Sensing with Soul (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 28:47

I'd like to look in a little more detail at the alchemy of perception—that transition, the process through which we come to sense with soul, sense the world with soul, sense others and things. How does that transformation of perception actually happen? What are some of the elements involved in that process? How does life become image? I want to give some examples and explore what's going on there.

But before I do, something occurs to me that I feel compelled to say again, perhaps to reassure you—though I don't know if that's needed. As I said in the first talk, I feel like I'm treading a bit of a tightrope. On one side, I want to bring in a sense of precision and careful discernment, a kind of acuity and refinement of attention and wisdom in terms of what's involved in all this business of imaginal perception—perceiving, imagining, sensing the soul. On the other hand, in that sort of careful delineation and examination of what's involved, I don't want to discourage or make it overly prohibitive or formulaic or too tightly circumscribed.

So I really would like you to feel like you can jump in and play and experiment. It doesn't have to be, "Am I getting it right?" This kind of freeze, this cramp that so often plagues meditators and people on different spiritual paths—especially, I find, in the way we teach insight meditation—I seem to encounter that a lot. So I'm really wanting to strike that balance and say a bit more that helps you feel hopefully free in this process, free to play.

I've pointed out that when we talk about soul-making and that whole journey or trajectory, that direction of soul-making, what we're really talking about is a dynamic process. There's a dynamism involved. In fact, there are all kinds of dynamism involved in soul-making. Eros itself is a dynamic movement towards wanting more, or of bringing something towards us and opening to it. There's a dynamism there.

There is a dynamism in what we described as the very soul-making dynamic—the eros-psyche-logos process, the way they get involved with each other, inseminate each other, fill each other out, complicate, enrich, widen, deepen. There is what I mentioned at the end of the last part of this talk: the kind of process involved in soul-making will bring, will give birth to discernment, discriminations, distinctions, delineations in both our conception and our perception of all kinds of elements of experience—emotional, material, sensory, intellectual, you name it—in terms of the logos, the conceptual framework. And the very making of some discernments and distinctions and refinements of delineation also feeds the soul-making process. There's a kind of dynamism involved in that—all kinds of dynamism involved in the soul-making movement.

And I would say dynamic responsiveness—the ability to respond to what's happening. We talked about

that hawk gliding on the thermal air currents, and the ability to respond to what's happening, to dance with what's happening in the being, in the perception, in the body, in the totality of that, and move in response to that very dynamically, very beautifully. That dynamic responsiveness is also an element of soul-making.

However, when I say all that and imply all that—that there's a dynamism involved, that we're talking about dynamic processes involved in soul-making—one also has to consider the time frames of what we're talking about. If something is dynamic, it can be dynamic with a very sudden dramatic shift of something bursting into consciousness or a sudden change of responsiveness that's happening in the moment. Or it can be dynamic in a very almost imperceptible way over time to build up a change. Or it can be dynamic in stages in the sense that we plateau for a while—it's not the best word, but let's say things look relatively static for a while. They're being consolidated. We're steadying with something, and then something suddenly shatters or just gradually changes.

So one has to look at the kind of temporal styles or different temporal characteristics of the way change happens. Dynamic response, dynamism, doesn't mean that there's always change happening, that it's always rapid change, and things are always exploding or moving rapidly. Sometimes it appears like that, and sometimes it's much more characterized by different trajectories of change.

For example—and I did already touch on this when we talked about the eros-psyche-logos dynamic in the last part of this talk—they actually have different labilities. They're changeable in different ways. Logos tends to change more slowly over time. We need to consolidate a conceptual framework or just a new idea, get used to it, over quite some time usually, and then something might shatter or change. Or, in time, with practice, there's this ability to shift it quite rapidly, deliberately.

So we can say logos is involved in sensing with soul. In other words, there's always a concept happening. There's always a conceptual framework being engaged when we're sensing with soul. It's not a non-conceptual experience. But the sort of expansion or stretching or shattering of a logos is something that's usually more gradual, slower over time. It's less labile as one of the elements in that trinity than, say, eros.

As another example, we talked about the movement—the organic movement, if we're not blocking it—for the soul-making dynamic to sort of spread from not just the erotically imaginable object or other, but also back towards the self and the elements of the self, and also out towards the world. What can be very helpful at times is attending to that particular trinity—self, other, world—and just allowing that to be, or encouraging that to be more balanced, the soul-making spreading in a more balanced direction at times.

But even saying that, it doesn't mean it always needs to be balanced. I don't always need to make sure that self, other, and world are equally balanced in this soul-making situation to the same degree or intensity of soul-making that's spreading equally in all directions. No, the whole thing is fluid. So sometimes we're much more with one of those three, much more than the other two. And it may be that we actually need to

dwell more with certain poles there. We could add eros to that and make it self, other, world, eros—in terms of what becomes, if you like, an object of soul-making, becomes taken up by the soul-making process and becomes an erotic, imaginal object for us.

