Instructions: Opening to the Current of Desire

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 30:18

We've got this general idea that we've got threads that we're weaving together—threads that we can actually separate and move between in our practice as we navigate our experience. We've got the thread of what we're calling samadhi in the energy body and cultivating that well-being—really, really helpful. We've got the thread of awareness of our emotions in the energy body, with the energy body, through the energy body—also a really indispensable element of practice, really important in developing the art. Then we've got this whole infinite area of imaginal practice to explore.

On this retreat specifically, we're interested in eros in the imaginal. Of course that involves all imaginal practice. Eros can be very, very strong—obviously sexual—to very, very subtle and not sexual at all. But eros is, I would say, an intrinsic part of the imaginal, and the imaginal involves eros. So in this retreat we're exploring the imaginal with that thread as one of the main emphases, and within that, the exploration of eros. So that's the third thread.

The fourth thread involves the whole investigation into the dynamics of polarity, of two-ness and one-ness as part of what happens both in imaginal practice and just in perception generally. That's a part of desire and eros. And then the last thread so far is what we introduced yesterday—the thread of renunciation, letting go.

So I'd like to add another possibility, another thread that we actually really encourage you to try out and explore. Any of these threads you can use as much or as little as you want, dip in, dip out, and so on. But we would really encourage you to explore at least a little bit what we're going to offer now.

To make a distinction: as I've just said, in imaginal practice, or with imaginal practice, eros is implicit. It's intrinsically woven in. When something is imaginal, when something or other comes alive to us imaginatively, there is eros involved. Where there is eros, if it's left to do its thing, if it's not blocked in some way, it will open up the imaginal. So the imaginal and eros kind of go together.

What I want to introduce now this morning as a possibility is a practice we call opening to the current of desire. And in this practice, the delineation I'd like to make is we actually let go of the image. The image is not so much primary, and we're working more with the energy of desire. So when there's eros, image is implicit and we tend to work in the field or in relationship with an image. This is almost like letting the image go a little bit and focusing more on the energy, as I'll try to explain.

So there's a delineation there. Like all delineations, it falls apart at a certain point—it blurs, the distinctions are not that clear. What's common to these two practices—the imaginal eros and the opening

to the current of desire—is that they both involve a trust. Trust is necessary to some degree, even just a little bit, just a grain of trust: trusting in the image, trusting in the imaginal in one case, and actually in both cases, trusting desire and trusting eros.

So we're not letting go, as in the renunciation thread. We're actually opening to desire here, allowing it, trusting it, and seeing what that opens for us, in us, what that opens to us.

There are three steps to this practice. It's actually quite simple. I'll say what they are and then go through some examples and then nuance it a little bit.

The first step: if you notice some dukkha, some dis-ease, some suffering—or even if you just notice a desire—you can work with this. If you notice dukkha, there will be desire wrapped up in it. That's basic Dharma teaching. Where there is dukkha, there is desire wrapped up in it. So if you notice either dukkha or desire, you can ask yourself: What am I wanting here?

Even if I don't actually see a desire at first, if all I notice is dukkha—I feel this or that—actually bring in the question: What am I wanting here? But what am I wanting more deeply? So you have to go really to the deep level of the desire. Rather than this person or that thing, that car, whatever it is, something more abstract, seemingly abstract. What am I really after here? Something seemingly more general.

Here's this thing that I want, this person that I want, this relationship that I want, this event that I want to unfold a certain way, whatever it is. And letting that go—letting that fixated image, that fixation go—and coming to the generality of what it is that I want. It's a deeper level.

It might seem more abstract, but it's actually a deeper level. So here, as I said, the image is not primary. In imaginal practice, we're not saying the image represents my desire for this or the image represents this quality in me or whatever. We have the idea in imaginal practice that we entertain the idea that the image is primary, like we said with Linda the other day. Here we let go of that and we come to something more general, more abstract underneath.

So we're unhooking from the specific object that we feel we want—the specific person, the specific event, the specific fixated image. You're unhooking from that and finding something deeper. What is it that I'm really after here?

