Dukkha and Soul-making (Part 5)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 56:56

So we've spent some time now drawing attention to some of the elements of soul-making practice around which we need to take care, to which we need to give some consideration, or some development if we want to ensure as much as possible that these kinds of practices and this kind of path of soul-making doesn't actually create more dukkha in different ways or bring its own whole set and level of problems.

Now I would like to turn that around and talk a little bit about how sensing the soul and imaginal practices can relieve dukkha, free us from dukkha, bring some kind of liberation in regard to some dukkha that we are experiencing or some situation of dukkha, some kind of healing, some kind of resolution or clarity or empowerment.

If you've been listening to the imaginal talks from when we first started, Theatre of Selves, and maybe even before that, and the whole trajectory there in different retreats, you'll have heard many examples of situations of dukkha, or sense of some kind of dukkha, some kind of pain, suffering, imprisonment, confusion, in all the different domains of one's being. Then practicing not an avoidance of that dukkha, not turning away from it, but rather a being with it, an intimacy with the dukkha, a holding of the pain in the emotional body, in the energy body, aware of the situation.

And then that being with the dukkha, with care, and with the body, and with the sensitivity, out of that an image arose, an imaginal image, and that transformed the whole sense of the situation, the whole sense of the dukkha, bringing some relief, some ease, some freedom, some dissolving of the dukkha—not often completely. So it's a slightly different approach here. What it leaves is not a blandly peaceful situation. But the being with the dukkha, the going into it, holding it, relating to it in a certain way, allows sometimes in the kind of alchemy there an image to arise that becomes imaginal. And that then transforms and with it brings an alchemy that transforms the dukkha, that brings some kind of freedom from dukkha. That's often quite remarkable and beautiful.

I want to talk about that a little bit. As I said, if you've been listening, you'll have heard many instances, and I hope that also if you're listening, you will have recognized this in your own experience by now. Many, hopefully, situations of dukkha for yourself that have been transformed, liberated, opened up, given another dimension, freed in some regard through the emergence of the imaginal—in a way that wasn't contrived, wasn't coming along and deciding, what can I imagine to make myself feel better here, and moving away and avoiding the dukkha, but by being intimate with the dukkha and the imaginal arising out of that.

So I want to draw attention to this—it should already be obvious for anyone listening at this point, but just

say a little bit more about it—as one of the options that we have as practitioners, one of the ways of approaching dukkha, and also one of the options we have of conceiving of what is going on in regard to imaginal practice, in regard to dukkha, in regard to pathology. One option among others, not better, not worse, just another option, another angle in with regard to dukkha and freeing from dukkha and also with regard to the whole kind of edifice of conceptions around dukkha and freedom from dukkha and soul and all of that.

As I said, you will have heard many examples, stories I've related of myself or of someone else I've been working with or who's shared with me something and said it's okay to share it. And hopefully you'll have seen this for yourself. There's some kind of emotional difficulty or unsettledness where the mind won't settle down, some kind of difficulty in the field of relationships that one is in or the work or social situation one is in. Any of that—emotions, nervous system, mind, relational, occupational, whatever it is, or combination of those kinds of dukkha.

And one option is, as I said, being with that dukkha with the emotional body, with the energy body, and caring for it in the ways that we've described before. Out of that kind of crucible of the alchemical vessel, an imaginal image arises, or we sense the situation with soul. We could say it may not be that the image is—it might be that the situation itself becomes image, or I become image, and I look just the same in the image as I do now. It doesn't appear that different than what we might call material consensual reality, or something might be very different. But some kind of sensing with soul emerges out of the crucible, out of the alchemical vessel and heat of the difficulty because of the way we're being intimate with it and connecting with it, with the energy body, with the emotional body.

And that imaginal perception, that sensing with soul, does something to the energy body. What was a feeling of agitation and disharmony and unsettledness and jangliness in the energy body that went with the dukkha actually now becomes a sense in the energy body, palpable and immediate, of harmony. Something—to use a certain language—the nervous system has been regulated through the emergence of the image, through the emergence of the imaginal, through the sensing with soul. The nervous system has been regulated. Something has been soothed, something has been healed.

