Opening to Desire and the Imaginal (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 40:19

I will try and repeat the question so that anyone who's listening can hear it better. And if you'd rather your question isn't recorded, then just let us know and we'll press pause.

Tom is asking about working with the energy body. He's saying there are times when he can establish a relatively spacious energy body that feels very nice, comfortable, pleasant, and really yummy. But there are other times, especially when an image comes, that the attention contracts towards or around the image, and with that the energy body contracts as well.

This is partly why Catherine was doing the two-ness exercise and what we did on the first day. It's like, can I have that and this? It takes practice—we need to develop that ability to have both.

I would guess a lot of this stuff is supported by not just one thing, but many different things. One of them is simply the more you hang out in that energy body space, and the more you take that with you into daily life. Here's the thing: splitting life into formal meditation and the rest of life is a mistake for a start. So you sit, and that's maybe where in the sitting or walking or standing you get your first taste of this nice energy body awareness. When you end the meditation, take that with you.

In other words, end it slowly and see if you can get up off the cushion and walk away with that energy body feeling. Standing in the lunch queue, can I just get it back? Walking meditation in the energy body is really helpful, obviously, because it's mobile and that's more like life.

The more you can get a taste of this, what the energy body becomes is just—it becomes eventually the default hangout. It's this kind of "this is nice," and we want to be here, and it feels good, and there are little micro-adjustments and things. So the more you do it, and the more you spread that doing into different activities, that will help.

Then you can begin doing more of what Catherine introduced on the first day or second day—this kind of doing it in relationship. Now it's hard with a human other. Most people find it hard with a human other because a human other is a whole other world and they're looking at you and maybe they're judging you and who knows what. So it's probably easier with something like a tree or something. You practice extending it like that, and then also with images.

It might work the other way around, though, in the sense that when an image becomes alive as an image—in other words, not just a mental picture and not just a fixation—when it comes alive in that imaginal way, then you might find that your energy body is actually quite expanded. So it's not just the fact of an object and the mind doing that contraction. It's actually the nature of the object and the

relationship with it.

I would wonder whether actually it's not quite a uniform experience that you're having. There are differences—when there's a different relationship with the image, there will also be different effects on the energy body. So look out for that as well.

It's not that you need to try and do something with the energy body with the image. First of all, it might not be really a soul image. It might just be whatever mental content. That's fine. Or it might be that just as you hang out more with a certain image, it becomes more infused with the imaginal, and that changes the energy body relationship with it.

Everything that's involved in the imaginal or in a soul-making dynamic feeds everything else. It's connected with everything else. So where you see the problem—like "oh, my energy body's contracted"—is not always the place where you need to go and try and fix it. You can give attention to other aspects of the whole constellation, and that will just naturally fix itself. There are a lot of different ways you can work with that.

Today the practice was to open to the current of desire. I would like to know your thoughts when there is...

heroes like a flame that is not fueled, or if it is rather the case that eros is always alive but part of it has taken hold of an idea or an image, has turned against itself and is counteracting a part of this current of desire. Do you have any thoughts on this and how to work with that lack of desire?

"Yeah, the lack of desire or the... Yeah, lack of feelings."

"Okay, so... You made that noise again, didn't you?"

"Did I make that noise?"

"I was just going to agree with Ramiro about the... If you look at it in terms of life force, certainly if a life force is kind of got to be encapsulated with an inner critic, for example, that's a lot of life force in there. It's not necessarily eros, but it's a lot of life force to hold us down. So I was just agreeing with that point."

"So let me see if I can summarize, if I understood. So I'm a little tired today. So what happens when there's a kind of depression, really, you know. Is it that there's a lack of desire, or is it that somehow the desire has got kind of stuck or worked back on itself in a way that's stifling and closing down something, or something like what Catherine just said? I don't know. I'm interested. To me, it's a really interesting question."

I certainly think, and just relating to what Catherine said, so let's take something like the inner critic. Imagination is involved in the inner critic. It's got this voice or this character or whatever. What the inner critic is not is imaginal, generally speaking. So in our... What's happened there is something's got reified. Actually, more than one thing has got reified. The inner critic has got reified, and I've got reified.