The second step is to just, if you like, sweep aside whatever dharma preconceptions you have about desire. We all know desire is a problem, it leads to suffering, it's a defilement, all that. Just temporarily sweep them off the table and just drop in a couple of grains of trust. Maybe this desire, maybe there's a soul intelligence that's stimulating, that's giving birth to this desire. Maybe this desire is a manifestation of a deeper soul intelligence. Maybe there's a treasure here in this desire. Just temporarily, we're playing with that conception, that trust, just a little bit.

Now those first two steps could be done in any order. In other words, you can entertain the idea that there

may be something to trust here, there may be a treasure here in the desire. You could do that first, and then you could ask, now what is that deeper desire? What is it that I'm really after here?

The third step is to open to the current of that desire, to really open up the body, open up the field of the body for that energy of desire to move. I'm making this gesture upward as we heard. Yes, oftentimes it is upward, but it might not be. It could be outward, and as Catherine was describing in the talk yesterday, it could go downward. Something is dynamic. Something in desire is dynamic. Desire is a dynamic force. And we feel that energetically in the body. So what is it to really open the body to that current of desire?

Now, I mean really, really open. Everyone in here has heard "open to whatever is going on"—a desire or a pain or a sadness, be with it, accept it—sort of general mindfulness teachings. I mean really open. I don't mean just be aware of it and kind of it's okay that you have this desire right now. I mean really open. Open the being to it so that you can actually let that current move as much as possible—the current, the stream, the energy of desire in the energy body.

What happens when you do that? Something very, very interesting happens, actually. I'll come back to the example that Catherine used last night, but that already gives it away. Something doesn't at first make sense in terms of traditional dharma teachings. What happens is an abundance comes, a sense of abundance comes into the being, is given and made manifest in the being. The state of consciousness and of body transforms. Peace comes, joy comes. The thing that we wanted, that which we really desired, is then palpably and immediately recognized and felt to be here. I have it already, whatever it was that I was after.

We may come back to this on this retreat because there are different ways that that which we're already after, whatever that is, is already present. But this is one of them. Somehow, in the treasure of the desire, it has yielded to my being, and opened to my being, the very thing that I wanted, and I haven't done anything different in the world. He may still not be interested in me, or whatever it is, can't get that job, whatever it is.

So let me give a few examples. I'm a little wary of time, but I want you to understand this. I'll give four examples. I hope that's not too much. The first one is actually in a way the most straightforward. The other ones are nuanced a little bit.

The first one was, I was sitting upstairs when I used to live here, and this is some years ago. Something was going on politically with Gaia House, I can't even remember what it was, and it was troubling me. And so I was sitting in meditation, I was troubled by whatever the situation was, and for some reason it occurred to me to ask myself, what am I really wanting here?

What's going on here? What is the desire for? What I saw was that what came was - again, it's this - I want this problem to go away, or whatever it was politically. I actually can't remember, like I said. But the deeper answer that came was freedom from constraint. What I wanted was freedom from constraint.

You hear the generality of that? It can sound a little abstract, but actually it was very meaningful to me. It's not an image, it's a kind of abstraction, if you like, but a personal one rooted in the being. So I really just let myself open to that, let myself feel that desire, and lo and behold, what came was freedom from constraint. I felt it. Nothing had changed in Gaia House politics - it probably still hasn't changed. Sorry, can we take that bit off? Yeah, I'm a dinosaur.

But there it was - the freedom from constraint was palpable, and the release of that was right there in the moment, in the being, to enjoy, to open to. And I thought, isn't that interesting? So that's a very straightforward example.

Second example: I was working with someone a few weeks ago, and here there wasn't any dukkha. So in my example there was dukkha. In this example there wasn't any dukkha, and she said - she was talking about someone, her lover - "I want to kiss him on the mouth." And there wasn't a problem there. She could kiss him on the mouth or whatever.

But then I was exploring this a little bit and asked, "What comes with that image?" So again, we're not sustaining the image as prime. What comes with that image? What is it that you're really after? Or what do you imagine you'd get through kissing him on the mouth? There's no, absolutely no hint of "what do you imagine you'd get" as we were doing yesterday. It's like there's nothing - it's not dukkha, it's not impermanent, a kiss on the mouth is not... So we've changed gear here, right? We're out of that "it's unsatisfactory" mode. You get that?