But it's not so much through addressing the nervous system directly. Not so much in this case, that trajectory I've just described, through addressing the energy body and playing with the samatha or ways of breathing or imagining the energy body. Not so much through thinking about one's personal family history or wounding or whatever it is. So there's just one option among other kinds of angles of approach to dukkha.

But for this to work, what arises has to be imaginal, has to be soul-making. And remember, that's for me now. In other words, as we said, the imaginal is only for a person now, for me now. What was imaginal for me yesterday may not be imaginal, or a year ago may not be imaginal for me now. And so it has to be alive as image for me now. And images transform.

So for example, as I shared the other day, there was that Lonely Wanderer image. It might be that months ago or years ago, that image or the solitary soldier, that image might have done its alchemical healing work because it was alive for me as image as it was, and transformed the dukkha and relieved the dukkha. But it might be that today, some weeks later, some years later, that image has transformed. And whether the image as it used to be would still function for healing or whether it needs the new one, there's not a formula for this. We can't predict it, but we actually feel when something is imaginal in the moment.

So it has to be imaginal for me now, where something comes into my mind with a kind of spark, a poetic spark, an imaginal spark, and something serves to help me see or sense the situation with soul.

Often what arises as image may borrow from historical persons or actual people in my life, but when they function as imaginal figures, my imaginal sense of them need not conform to historical reality.

I remember precisely this kind of situation where the mind wouldn't settle, the nervous system felt jangly with agitation related to what seemed a difficult political work situation. I was uncertain how to navigate the relationships involved. A book by Michel Foucault had arrived in the post, and I glanced at the small biography on the back. That came into my mind—this image of him—and he functioned as an imaginal spark for me.

In my image of him, I had assumed several things about his character. Noticing he died quite young, I imagined perhaps he died of this or that, perhaps he was this kind of personality. That image triggered something else, which triggered something else, and the whole situation—these upcoming work meetings—became imaginal for me in a way that immediately released tremendous energy. There was harmonization in the energy body, settling of the nervous system, regulation and relief.

Later, curious, I researched Michel Foucault online and discovered that what had functioned as such a helpful imaginal image—what had made him so beneficial for me—wasn't actually historically accurate. But it doesn't matter. When historical figures, famous people, or even friends become imaginal images for us, correspondence with so-called historical reality is irrelevant.

Something happens: dukkha is relieved, the nervous system regulates, emotions find healing, and perception of a difficult situation transforms—as does perception of self. This doesn't mean the situation is transformed into something no longer difficult, rendered bland and without challenge. The situation may retain a calling, for this is part of the duty of image.

We're not talking about "no problem, no self, no issue here." With image, the situation might still be challenging, but the self has become imaginable. The situation has become imaginable. With this comes duty—the soul issues duty as part of the process. This may still be challenging, still charged with emotion and energy.

We're not discussing mere relief or a bleeding out of life from the situation. It remains charged, but the emotions are harmonized—harmonized with the imaginal self and the imaginal sense of the situation.

With the duty that may emerge through image comes clarity about direction, about one's part, bringing poise, stance, resolve, empowerment.

The whole thing becomes soul-making. It feels soul-making. This doesn't mean without challenge or even without difficult emotion, but everything that characterizes soul-making is present: beauty, duty, meaningfulness.

Consider the examples I've used throughout these talks—the solitary wanderer and the solitary soldier warrior. In a certain situation of suffering, a certain difficulty, when imaginal perception opens and we sense with soul that whole social constellation, dukkha transforms. Something shifts, though some dukkha may remain.

There may still be a certain loneliness—the loneliness of that solitary wanderer. It remains, but large portions of dukkha have departed. Similarly, a certain kind of battling may remain in whatever situation. One stands up for what one believes needs defending, resists what one's soul knows must be resisted. One speaks out, perhaps putting life or career on the line.

Much transforms, much dukkha drains from the situation, discombobulation clarifies and aligns, poise emerges—yet still certain dukkha remains. For these examples: the dukkha of the solitary wanderer, the dukkha of the solitary warrior.

