Awakening and Soulmaking (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 38:23

Anyone?

Suzanne, yes.

First, I want to say that your talk last night and this morning really resonated with me and was very useful. It got me very excited. The world of the senses is kind of taken care of for me. For as long as I can remember, I've always had a yearning, a really deep yearning to connect with something divine. I've interpreted experiences as Buddhism 101—all things are connected—and I had some synchronistic experiences. Then when I learned about emptiness, I thought, oh my god, I knew it. It just seemed to all make sense, and I developed this passion for experiencing it.

I know that it can slip into cravings sometimes. But in our meeting yesterday, you mentioned that I don't have to meditate. Because of my physical limitations, I don't think I'm going to be able to meditate in the traditional way. I know I'll have to try different things and be flexible.

So I'm wondering: can you have—as you were saying, you don't have to meditate to become enlightened—but what does enlightenment look like if you're not sitting on the cushion? Can you have an experience of the unfabricated? I know I've heard stories about monks and sudden realizations. What does that mean? Is it the same thing as having a cessation experience, or is it something else? Is it something different for everybody? I would think not, to a certain extent. There's a certain knowledge that you gain, right?

I just want to know that I'm moving in the right direction. I don't want to go off thinking I could just do this or that when it's not really a good direction.

Let me summarize the basic question: given what's happening physically right now with health, and feeling like long meditation sessions and frequent meditation sessions are not within the capabilities of the body, is it still possible to get enlightened? And is that kind of enlightenment I might get without long and frequent meditation the same kind of enlightenment as the beyond that you've described?

Thank you. I don't recall saying to you that you don't need to meditate.

What I did say was that meditation might not look like what you have a picture of. When someone asks me what is meditation, what is insight meditation, people give all kinds of descriptions. They think it's a certain posture or concentration or stillness, whatever. To me, it's just, in a nutshell, practicing a flexibility of ways of looking and seeing what comes out of that flexibility of ways of looking. Understanding comes

out of that having to do with all kinds of things, but primarily emptiness. That doesn't have to look a certain way.

To make a distinction between meditation on retreat, on the cushion, and not—I feel that's overdone. People become enlightened during walking meditation absolutely. If you look at the suttas, there are loads of stories of that. There's this strange hierarchy between the four postures—sitting, standing, walking, lying down. Sitting is usually considered the best one apparently, but this division is artificial. Even in the Buddha's teaching, there are the four postures.

Even in the division between retreat and not retreat—long meditation sessions and long meditation retreats can be really fruitful, but they're not necessarily where a person's most transformative insights and liberations come. I have spent a lot of time on retreat, but even looking back, I wouldn't pinpoint the long times or sessions as the moments of greatest transformation. I don't think it stacks up that way. I don't think that bears up to scrutiny, really.

We have these ideas. I shared with Suzanne that when I was about 21, I was on retreat at IMS and had all this crazy energy happening. The teacher asked me to sit at the back of the room because I was disturbing people. When I was still disturbing people from there, they told me to go away. I sat on the other side of the courtyard, outside the meditation hall, in my room by myself, and eventually they asked me to leave.

I was 21, living in a foreign country, so passionate about the path, so wanting enlightenment and awakening.

And I remember after he said, "You know, it's better for you to leave. You're going to hurt yourself. You need something," he recommended. And I was devastated. I was absolutely devastated. I told you this story. I walked up that road thinking, "How am I going to get enlightened now?"

To me now, looking back, I really feel for him and that kind of passion, but it seems I was so naive. There was this simplicity: "If I can't do long retreats, then I won't get enlightened. If I can't sit a long time still..." I had gotten into this jhana practice and was trying not to be attached to it, but also thinking less and less fabrication—that's how it's going to happen through jhana practice.

But that's just one way things unfold. I've had many teachers say that there are ways other than jhana practice, that jhana practice is supposed to get you to a place where you can do insight. But that's just how it's often taught.

Teachers are important. Right now we're having this dialogue—I'm the teacher and you're the student—and I really recognize the support of that. But in this moment, I'm feeling a little uncomfortable, partly because this is such a big, tricky area. What is one's relationship with teachers and outside authority and people who say it's like this or like that?

For example, that idea about jhana. In my Insight Meditation tradition, jhana was taboo territory for a

long time. Then certain teachers began to teach jhana, and some said you need jhana because it will sharpen the mind, and so on. This is all just dogma, really.