What do you imagine you'd get through kissing him on the mouth? And she said, "Joining. I'd get joining."

So I was working with her and thinking, is that deep enough? Is that abstract enough? It turned out it was. It could have gone to another level. I asked again, "What do you get through joining?" - take it to an even deeper level, more general if you like. But actually it turned out to be fine. That was enough, and there the sense of joining came right there, without the kiss. And it wasn't through imagining; it was through the energy. So it was enough, and there was the delight of joining right there in that moment.

Third example: This is from some years ago. I just need to remind myself of the different elements because it's a little bit complicated. I was working with a woman in an interview and she was about to go off to California. She'd met someone there - a guy - and they were about to start a new romance. It had just been long-distance texting and Skype mostly before that. Anyway, there was some contact electronically.

But she came into the interview in a state of anxiety about the whole thing. And she said, "I'm craving."

And I feel that's painful. I feel the contraction of it."

We talked a little about it. She expressed a fear of loss—perhaps she would go out there and it wouldn't work out. So alongside all the loveliness of a new romance was this anxiety, this fear that maybe it wouldn't work out.

The first thing we did was talk in the more standard dharma way about craving and how it relates to dukkha. Craving involves what we might call hype—papañca. When there's craving, the mind goes into hype about how wonderful it's going to be, how great this thing will be when I get there. The same happens with aversion—how terrible this thing is going to be.

So craving involves hype. We discussed how the mind in the grip of craving constructs an artificial distinction between things and times, making them seem so dramatically different. Here and now seems so different from there and then. It's hyped up by the mind through craving.

She expressed this perfectly in her own words: "The adventure begins then when I get to California. Now it's just waiting, it's just limbo." So now was just boring waiting time. Here and now—there and then would be the adventure. Even though there was lots of Skyping and texting, lovely exchanges, the mind was creating and emphasizing this polarity between things and times, events and times.

Do you see it? Is it really that different? This is more standard dharma teaching. Is it really that different—things and times, here and now, there and then, past or future?

In dharma language we could deconstruct it. What do I have here? What is my world here? It's five aggregates: body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness. Six sense fields: touch, taste, smell, sight, sound and mind. I have that here, I have that there, I have it pretty much wherever I go. Is it really that different? A little bit different kinds of pleasure, different kinds of unpleasantness. There's a deconstruction of the hype.

Deconstruct it into the elements of existence. Is it really that different? So that's standard dharma teaching. Less hype, less craving. Less craving, less hype. They feed each other.

But then I was interested in working in a different way, seeing what else might open up. I asked her, "What are you wanting? What do you want?"

She said, "Him." It was obvious. And it's hard to see—it's like, what do you mean? Of course it's him. It's hard to see that it's more than that.

As I gently explored whether that question could open up, she began to go deeper. She said, "I love that I can say anything and that I'm listened to." This opened things up. Going deeper into this question of what she was wanting, she said actually there were four things—quite complex, but you can hear the generalities here.

"I want the opening of the heart. I want the expression. I want the connection and being received. And I want to love." Four things.

Can you hear the generalities there? So here the desire is not landing on a limited object.

Then we did this thing: Can you really trust that? Can you really open to that? Just trust it a little bit.

Really, really open to it.

Now for her, that current was unfamiliar. The force of it was unfamiliar—a little bit like what Catherine was alluding to last night. The current was deeper and more powerful than who she usually took herself to be.

So can you let it fill the body? Can you really allow it? Can you really feel it?

Her boundaries of self began to dissolve. Now where she was at in her practice, that was quite a new thing. So we worked a little bit with kind of being okay with that. There was the expansion of the sense of being. There was a little bit of fear with that, as I said. We investigated the fear, brought in some compassion, and so on. And that was enough for her for that time. But something was really opening.

Eventually, whether it's gradually or suddenly, we are able to allow that kind of expansion, that kind of dissolution. There's a whole new sense of self, of life force—strength, openness, independence, not dependent on the object of desire being there, fulfilled somehow to a great extent by what we could say the life force opening, the deep desire flowing, not on getting.

This is not so much standard Dharma teaching.