But this dukkha, now seen in imaginal opening, is given place. It has rooting, grounding in the imaginal, in the mundus imaginalis. It has rooting in soul, in divinity. This dukkha carries all the nobility, beauty, and meaningfulness given by finding its place—by taking its place, by having its rooting and grounding in soul recognized.

So dukkha remains, but with beauty. There can still be purpose, nobility of different kinds, love. That solitary wanderer carries much love, receives much love. One doesn't abandon duty—may even be given duty through relationship with the imaginal, as we've touched upon repeatedly.

The whole thing becomes imbued with meaningfulness, set in a kind of fluid, light structure of meaning. Everything opens to dimensionality. Life and dukkha, whatever situation we inhabit, oneself—all begin to be sensed with soul, seen as image.

As we've elaborated in this series' first talk, this creates infinite echoing, infinite mirroring of image and life, self and image—my story and endeavors in the world dancing with this imaginal figure, whatever it may be.

And that sense and the mystery of that infinite echoing and mirroring comes as a blessing. It adds a texture of profound and sweet blessing, although some kind of strand of what we could call dukkha remains through this whole thing. But because of that, the larger part of the dukkha is attenuated, released, freed.

So in terms of part of what I want to do—as I said, situate the soul-making path alongside and in context with other paths and approaches, particularly around approaches to dukkha—one could, for example, approach dukkha with a sort of regard for the nervous system as primary. Something has happened—a situation ongoing, an event, whatever—and it's jolted or programmed, if you like, the nervous system to get stuck in certain unhelpful patterns. It can be very difficult. And so one can approach the dukkha that then arises at any time with a conception that places the nervous system as primary care, and also an approach that heads straight for the nervous system. And that's great and fine.

Or one can regard one's history with the family, or everyone's personal psychological history, and regard that as primary. Obviously related to the nervous system—not completely the same, but overlapping. And again, take that as the primary approach. This dukkha now—how does it mirror what happened to me when I was a child, the situation I found myself in? Go back to that and heal that, so to speak. Open that up, address that first, and then allow the current situation to heal from that. Wonderful, too.

Or one can turn one's attention and place one's conceptual primacy on the current actual relations and what they need, how they need to be addressed, what is skillful relationship here, what's actually going on in the room. And all kinds of other possibilities too.

But these are all, as I said, possible conceptual frameworks and possible practical approaches in terms of what they approach first, primarily, and what is given conceptual primacy of place in their structure.

But there is also the possibility to approach via the imaginal first, via sensing with soul. That becomes the leaning of the approach. At times—not always, but one approach among other options—would be to look for, if you like, the imaginal. Where is the imaginal here? What needs to emerge? Is it something that needs to be revealed here, some image or some way of sensing the soul that can emerge? And that can be, if you like, the primary leaning of the practical approach. And we can create or discover a conceptual framework that gives the soul in our sense of the word, or the imaginal in our sense of the word, conceptual primacy. In other words, we regard that as the foundational factor, if you like.

Actually, one can see that all these are tools and all these are aspects of a kind of human situation of dukkha that are mutually dependently arising. In other words, what's happening in the nervous system—whether it's regulated or not, what kind of patterns gain control at any time in the nervous system—how we see a social situation or work situation that's difficult, the actual situation we're in and how we perceive it, what images of self are operating in the plural way (images), and whether they're imaginal or not, the relative activation of the erotic-imaginal—in other words, the energy body sense—all of these are actually mutually dependently arising.

As I said, what is the dominant and dominating state of the nervous system depends on how I'm paying attention to the energy body, and vice versa. And my perception of this social situation, this difficult work situation or whatever it is, depends on the energy body and the state of the nervous system. And my perception of the situation that I'm in also depends on whether that's imaginal or not. In other words, I

can have an imaginal perception of that, and how I'm paying attention to the energy body, and what is the sense in the energy body. All these factors are mutually dependently arising.