Jhanas can be really helpful for lots of different reasons to some people. For others, they're just not a big factor on the path. I don't buy this thing about sharpening the mind so you can do insight. I just don't buy it at all.

As a teacher, I know there are many teachers who teach a way of doing things. One reason I always love talking to you is because you encourage me to do what's right for me, whereas other teachers say, "Don't do this," and then I start doubting. But I don't want to do that. I still want to meditate.

But again, I would open up what that word "meditate" means. If I look back to when I was twenty-one years old, there was a period when I didn't meditate. I cared so much about it, but that period and everything that came out of it—everything I learned, the bodywork I did—it was so helpful.

I'm not a doctor, but I don't think what you're going through will last your whole life. It's a period. And meditation is more than sitting still and getting the mind to shut up. If it were just that, it's nice, but there's so much more.

If you have this broader view of what meditation means, it becomes something much more creative. Things like insights into the unfabricated and fading—they come, but it's not so linear. The person who sits twelve hours straight isn't necessarily the one who gets it. It's not like that.

The jhana thing as well—sometimes people say, "I sat there and didn't have a thought for two days or something." And it's like, okay, where's the insight? It doesn't stack up that way. I'm not saying it's not worth it, but it's not a one-to-one correspondence at all.

In terms of the unfabricated as well, sometimes—and this isn't textbook dharma—one has the perfume of that even without formally meditating. You walk in nature, you walk somewhere, or even when you're with someone, there's something we sense. That's meditation.

What's happening there? The way of looking is opening up. The perception is getting attuned to something. I can't put it into words. I can sense it somehow, beyond sense or whatever. These are the kind of things. They start working their way into your life. Not only do they stack up, but they also bring a certain amount of liberation.

Before you've had... well, let's leave that. But these things give you a faith that you feel in the marrow of your bones in something like that. All of this...

And then the last thing is—and I also said this to you the other day, relating to what I was talking about yesterday and today—you're going to want a big, fat liberation, not just a deep liberation. You know, a wide one, because of the art and because of... Do you understand?

So it's like how you find your path, create your path, discover it, is going to have to include all that rather than getting too tight around it.

Johan's question brings up something fascinating. He's describing something that seems to be occurring quite regularly with the same image. There's an image that has to do with stopping of time and is kind of cosmic in terms of galaxies and stars and things. And there's eros with that image, there's beauty. It's a poetic image that captures something. There's an image of stars and space, and as we're moving through it, all of a sudden it freezes. And then here's the jhāna. It happens quite frequently.

He's a little surprised how sometimes that leads into jhāna, or quite frequently into jhāna, rather than what I was saying about how imaginal work tends to create more complexity and branch off. This is actually leading into more simplicity, less fabrication.

This has actually come up a couple of times here. This is really common. So why is it happening? I think it happens because when something is imaginal, the energy body responds first of all, and comes into some kind of harmony or alignment or openness or something like that. And if the mind—part of the mind gets—attention gets captivated by what's happening in the energy body and the kind of harmonization there, it will just go into jhāna because focusing on that is a jhānic state.

So anytime there's an image, it doesn't have to be an image of stopping time or space or some kind of image of stillness. Actually, it was you, Johan, the other day, asking about an image of anger. Do you remember that? So it could even happen with an image of anger.

You think, here's this—not the image you were alluding to—but maybe some image of stomping, monstrous, raging dragon god or something. And it's all this fire and energy. The power of that can be felt in the energy, but there's a resonance with it. The anger itself is kind of transmuted alchemically into whatever its golden equivalent is, so to speak. But the energy body starts resonating with that energy, and one can—one of the options is that it enters jhana.

So as I think I was saying yesterday, at any point with imaginal practice, you can kind of glide in any direction. You get to have a little more say sometimes; sometimes it just takes you. But because of the energy body involvement, there will always be a possibility of samadhi. You can always lean off into that. At the moment it sounds like it's kind of happening because the energy body constellates that, and then probably the attention is just getting captivated by it.

But as you develop, it will become more and more an intentional possibility. So you could always just do that—let the image go. You could say, "Very nice energy body stuff, but I want to go further with the resonances with the image," so you don't go so much into the samadhi. And then you can play with the emphasis of attention—like how much attention is on the meaningfulness, the beauty, the poetry of the image, how much is on the energy body, how much is on the emotional impact.

With time, all this becomes like—you've always got these directions you can lean in multiple ways. Also in terms of how much attention am I giving the image versus how much to my own process or my own self, the way the self is constellating in the imaginal constellation. So you've got things like self, other, world, and the eros itself, all of which can be imaginally infused, come alive as image. You understand me?

