Modes of Soulmaking (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 36:29

Sometimes when I sit in my kitchen and open my eyes—or even during the sit—things become insubstantial in the sense that the kitchen cabinets now look completely new and fresh and still, and almost vibrating at the same time. The other thing is I'm not quite sure sometimes whether I'm in samadhi or emptiness; it's just a blend. I'm thinking about it.

Let me see if I can summarize adequately. She used to be what she calls "an emptiness bore"—I'm really interested in that. So this whole area of imaginal practice is relatively new. We're talking a lot about divinity and mystical experiences and things. She recognizes from the past that whether at home or here on retreat, opening the eyes after there's some stillness, she perceives the world as shiny and radiant, but also recognizes in hindsight that in that perception there's some majesty and some mystical depth. She also experiences the insubstantiality—the kind of film-set quality with that sense of insubstantiality to perception. And she's not sure: Am I in a state of samadhi or emptiness? What's the relationship? And is it possible to experience the mystical opening and the divinity through emptiness?

Thank you. This whole business about the path—the whole way Buddhism is construed, and who the Buddha was, and what he tried to communicate, and where the teachings go—even here at Gaia House, if you were here for a while and went to every retreat, you would get very different, almost completely opposite pictures of what that is.

You will get people who say the Buddha was categorically not a mystic. He was trying to go away from all mysticism and anything like that. And then you get people who would say the Buddha was a mystic and he was opening that door. So everything within the Dharma—things like emptiness and samadhi—they all get interpreted according to this vision or fantasy of the package of where the whole path is going.

In a vision or fantasy of the path that categorically refuses any mystical sense, then emptiness has to be interpreted accordingly. Sometimes what you get is emptiness having this kind of deflationary quality—it's a deflationary teacher. Emptiness is saying, "Don't get excited about anything. Why? Because there's nothing behind anything or mystical. Nothing has any depth. Everything is interconnected, so nothing is worth getting excited about." And the path is essentially letting go of any kind of possibility of that. It should meet this existence, face up to it. It's what it seems to be.

Versus the way I would construe the whole path of emptiness—it's an opening to divinity. That's where it goes, absolutely. Or that's where it can go. Put it that way: that's where it can go. It may not be obvious at first with the whole way, at least the way I would present the way emptiness opens up. It may be that the first thing is just a bit more cooling, a bit more spacious, a bit more ease with things. But as you go

deeper—and this I would again be in the plural of it—divinities, perceptions of divinities, different kinds of mystical experiences open up.

Emptiness can provide certain almost predictable experiences that open up for people. And then at a certain level it provides a kind of platform that allows all kinds of other experiences to open up of divinity. So divinities or experiences of divinity, different kinds of mystical experiences.

What we're adding on this retreat is that actually those possibilities are amplified, magnified even more in any possible direction. It's not just everything is divine because it's empty, or everything is divine because it's universal love, or everything is divine because its nature is awareness. What starts happening with the soul-making process is the kinds of divinity and where you find them, the faces of divinity—it just multiplies in the opening, in the perception.

Am I in samadhi, am I in emptiness? The two are related. They're related by virtue of the fact that states of samadhi are states of progressively less fabrication of perception of self, other, and world. And doing emptiness practices are also practices that fabricate less.

So they converge in direction. In that movement toward less and less fabrication, mystical experiences arise along a certain avenue. Does this make sense? What we're doing is saying: not just that avenue, but this avenue, that avenue, that avenue, that avenue, that avenue, that avenue, that avenue. It's infinite and proliferates in the best sense in every possible direction, rather than just the classical direction you tend to get in most spiritual teachings that offer a more universal perspective on things as opposed to personal deity.

This is one of the places where I see the emptiness path opening out most valuably—creating a platform or legitimization, a freedom to see in all kinds of different ways without getting hung up on the idea that something needs to have some kind of objective reality. You've released all that, and what you have is simply freedom to play with perception in all kinds of ways.

Let me clarify something about the jhanas, because someone asked this in an interview today. When I say the jhanas are states of progressively less fabrication, I'm not suggesting that's the way everyone needs to go—that everyone needs to practice the jhanas to know the unfabricated. It's more a way of understanding what happens in classical Buddhist practices.

Everything in the Dharma—metta, generosity, samadhi, insight, you name it, all the practices in those classical lists—moves in the direction of less fabrication. I don't mean to suggest it's a practice everyone needs to do: "Do the jhanas, otherwise forget about it." Rather, there's a way of understanding what that whole movement in the Dharma is. It's a conceptual framework for understanding this business about fabrication and what gives you the freedom to fabricate in beautiful ways. But it's not necessary that everyone tread that particular practice path.

Dave is asking about examples—we've talked about the force of eros being able to open up cosmopoiesis.

Cosmopoiesis means the creation of cosmos—*poiesis* means to create, like writing poetry. Through perception, through ways of looking, we're discovering and creating the cosmos in beautiful ways through the force of soulmaking.

