Aspects of the Imaginal (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 53:13

Good evening, everyone. Welcome to this short course, this set of talks that will focus on soul-making, imaginal practice, related ideas like eros, and other themes we've explored over the last several years. We'll examine what these concepts mean, what they might mean in the Dharma and for the Dharma, and how they might expand, stretch, enrich, deepen, and dimensionalize our understanding of what Dharma practice is, what it can open up, and where it can lead.

Actually, if I'm completely honest, I know this will change, but right now I'm feeling somewhat ambivalent about giving more talks on these themes. There's already quite a large edifice of teachings around soul-making in the Dharma, and it's substantial. It's a lot to digest, to come to terms with, to integrate into practice. It's complex to understand and for the heart to open to. It's not simple, and I'm acutely aware of this.

These teachings are quite new in being different from usual cultural ways of seeing the world, feeling ourselves, and sensing existence. They're also quite different from other Dharma approaches and perspectives on what Dharma is and can be. So I know it's substantial, and I'm feeling hesitant about adding too much more to that edifice at this point. I don't want to overload you or put out too much too quickly in a way that might be consumed hastily, leading to indigestion or confusion.

There's a certain pacing that's necessary to give proper attention and mature reflection to the appropriation and digestion of these teachings. So I won't be adding much genuinely new material or ideas or whole new directions. Rather, this set of talks will supplement, elaborate, and clarify previous material we've already presented.

On the other hand, I won't repeat everything we've covered over the last few years in terms of laying out that whole edifice again or explaining what we mean by all these terms and practices. Instead, I hope to clarify and supplement aspects of what was already taught where clarification and supplementation seem needed, based on what we're hearing back from people.

This is an attempt to clarify certain aspects, themes, and elements, and to fill out some strands of what we've done and their implications. Perhaps I'll show just a few possible directions for extending practice. As I said, I'm aware it's already substantial—a lot to take on in terms of practice possibilities, the skills and art that requires, the know-how and capacities needed, as well as intellectually. For the heart, the soul, the practice, and the mind, it's a lot. So the purpose is not to add more, but rather to supplement and clarify what's already been offered so that you can digest and understand it better.

All of this—both these talks and past talks from recent retreats—will sound quite abstract, even bizarre and baffling, unless you've done considerable serious experimenting with imaginal practice, eros in practice, and what we're calling soul-making, alongside general Dharma practice including mindfulness, samadhi, metta, and some understanding of emptiness.

Without quite substantial grounding and intimate familiarity with these practices, all of what we'll discuss will sound puzzling and it will be difficult to recognize its value. If that grounding is present, or to the degree it's present, then I think and hope you'll truly recognize the value and significance of the discriminations and clarifications we'll make, and see their relevance. But without that practice foundation, it will likely sound strange or simply uninteresting and irrelevant.

In this first talk—or first group of talks, depending on how you count them, as I might divide them into parts—I want to examine in more detail this word "imaginal" that we've been using. I want to clarify what Catherine and I mean when we use this term.

I'm aware that "imaginal" is somewhat in vogue in certain circles right now, and there's plenty of overlap between how different people use it. However, there are also some really significant differences—not to say one usage is better or worse, right or wrong. I'm not interested in such judgments. But in terms of what we're trying to lay out and put forward—this edifice of teaching, conceptual framework, and practice idioms—it's quite important that we're all on the same page about what we really mean when we use the word "imaginal."

So I want to clarify this by reiterating and re-emphasizing certain aspects or elements of what this means—this word "imaginal" or imaginal experience—that may easily have been missed in past teachings or haven't been clear enough for various reasons.

Secondly, in this first group of talks, to help clarify what we mean and what's involved in these practices, I want to introduce a new term: "sensing with soul." I want to add this alongside, not replace, the word "imaginal." I'm aware some people don't resonate with the word "imaginal," while others love it. Some love it but could use more understanding of what it means and its discriminations, as I mentioned. Some might prefer this phrase "sensing with soul."

This isn't really a new concept or practice or way of looking. It's another language for what we'll explore as we go through this first group of talks.

some of, or quite a bit of, what we've already been talking about. It's almost—we might say—identical with the word imaginal or imaginally, perceiving imaginally. They're almost interchangeable. And I'm quite happy with the word imaginal, but I'll try to use them roughly fifty-fifty so you can gravitate toward whatever word you prefer. But hopefully the understanding is most important, rather than the words. By introducing this different term, it will open up and increase the understanding, making it fuller and more precise.

