Body and Soul (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 32:43

We may have a Q&A session each day, depending on how it unfolds. The timing might remain at this pre-tea period or it may shift. These sessions are entirely optional, so I encourage you to check in with yourself each day around this time. What would feel most helpful? Sometimes you have a question to ask. Sometimes simply listening to someone else's question or witnessing an interaction can be profoundly beneficial. And sometimes you may prefer to turn toward innerness and silence.

These sessions are being recorded, as people have found them quite valuable to revisit later. However, if you prefer that your question not be recorded, please let me know and I'll pause the recording. The choice is yours.

This is truly an opportunity to ask anything you wish—whether about the practical nuts and bolts of practice or broader understandings, anything arising within the full spectrum of what we're calling soul-making practice and all the various practices it encompasses.

*Question from Anna:** I was wondering about consciousness in relation to other people, but specifically about multiple consciousnesses within the body—like different organs having their own distinct consciousnesses.

*Rob:** Absolutely, yes. Let me emphasize something crucial here: virtually any concept we engage with—and the energy body is indeed a concept—is infinitely stretchable. These concepts have no fixed boundaries; they can diversify endlessly, gaining dimensionality, opening up, and revealing new aspects.

We might begin with a fairly narrow and simple sense of what the energy body is. But as we practice more deeply, as this bodily sensitivity becomes in-souled—meaning it becomes enchanted for us—this awareness of the body gets woven into the soul-making dynamic. It then begins complexifying, becoming more intricate, more profound, more multi-faceted. And exactly what you're describing represents one such possibility.

It could very well be that you sense a particular organ possessing its own kind of intelligence, its own sensitivity and receptivity, its own distinctive ways of knowing. This is entirely within the realm of possibility.

What I want to stress—and I'll touch on this more tonight—is that the concept and experience of the energy body is inherently growable. This kind of awareness can absolutely come alive in the ways you're describing. If it feels helpful in the moment, if it feels beautiful, if it feels opening, then you're on the right track. Something genuine is happening—something good and soul-making. You can recognize this by the

beauty, the sense of sacredness, the sensitivity, the harmonization that accompanies such experiences.

The possibilities are truly endless. When we speak of the energy body, we're working with a deliberately open and expansive concept. I might say, "This field," and I'm attending to the feeling within this field—but it's simultaneously an idea.

We always carry some conception of the body. One model might be scientific materialism: "My body is a collection of organic, carbon-based molecules arranged in synergistic combination." Another might be: "My body is a field of light with its own intelligence." Still another: "My body is diversified into multiple individual intelligences." These are all concepts of the body, each offering different possibilities for experience and understanding.

And senses of the body, and images of the body. So all that is wrapped up in the possibilities of what energy body can be.

Does this make sense? Any more with that?

"Because you then get resistance in a certain area of the body. And I guess the nature of awareness and of energy and how that locks into things become resistant and how that creates experience, and how when you kind of give some space to it you get that opening out and sort of healing."

That's a really good insight. Let's just repeat it for everyone. Anna's saying that it's interesting, paying attention to the experience of body as a human being and the range of experiences involved there. And what we notice, as Anna points out, is when there's resistance. In Dharma language, resistance is a form of clinging. It's "I don't want" or "I contract around" or "I want" or something like that.

There's the contraction of clinging, and that's wrapped up in the fabrication of experience. That clinging, that aversion, that resistance, that grasping—whatever it is that I don't like, I wish it was better, it's not good enough, whatever it is—all that's just varieties of clinging, and that will shape the experience that I have of anything in that moment: of body, of self, of other, of world, all of it.

So clinging is involved in, as you say, the fabrication of our experience, the fabrication of our perception. In the moments that I relax clinging—as you say, I just create a bit of space around it, I ease something with it, I bring a bit of love in. Love is the opposite of clinging, a bit of softness. All these ways of relaxing clinging in the moment—it's like the experience that then we're in relationship with, whether it's an experience of my body, my health, my self, whatever it is, it becomes less solidified, less rigidified as an experience, less painful, actually.