And then you've also got things like the emotional aspect, the energetic aspect, the samadhi aspect, the image aspect, and you can kind of—sometimes you're just taken into one or another. Sometimes you need to rebalance things. I think I alluded to that in the second night's talk. Sometimes we're just too much in the image or too much with the self or too much—like the self needs to come alive imaginally. It's all over there, the divinity.

So there are all these options. Sometimes you're balancing things so that there can be more steadiness and equanimity and fertility with the image. And sometimes you're just making a choice out of curiosity, and sometimes you're just taken one way or another.

So I'm answering more than you're asking, but do you get a sense of what can evolve here? This is not at all uncommon. It also happens with non-imaginal things. Sometimes one way people kick-start jhana or samadhi is just by remembering something that brought happiness, for instance. And then that happiness infuses the being, and there's just a gentle inclining the mind to that happiness—getting into the happiness and letting it suffuse. And for some people, that's a way into jhana. So it's a little bit similar to that as well, but that's not so imaginal.

The image falls away into samadhi and you let it go because the samadhi is what you want? Well, I didn't realize I was doing that. I just thought it was a natural progression.

I have more the feeling that as it unfolds more and more, you'll realize that you can—like sailing or something—you can kind of lean different ways and guide it. A little bit related to Suzanne's question, you know, samadhi is great. I really, really value it. And jhanas and all that. But if there's a lot of eros in a soul, that won't satisfy. It's part of what we want, but there will be something that wants the image as well.

I mean, a jhana by definition is a non-bored state, but something in the soul, in one's life, will get—okay, that's enough. Not enough, but it's like, I want more soul-making. I want more of the poetry. So I would keep both options open. And some people have long periods of time when they're more leaning this way or that way. Other people, or as it unfolds, you might just go back and forth more regularly between the two.

Does that help?

Yes, it's Bo, yeah. So I'm very new to this.

I'll do the English thing and apologize for anything that's not correct. But you have planted some really beautiful seeds, both of you. And I wanted to cross-pollinate a little bit with some things related to the

body. One of the things I think you said is that image is primary and experience is secondary, or image is primary.

So image is primary, and I was reflecting a little bit on some lines of research that have come out about the body. One is in the area of connective tissue that talks about our tissue not being inert, but always moving, all the time, kind of in what has been called intelligent chaos. And then also, embryologists are starting to say that we never lose the embryo. As adults, it's still present in our bodies, and that motion is...

Thinking about fabrication, I have been hearing things like, the body doesn't have a soul, the body is a soul. And I'm wondering if part of the beauty of all of these exercises is a sort of... you talked about who is the soul-making for. Could the fabrication and the soul-making be part of stepping into the soul of the body, if there is one, through all these many threads, nature and the connection to this? There are times when I think in my experience here, it's just feeling like there's a moment where there's music, you're stepping into... I wouldn't be sure I had to sum that up.

Are you asking, like, whether instead of image being primary, we could view body as being primary? Is that part of what you're asking?

Yes, and there's one tiny thread, which is that part of what we're doing here seems very devotional, like very bhakti in nature. It's part of our devotional practice to do these things.

So Bo's asking whether body could be primary instead of image, and also noting that part of what we're doing is very devotional and has bhakti in it.

Here's how I might frame it or think about it. We have eros as human beings. If everything is empty, and any conceptual framework, including the scientific, cannot possess a claim to the singular truth of things, then classical science, fantastic, wonderful. Embryology and all this stuff, brilliant. It has wrapped up in that as a whole conceptual structure, way of thinking, assumptions. Great, very fruitful. Is it the ultimate truth of things? Is it the singular truth? No.

Starting from those premises and looking at things and asking questions, from those premises unfold certain experiences and truths. Starting from some other premise will... You understand?

So what if we start—and we could start anywhere. We could start where you started with the body. We could start with the idea that image is primary. But if someone asks me, is that an ultimate truth? I say, no, of course it's not an ultimate truth.

Once you've seen something about reality and about epistemology and about all that, you start to realize, oh, I participate in truth-making. And I participate in world creation and perception creation, if you like. And so I can, we can, just play with entertaining certain concepts and conceptual frameworks and seeing what they open.

So we could start with the idea that body is primary and motion in the body, as you were alluding to.

Beautiful, absolutely beautiful. We could start with the premise that body is not separate from soul. You could start with the idea that image is primary. When we say "this is primary," we're already suggesting something quite radical: What happens if we take that as a basic principle?