Fourth example, just to revisit the example from last night that Catherine shared in her talk: someone in the group saying, "I want not feeling alive. I want to feel alive," having a fixated image, letting go of that, "I want to feel alive," and then what happened is the aliveness came—in this case came down, that current. Then what happened is it went into an imaginal image.

So there's a little bit of a fork in the road here. In other words, liberating the desire this way can open up the realm of the imaginal, and that can be very fruitful—and you go into the imaginal. Or it opens up the being, and what we want is already here, and there doesn't need to be an image. So it can go either way.

Let me just say a little bit because sometimes what happens—often times what happens, but not always—is that wrapped up in our experience of desire is the feeling of lack, a feeling of frustration, a feeling of perhaps grief or loss, or a presumption of not getting and not being able to get. We just either assume it's a fact or we just assume that.

In other words, desire is wrapped up with elements that make it more complex and more problematic. It's really helpful then to be able to discern sometimes what's wrapped up with my experience of desire and my assuming I won't be able to get. But why? Because it's always been that way for me. Is it actually what I'm feeling—not so much the desire but the lack or the frustration? These are actually different things. They get intertwined. Do you understand?

So sometimes with this practice that we're opening up to, sometimes what we need to do is to care for those other elements first, and need to discern: are they present? What else is present? Is there a sense of lack? Is there a sense of crushedness, impossibility, frustration, grief, whatever? Discern them and

actually go to them first and care for them. This—we've talked about at other times—but this kind of heart work is really, really important.

And sometimes we do not need to do that. Sometimes we don't need to do that. So often in these circles, there can be a kind of habit just over years. It's really good practice to do that, but sometimes we don't need to do that. We don't need to be with the difficult first.

Sometimes, as I said, there's a habit of the movement of the mind and the heart to go to the difficult, to the lack, to the frustration, to the grief or whatever. And we can get a little bit stuck in that. We always do that, always do that. And in a way, we never get out of it. So I'm not liberating the desire, I'm just going to that lack and that pain. And it might be tender, it might be lovely, but there's a way sometimes that it just stays there.

I'm just circling endlessly in my sense of lack. This doesn't always happen, but it's a very real possibility. The attention becomes habitually drawn to the lack, to the grief, to the disappointment, to the frustration. What I don't see is that this very attention and this habit of attention is actually keeping the whole pattern of lack and disappointment in place. I don't see that.

Instead, I think this is real, this is the reality. That exploration of working with desire—that feels like I'm creating something artificial. This other way, staying with the lack, this feels like the real thing, the truth. I don't see that my attention is actually fabricating and manufacturing even this sometimes.

This requires really delicate investigation in practice. It takes tremendous courage and care to investigate this territory. So I hope that's sufficient to convey the understanding. There is this option, this thread that's possible in our practice. I'd really like you to try it, if you're drawn to it. Use it extensively if it resonates. If you prefer, just visit it occasionally. You can put it on the shelf for later exploration, whatever feels right. But please try it at least a few times—moving away from the image, into the current of the desire itself, and working with that while trusting the treasure that lies within it.

One final consideration: you'll notice that the desires we have in life, especially the deep desires and those profound currents of longing, are extraordinarily important. They matter deeply to us. Some of them genuinely need acting upon. It can't always be simply a matter of awareness of desire. Sometimes, particularly with imaginal material, something is actually being asked to manifest in the world. What that is may not be obvious or clear, and sometimes it may be nothing at all. I've explored this theme in other retreats.

Both with our deepest longings and with what moves through us imaginatively, sometimes something is truly demanded of us. What that is isn't always apparent. Yet sometimes it's neither appropriate nor possible nor necessary to act on a desire. We can work with the imaginal dimension or with the energy of the desire itself, and no external action is required. Nothing in the outer world needs to change, and taking action isn't the point.

Other times, action absolutely is the point. Something needs to be brought into being. Words need to be spoken. Actions need to be taken. But at other times, it's completely not about outer manifestation. The work is what we might call internal—that's where the real transformation occurs.

In this particular practice we've been exploring, we're emphasizing this internal dimension: the opening to the current of desire itself, rather than the acting upon it. Is this sufficient to make sense of this approach? Does it feel clear enough?

So let's sit together now in the spirit of this exploration.

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