# Longing, Vulnerability, Anteros

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 26:35

What I want to talk about is longing and devotion—some aspects of that whole dimension and movement of our being where divinity meets humanity, where our humanity meets divinity. Specifically, I want to explore where our longing and devotion touches and includes our vulnerability, our brokenness, or even our burden.

I'll try to illustrate with a few examples, but see if you can translate these to you and your life and your longing and your devotion. What I'm trying to get at may have levels to it—levels of meaning. So if it sounds simple, perhaps there are other levels as well.

Longing, devotion, vulnerability.

I remember when I wrote a book a few years ago. For many different reasons—too many to go into now—lots of different conditions, inner and outer, came together around those years that I was writing it, and it was very difficult to write. I didn't want to be writing that book. I had moved on from the subject matter in my own explorations, and there were many reasons that made it very, very hard for me. It felt very hard.

Instead of just seeing the emptiness of all that and letting go and sailing through equanimously, I chose—because I was actually more interested by that point in imaginal practice—to relate to the challenge of it in my own practice and the difficulties through imaginal practice. And that was hard. It wasn't even immediately apparent how to do that.

So there was a lot of difficulty in writing it, lots of different kinds of difficulty. At a certain point, the work itself, the book itself became image. There was the image of the book. It wasn't even written yet. There's the image of the book. And there are the imaginal beings that come to meet the difficulty of writing it, the difficulty of giving oneself, of being devoted to something.

So there are angels of the work, angels associated with that which we give ourselves to, and they might come and they might love us. The book is an angel, the book is an image—it becomes image. Figures came, angels come, healing, ministering, loving me, loving me in the difficulty, loving me for taking the trouble.

Only through going or being in, sitting in the crucible—the alchemical vessel of the pain, of the need, of the dukkha—sometimes, only through that can the image and the imaginal world open up and the whole movement of devotion open up and another aspect of the alchemy of desire can happen. We have to go through whatever it is: the sense of burden, the sense of difficulty, the sense of brokenness. I can't, most often, circumvent that.

Devotion includes eros. Where there's devotion, there's eros. Where there's eros, we may not recognize it at first, but there's devotion. They go together.

In classical Greek mythology, Eros hangs out with a sort of crew, a band of what's called the erotes. One of them is Pothos—this infinite longing, this infinite desire that always wants the beyond, the next thing. We've emphasized that and how crucial it is in the whole dynamic of eros.

There's another character in this little band called Anteros. And Anteros is reciprocal eros—eros coming back to us from our erotic beloved other. We are loved by what we love. We are loved and beloved and held erotically, embraced erotically by that which we are devoted to. We are loved by that which we love.

You can say, "But I love that person and they don't." Listen: we are loved by that which we love. That which we are devoted to is devoted to us. Anteros. Where there's eros, there's anteros. And it may not be obvious.

More recently, there's another huge creative project that I'm involved in, even bigger, probably. Yes, colossally huge.

It feels that way to me anyway. This is even just some weeks ago, and I found myself very consumed in it, very much giving myself to it, and then feeling at certain times anxious about what the outcome would be.

So, anxious for the outcome. Would this work disappear without a trace? Would it just sink? Like when something sinks in water, it's just gone.

Sometimes when we long for something, when we give ourselves to something, when we're devoted to something—please translate this to whatever longing, whatever devotion—we need to touch that possibility of not getting what we want, the possibility of losing, the grief at the potential losing and the pain of that, what we hope for, what we long for. Something in touching that may constellate an image, even if it's an image of that pain. And then I can have the imaginal relationship and something can open.

Because eventually then, that whole devotional relationship opens up faith, energy, alignment. We recognize somehow that we are not alone in wanting this thing. We're not alone in it. It's not only up to us. If we want something really deeply, let's say it this way: the angels and the divine wants it too. It wants it through you. The angels want it through your wanting. And I ask them, whose eros is it? We asked the other day. Whose eros is it? Whose longing is it? Whose devotion is it? Where is it coming from?

So I had this worry or anxiety come up, something felt consumed by giving myself to, that it might just disappear, get lost, sink. And with that there's the sense of self gets constructed around: I am responsible, I am burdened with this, it's up to me to make sure this happens, to make sure it doesn't sink. I was actually talking with Catherine about it and she was helping me inquire into this.

So being with that anxiety, being with that worry, and articulating it, and being with that emotion, not covering it over, being in that difficulty, and staying with that, and then that emotional difficulty and the

willingness to be in the fire of the emotional difficulty constellated an image.

And the image that came was of a black woman and she is a single mother, but she had lost her only child. Either he'd died suddenly or been murdered. And she was stunned, in a state of just absolute stunned. Life had become baffling. There was a sense of meaninglessness. She was in a state of shock. Everything was rendered meaningless and disorienting. She was just standing there in her kitchen or something.

So this was an image, it was a very emotional image, it was really impacting emotionally. The image had to do with loss and the devastation of a feeling of loss when one poured all her love into her only child. Gone. Gone.

Something about being with that image was powerful. But I want to go slowly here because I want to illustrate what happened. It wasn't then that something just opened up. It actually put me into a state where it was like murky, like water that has sediment in it, you know, and it's all like particles floating around. It wasn't like great clarity came in. So I was in this kind of state of, what would you call—yeah, like kind of sedimented water. So it was kind of dark, but there was something that had shifted there in the anxiety. But I didn't know what it means or it wasn't even clear what the effect was.