So if we go back to this self-other-world business, both self and other are both reified. They're concretized. I really believe what the inner critic is saying about me. So even if I don't believe the inner critic's a real person or thing or character, I believe what they say, that kind of object, is saying something real about a real subject, me. So the problem is in the reification.

There's a lot to your question, but what happens when there's a reification is it's like... push of the eros. This eros wants to push. It wants to expand. It wants to penetrate. It wants to open. It wants more. It's this pothos with the eros. It has this dynamic quality. When it meets some kind of block, and there can be all kinds of blocks, but one kind of block is reification, concretization, that push meets the block. Something's going to happen.

Either the push of the eros, the life force, is strong enough to break the block. And then it can go through that reification block into the realm of the imaginal. And the imaginal has the capacity to expand deeper, get richer feedback on the eros, make the whole thing really fertile. If the block is stronger than the eros, or just really entrenched, then something can happen. The eros cannot move into depth, cannot move into dimensionality, into the imaginal. It has to do something, and yet could get tied up in a negativity, could just have to go horizontally, all kinds of things.

So there's that possibility, and I guess it could happen in many ways. There might also be, and you also mentioned, what can happen is, I sometimes wonder, I think, I'm certainly not an expert on depression, but I wonder whether depression is actually, like so many things, many different kinds. And one kind of depression is actually the absence of fantasy. The absence of anything, any kind of image, specifically around the self or around one's activity in life or expression, that is not alive as an image, is not permitted or hasn't found its way. And then there's nothing to kind of, the waters of eros or the fire of eros to flow into and galvanize and give life to, which then feeds back into the whole libidinal energy in the whole life.

So yes, sometimes I think depression is an absence of image. Or it's an image that's fixation, to borrow Catherine's word from this morning, and there's a stuckness.

This is a fascinating question. The fear of opening too wide and being flooded by all the painful images we carry - the torture, cruelty, and suffering we've absorbed throughout our lives - feels very real. But I wonder if this kind of flooding actually happens when we're truly open, or when there's repression.

Think of that pressure cooker image again. What you're describing - opening the awareness really wide - is almost by definition an easing of pressure. There's more space, so less constriction. When awareness expands, it creates room rather than intensity.

Jung went through a period around 1913 that he described as nearly psychotic, documented in his Red Book with all its florid, overwhelming imagery. But I wonder how much this was a product of his particular time - before the First World War, when there was enormous collective repression brewing, when the whole psychological framework was built around the dangerous "unconscious" that could erupt

and overwhelm consciousness.

We live in different times now. I don't think there's that same kind of pressure building toward flooding for most people. When you're genuinely open in the way you're describing, the tendency is actually toward a kind of beneficial liquidity - more images can flow, but they flow rather than erupting.

Paradoxically, when awareness is really wide and open, it often moves in the direction of quieting imagery altogether, toward what we call non-fabrication. So rather than being flooded, you might find that painful images - the dark, torturous images of world suffering - do arise, but they arise within this vast, spacious awareness that can hold them without being overwhelmed.

The flooding typically happens when we've been holding these images in a pressurized way, when there's been unconscious resistance or repression. True openness creates the very container that can receive whatever arises with grace.

Absolutely. The imaginal is essentially a certain set of ways of relating. I can turn on the news and be flooded with really difficult imagery these days—and that's a reality, let's say. I don't take it imaginatively. I still have to navigate that in my heart and my soul and my house: how am I going to work with this and with my sensitivity and the way I'm impacted and the pain in the world and try to respond to that and take care of it and balance my compassion. So all that has to do with compassion practice. It's really, really important.

When we're talking about the imaginal realm, we're talking about, to some extent, a different kind of relationship with that imagery. Already people are starting to report something that is very common with imaginal practice: an image that the mind at first goes, "Oh, that's horrific, that's violent, or that's dark, or that's weird, or whatever." And in the realm of imaginal practice, it's like, just stay with that. Can I just have a little bit of trust in that image? It's not a flat, literalized image of something that's going on in the world. It's imaginal. What looks dark and disturbing has got its own kind of beauty and its own kind of reason. If I can stay with it and trust it, it opens up in a different way.

So it's almost like mixing camps a little bit in your question. What's the real pain in the world and what's more imaginal things that come out? They're different. Is this making sense?