And sometimes what happens for us as human beings is we forget that. In fact, we forget it a lot. And we want to, or we find ourselves clinging to some conceptual framework—even if we don't think we are—that forgets about the mutual dependent arising of these things. So it wants to take one of these things, for example the nervous system, for example the family history, or whatever, and place it as primary and focus on that as the most important thing and the most foundational thing. Forgetting that how I see my history actually depends on all kinds of things in the present moment, like what's happening in the energy body, like what's happening in the nervous system, like what kind of images are operating, how authentically imaginal they are, like what social situation I'm in in the present also influences my perception of the past.

So all of these—we can paint arrows of causation, or we should realize that the arrows of causation move among every node there and others, and in all directions. Mutual dependent arising between all of that.

So, as I said, I really just want to highlight the imaginal and sensing the soul as one option among others, possibly among many others, including many Dharma approaches. And I've also given examples of how we can be in a situation with another person, and perhaps we're experiencing dukkha of some kind, and this is our friend or teacher or something, and something is communicated by that person from us, or by us to that person, and the one who is suffering is able to see imaginatively, to sense with soul. Something has been communicated, either because the other has an image alive for them, or feels something in the present moment of image, or sees the suffering that we are in imaginally, and they communicate it to us.

So the imaginal is communicated in the field. We catch that spark, something of the imaginal perception, something of the sensing of the soul is ignited in us through what is being given to us by another.

I described that situation of Skyping with Catherine when I was struggling with something that was really important to me. She saw me imaginatively, communicated that to me, and that helped me see the whole situation—the work itself, what would happen to it, myself in relation to the work. I was able to see that as image, to sense it with soul, and the dukkha went out of the situation. The beauty came in. The soul-making expanded the whole thing, and it became clearer what to do, what my poise and relationship and stance and duty was in relation to it all.

Or the story I shared of the words I heard, the image that was vaguely emerging for me as she was telling me something from her history that was very difficult—something that had happened some decades before. I voiced the poetic phrase or image of the sacred prostitute. Something was communicated, picked up by me, communicated to her, and then she was able to perceive that whole history and herself and the entire trajectory of her life in this imaginally filled out way. It became rich with image. It was transformed.

The whole situation was given its mirroring, its echoing in the Mundus Imaginalis. The situation was seen as a contracted echoing—what happened in the history was seen as a contracted echoing, a contracted, distorted mirroring of an image, of something in the imaginal realm.

As a teacher, I have completely lost count of how often this happens—working with someone and sensing an image as potential, glimpsing something, or sometimes even sensing what wants to happen in the energy body of the other, or seeing the image of their energy body. All kinds of things, very subtle and not really a big deal. In communicating that, the other person taps into an image and, for instance, may open up to a different sense of themselves because they're sensing themselves with soul—a different sense of their body, a different sense of empowerment, perhaps a kind of empowerment that's really not familiar to them.

Sometimes when working with people, I'm a little unsure. On one side, there is this real potential to communicate images in a field so that another picks up on them and their sensing soul is ignited. On the other hand, I sometimes wonder how much should I say, what the timing of that is. One wonders, does it matter where the image arises first in a field? There will be many examples where the image arises just in them, and I am simply a witness or holding space.

All this can happen in a field, and it can also happen alone, in one's practice, in solitude.

I pointed out, I think it was in Eros Unfettered, that there might be times or situations where there's a desire to be with a particular person romantically, sexually, and one feels stuck because this other person—that's not what they want in the relationship with us. There's a very clear boundary, it's not possible, or something. One finds oneself locked into a kind of grasping and clinging and stuck with the dukkha of that craving in relation to this person. There is some eros, but there's also a lot of craving mixed up with it, and the whole thing is painful. If we're in some kind of relationship with them—perhaps we're friends—that relationship also becomes quite difficult because of this stuck clinging, this grasping.

Rather than only the options of letting go, putting it down, cooling off, finding what you want somewhere else, or looking at what one's dragging in that's inappropriate and doesn't belong here and needs a different kind of healing—as well as all those options and many more—there is the option of letting that person become image even more, become imaginal even more.

Dwelling with them, with the image of them meditatively, tuning in to all these elements of the imaginal we described in the first talk of this series, letting that amplify, letting that fill out, letting it flesh out and gain that richness and dimensionality. Allowing oneself, encouraging oneself even, to dwell meditatively, mindfully, sensitively, exploringly with the image of this person and tuning to them as image, as potentially soul-making image—then what happens is we start picking up on some or other imaginal aspects or elements of that whole imaginal constellation.