But maybe we need to dwell with one of those poles of that pattern. For example, habitually we might not allow the soul-making process to return to ourselves. We're always—and I've mentioned this before—seeing the divinity, the beauty in the other, in the imaginal object. Yet habitually, for different reasons, it doesn't return to the self, or we're blocking it from returning to the self, or simply neglecting to look there. Through the looking, through the noticing, we allow it to ignite the self as an erotically imagined object for ourselves.

So that might be a habit. We might need to linger a little with the self as image and stay there, being somewhat imbalanced the other way for a while, because it's countering our habit. Or it could be the other way around—we're always with the self and in situations where we forget to notice, "Oh, what's happening with my perception of the other at the moment?" We let that become more imaginally alive.

In working with different people, I see people have different habits here. Sometimes, if I'm working with them, I need to gently remind them: "What about that? Can you notice what's happening there?" And then something opens. The water spreads in that direction to balance things out, and that helps the whole soul-making process.

Or it might be that in the soul-making or in the sensing of the soul, we need at times or stages in our practice to give more attention to the bodily experience, the energy body experience in what's going on. This might be because attending to the energy body hasn't become second nature to us—we lose touch with it in our erotic fascination with the other as we go outward. Hence the exercises on *tunas*, or part of the reason for those exercises we were doing on recent retreats.

We may need to linger more with the energy body and really become accustomed to what it is to pay attention in a way that brings the energy body alive. That in itself can take months and often years. It's really a journey for people. As I've pointed out before, it doesn't just equate with mindfulness of the body. It's a certain quality that opens up the experience of mindfulness of the body, opening up the wavelengths of that experience much more broadly.

Within that, we may be so used to attending to the energy body experience that our habit is always very solid—always just the sensations of the body on the cushion or chair, very gross level, solid level sensations. We need to become accustomed to, and this can take time, the much finer range of the spectrum where things are much more ethereal, and the sense of the body as a kind of luminous space of refined vibration. Or vice versa—that's someone's habitual default, and they need to become familiar with the more solid, earthy sense of the energy body.

Again, in terms of energies and body, someone might be, for various reasons, comfortable with different

kinds of resonances and movements and feelings in certain areas of the body—for instance, the heart area can feel very alive there. But when it comes to the hips or the sexual energy, it's a bit cut off or frozen, not felt there. So there might be a period where that area needs to feel out more. Or again, vice versa—the heart and the whole quality of heartfulness and how that feels, the movement of emotionality filling out with the energy body, is not something a person is used to attending to.

Extrapolating from that, maybe within the whole constellation, dwelling more with the emotions as the pole of what one's paying attention to might be important for some people at certain stages in their practice. Really leaning toward that over and over might be very important as a kind of growth.

Or we get the sense of the imaginal and the whole soul-making process, and it's always habitually very nicey-nicey—always white-robed angels of light, very ethereal in the texture of the images, with less of the dark gods. Maybe, conversely, it's all a bit dark and filled with *dukkha* and angst, or dark in different ways—perhaps sexually or otherwise. There needs to be that opening out to the more obviously traditional, ethereal, beneficent, angelic, light, luminous, refined presences.

Again, what's the habit? What's needed?

Or, as I've noticed recently, the whole realm of desire—for many people, it's actually not okay to have desire. That can be a cultural transmission from the wider culture, an early religious transmission, or something in the family or schooling, or in the Dharma teaching. Even just allowing one's desire and allowing one's eros, if we talk about the opening to the current of desire practice or just the awareness of eros in the imaginal practices.

There might be a period where one is learning to notice desire, actually feel what it feels like, allow it, and be okay with it. Then even recognizing it as a lovely thing and a beautiful thing, and that can increase all the way to sensing it—as I've explained in the Eros Amphitheater talks—sensing it as a divine thing, our desire. It's divine desire.

So that might be a whole way that the dynamic or the constellation needs to be weighted for some people, perhaps for a while.

We've talked about balance and all these elements, but there's also the individual growth or development of a soul, if you like, as an expression. What is the habit that we need to address? "Oh yes, that always happens. I always neglect to do this." It's just a little shift or a little shift of attention that allows us to break out of our normal habit. Sometimes these habits are not—you know, "Oh, that's terrible, that's going to take me decades"—it's just a shift, and then, "Oh, that's moved right there in the moment."

The habit might still carry some entrenchment, but the actual shifting of it often proves less daunting than we imagine. Sometimes the process requires more involvement—we may need to examine certain murky beliefs absorbed from our education, our culture, or even dharma culture itself, beliefs that block off, inhibit, and disallow our desire and our celebration of its inherent beauty, or even the possibility of such

celebration.

This brings us to the essential question: What is habit? What does it need? And what is given by soul to me?

