's going to happen.

The third thing is different: I would say, at least the way I've taught it so far, that we're polyamorous imaginally. We're also polymorphously perverse, but we'll return to that later. This means it's not being

unfaithful to have many images. The nature of most people's psyche is that there are many images. Just because you have multiple and sometimes contradictory images doesn't mean you're not faithful to one. It's different from how we usually think about faithfulness in relationship.

This is complicated by the ways we tend to think about erotic relationship in the larger sense in most Western culture, but also religious relationship. Typically there's one Buddha or one Jesus. But even in religions, you can see how Jesus comes, then Mary, then different saints. There's a tendency—and we'll explore this more as soul does its thing, as soul-making happens—toward making manifold. More and more images: more separate images, more contradictory ones, more complementary ones. But also one image starts to become more complicated, creating more faces, more aspects.

You see this in institutional religion as a cultural, historical movement. We have Buddha, then Kuan Yin, then Tara—that's what happens historically. You'll see it internally in your own soul-making process as well.

None of these options, to me, constitute being unfaithful. They're all valid, beautiful potential explorations.

So, in a way, I haven't really answered your question. How does that sound?

Last night you mentioned something about having an erotic relationship with the path, and I was just wondering whether you could say more about that.

There's a whole other talk about that, and we might also devote a bit of practice to it in a couple of different ways. But a little bit relates to, in a very general way, what we were talking about with Bridget. What happens—and I think this is in the talk tonight—what happens is that as Eros gets going and as the whole soul-making process gets going, it is very generative, creative and prolific in what gets discovered and created.

In every facet of our life, in every dimension of being, Eros can come and infuse and start to inseminate that thing or that relationship or that aspect of being. And then soul-making happens in relationship to that being, to whatever that aspect is or that thing is. So this could be obviously a person, it could be the path, it could be nature, it could be something in nature, it could be oneself, it could be some aspect of oneself.

In that process, the object comes alive and comes to be more than it was before. And wrapped up in that is meaningfulness, love, dedication, devotion—all these things in relationship to the erotic and imaginatively pregnant object. So that happens in relation to the path.

If I turn around what I just said, I say: where there's love, where there's devotion, where there's meaningfulness, there there is Eros, there there is image happening, there there is fantasy. And often we don't realize that. So we think our life is without images. But our life is infused with images. Where are they? Look where there's meaningfulness, where there's love, where there's dedication, where there's

devotion, where there's aliveness. That thing is erotically, imaginatively alive for you.

And it could be something you would never have thought to put the word Eros or imagination with. It could be an idea. It can be something very—your feet. It could be absolutely anything, from the most gross concrete thing to something very subtle to something seemingly abstract. Anything can come alive in this way.

So that's a general point. Do you want more about that specifically now, or do you want to wait?

It was more just the sense of relating to it, because it's not an object, it's not a visual image, it's not something kinesthetic. It's not like an image—relating to the pull, or to the pull of that kind of calling.

Well, I would say it is, but the idea of the path or the truth or something like that is not kinesthetic or visual. It's not like an image, not a being.

Actually, I want to go back to your question because I think it's quite important. When you speak of feeling called by something that doesn't quite have the quality of a being, yet demands something from you - this is very common and very valid.

An image doesn't need to have a discernible form. As I mentioned briefly in the guided meditation, we often think of images as having clear visual characteristics - he looks like this, she looks like that. But an image can be something as vague as what you're describing, and it still constellates as an image. Around that calling, in relationship to it, there's still the fantasy of the self, the movement, the world it happens in, the tradition, the history, the future. Do you understand?

It's perfectly fine if our images aren't clearly delineated visually or in any other sensible way. They can remain vague and that's entirely valid. But there will usually be something in the constellation that is a bit more formed - like the sense of self and what the self's job is in relationship to this calling.

I realize the kind of practice we did in the guided meditation might seem harder to do with something so formless. But you can still feel energetically and heartfully and soulfully what that pull and calling does to you, even if the object isn't quite clear. It's going to do something in your being when you open to it, when you sit with it, when you align with it, when you give yourself to it. Sometimes that's all that needs to happen.