When I say "sensing the soul"—and I'll explain more as we go—I do mean to include the perception of intrapsychic images. I close my eyes and see whatever it is: an image of a wise old man or some other intrapsychic image. That's part of sensing with soul—perceiving with the inner senses, the inner vision or the mind's eye.

But another part of sensing the soul, equally important, is perceiving this material world we live in—others, objects, things, trees, whatever it is—and perceiving them imaginally. When we've talked about this word imaginal, we've actually been including this perception of the world imaginally. So another way of understanding all this, rather than using the word imaginal, is "sensing with soul." I'll try to fill this out more as we go along.

The third aspect in this first group of talks is a little of the how. We've covered some of the what—what we mean by imaginal, what we mean by sensing with soul, what's involved. Now, a little about the how.

Sometimes I hear from people: "It sounds really interesting, I really want to develop this, but I don't get images. Therefore it must be irrelevant to me." I want to address the practitioner who thinks this is their case. What might we do to develop in practice? How might that develop beyond the statement "I don't get images"? What needs to be understood? What needs to be developed? How can it be developed?

Or someone might listen to this more nuanced and finely discriminating definition of what imaginal means and say, "Hmm, I get images, but now listening to what you say about what imaginal means, I'm not sure they're imaginal"—which is actually a really good thing to be aware of. How might such a practitioner be addressed and helped in practice? In other words, what allows some object of the imagination to become imaginal? What supports that?

Another practitioner might say, "I only get intrapsychic images—I haven't found a better word—but I don't really get what you mean when you talk about things like cosmopoiesis or seeing someone imaginally or sensing the world with soul." What might be offered to such a practitioner?

And the opposite or complementary practitioner says, "I get this kind of perceiving the world as sacred and the sense of divinity in nature, and how the understanding and practice of emptiness opens that up and legitimizes it, but I don't get any intrapsychic images. How does that happen?" I want to say something hopefully helpful for such a practitioner as well.

So regarding practice, hopefully a little about better receiving images, opening to images. A little about how objects of the imagination might be supported to become more fully imaginal. And what is it—how can we support a sensing with soul, a sensing of the world, self, other, material objects in the world? What supports that movement toward that kind of opening of perception?

That's the third domain about practice that I hope to weave into this first group of talks.

Lastly, fourthly, just a little bit more about some of the assumptions and implications in what we're

saying. Really a little bit more—I know I've touched on it quite a bit in the past—about some of the philosophical dimensions and aspects of this whole subject. Specifically, and again I know I've touched on it before, about ontology: the question of what is real, or what are we associating

So with regard to practice, hopefully a little about getting—or better, receiving—images, opening to images. A little about how objects of the imagination might be, how we can support them to become more fully imaginable. And what is it, again about practice, what is it—how can we support a sensing with soul, a sensing of the world, self, other, objects, material things in the world, sensing the soul? What supports that movement toward that kind of opening of perception?

So that's the third domain about practice that I hope to weave into this first group of talks.

And lastly, just a little bit—fourthly—just a little bit more about some of the assumptions and implications in what we're saying. So really a little bit more, again, I know I've touched on it quite a bit in the past, but just a little bit about some of the philosophical dimensions and aspects of this whole subject. Specifically, and again, I know I've touched on it before, but specifically about ontology—that is the question of what is real, or what are we associating with regard to the world, ourselves, others. This question is so central in terms of what gives a foundation to these practices, this kind of whole outlook, this whole conceptual framework. But it's also part of what gets opened up—our whole sense of reality can be opened up, questioned, challenged, extended.

And complementary to that is the whole philosophical area of epistemology, which is: How do we know? How does a human being know? I know I'm sitting on a chair right now—that's knowledge. Everyone would agree, you can see me, Rob, sitting on a chair. And we just say, well, I take that knowledge for granted.

But when we get more into the imaginal or sensing the world with soul, then this question arises: How can I claim knowledge? How can I claim this as knowledge? Most of society, contemporary Western society, discredits, discounts that kind of perception as any kind of knowing of anything real.