Absolutely. As I said at some point, what we're doing here is asking a lot. It's kind of saying that to do this kind of practice we're talking about requires that we have skill with our emotions—which means knowing when we're numbing, taking care of it, learning how to soften the heart, open it, take care of it, balance it, be sensitive. It's a lot already, that's a lot—in relationship to our personal history, in relationship to present relationships, in relationship to world pain.

So all that's kind of—we're not talking that much about that on this retreat, partly because we're just kind of saying, let's build on that as if it's already there. But we know this is difficult stuff. So I'm not sure what else to say about that piece right now. Could we talk about it another time, perhaps, if that's okay? But it's

a really, really important question.

"I was spending time doing that, and it's very romantic."

"Spending time opening that desire?"

"Well, I suppose, yeah, opening that desire. And then I suppose from it, it wasn't the way that Catherine described, or the other people, the way she described it. It wasn't like, oh, I had..."

"So let me check with you. I was picking up on Catherine's talk last night and the instructions this morning, with opening to desire, and the desire was to just see people happy and flourish. And then what happened seemed to be neither just opening to the energy and having that desire manifest nor something imaginal but it was more like an opening to a realm of happiness—is that a realm of not an individual image but kind of like as if I was walking through that world?"

"Oh, okay. So my question is why is that not imaginal? It's an imaginal realm, an imaginal world of that."

"I suppose I was just checking."

So, yes, absolutely. There's a couple of things there. It's an imaginal realm, an imaginal world. Yes, linger there, enjoy it. When an image opens up, it's asking us for sensitivity. It's asking us to resonate with it. It's asking us to be with it and in it and relate to it.

It might be that then it unfolds some other—you know, it might be that it feeds back on this world and the way you see this world, so to speak. That would be one of the ways that it could kind of infuse or mix with the perception of this world. And then that would be an interesting thing. But there's all kinds of possibilities. It sounds like that's what's opening there.

And so in terms of the instructions, I think I said this morning, it can, once you're open to that, it could go into an image, which sounds like what you're describing, or it could just stay with the energy free of image, and you just have that. And they're both fine choices.

Both experiences point to something beautiful about the nature of practice itself: almost every step along the way presents us with choices, with what I think of as forks in the road. This happens constantly—whether we're exploring emptiness practice, developing samadhi, working with the imaginal, or following desire. Every short while, the path branches, and we learn to sense which direction to take, or sometimes the way simply unfolds naturally.

Someone shared a perfect example of this today in a note. They found themselves in what began as a sexual fantasy, stayed with it, and somehow discovered they had moved into jhana. This is actually quite common, and there are several reasons why this happens.

Much of it relates to the energy involved. Sexual energy can be remarkably similar to piti—that quality of rapture we cultivate in meditation. What typically occurs with sexual fantasies is that we become fixated

on the images while remaining disconnected from the broader body experience. We might feel sensation in specific areas, but we're not opening to the full energy body or allowing the sexual energy to spread throughout our being.

But if we approach it differently—if we take that same fantasy or daydream and, instead of fixating on the images, allow the energy of enjoyment to spread, opening to the sexual energy itself—it naturally moves toward a beautiful energy body experience and samadhi. This represents one of those forks I mentioned.

This principle applies to any image that comes alive imaginally. When an image truly awakens in this way, it will always be reflected in the energy body through some kind of harmonization, opening, or pleasurable sensation. This energetic response serves as one of our most reliable indicators that we're moving in the right direction with an image—even when our rational mind protests that what's arising seems weird, dark, violent, or somehow inappropriate.

The energy body offers honest feedback about our imaginal work. At any moment when this energetic aliveness is present, we can choose to let the image go and simply rest with the energy body, or we can continue playing with both the image and the energy together. These choices keep appearing throughout our practice.

As we go deeper, much of our development centers around cultivating sensitivity, responsiveness, and delicacy in navigating these subtle currents. I imagine it might be like hang gliding—learning to ride the air currents with tremendous subtlety, picking up on what's available in each moment. Sometimes these movements are extraordinarily subtle, requiring us to sense a possibility and then gently incline toward it. Other times, it feels more as though the soul itself possesses its own intelligence, guiding and offering the unfolding in ways that surprise us.

Let me turn to someone who hasn't spoken yet. David, was it you who wanted to ask something?