Instead of, for example, taking my psychological history as primary, or materiality as primary—all of which are fine as starting angles that will give a different perspective on reality. It's like those disco balls, you know—reality kind of shimmers and shifts depending on how the light hits it. And I am really cool, by the way, in case you're wondering.

So yes, we can start with image as primary. We can start with what you said, absolutely. Each approach will unfold its own revelations.

Now, we could start with Eros as primary. In a way, this retreat is leaning in that direction. What happens if we just pick up the Eros thread and discover what Eros is through our experience and what opens from that? That's what we're doing here, to some degree.

Or you could start with—I think I tossed this out at some point—the soul loves soul-making. This is my axiomatic proposition. What the hell do I mean by that? Well, I unpack what I mean. It ends up being somewhat circular as a definition, but it proves to be remarkably fertile.

So if I take Eros as primary—let's say I have noticed in my experience, in my life, where there's Eros. And wherever it moves toward... that could already be the body. It could be materiality. It could be my lover. It could be the transcendent. And I just trust that Eros. I investigate the experience of Eros psychologically and phenomenologically—what it does and what it opens.

Then I will find that it starts to subsume everything, as I said. Everything gets made sacred and made valid, if you like. So if I start with "my body is just not soul," eventually I will come through experience to the perception that opens up: the body *is* soul. You understand?

Now, another person might start more from there—that's where their Eros goes immediately. Another person might seem a million miles from there. They want to be un-fabricated, they want to go beyond form, all that. But if we allow the Eros and allow that fire to catch, it will eventually catch everything. It will eventually discover more things, more facets, more sacrednesses. It will discover soul everywhere. It will create soul everywhere.

You understand? So there ends up being this unlimited perspectives and unlimited soul-making, unlimited en-soul-ing. And you ask, which is first? Just follow your experience, follow your own unfolding.

So if you start with what you're saying about the body—there's both conception and personal experience there. You have a felt experiential connection with body and bodies, and the investigation and experience and understanding of that. There is Eros there—conceptually, experientially, soulfully for you. If you do that, then it will just... it will go to other things. Someone else approaches it the other way around. Just

soul-making, yeah.

I could have cut all that and just said yes. Yes, you're right, and so is someone who says something else, and so is something else entirely. Because of this, there's something quite radical here—a shaking up of the whole notion of truth and objective reality.

Again, if we follow the thread of this retreat, it's like we have this experience of Eros. If we just name it, we begin to see what it does a bit more. Then we say, "I'm going to trust this, I'll follow it." And then you start to see what it does—experientially, erotically, soulfully, psychologically, philosophically, conceptually, all of that.

So it's like, it's all right, you know? It's all true. Does this make sense?

And the devotion is exactly connected with that, because where there's devotion, there's Eros. Where there's Eros, there's devotion. Again, this might not be so obvious at first.

You feel into it. Let me explore my experience of devotion. Let me explore my experience of eros. Or as I said, just in the imaginal—here's an image and you start to realize, hang on, start to notice: oh, there's devotion here. Oh, there's eros here. And then I trust that. And then that's how that threads into the other. I'm just following my devotion. The whole thing opens up conceptually, experientially, heartfully, soulfully, physically, energetically. You know what I'm saying?

So those two parts of your question are extremely related. The bhakti, the devotion—it ends up being a kind of philosophical opener as well as an experiential opener.

Does this make sense?

Well, just what I just said: the devotion is—where there's devotion, there's eros. Where there's eros, if we get interested in it and don't get in its way and allow it to do its thing, it will instigate, inseminate, ignite that soul-making process which starts changing my experience of things. So it changes my experience of body, of what my body is as a thing, from the point of view of subject, from the point of view of expression. Everything—it gets the image, the sense, the experience, the felt sense, the ideation, and that's where the philosophy bit comes in.

This is why soul-making is so significant, because every dimension of the being, experientially, it's got this expansion, and I know it, I taste it. And not only that, I know it in a way that's important to me, and everything comes into support—that ideation, the conception, the philosophy, the psychology, the emotion, the energy, et cetera, et cetera.

Does that make sense?

Okay. I'm happy taking a... Yeah, okay, sure.

This is from Nick's book. "Does your bear have a name?"

"Bear."

Bear. Bear is asking—he's enjoying your teachings. He thinks they're quite good. Would you like me to justify your claim that there's no such thing as bare attention?

I bow to his greater wisdom.

Thank you for listening.

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