So again, these practices and these concepts and these ideas and these sharings push on and break open or extend our epistemological notions. They call them into question and they also rely on a questioning of epistemology, a penetrating kind of assessment and investigation of epistemology. What counts as knowledge? What counts as knowing something? I don't mean intellectually knowing something. I mean knowing something with the senses as well, or the intuition. Knowing something with the heart. We'll go into this a little bit.

So I just want to touch on these areas. So those are the four main themes and strands that I want to weave together in this first group of talks.

Okay, let's make a start and focus a little bit on this word "imaginal." And it seems to me that in various ways this word imaginal is confusing for some people or not clear—really its meaning is not clear for

perhaps many people. Sometimes a person is aware of their confusion or their lack of clarity as to the meaning of the word imaginal. And other times they're not so aware. They're not even aware that they're confused. The conception that they have is confused. The idea is confused. And they're not aware that they're not clear.

So as we said, it may be better for some people to use this term—this phrase that I'm introducing now called "sensing with soul"—may be for some people more helpful for them to use that to get a better understanding and a better feel and approach to practice with the imaginal.

So if we think about the imagination for a moment, we can see very easily that the imagination is certainly part of being a human being. It's a faculty of the human being. But there's, at least to my mind, clearly a difference between what we might call *papañca* and the way the imagination spins in a state of *papañca*, of proliferation. He, she looked at me a certain way or didn't look at me a certain way, and now I believe they're evil or I'm a loser or whatever it is, and I spin off—the imagination spins off, creating catastrophic scenarios in the future or whatever it is. So clearly there's that kind of use of the imagination or ensnarement in the imagination run riot there, very different than a mindful use of the imagination.

For example, imagining my friend and keeping the image of her, the sense of her—whether that's a visual image or not—keeping the sense of her mindfully in the consciousness and radiating the intention or energy of *mettā* toward her. And there's a deliberate and mindful use of the imagination, clearly very different than the use of the imagination for *papañca*.

And maybe even that use of the imagination is not just mindful, but quite embodied. In other words, my energy body, my awareness of the energy body is really integrated seamlessly in that experience of mindful imagination, for example, in *mettā* practice. So that I have the sense of my friend and the image of them and the sense of the awareness of the energy body, and the intention of the *mettā,* and all that kind of harmoniously woven together in the embodied mindful imagination in the *mettā* practice. And certainly that's how I would tend to emphasize the practice of *mettā* and how I would teach it.

And then there might be a healing—for example, we talked about the figure of love in the imagination a few retreats ago. And so it could be even someone like Tara, or a deity like Tara, or the Buddha, or Jesus, or your grandma, or whatever it is, and one, again, with mindfulness, and with the energy body awareness, is aware of this image, and there's healing flowing there toward one. Really, really helpful.

So there's *papañca*, there's mindful imagination, there's embodied imagination, there's healing imagination, or a healing image. And then there's the imaginal. And we could make more gradations as well.

What do we mean by this word "imaginal"? Because it's certainly more than—let's say, more is implied and included than in those other examples of sort of categories of use of the imagination: *papañca,* mindful imagination, embodied imagination, healing imagination. When we use the word "imaginal," we

mean something more than that.

So I want to tread carefully here, and let's maybe open up the idea of a spectrum. There's a spectrum of—we could say a spectrum of the use of the imagination, in what I've just outlined, from *papañca* on one side all the way to, let's say, the imaginal on the other. Or we could say that's the spectrum of the imaginal, and it's all—we get more and more toward the, if you like, authentic or fully imaginal.

There's a spectrum of experience with the imagination. What do we mean when we use this word imaginal?

As I pointed out earlier, people have used and do still use that word differently. It was originally coined by Henri Corbin, but different people have picked it up in different psychotherapeutic modalities and other directions, using it differently from each other. I really don't believe in a right or wrong here. People are free to use words however they want, and I'm certainly not interested in saying I'm right or someone else is wrong. But there is a particular way that we are using it.

A particular way that we are using the word imaginal that is not completely the same as the way Henri Corbin used it, or James Hillman, or Tom Cheetham, or Philip Pullman—although I don't know his work very well—or Mary Watkins. Many of these people, except for Pullman, have been very important to me personally, very influential and dear to me, and have contributed significantly to my relationship and explorations of all this. But still, there are differences. We are using it in quite particular ways.

