Energy Body and Image (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 45:49

Bye.

What are the useful distinctions around physical or gross body and energy body? Where do we put down one and pick up the other? And what to do with this mixture of feelings that's going on?

You're asking about experiencing the energy body as light and pleasant, while the physical body has more gross sensations. You've also heard of things like the astral body. What's the distinction there? Is there even a distinction?

Practically speaking, sometimes it feels like the energy body extends quite far out—yesterday in the hall, maybe 8 or 10 feet. You were even experimenting with reaching it out to the tree through the window. Out there, it feels really quite nice and rarefied and subtle and pleasant. But something in here feels difficult, particularly around breathing and sometimes jerky sensations, with the physical breath very shallow and stuttery.

In terms of conceptual distinctions, I don't know the answer in a way. I'm not sure how much it matters. I feel like we're a little bit stuck with this word "energy body," which maybe if I go back a few years, I would come up with something different, because it's more a way of seeing, like everything else—a way of relating.

Sometimes this space feels more like a field of energy and light and pleasant, and maybe that's where it got its name. But that partly comes from a way of paying attention to it. It partly comes as a reflection of what's going on emotionally and energetically. But at other times it can be very dense—dense in a problematic way, and dense also in a lovely way. There's a whole spectrum to what it can feel like in terms of density or insubstantiality. All of that's energy body.

So energy body is more a way of relating, a way of seeing, a way of sensing. It's not confining my experience to just the range of the usual kind of sensations we have or the usual ideas of the body. It's a way of perceiving, a way of looking.

As for astral body and all that—you can have all kinds of experiences. What the truth is about that, I'm more inclined to say the truth depends on how I'm looking at it and the divisions I make. It's interesting when you see different people's systems. This system has four chakras, that system has seven, that system has nine, that system has eight. This one's red. No, no, it's purple. It kind of goes to show that the way I'm looking at the body, what's going on conceptually, what's going on in my relationship to it, fabricates and constructs what's happening to it.

Is that a problem? No.

No. It doesn't matter. So I don't know the answers, if there even are any, other than it's a dependent arising. Do you feel like you need—and this is the first part of the question—do you feel like you need to know the answers to that? What's behind the question?

With the breath, it's very subtle. There's something going on here. It's called dukkha. So if we come back to that in just a second, the problem and how we can relate to it and work with it. You said something very lovely: it's an exploration. So what you're exploring is experience. With that experience, there will be certain conceptions of what the energy body is, but explore.

What I would feel wary of is getting too stuck in one kind of experience. I'm always dense and I'm always focused on dukkha, or I'm always really wide because that's the cosmic consciousness or whatever. It's like all these ranges of experiences are available. Can it be related to the breath? Absolutely.

So there's breath and they talk about subtle breath. I could use those words interchangeably: breath body and energy body, subtle body—it's all good. Or you can have an experience where the experience of the energy body and the perception of the energy body doesn't seem to have anything to do with the breath. You stop breathing and you're still—there's all the vitality and you're alive.

I tend to be more fluid with these kinds of divisions. Divisions, delineations, concepts—they're only useful insofar as they're useful. And they're not realities. So it's like you can pick up a delineation, create a delineation, and if it's helpful for you, go for it. Just don't get locked into it. If it's not helpful, leave it.

But if you view the whole thing as an exploration of experience—which means perception—and all reality is in the realm of experience and perception, which is bound up with ways of looking, dependent on ways... You understand? So if you view it that way, then... Do you understand what I'm getting at? It's like the conceptions are not realities outside of you. The whole thing is just in the service of exploration of experience, either what's helpful, what eases dukkha, or what's soul-making. Or both.

So in terms of this thing that you're feeling, I don't know—maybe if we have time together we can do a little bit. But what I will say is... Sometimes what happens is, let me work the other way around. If it's pleasant out here, it depends on your intention. If my intention is to have some samadhi, some well-being, then first port of call would be to go to where it's pleasant.

In the stream of that intention, that's not the time to get entangled in the difficult. So the difficulty—you're not ignoring it, but you give more attention and nuzzle up and enjoy the pleasant. Most people have a habit of getting pulled into the unpleasant in ways that are not helpful.

So the first port of call—what you'll often find is that inclining the attention towards the pleasant and just again and again enjoying it... So just, let's find the pleasant again and again. What can happen then is that the pleasant begins to wash over the unpleasant. It's the subtly unskillful attention to the unpleasant that's

keeping generating unpleasantness sometimes. You understand?

So there's just one kind of—if you can incline the mind that way again and again in the moment, just very, very relaxed. Your job is just to find the pleasure and just subtly enjoy it and keep doing that. And sometimes you don't need to bother about this. It will blend over if the intention is towards samadhi.