It may be given that this particular complex emotion needs lingering with, or that this bandwidth of the energy body—this entire spectrum—requires patient attention. These are gifts from soul, part of our soul-making, our soul education. So we must distinguish: What is given by soul? What is purely habit? What is needed here?

I'm not suggesting these are necessarily easy questions, but I encourage maintaining this quality of light inquiry rather than approaching these questions of balance and dynamism with rigid formulas about what needs to be happening, what should be happening.

There's also the question of personal soul style—the unique way that my soul is, that your soul is, which deserves deep respect. Some people carry more darkness in the beautiful sense of the word—beautiful, rich darkness—as part of their soul makeup. Some people naturally have greater facility with the ethereal than with denser realms. Some simply carry more sexual libido and eros than others. All of this needs honoring.

So we ask: What's personal soul style that needs respecting? What's habit and indoctrination, or simple encrustation through repetition? What is given to me by soul? And what is actually needed?

All of this inquiry remains very light, very open, playful. Don't fear making mistakes in this exploration. As Miles Davis understood, mistakes are simply part of the creative process—not something to fear, but something to respond to dynamically. They become part of our responsive dance.

I really want to encourage this sense of play, this permission and freedom to simply dive in and explore. Though I'll qualify even that statement later.

All this talk of dynamism and dynamics connects intimately with pacing. I believe I discussed pacing in the Path to the Imaginal retreat—though I'm aware there's an abundance of material being communicated, so this concept might have gotten lost in the vastness of information being shared.

Pacing operates on multiple levels. There's pacing in relation to a particular image: How long do I stay with this one image and deliberately call it back? When do I let it move on naturally, transform, or invite another image in? These questions I've explored before.

But now we're bringing pacing into relationship with these elements and this entire sense of dynamism. How quickly do we move through different logoi? Consider the breaking of vessels that I've discussed in several retreats. Vessels cannot break constantly. There must be periods of building—building vessels, building structures, understanding conceptual frameworks, truly absorbing and digesting them, making them work for us, extracting their full juice and mileage. Only then might come the breaking or stretching

or questioning.

So there's pacing in all of this—pacing questions and discernments to make throughout this exploration of dynamism with regard to the different elements.

I speak extensively about reification and how crucial this middle way of the imaginal is—this theatrical quality that belongs to the whole sensing of soul and imaginal work. While the reality is more complex than I can fully articulate here, what I want to emphasize now is this: reification is indeed a significant issue, and it often lies at the root of problems we encounter in these practices.

When the work feels like it has exploded or hit a brick wall, when something goes wrong or the soul-making feels stuck, when dukkha arises instead of the opening of the soul-making process, when things fail to be fully or authentically imagined in the way described in this series' first talk—often we can trace these difficulties back to reification of something or other, sometimes quite a lot of things.

This is genuinely the case, and it is truly important. Yet I don't want us to become the reification police, with "Thou shalt not reify" as our first commandment.

We don't, you know, it's like—expect to reify. Look, it's human. To me, that goes with the first noble truth: there is dukkha. Dukkha arises. It's like dukkha rests on reification. And so we will do that. We will reify. Expect to reify.

And again, in the context of what I'm trying to say right now in this little fragment here is: don't get too hung up on all this. Sometimes it's necessary to reify something, and maybe for a while, and there can still be a lot of soul-making that happens in a reified perspective. So it is a big deal, but you don't need to get frozen thinking, "Oh my goodness, what happens if I reify?" so that the whole thing gets stuck that way.

Expect that you will reify. It's probably quite a maturity to really whittle that down so that it tends to happen less and less. But you know, it is a big deal, but don't get too hung up on it. So we really don't want to be the reification police with this, and we don't want you to be the reification police with respect to yourselves.

And so just finally for right now, you know, I feel like whatever I say in all this—trying to make these delineations, trying to say things, "Do you see how this is working? It's like this, or it has this element and not that, or this rather than that, and it must include this"—whatever I say, whatever we say in trying to provide a framework and a platform for all these explorations, there's going to be exceptions. I'm beginning to think so. There will be possible exceptions.

Teaching this stuff, I feel like it's more like teaching art, or teaching music. It's like, yeah, it's really important. You learn rules of harmony and things to look out for when you're improvising and different ways you can do things. "And did you think about this? Or you can explore this and don't forget this," and all that. But whatever one says as a teacher—I think, or whatever one is told as a teacher—there are

exceptions possible, and someone can just give an example of exactly an exception to what you've just explained, and the opposite of it.

That doesn't mean, though, that all that explanation, that delineation, and the exploration of those delineations and those refinements of perception and those conceptions and conceptual frameworks is irrelevant just because there are exceptions.

So again, I feel there's this kind of—tightrope's too dramatic a metaphor—but there's a balance and a looseness with precision that's involved in this. A looseness with a precision of discernment and refinement and attention.

So again, I'm inserting this fragment at this point just because it occurred to me and because I really want to encourage and not discourage. So I hope that's helpful.

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