There's much overlap and similarity between how this word is used among different groups, but there are differences. The same is true of the term soul-making that we're using. Again, it's a niche word, but relatively common these days. Words like eros, soul, or logos are all used differently by different people. There's quite a bit of overlap and similarity, and some very significant and important differences that actually mean the whole trajectory of practice and understanding and revelation unfolds differently depending on how the terms are conceived in the first place and thus how practice is approached and what then unfolds.

If I were to briefly throw out a list of what is involved—the aspects of the imaginal as we are using that word—there are different aspects that come together to make up the fully imaginal as we use that term. I do this with quite a lot of caution, trying to walk a tightrope between helpful precision and discernment on one hand, and daunting pedantry on the other. You'll perhaps hear my own ambivalence about the whole thing. But for the sake of clarity and bringing more life, color, beauty, and power to this direction of practice, let me throw out a list very briefly. We'll return to these elements or aspects of the imaginal in more detail later.

What are some of the aspects or elements in the constellation of the imaginal? What nodes are involved in making an imaginal experience? I'll throw these out quickly and we'll return to them. I'm deliberately not numbering them. I roughly count eighteen, but that depends on how you divide them up, because

something might count as one item on the list but actually involve several aspects, so it might count as more. There's a reason for me not being too precise about this.

First would be love and being loved. I've talked about most of these before in different talks, and right now I'm not going into detail. We'll pick up many of these as we go on in this first group of talks.

Second, eros. Again, I'm not going to define it here. We've talked about it extensively before. It's different from and more than love and being loved.

Third is beauty. Beauty is involved in the imaginal.

Fourth is a sense of dimensionality—depth—but dimensionality that eventually opens out into a sense of divinity. Dimensionality opening out to a sense of divinity.

Fifth and related would be a sense of beyondness. Not complete transcendence, but an image has a sense for us of there being more than I can quite get my head around or grasp or even see or sense right now. It has more for me to move into. Actually so much more that one intuits a sense of unfathomability to the image.

Another aspect is autonomy—that the image is not sensed as just a part of me or an element of my consciousness. It has its own somewhat distinct autonomy, its own somewhat distinct independent being, so that there is a two-ness. Two-ness is an aspect of the constellation of the imaginal.

There's me, and there's this image, this imaginal object or person. And even if it is an object—this book, for instance, may be imaginal to me—as the imaginal sense deepens, there is a two-ness of person, of personhood. It's as if the book also has, or is also, a soul, an intelligence. And so there's this autonomy, there's this kind of distinct two-ness, yet the boundaries are not definite. There's a kind of softness or blurring of boundaries of the imaginal object.

So that's six or seven so far. There is also, number eight, what I would like to call a kind of infinite echoing or infinite mutual mirroring between the image and me or my life—you or your life, if it's your image, obviously. There's a kind of infinite echoing and mirroring between the two. I'll come back to what I mean by this later, as I said.

This includes meaningfulness. The image is pregnant, full, super-abundant with meaningfulness—a sense of meaningfulness for us, for the subject. But we cannot quite grasp or delimit or totally articulate or define the totality of that meaningfulness, the complete meaningfulness. But it's pregnant with that; it has that sense of meaningfulness to us. Meaning is a part of meaningfulness. So yes, it may well have meanings as well, but meaningfulness is even bigger than meaning or meanings plural.

And in that, perhaps ninth, we are not reducing the image to "it only means this," "it only represents that," "it only is this." There's not a limitation or a reduction of the image in any way.

Another element is that there's a quality of what I call theatricality to the imaginal. Meaning it's powerful. It has an effect. It moves us. It stirs our soul like good theatre. And it's intimate like good theatre. But we know that it's theatre. It's neither real nor not real—rather, either one of those doesn't feel quite right. There's what I also call sometimes the imaginal middle way between real and not real. It's a really crucial part of the imaginal, the theatricality, the imaginal middle way.