Sometimes that, still within the intention towards samadhi, doesn't help. So then you can see: does this thing want to move in any way? Now you mentioned restlessness and it seemed like it was a bit... so then you might get the sense that somehow it wants to—you know, could be—go out the top of the head, or out the throat, or this way, or... It's like, what does it want to do? And kind of allow it to do that.

So the energy body is dependent on perception—it's a fabrication, that whole structure. You can either imagine it doing that, or just kind of open it. Open the energy body to allow it to move how it wants to move.

As a principle, and I'm speaking to everyone here, sometimes contraction, pain, these difficult sensations are, in energetic terms, just stuck energy. They want to move in a certain way, and we simply need to help allow them to move. So you can use your imagination, whatever works. You can use the breath.

What is it? If it's here in this particular place, maybe it wants to breathe in and out this way, or in and out through the back, or up and down, and out through the head, or in through the head, or out through your heart—you know, whatever. There's some way of bringing the dynamism of the felt and imagined breath energy into play with this stuck place, including it, and that allows it to move more.

The thing I say about samadhi is: anything goes. Anything. If it works, great. It doesn't matter. We're just in the business of—here's this field, let's try and get some well-being without struggling too much. So if it's the imagination, great. If it's a more energetic approach, fantastic.

There's a third possibility, still in the realm of the intention of samadhi. Okay, those two didn't work, and then you go to this stuck place, this contracted place, this difficult place, and actually move into a mode of hyper-allowing.

So it's unpleasant, and then you say, "This moment I just completely open to that unpleasantness. I completely..." There's this kind of open, open, open. What's happening then is you're entering into a way of looking that has minimal aversion. You have to get to 120% opening, allowing, welcoming to this thing. Because what's keeping it in place is the aversion—there's a subtle aversion to it.

There are so many different responses and things you could try. Sometimes it's a matter of caring for the being who feels like they're drowning. So drop the "I'm trying for samadhi" agenda. Something needs care there. There's vulnerability, and breath is so primary. If you feel like you can't get your breath—I mean, you're not going to asphyxiate, I can tell you that. But still, that might not be enough reassurance.

So something needs some care there, in terms of that experience. With this way of approaching it, you

would more gently focus in on that and want to hold it. And it's not just the sensations, because you can kind of laser beam those unpleasant sensations with mindfulness. We want also to care about the person who feels like they're drowning. It's not just sensations reduced from a person—it's sensations with the person, with the self.

When I teach people to work with the breath in these moments of intensity or discomfort, I emphasize that there are so many different possibilities—endless approaches from many different angles, moving in many different directions.

Sometimes, as Andrew mentioned, you can actually use the breath to smooth out these difficult sensations. But you have to be very gentle; you're not forcing anything. If you're coming from a place of "Come on, change this," it won't work. It's really like you would stroke a wounded cat or something tender. You're just easing something with the breath—with kindness and with the breath. Sometimes this can really shift the energy, heal it, calm it, open it. There are so many possibilities.

Andrea raised a question related to what Sampo asked the other day about feeding the practice or leaning in a particular direction. "I've been noticing that I might be taking a breath that feels rather lovely, but is not necessarily desire, but I've been perceiving it as desire in the moment, which leads to more breaths or more currents that feel like eros, not necessarily with an image attached to them. And then sometimes an image does come up as a result of perceiving in that way. So the question was more around if there are ways of looking that allow more imaginal to come through—like with metta, sometimes feeling the sun on your face and suddenly feeling that that's metta coming to you helped me lean into metta. Can you do that with desire, this perceiving lovely sensations that may not have that relationship as desire?"

I understood the example about metta and the sun, but I asked her to clarify the connection with breath and desire.

She explained: "You might suddenly take a breath in the hall that goes from the nostrils all the way down to the perineum and feels wide and open and lovely. There isn't an image in your mind at that moment—it's just the body opening. But the next breath, the head's tilted back and there's more sensuousness with the breath. It could be just words that you or Catherine uttered that suddenly sends the body into a little bit of an 'ooh,' and not necessarily an image, but a leaning into that sort of 'ooh,' having a momentum that would propel."

Let me try something, if I understand. If we go back to the sunlight on the face—sometimes one can feel that warmth and that light, but essentially it's an imaginal perception of the sun that's fused with metta. All that's an imaginal constellation: sun, skin, warmth, metta. These things—if you go to Newton Abbot High Street and say, "Do you know that the sun radiates loving-kindness?"—it's not a usual perception. So it's an imaginal perception.

So there's something that arises in a moment, and then you can gently encourage that or deliberately

return to it at a different time. The same with the experience of body and breath—actually, the experience of anything.