What does that feel like? Sometimes when you let yourself do that, when your being opens - and this relates to the earlier question about images changing - something then shifts in the image and something may become more formed. But it doesn't need to be. It's not necessarily better if it's in technicolor and really clear.

There's a fullness and multi-dimensionality and multi-facetedness to that whole erotic relationship that you can find your way into. You can let it fill out more without demanding that it have a certain form. These things unfold organically. I'm very much not about telling the imaginal world what to do, having an

agenda where it should be like this or fix certain aspects of our personality. I incline much more toward being led by something, listening to something and letting that guide - the other way around.

Now, regarding your question about resonances versus interpretation - you're absolutely right that the way of relating to images is much more about resonances than analysis or interpretation. But I understand your wondering whether, especially in early days when this approach is being learned, there might be a place for moving between receptivity and some analysis or interpretation.

Because what I find is if I allow that, it can kick it off again. It can get something moving again.

So if I understand—by early days, you mean early days in your practice? And so something makes sense analytically, or you can see why a certain image would come up, and then that kick-starts what? Then it kick-starts something happening spontaneously.

I'm absolutely fine with this. The thing about soul making is that every dimension of our being is involved, every facet. So for me it absolutely includes the intellectual faculties in all kinds of ways. The only caution I would give is: don't limit. So once I've analyzed it—done, put it in a box—the image will die. The opposite is what we want.

If you have this sense, or grant—let's say grant, play with the idea, entertain the idea—that the image is infinitely meaningful, then whatever analysis comes to you or you come up with at any point never exhausts the image. It doesn't finish it. It's just one facet. It means this, and it might mean its opposite, or it might mean something complementary. It might mean many things. It's not that you necessarily have to find them all out, but there's a kind of superabundant depth to that. Does that make sense?

So fine, absolutely. And especially, again, you're finding what works for you with this. I really encourage experimenting with what works and what gives it life. I would just be cautious about putting things in boxes, because then they die.

I suppose it happens—if an image comes because I've taken something to a sit, so I'm going to look at this, and then there's some apparently completely disconnected image, then at some point there'll be an "oh yes, I can see how this relates back to the question or issue I brought to the sit."

Yes, beautiful. And how about this: the image was always there. What drove the issue was the image. Do you understand? So the image—we're playing with an idea here, partly. We're playing with the idea that image is primary. It's not how we tend to think, at least not in this culture. We tend to think exactly the way you said: I had this issue, I had this thought, and then this image came. Fine, this is a great way of thinking, but also the other way around. You're kind of supporting this view of superabundance and mystery and fullness and primacy of the image—the specific image.

That sort of involvement of the intellect can really be fertile for the whole soul-making process. It kind of gives it more soil and more structure to unfold in and grow.

Yes, Mary?

Two quick little things, really, that have come out of what both Catherine and you have said. One is what Catherine said—that every desire has an object. And I find that problematic. I understand it because that's the psychology of desire, that's how it's spoken about. But I've worked for quite a few years now with Prapto, Prapto Suyadharmo, a Javanese movement teacher, and he always says: not subject-object, but subject-subject. And I think it relates to what you say about allowing an image its autonomy.

There can be many problems when we start thinking about an image, a tree, or a flower as an object. That's something I wanted to share.

The other thing is my difficulty—it's probably just how I image soul, but I don't feel a difference between heart and soul. Heart gets bigger sometimes, but it seems to be the center and the engine of soul for me.

What do you mean by heart, exactly? Well, certainly I feel it in the energy. I feel it here. And sometimes it stretches and can stretch way out there. But any image that has that kind of resonance—this is where I'll feel it. I'll feel it in the body as well, all over the place. And I'll get mentally excited. But that's the center.

Catherine and I were talking about this recently. So there's no reason to change anything there. Again, I would just be quite open. It may be that for you, this is the center or the faculty or the instrument of soul perception. But fine. For me personally, it's not located in any one place, but it does definitely involve the energy body. It has to be involved. But for you, it might be centered here. For someone else, who knows? So, great.

In some of the Sufi traditions, they talk about heart as the center of soul perception. It's not quite what we mean by just openness of heart and sort of emotionality. There are linguistic problems here. There might also be—and I'm not sure, I don't know the answer—there might also be just personal ways we tend to feel this differently, and that's fine. Again, I would just keep open. It might be that it's always going to be that way for you. It might be that it evolves.