I've lost count now, but it's about ten, I think. The imaginal is not a non-conceptual experience—if such an experience is really possible for a human being to have. The imaginal is definitely not non-conceptual. Implicit in the imaginal, in the constellation of the imaginal, in the experience of the imaginal, is a logos, is some kind of conceptual framework, some kind of conception of what is going on. Now, it might be very loose and quite open and unarticulated, but it's not a non-conceptual experience. And the imaginal, and that whole realm of the imaginal, involves logos, involves the mind in that way, the conceptuality.

Next, an imaginal image has a quality of what we might call eternality to it, and timelessness. Something is different in the sense of time that pertains to an image or that an image inhabits, if you like. Again, we'll come back to all this, and I've mentioned much of it before.

Next, humility is an element in the constellation of the imaginal. We feel humble in relationship to the image. That's a quite loaded word, and again I'll revisit this. Some people are not quite sure what that means, or it gets too squeezed, that word. But humility—I'd like to explore a little bit what that means.

And also next, reverence. And grace. When an object is imaginal for us, whether it's a purely so-called intra-psychic image or something in the material world that has become imaginal, there's a sense of grace there, of kind of inexplicable gift, an overflowing, a bestowing on us from something greater—a sense of grace.

And another kind of defining element or aspect or quality of the imaginal is that it leads to, it brings with it, a sense of soul-making, a sense of soulfulness. As I said, it stirs and engages and ignites our soul with full of resonances and richnesses. What does that mean? Soul-making—we'll come back to this, and I've touched on it a lot before—but basically the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic is stimulated and starts to expand and deepen and enrich and mutually fertilize its elements of Eros-Psyche and Logos. So soulfulness as an element in the constellation of the imaginal. And that's more than heartfulness. It includes heartfulness, but it's actually more than heartfulness.

More than just being touched in the heart.

Next, the imaginal could actually be conceived more as a way of looking at something than as the thing itself, than the object itself. So we could say that in the constellation of the imaginal—which includes both subject and object—what's key, a key aspect, is the way of looking at the object and the way of conceiving. Part of that way of looking includes the awareness of the energy body in this very integrated, very sensitive and responsive way. It's part of the way of looking that, if you like, makes or supports something

to be imaginal.

And lastly, when we are with an image, with the imaginal object, we have the sense that it is part of a bigger context of the imaginal. It's part of what Catherine and I sometimes call the concertina of images, or the concertina of the imaginal. In other words, this is one image, but we have a sense—either sometimes directly right then in the moment, palpably or sensibly right then in the moment, clearly, and sometimes much more vaguely, much more intuitively—of other possible images, possible other imaginal objects, if you like, waiting in the wings of the theatre, so to speak. So there's that sense of the concertina, of the context, the imaginal context.

Okay, so there's a brief list of, say, eighteen, or depending how you count it, maybe twenty-something elements of the constellation of the imaginal. I'm going to come back to many of those in more detail and expand on them.

As I said, I'm cautious here, and I'm wanting to walk a bit of a tightrope. So as I said, we might, in our understanding, conceive of a spectrum of experiences that involve the imagination. If you like, culminating—one end of that spectrum is the authentically imaginal, if we can use that word, or the fully imaginal. Again, I'm not quite sure about those words.

So I feel a little ambivalent here about churning out a list like that or stipulating a list like that. Now, you probably know this about me already, but I can admit that perhaps my personality type, my tendency, is to be quite picky and precise and fussy. I am perhaps a quibbler by nature. Some might say I'm a quibbler by trade. To me, that's just my tendency.

So I'm aware of that tendency, and at the same time, I want to encourage a kind of generosity or amplitude in these teachings so that a certain looseness is required to kind of balance out, or at the same time as, this kind of fussy precision that is perhaps my tendency, but I think is also quite necessary if we're really going to get the power and the potency out of these teachings.

If—and I might as well share as well—if I have a fantasy or a hope of, at some point in the future, a kind of creative sangha contributing to and developing these directions in practice, these logoi, these conceptual frameworks, these ways of practicing, then I think both a kind of looseness and a kind of rigor of discernment and precision and clarity are going to be necessary to allow that potential of communal creativity to actualize. Just as in the arts or the sciences, the ability to create and discover in those fields needs a clear common ground in understandings and a developed mastery—if you like; again, I use that word with caution—developed mastery of the history of its tradition, whether it's painting or jazz or classical music, whatever it is. And then, based on that, can come new creations, new discoveries out of that grounding.