One way this can happen is through an imaginal image charged with eros. The whole galvanization of the soulmaking process—perception, movement, involvement, relationship—happens with that image. Then it begins to spill over into the world. You look around after meditation and notice the world looks different. How does it look different? How do I feel it differently? What is the world? The idea and perception and sense of the world is transformed, transubstantiated in connection with the flavor of the image.

You mentioned an example with a tree—the sturdiness and patience of the tree perceived in other objects in nature, though perhaps not in the pervasive way that might have been alluded to. Don't get too hung up on cutoff points. I would just keep practicing and see what happens. It can also happen the other way around—you're walking or sitting, and suddenly everything is a certain way.

With these things, try not to force or pressure. We work hard in meditation, asking what we can do to find balance, learning the skills and elements of the art—and that's good and important. We bring our heart, soul, dedication, and intelligence to it. But you can also conceive it another way: that the soul is driving this. What perceptions arise for different people at different times is what needs to arise.

Sometimes images move in series, building gradually rather than jumping to something dramatically cosmic. Sometimes the whole experience is very dramatic, sometimes really, really subtle. The key is not putting too much pressure on yourself, wanting the dramatic experiences you've heard about. What's needed is what arises naturally for you.

But how does that sound?

Look, I'm not hearing a lot of frustration in your question. It sounds more like curiosity rather than struggle. So beautiful things are happening, right? Would you say? Trust that. Stay with the beauty. Something really beautiful is happening.

You don't need to force anything. Much of imaginal work is simply noticing—we start to notice more and more. Some of that comes from familiarity, some from attuning more deeply, rather than trying to make different things happen.

So this whole teaching about self-other-world eros—what's a quadrupod? This four-legged stool of imaginal engagement—it's not obvious at first. The world, the cosmopoietic dimension, is usually present in images as the object. We don't realize, as I mentioned, that the self is actually also ignited and infused in the imaginal constellation. We miss this. Sometimes that's fine. Other times, whoa, things get really out of balance. The whole quadrupod has lost a leg, and we need to look around for what's missing to restore balance.

That was something I just noticed over time. Much of this work, including the cosmic ways, is about noticing: "Oh, that's interesting." I can't remember if my first recognition was dramatic or subtle—it doesn't matter. The point is noticing gradually rather than making things happen.

This applies to many aspects of imaginal practice. Even recognizing divinity—it's "Oh yes, it does have that quality." I might not like the word divinity, but it's what we notice rather than manufacture. This is characteristic of the imaginal. You start to notice: "Oh yes it is, oh yes it is, oh yes that, oh yes that," rather than trying to make it happen.

Now, I'm wondering about your question regarding how I use the word eros. When I talk about it in definitions, I mention contact, this wanting toward the beloved, this desire to penetrate or open to. You noticed I don't make any distinction between those two modes—penetrating and opening to. Is there a reason for that?

In your own practice, you feel a lot of eros for your direction, your path, but what your being wants to express is more in what we might call the feminine mode—not so much about going toward, but about being known by, being opened to rather than penetrating.

When you talk about eros, it often seems to carry that penetrating tension, that more masculine quality. Thank you for raising this.

Yes, when I talk about eros, it does seem more penetrating. I'm a guy. In terms of what we call masculine and feminine energies, I'm very masculine. So I have a lot of that penetrating quality, and I apologize if that emphasis comes through too strongly. The truth is, eros includes both movements—the reaching toward and the opening to be reached, the knowing and the being known.

Continue following this principle of how Eros wants to move in every way—go with what seems to be alive. If the directionality flows toward opening the self to what we were talking about this morning, if it's the anteros first—which is similar to what you're saying—then fine, just go with where it's alive. It's like a flame; wherever it's alive is where you trust, and then it will start moving. So eventually you get both the penetrating and opening, and so on.

I think I mentioned in the guided meditation that you can have purely sexual, erotic, imaginal experiences unfolding, and you could be the penetrator, and then transform into the one who's being penetrated. It doesn't even make sense anatomically, but it doesn't matter. You just trust—again, back to Dave's question—there's a soul movement here that will unfold how it unfolds, in the order that it unfolds for you, in the order that it unfolds for others. It's going to be different for everyone.

It's a bit like the question yesterday about conceptually starting in different places and experientially starting—some people more with the body, some people more with other dimensions. It doesn't matter. Trust the Eros and let it do its thing, and it will flourish. So apologies if my language tends to tip in that direction—it's just how it is.

Another practitioner shares about images and merging

So often when people talk about working with images, it's like merging with the image rather than relating to an other. But actually, whether there's an image which I merge with or whether the image is just myself, there is a sense of other in the conscious being-known within that image. The experience is that I am the image, but there isn't so much...

That's interesting. It doesn't seem like there's so much of an other—the self, or that pole of the self-other dynamic, has become the principal image, and there's not so much duality because there's quite a lot of merging going on.

Again, I would just trust it. When there's Eros, it creates otherness—othernesses, actually. What happens is it proliferates more and more othernesses. So you become multiple. The folds of your being start proliferating. It's not just one self—it's like this element or this dimension of my being that becomes a pole. And so there will be another, a beloved other, and then there will be more and more.