In terms of soul—and again, I can't remember what's in the talk tonight, but I might touch on it—so we can talk of soul as a subjective entity, as if it's a subjective thing, like we talk about mind or something like that. We can also talk about soul as just a way of relating, and that takes it out of this "where is it" sort of thing. It's in the relationship. It's a mode of, or actually it's modes, plural, of relating, if that makes sense.

I think probably what you'll find when I speak is I slip between those two ways of talking about it. But again, I'm a little loathe to tie it down to one or the other, if that makes sense.

Sampo, did you have a question? [Question inaudible: something about analysis and interpretation and hesitancy...]

So again, I go back to this thing of there's no right and wrong. It's like surfing or cycling or that kind of thing. In the sense of—like any meditation practice, we could be talking about emptiness practice here, we

could be talking about samadhi, we could be talking about metta—there's a creativity and a playfulness and experimentation involved.

You get the sense of like, "Whoops, I've gone down a hole here," or "Whoops, I've fallen off," or "I've hit a brick wall," or whatever it is. Or, "Oh, that's interesting, it feels just right now," or "It's opening nicely." And I wouldn't have thought that my analysis would have done that, because analysis is supposed to be a bad thing. Or vice versa, I'm analyzing and I get all just heady and disconnected here.

So rather than creating a rule, I would just say this is part of the sailing. You're feeling the wind, you're feeling the breeze, the currents of the water, and what kind of catches it, in the moment. There are things we can say, absolutely, that this tends to help and that tends to hinder, but generally I don't think there's such a formula to all of this.

It's asking—that's why I keep going on about sensitivity and all of this. It means in the moment, how's my little boat doing here, you know, with the wind? You understand?

And the second thing, just to reiterate something or put in different words what I said to Linda, there's analysis at different levels. So there's an analysis that might be particular to this image and say a connection or whatever—my psychological history perhaps, or who knows what. But there's also just the analysis in terms of understanding, for instance, the whole process of soul-making and how that happens. So there's a kind of—do you understand?—it's more like a meta-level.

So it's all good if it's good in the moment. Do you understand? I would be wary of giving prefab formulaic answers, really. How does that sound?

*Student**: Sounds good. And will you be talking more about transforming the craving, clinging desires into more erotic desires instead? Because that's also something that with some images, especially in the guided meditation when you suggested that we just bring an image of our choosing, there might be... well, it's not exactly like a divine image at the moment, but it feels like there might be something coming on. It might just turn out it was something I craved or that was cool or whatever.

Yeah, sure, sure. This is—yeah, I think we'll be talking about it more. I'm pretty sure we will. I actually can't remember what's in the talk, but I'm pretty sure. If not, let's talk about it more.

Basically, yes, we can move. So you can have eros, all that lovely divinity and multidimensionality, and then, whoops, it's just contracted into craving. How do I know? Energy body is one thing, yeah, that tells me. With craving, the energy body contracts—that's one signal.

But similarly, we can stay with something and say, oh, this is—you know, this shouldn't work or this is craving, whatever. And the way of relating to it—and it might have to do with bringing the heart more involved. It might have to do with getting the energy body more involved.

So one way to lean it more towards eros is to really get the whole energy body involved and expand that

field. When there's craving, the energy body also contracts, the awareness contracts maybe to one area in the body. Sometimes extremely, you know. Sexually, sometimes what can happen is the awareness contracts to one area of the body. So what can really help is opening that, getting the whole energy body involved.

So what is it to look at this imaginal object—and I use "look" in inverted commas—to look with my energy body? Do you understand? And that leans the whole thing more towards what we're calling erotic.

Humility is another thing. There's a sense—it's related to the autonomy—so I give this being, this imaginal figure, rather than they're an object that I want, or they're an object that's going to do something for me. You understand? So even you can have a spiritual—I can have a god that's basically just trying to do something for me, or that's how I see him, her, etc.

So there's something about humility and reverence as well that leans it towards, or opens it towards the erotic. So there's two things for right now, but hopefully we'll be saying a lot about that. Does that sound okay?

*Student**: Yes, thank you.

Okay, good. So there was the tea bell. Let's just have a couple of moments quiet together.

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