There's this ignition as we notice a certain aspect, the ignition of that particular aspect, the illumination of

it as imaginal image, and then the whole constellation. One of the elements of that imaginal constellation will be the very sense of imaginal middle way, the very sense of theater, the very sense of not quite real, not quite not real. Neither category seems to apply. This is one of the things that will make all the difference.

Instead of "I need to manifest a concrete romantic or sexual or whatever kind of relationship with this person," the whole thing—the very sense of them—is expanded, altered, enriched, deepened, widened. It's allowed to become more imaginal, allowed to become more authentically imaginal than it perhaps wanted to be in the first place.

There's a sense we're not mistaking—we're seeing image as image, not mistaking potential image for concrete reality or something that needs to be concretized. That's one of the aspects and elements of the imaginal constellation that we actually encourage and support to become more obvious to us, more palpable to us, so we don't make that mistake between insisting on material fact and actually recognizing what is image, what is the Mundus Imaginalis, what is theophany.

In the whole soul-making dynamic that's supported by that kind of sensitive tuning, in the whole soul-making dynamic that opens up there, we create and discover the more that pothos wants. Remember how we described the whole dynamic that eros pushes on, because eros wants more connection, more contact, more penetration, more intimacy, more touch, whatever. That's the pothos in the eros—it always wants more. If we don't allow things to open up on the dimensions of the imaginal, we pursue that more in concrete reality.

Or we find ourselves compelled, so to speak, to shut everything down—to shut the eros down, return to simply letting go or whatever path of renunciation we might follow. There is a third option, if you will: the option of erotic imaginative opening that unfolds the soul-making dynamic and hence enables us to sense with soul.

In this possibility, the *more* that the Eros seeks is created and discovered within that soul-making dynamic—within the mutual fertilization of Eros, Psyche, and Logos, their widening, deepening, complication. I have then more intimacy, more faces and aspects of the Beloved with which to become intimate. Different light shines through—deeper, wider, more varied. I have all kinds of intimacy available in those dimensions. With all this comes meaningfulness, beauty, divinity as part of the dimensionality.

I am actually receiving all of this as grace through allowing the image to expand rather than shutting it down—or rather than locking onto it and demanding it manifest concretely, physically. In receiving this abundance, all the beauty and gift of it, and in recognizing the imaginal middle as one of the elements in this constellation, the clinging is reduced. The grasping, the fixation diminishes. The pressure of the situation lessens, including the pressure I am placing on this person in whatever our actual relationship might be.

There is less pressure in my psyche because there is *more*—because the soul-making dynamic's opening has created more vistas, more facets and dimensions of the beloved, of myself, of the eros itself. Larger, deeper, there is more space, and therefore less pressure. With this relaxing of grasping and pressure, not only might that person feel less pressured by my insistence on some particular material form of relationship, but my own dukkha is eased through this relaxation of clinging and pressure.

This represents a truly important possibility. Let me emphasize three aspects of it.

First, this transformation is not necessarily easy to accomplish. It might require considerable practice and skill to be able to effect such a shift. But it really is possible—I cannot stress this enough. It's almost as if both they and we become larger through the soul-making expansion. The whole contraction of craving is released, and everything emerges with a different sense entirely. It would be remiss of me not to stand by this possibility and point it out clearly. Yet I must also acknowledge that it may prove quite difficult, involving considerable maturity of practice and development of skill in imaginal practice and with the erotic imaginal.

Second, in working this way with a person who might actually be present in our life in some form—though perhaps not in the kind of relationship we think we want or that our craving desires—this practice doesn't mean turning away from dukkha. Nor does it mean turning away from actual relationship, avoiding this person, or neglecting to care for any potential difficulties in our relating. We must still address and approach the actual relationship and what it needs, because when there's significant clinging and one person wants something the other cannot provide, this often creates considerable difficulty in the actual relating. That too requires attention.