I was wondering—it's actually quite hard to articulate what it is that... you know, when we talk about intrapsychic images, for most people that's relatively easy to understand. Some people say, "Oh, I don't get any," but that's a different kind of thing. But when we talk about—like the other day when I said this is an imaginal hat—it's not an imaginary hat. Actually, it's not imaginal, but it could be imaginal. It's not imaginary in the sense that there is a thing here. But it can be an imaginal hat.

So it's quite hard to articulate what it is that moves the material perception of anything—what is it that infuses it with the imaginal? And how do we make ourselves available to that? And how do we support that?

A lot of the time, what happens is actually what you're describing already—we catch things on the breeze. We are in a receptive mode, relatively speaking, and something... a current just comes and a perception begins to open and we just ride it. In time that gets more—depending on a lot of conditions—that kind of receptivity and sensitivity gets more and more encouraged.

But apart from that, it's actually quite difficult to pinpoint what we can do in the moment to encourage that opening. I think part of it is listening to poetry—there's something Catherine mentioned that illuminates this. Ideas and words and other images function as drops of some kind of poetic potion that goes into the mix and sparks an imaginal perception. It's not just visual—it could be sound, it could be absolutely anything. Something starts to function as a kind of poetic, alchemical elixir.

What else is happening there? I haven't quite articulated this fully, but I can identify several elements. There's a loosening that's happening—a loosening of my ideas about what things are, of how things are. This involves the logos. It doesn't have to be a big deal, but I've relaxed the idea that the sun is only a massive ball of hydrogen undergoing nuclear fusion. It is that, but I've loosened my conceptual grip.

There's also more looseness in the perception itself, so that images can move. The energy body becomes involved again—this is another crucial aspect. The more the energy body is total and engaged, the more openness there will be to catching those currents.

There's also this sense of something being bigger than—and sometimes that's hard to pinpoint. What exactly is bigger than what? But there's this quality of humility and reverence, and the heart is involved with that. All these aspects arise together.

What this means is that we can consciously loosen some of these elements or cultivate certain attitudes—like coming into heartful humility and reverence—and that will support the opening. Sometimes what happens practically is that you've had that experience before, and you gently remember it and open and loosen in this way, and it returns. You can ride it again or open to it again.

But yes, it's actually quite difficult to formularize. I would be wary of creating a step-by-step process, although there are certain elements that consistently support this opening. Related to what Catherine was discussing, this represents a principal direction we're moving toward.

Sometimes people want an image, or they hear about someone else's fantastical encounter—a monster that arose in meditation with nine heads, purple skin, green flames coming from its mouth. That's an image, and it might be really meaningful. The test is in the soul-making. But even more important, I believe, is when the world itself becomes imaginally alive, imaginally perceived, opening up this dimensionality of sacredness. Some people will start there. This capacity to support that opening is really crucial.

Rachel had a question about this process. She described being in a receptive mode where images come that are very beautiful, definitely feeling like she's in the realm of the imaginal. After some time, the image delivers its message—it offers an insight or something important. Then it goes quickly, and the next image comes flickering in. In this receptive mode, it feels quite flickery. If she stays with an image longer, it feels like it's offering something up, and once she receives that, the next thing comes.

So Rachel is describing how images sometimes arise, and there's definitely the quality of the imaginal—she recognizes that. Then the image delivers its message, conveys whatever it came to communicate, and simply goes away as another image arrives. This process doesn't necessarily happen super quickly; it could unfold at any rhythm.

Okay.

When you feel like you try and hang on to the image, does it feel a little, what—forced, contracted?

"Yeah, it feels like the sacredness is falling away."

So when she tries to hold on to it, the sacredness is falling away. I wonder if I'm trying to hold on to this image because either I think I should, or because there might be something else it has to tell me. In other words, why am I trying to hold on to it? It might be that the intention is making the difference, draining the sacredness out of it.

Is it possible to start with the sense of sacredness itself? That the sense of sacredness is not exhausted by the message you've already received? If you think of an image like a person, then the person could rightfully feel insulted and not respected if you just view them as being there to give you this one thing, and then when that's done, they can go.

There's a way of entertaining the sense that the image is inexhaustible. That message was important and part of it, but it doesn't exhaust the image. The sacredness is always bigger than that message. What's really happening is we're granting an image its sacredness—entering into that posture, that relationship with it, and seeing what that does. This is different than trying to make it stay.

If that's possible, then if it goes, it goes. But I'm not entering into—what's the word? Utilitarian relationship. If I reduce an image to one meaning or one communication, it dies. It's like entering into a kind of relationship and attitude that doesn't do that.

"I mean, I feel like on some level I get that, and in a way that's why I'm opening to it, because I don't want to reduce it just to one message—like give me the message and go."