So my sense is it's similar here. And so we need a certain precision, a certain kind of subtle discernment that's quite rigorous. And we need a certain looseness.

Now, many of you—just again about the relationship to lists—I know one or two of you, maybe no more, one or two of you actually like lists. Like, you like when the Buddha gives lists and you like when I give lists. But there are, I'm guessing, probably many of you who actually hate lists and it turns you off.

It may help that latter group to know that I feel quite ambivalent about lists, actually. Sometimes though, when one is teaching something that's relatively new, this can be a good heuristic, a good educational tool or device to stretch and light up the awareness and the discernment where it might otherwise just not notice what is new. We tend to hear what we already know and kind of hear within a box. So lists sometimes help stretch it. You say, "What was that number twelve on the list? Hold on, what does that mean? Am I including that? Am I thinking about that? Is that in my awareness?" So it helps us to notice what is new and different outside of our habitual conceptions.

However, lists can also get dry, and if care is not taken, what I think is even worse is they can get regarded as atomic truths, which I get a bit nervous about.

But I'm ambivalent partly because I don't want to discourage you, and you might hear all that's on the imaginal and think, "I'm nowhere near that. I don't know what you're talking about, and this thing, and that kind of dimension of experience, and this and that." So I really don't want to discourage you; I rather want to encourage. And what I'll come back to later on in this first group of talks is you'll actually see that the elements of this list actually each end up being a kind of ignition key for deepening the imaginal experience and practice. So it's not just useless pedantry and pickiness. I'm actually pointing to these things, these elements, because awareness of them and turning towards them, as I'll explain later, can actually deepen the practice. They are keys to igniting and deepening the whole imaginal opening and soul-making opening.

I'm cautious in treading a tightrope for another reason, an even more subtle reason: if you've been following the teachings so far over the last couple of years, you'll recognize the fact that imaginal and soul-making experiences are dynamic. They're not static experiences. This is because, as we've explained in previous talks, the soul-making dynamic starts to involve the other elements, so the eros and the logos, or the image, and they start to deepen and widen and enrich and fertilize and complicate each other.

That's a dynamic - it's moving, on its way, expanding, enriching, growing more complicated and deepening. And then, as you may remember if you've been listening closely, when there's an imaginal perception, eventually at some point the sense of the self becomes involved in that imaginal constellation. So subject and object, self and other, and then the world too in cosmopoiesis, and the eros itself. Within all that, as we alluded to earlier, there's this infinite echoing and mirroring.

At some point in the dynamic - and all this is a process, it's happening, expanding and enriching - the self-image becomes actually one's whole life, one's whole storying. It's not just this moment now without past, without future. As I said, something of the relationship with and the concept of time is opened out and altered.

But the main point right now is that there's a dynamic. So how much of this - what stage of complication and enrichening and deepening and widening of the eros, of the psyche, of the logos, what stage of involvement of the self and the world and the image of the eros or the logos of the eros are we at, at any moment, in relating to an imaginal object? At what point in that dynamic, in that unfolding process of mutual enrichment and involvement deepening and complicating, at what point are we going to say now it's imaginal?

So I might have all the beauty and meaningfulness and theatricality and all those other elements with the imaginal object, but the self is not quite fully involved yet as image. It hasn't been drawn into and involved in the imaginal complex, in the constellation of the imaginal. Am I going to say that's imaginal or not imaginal? It's a little bit arbitrary.

So that's another reason, more subtle, why I'm cautious about throwing out these lists that can easily become sorts of rigid or formulaic and stipulative categories. There is this spectrum. Clearly something like papañca is imagination, but a state of papañca is not imaginal, neither is it imaginal when we do a straightforward mettā practice necessarily. And there's this gradation of uses of the imagination that we could say get more and more imaginal. Exactly at what point we say "now it's imaginal" - we could argue about that.

So what that means as a practitioner is that one wants to listen to all these elements and ask: How can I move towards more of that, the fuller end, the more authentically or more fully imaginal end of things? How can I enrich my experience, deepen it, open it out, make it more fertile? So it's not so much about judging oneself or measuring up. It's the direction we're interested in.

For me, the clarity is important. We're really talking about something other than just the use of the imagination, or something merely mythic, or whatever.

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