The inner work, from this angle of possibility, may involve opening up the whole imaginal perception, opening up the sensing with soul of other, of self, of the eros itself. All of this is possible, but not at the expense of caring for the actual relationship. What actually unfolds—whether you end up in a romantic or sexual relationship with this person or not—becomes much less important because you have received something else that was, in essence, what your soul was seeking.

I could offer countless examples of instances where something truly disturbing was occurring—a memory, or someone deeply troubled by recognizing their impulses in certain situations or relationships, or difficult events or circumstances, or self-images that were genuinely disturbing, painful, contracted. So many instances of different kinds of suffering, whether in relation to impulses one observes in oneself, memories, situations, events past and present or potentially future, self-constructs and images that cause real pain—not imaginal constructs, but seemingly solid, terrible realities.

Whatever the dukkha, it can appear almost irredeemable, terrible—something that shouldn't even see the light of day, let alone be shared with another. Shameful, pathological, strange. I'm not sharing some specific examples now, partly because the immediate effect might be disturbing, and partly because I've already offered many illustrations throughout these talks.

But what can happen—what is truly possible, and what I have witnessed repeatedly—is that this thing which seemed so strange, so terribly difficult, pathological, hopeless, can through soul-making practice become image. The whole situation can be seen with soul, beginning with the dukkha itself. Perhaps the sense of that dukkha, or the very thing that was dukkha, comes to be perceived imaginally. In this transformation—this transubstantiation, as I've called it—an image or sensing with soul emerges from that difficulty, from becoming intimate with it. And with this emergence comes some release of dukkha.

Not avoiding the problem, but going into it in a way that opens up the sensing of the soul. And then that opens up the whole situation, opens up the sense of the dukkha without dissolving it completely. It transforms it.

In a lot of these transformations that I'm describing, and I have described, one wonders whether it's actually—or whether one way of conceiving would be, as I mentioned earlier—that the image is actually primary. It's almost that in this difficulty, in this pathology, in this terrible thing or this impulse that I have, or even in the memories and events or situations I'm in, in this contracted self-image that seems like it just can't be helpful at all—one wonders sometimes whether it's almost like there's an imaginal image, or potentially imaginal image, kind of, not hiding, but buried in there. And that the healing, the liberation, the relief from dukkha comes when it is revealed. The image was there all along. It perhaps was driving the whole difficult pattern.

This is what I meant when I said right from the beginning, in Theatre of Selves and all that: image is primary. What would it be to consider image as primary? What would it be to entertain the conception that image is primary?

So that's there, buried. Somehow we've gotten into a kind of wrong relationship with that image. And what could have been Eros, or what started off as Eros, got contracted into craving, which brought more contractions. What started off as image and potentially imaginal image was grasped the wrong way and became what we call a fixated image, not imaginal image, reified, or became, in other language, kind of *pa pañca*.

If you, again, trace your own examples where this has happened for you, or if you recount to yourself different examples that you've perhaps heard me give of this transformation of dukkha through the erotic-imaginal and through the sensing with soul. And play with: oh, I could see that in a way that conceives of the image as primary—not my history as primary in itself, in the usual way we think about that causally, not my trauma as primary, not my nervous system as primary, not my whatever it is. But actually, one could at times, and again, this is just one option among others, and that's something I'll come back to.

One could—I think it would be a very good exercise. If you really want to fertilize and till the soil of your understanding and your grasp and your taste for these practices and this whole path, it's really good to kind of play with the conceiving.

So as I said, trace it if you can—bring to mind instances where you have undergone this kind of transformation of dukkha through the imaginal, through the sensing of soul. Or you've heard me or someone else give an example of that movement. And can you kind of see that in many of those instances, one could actually reconfigure the conception to see: actually, there's kind of a seed image in there. And that seed image has been related to in the wrong way, and all this difficulty has come out of it. And Eros, as I said, becomes contracted to craving; potentially imaginal becomes fixated image or *papañca*. And what may be required from this perspective for healing, for liberation, for relief and easing of the dukkha is the revealing—or creation slash discovery—of the imaginal image, the uncovering of the imaginal image at the core of the pathology. You understand?

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