Over time, and it was really I think maybe the next day, something settled. I didn't really even do anything. I was just with this image, with this murkiness, and with that image of the single mother.

And the next morning I was able to sense—it came to me—the soul of this project, the soul of the work, the angel of the work. And that wasn't something separate from the life, it's not something separate from the work, it's not something separate from other people. So a second image came, which is actually the primary image, the image of that which I am devoted to. It comes alive and it's bigger than me. It has its own autonomy, it has its own intelligence, it moves.

I am part of that movement, I participate in that movement, but it's not up to me. There's a sense then that it's bigger than me, that there's a soul intelligence moving that I can trust. I open to the sense of this movement. There's a flow there that's wider and deeper than I am. It's not just my responsibility. And then I can align with that. Then I can give myself to that. Then I can feel the trust, trusting in the intelligence of that. Then I can devote myself again. Then I can have faith.

Or another example: you might have a practice of, perhaps when you're feeling vulnerable, putting yourself in relationship with a deity. Maybe it's Jesus, maybe it's a bodhisattva of compassion, maybe you curl up in the lap of the Buddha. This constellates the human in vulnerability, in relationship to and being held by the divine. Really, really important. With that humility, with that reverence, with that recognition and feeling of that which is bigger than me, that which holds me.

Or perhaps you're in relationship with Quan Yin or Avalokiteshvara or some other tantric deity, and you're giving yourself to them, devoted to opening to and surrendering yourself to them and to their mission. The mission of Avalokiteshvara is compassion. What is it to open myself to that deity, to open

myself to their mission, their mission of compassion? What happens over time if I do that again and again?

This level of the relationship—me the human and them the deity, they are the other, they are divine, I am human—that level is really, really important. It has the humility, it has the reverence, it has all of that. If I hang out in that space long enough, what happens? The whole soul-making dynamic starts getting going because of the eros in the devotion.

So that in time, self, other, world gets subsumed, involved, ignited in the dynamic of expanding eros, psyche, logos. I'm lying in the lap of the Buddha, I'm sitting at the feet of Jesus, I start to become divine. Why? How? Because of the self, other, world constellation being drawn in and catching the fire of the eros, of the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamo, I start to feel myself as divine. Then two deities are exchanging and sitting. We both become—the other is already an erotic object. I become to myself, so to speak, a beloved other, an erotic object. I become erotic to myself. My own eros starts to become erotic, an erotic object to me. I see the beauty, I see the divinity of my longing, of my devotion, of my eros. Everything gets caught up in the fire of eros and transubstantiated in the alchemy of desire. All of it, all the elements potentially. And one can have both perspectives at once: human-deity, deity-deity.

So when we really allow ourselves to give ourselves to something, to someone, when we really pour ourselves into something, to someone, then something or someone pours itself into us, pours itself through us.

When we don't know the outcome—this thing that I long for, please translate this to wherever your longing burns—when we don't know the outcome, don't know if I will get this, receive this, open to it or not, there's that vulnerability of not knowing. If the hoped-for goal does not, maybe won't manifest, what happens with the devotion? What needs to happen with the devotion?

Also, when we start to see that our devotion is based—as I think we were talking about yesterday—start to be a little more psychologically aware, you start to realize that devotion is based on fantasy, it's based in image. So both from either angle, we start to realize that devotion must be to image. Devotion is to image. Must be.

I mean, it must include reality, if we use that word, materiality, physical appearances. But devotion is not just to a flat reality. The depths of devotion include image. So what are we devoted to? What are we devoted to, really, when we're devoted? Are we not, at some level in a certain manner of speaking, actually devoted to soul, devoted to beauty, whatever that thing is that it seems like it is?

So even when we're devoted to the manifestation in materiality, some manifestation in materiality, that's what we long for, that's what we're devoted to, it needs a soul dimension. The devotion needs a soul dimension. It needs a fantastic and imaginal dimension. And devotion needs trust. It needs enough trust.

Trust in what? Devotion needs trust in something. Trust in what?

Do we discover sacredness? Is it revealed to us? Or do we create it? If we discover it, if it is revealed to us, how? How do we discover it? How can we open to that discovery? How is it revealed to us? If we create it, how do we create it? How can we support that creation?

And if we create-slash-discover—that word that we don't really have—how does that happen? We participate in the creation-slash-discovery of sacredness. We participate in that. We participate in perception. We participate in truth-making. We participate in the creation-slash-discovery of the nature of awakening.

By "participate" I can't quite articulate this—I mean something much deeper than we participate in life because we pay our taxes and whatever. Something that, if we think too much in the usual ways of thinking in terms of subject and object duality, doesn't make sense or seems silly. If I go to oneness and just the perspective of oneness, it also doesn't quite make sense.

Eros, as we've been saying, needs twoness. It needs otherness. Eros also creates twoness and creates otherness endlessly. And through that, Eros discovers-slash-creates sacredness. It reveals sacredness.

I was very touched by the ceremony last night. I don't know—of course people have, each person even has many different experiences during whatever it was, an hour and a half. How do those tangerines... how are they made? How are they sanctified? How did that happen? If it happened at any point, how did that happen? How did the tangerine become sacrament?

We bless things. We bless each other. We bless ourselves. We bless the world. We sanctify self, other, world through our ways of looking, through our conceptions, through our actions, through our body, through our speech. And then the sanctified world, the sanctified other, blesses us.

I don't know—when I put those tangerines in my mouth, it was quite powerful. How does the world get made holy? How do we discover the holiness of things?

Shall we have a little quiet together?

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