So again, I would just say trust it. What we're not doing is only diving into a kind of complete melting, dissolving experience. That's fine, and probably that happens for different people—that's quite normal. You can let that happen, you can enjoy it, but always there's a coming out of that. We don't want to get lost in that. We want to know it, and then otherness reestablishes itself in a beautiful way. There are degrees of melting, but there will be this proliferation of othernesses. You can basically just trust, I think.

The practitioner continues sharing about experiencing multitude within the image of self

Yes, that's fine. There'll be othernesses within that, yes. So it's like self almost becomes like another, like a beloved other, or beloved others, within that knowingness.

Oh yes, exactly. Thank you.

Jamie asks about Tantra

You mentioned in one of the talks that there are elements of Tantra that are analogous to the soul-making paradigm. I'm wondering if there are any critical ways in which it's definitely different.

There are probably lots of different ways that Tantra gets disseminated—classical Tantra, I mean. First of all, there's Buddhist Tantra and Hindu Tantra and all kinds, and then there's modern Western sexual Tantra. So what are we talking about? But even in Buddhist Tantra, there are many different schools and traditions.

One thing that comes immediately to mind is that often what you get in tantric teachings are prescribed deities with prescribed forms and prescribed colors and prescribed meanings and all kinds of specifications. That's all great and fine. I think we're leaning more toward this trusting of the soul and what comes up individually—what images come to you. So that's one difference.

There are others, but I'm not sure whether I want to say what they are right now.

I think I won't, if that's okay. Sorry. Is that okay? Is that enough?

The practice is so revelatory and powerful that why has no one found this before and talked it in a considered way? Well, what's in Tantra? Should I go to Tantra and see what else is there?

I'm not an expert on Tantra. I don't consider myself at all an expert. I suppose one of the ways it opened up for me was from the emptiness practice—it almost to me just suggests tantra, suggests the ability to do that. You reach a certain point when it becomes the obvious next step and the obvious unfolding.

So I went to the library next door and rummaged through books and tried to apply myself to the practices they were taught, but it worked to a certain extent, though it actually felt like it wasn't the right thing. And then for me, what was really a big thing was reading James Hillman. Moving through that and taking that and then just experimenting.

Your question of why isn't... It has a lot to do... That's why I tend to try and talk a lot and think a lot about conceptual frameworks, conceptual ideas that actually block it, that prevent... Why isn't it? There's actually a reason why. It's because we believe X or we believe Y or we believe that X or Z is wrong or this and that. There are actually ideas and psychological reasons—lots of reasons why not, why it doesn't. So that's actually quite an interesting question.

But yeah... then become the image in a way you need it.

I'm just a little... Dodgy territory. Well, it's dodgy for a reason I don't even want to say why. Let me just see what to say now. We can pause there if you want.

I think... Tantra is effectively infinite. I might have said that in a talk the other day. It's not taught as infinite. And it's also... The direction is prescribed. There are more directions than, say, in classic Theravada. But the directions are prescribed.

I think what I'm just kind of letting the cats out of the bag a little bit, here and in other talks and places, it's like, let's really open up that infinite thing. Let's really admit that that's implicit in the whole soul-making, and the directionality is infinite. And what happens if we just really open to that idea, realization, and then create a path out, or find a path out of that?

Tantra is an odd animal. Or religions are odd animals because there's this religious fantasy which goes backwards. So I have to tie something to this authority and this logos and this image of what awakening looks like. And then some things expand. There is a soul-making, but I still have to tie it to... Did you see what I mean? And there's a tension there.

And there was in Tantra right from the beginning because often... Historically, probably a lot of the tantric roots came from shamanism and village shamans meeting kind of orthodox Buddhism and stuff. So to me

it's interesting, but there's still a kind of reined-in-ness that... it's a big step to do that, but that's a bit of an answer. Is that okay?

Okay. Let's just set someone who hasn't maybe asked anything. Anyone?

"This is one that could be answered or not answered, but it feels like one of the Eros practices that both of you have been seeding in us is maybe the art of asking beautiful questions."

I've been reflecting on how we can ask questions that elicit what you could call images in their own likeness. Because we have, literally, Eros and Psyche sitting in front of us—did I hit the mark there? Yeah. And as we prepare to go, with the knowledge you have now, sensing us the way that you do and having that heart connection, is there a question that you would craft for us together that we haven't thought to ask? For everyone.

You've been doing that all along in some ways, so it doesn't have to be answered now, but what would be... I'm also aware of that part of myself that always wants to ask: "Is this right? Is that right? Are we doing that right?" So this is just an open invitation at any point.

What was that about doing it right? I didn't catch that.

Well, as we prepare to leave, having some sense that the questions which elicit answers in their own likeness tend to be... I mean, we could probably map them out together, all the ones that... "Am I doing this well enough to be able to go home?" But what would...

Because you've been teaching us things like: "Is this soul-making? Does this feel alive?" To recognize the quickening that happens inside us when we ask something beautiful, or when there is an image of beauty.

We can think about it. Is that okay?

Yeah, maybe we'll ponder it and see what comes.

Okay. Unless anyone has something burning, shall we... We might, but... Okay. Shall we have a bit of quiet time?

Okay.

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