David shared two interconnected questions. First, regarding the instruction to follow the stream of desire—he finds this experience quite dynamic, sometimes very strong, sometimes extremely subtle, but often accompanied by intense and quite enjoyable energy. His second concern relates to physical pain in his shoulders, neck, or back that frequently arises during retreat. Following the suggestion to inquire into the deeper wanting beneath the pain, he received a series of answers that seemed to exist at different levels, with the deepest pointing toward some form of perfectionism.

When you mention that "it's pointing to," David, do you mean the desire itself or the physical pain? And when you speak of getting rid of it, are you referring to the desire, the pain, or both?

But there's not that sense of the eros building or being ignited or kindling in some way. Yeah, so a few things. Sometimes when there's an opening, it's almost like we need to rest there for a while. There's something that needs to integrate or settle or be received. And we can actually push too much, you know, if we're like, "Well, that was nice, but now what? Where's the eros?" There's a way that the psyche needs to

actually receive what just happened.

So that would be one possibility. Another thing is - and this is something we'll talk about more - but sometimes the eros is actually in the opening itself. It's not that we open and then the eros comes after. The eros is actually the opening. There's an aliveness, there's a dynamism in the very process of opening that we might not recognize as eros because we have ideas about what eros should look like or feel like.

And the third thing is that sometimes when we've had an opening, there's a kind of natural completion to that movement. It's like the desire has been fulfilled in some way, at least temporarily. And so there isn't more eros there because that particular thread has reached a kind of natural conclusion for now. And then we wait, and usually something else will arise, another desire, another longing, another movement.

But if we're too impatient and we're like, "Well, where's the next thing?" we might actually not allow the space for the next desire to emerge naturally. Does that make sense? So sometimes there's a quality of receptivity, of just being available, that allows the next movement of the soul to show itself.

Yeah? Okay. Someone else?

Yes?

Actually, can I just add one more thing to what I just said? Sometimes when we've had an opening, particularly if it's been quite significant, there can be what we might call a "fear of the depth" or a "fear of the bigness" of what we touched. And so part of us might actually be putting on the brakes a little bit, not allowing the eros to build again because we're a little overwhelmed by what we contacted. And that's completely understandable. So if you sense that might be happening, you could just acknowledge that and maybe ask, "What would allow me to feel safe enough to let this energy move again?" or "What support do I need to be able to open to this aliveness?"

And then there doesn't seem to be much eros present. I would prefer to connect the word *eros* with the imaginal. It comes and goes—it's not something that's there all the time. When an image reconstellates, then the eros will return in relation with that image. This isn't something to worry about or some state we're trying to sustain.

What you've accomplished in the opening to the current of desire practice, if you've done it in the classical way, is that you've let go of images. There's a fullness of libidinal energy that transforms into something that's not eros and not imaginal. So then you're resting in that state, which is totally understandable and not a problem at all.

Eros is connected with image and fantasy. When there's craving, you can transform that into eros. But you don't need to worry about maintaining eros all the time. Like everything else, it moves in waves, and certain conditions feed it.

I'd suggest two approaches. First, if you want to return to the imaginal, it's a matter of loosening

again—perhaps loosening the energy body through some emptiness practice, liquefying the psyche so that images can be reborn. When some issue arises or presents itself, that will reconstellate the whole imaginal realm, and with it, eros.

But also, we can look for eros where it's already present—where we love, where something holds meaning for us. You don't always need to search for an intrapsychic image. You could look around you on this retreat and notice the meaningfulness it holds, the appreciation, the love, the dedication. Eros is connected with all of that—here in the environment, in the world around us.

The third possibility is that eros can be extremely subtle. Rather than wanting more eros and worrying that it's something you lack, what might be needed is greater sensitivity in noticing its much more delicate manifestations. Eros can rage powerfully, or it can be incredibly subtle. This could be quite an interesting exploration.

To me, much of practice is about opening—expanding our capacity and skills, our ability to handle more than we thought possible. When we consider the world, compassion, our own emotions and energies, much of our practice involves this expanding work. It's about developing the capacity for a great deal to move through us and touch us deeply in a way that's truly sustainable.

But there's also a whole dimension of practice evolution where things become much more subtle, with fewer fireworks. This may be calling for greater sensitivity, more attunement to subtleties. We often learn tremendously from these quieter experiences rather than the more dramatic ones. This might be part of what you're encountering as well.

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