Maybe it's like getting away from the whole message idea. More just being in relationship. What about just loving it? What about just hanging out? What does relationship mean? There's a different relationship with the relationship itself.

It might be that there's the obvious thing, and then there are more subtle communications—but they might not be messages or instructions or insights. There's a rapport, a back and forth, a communication in the broader sense of the word: from the image to you, from you to the image. Some of that stuff is much more subtle. It might be a matter of quieting and taking the pressure off, just attuning more.

Having said all that, some images do just come and go. Sometimes it's just the restless mind. Sometimes it's just the nature of things. It depends on a lot. Sometimes you're skidding around and images are moving very fast. Then one becomes meaningful, more long-lived.

But it might be a matter of granting it that sacredness and that moreness, then easing into more sensitivity without grasping. There's something about the rapport, the relationship.

Yeah, so I would say yes, absolutely. But I would also say—and I think I mentioned this here the other day, I can't remember—but when you do imaginal practice, generally speaking, there's some release or opening or harmonization in the energy body that comes with the image. This is your indicator that you're on the right track. There might be agitation in the sense of excitement, but something in the energy body... You know, pīti is also agitating, right? So it's not so much the presence of agitation as the presence of some kind of harmonizing in the body. That reminds me of something else to say to Lawrence, but...

What you get as you develop imaginal practice is that at any point there's this possibility of just leaning more into the samādhi—leaning more into the energetic quality of what's going on and enjoying that and opening to that. And it takes you into deeper samādhi. So you're kind of letting the image go to some extent.

But then you can also go the other way. You can lean more into the image, into the complexity, into the meaningfulness, into the relationships within the image, into the emotions that are involved. Both directions are available to you, and both are part of the practice.

So yes, it definitely gets more subtle. The imaginal has its own spectrum of subtlety, just like samādhi does. At the gross end, you have very vivid, complex images with lots of narrative and emotion. As it gets more subtle, the images might become simpler, more archetypal, more essential. The emotions become more

refined. The sense of meaning becomes more distilled.

But it's not exactly the same kind of subtlety as samādhi. In samādhi, things tend to merge and lose distinction. In imaginal practice, even as it gets more subtle, there's still this quality of relationship, of eros, of meaning-making that remains. The image might become very simple, but it's still an image. There's still this sense of "other" that you're in relationship with.

This is part of what makes imaginal practice so rich—you have these two vectors available to you at any moment. You can go deeper into the samādhi and let everything become more unified and peaceful, or you can go deeper into the imaginal and let the meaning and relationship become more complex and profound.

Eventually, you can learn to play with different emphases of attention. You might give very little attention to what's happening in the energy body, or place most of your attention there. You could focus primarily on the image, or on the emotion that's arising. There are all these facets of experience, and with practice, you can decide where to lean at any given moment.

Imaginal practice can absolutely take you to different levels of samadhi, simply by staying in touch with what's happening in the energy body and then, at any point, peeling off into that dimension and focusing there if you choose.

But there's also a way that images, as the whole thing matures, become more subtle—like most dharma practices. Going back to what you said initially, samadhi is a movement toward less fabricating. When you do imaginal practice, you fabricate. But what can happen is a kind of settling into samadhi where you can go as deep as you want and rest there if that's what appeals to you.

Then at some point, you can simply come up a little, so to speak—just loosen the whole thing slightly. What will have happened in that plunge is that the psyche has become loosened, creating a space where images can be born. If I'm deep in that stillness, I'm truly in a state of non-fabrication—and actually, all fabrication, all perception is fabricated. This includes worldly perception, bodily perception, and imaginal perception.

But it's like taking that plunge, then coming up just a little. The whole psyche becomes looser, and more imaginal material can arise if you wish.

This brings me to something else about what Lawrence mentioned—this energy that feels unpleasant. This is actually quite common. Piti can indeed feel unpleasant at times. I define piti as non-sensually arising pleasantness, but for many people at different stages in their exploration of samadhi, piti actually feels uncomfortable. It's too agitating, or too coarse.

This is very common. Many people who have tasted the calmer dimensions of samadhi become what I call "piti snobs." Something you would have given your right arm for years ago—this bliss—now becomes

unpleasant. We need to find a relationship with it that allows it to be pleasant again.

Part of that is about allowing. There is some enjoyment present, even if it doesn't seem so. Often we've simply gotten into a relationship with piti where we tune into the unpleasant aspects, and our very resistance to it fabricates it as unpleasant. If we can open to it and find the pleasure within it, this actually begins fabricating it as pleasant.

This pattern is quite common at different stages of practice. Again, everything depends on the relationship. The relationship conditions, fabricates, shapes, and guides what unfolds—body, world, emotion, mind, image, energy, all of it. Everything depends on the quality of relationship we bring to our experience.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.