And in that relaxing of clinging, we say in technical language, it's fabricated less. The experience is fabricated less. It becomes more liquid and more amenable then to imaginal perception, to seeing it this way or that way. There are more possibilities. Clinging contracts the possibilities. "This thing, it's real, it is what it is, and I'm stuck with it," versus what happens when there's—and there's so many different ways

of clinging, and there's so many different ways of relaxing clinging. There's a whole art.

When I do that, things become more fluid, more liquid, and more open to possibility, to magic in the perception. Does that make sense? So that's a really important insight.

Good. Also about the energy body. So, I suppose my question is, I suppose I've got two different energetic things going on, that I think are probably both, you could call them energy body. They feel quite different from each other.

The strongest sense that I have is around the head, and it also goes down my back a little bit, sort of down to the waist. And that field, when I'm practicing regularly, it's there quite a lot of the time when I'm not practicing as well. I can feel it now. And it's pleasant and if I tune into it, it sort of goes out more as well and goes more down my back a bit.

And then the other field of energy that I feel is, it's a bit like, if I experience my toes I can experience my toes as a visual picture, and I can see in my imagination, I suppose, see my toes wiggling, and connect that with my body as it were. Or I can feel the felt sense, what I think is the felt sense, which is almost like going into the inside of my toes. And when I do that, I can't really find toes as such. I can just sort of find this kind of toe-ness. And then beyond, so that's another sort of sense of energy, I suppose. There's an energeticness around that.

And then there's a sense that, so if I feel into that now, it doesn't stop there. The energy doesn't stop at the sense of toe-ness. It's as though it slightly keeps going underneath me a bit, not very far, but a little bit. But it's a very different feeling to this strong, quite strong energetic feeling around my head and my back.

And I just wonder, why? Is one not the energy body and one is? Why are there two fields? And I kind of feel like what I should be doing, as it were, is to strengthen one around my head and bring that more around my body.

And bless you, I forgot your name."

"Rowan."

"Rowan, that's right, yes."

So Rowan is reporting two seemingly distinct experiences and wondering what their relationship to each other is, whether one's the energy body or they're both energy body, and what to do with each of them. One is an experience that's over and all around the head and then down the spine, and it's quite pleasant. The other is actually different experiences of the toes and around the toes. Some of those experiences...

"Everywhere in the body."

Oh, everywhere in the body. Okay. Well, I can sort of tune into it. I can feel it in my hands.

Okay, so an experience of body parts, where sometimes the form of the body parts is retained in the imagination, and sometimes that kind of dissolves into just a vague sense there, and sometimes it extends beyond the body, beyond the confines of the physical, the outlines of the physical body, but it's not as pleasant or as intense as the first experience.

"It's neutral."

It's kind of neutral, okay, yeah. And it's much less strong.

"Yeah. The thing around my head is very strong."

Okay, yeah. So, I would say it's all energy body, okay? Energy body, I sort of... If I could press rewind, I might have chosen a different word. Because it's really a kind of... It's such a huge scope, you know?

What we're talking about with energy body is a whole range of experiences that we can have of this space. And that might mean it retains the contours of my physical body. It might mean a very subtle experience. It might mean a really intense experience energetically. It might be very pleasant. It might be very ethereal or very dense, like dense as stone, you know. All of that is energy body. It's just the range of what's available.

So what we're interested in, in the broad reach of, let's say, soul-making practice, what we're interested in is opening it all up for investigation, just opening it all up for experience, just expanding the range of experience and familiarity and what we're comfortable with and what can kind of get ensouled.

If you had a different question, for instance, "I'm interested in energy body, but right now I'm interested in that kind of direction of energy body that's about developing the samadhi, developing that well-being and moving into jhana and all that stuff," which I know that you've explored a little bit. Then I would say, okay, of these two experiences, I would lean more into the exploration of the first, because it's more pleasant and more vivid.

And your job then, if you're in your gear of, "Right now I'm just into developing this well-being in the energy body. I'm not so much in the emotions, I'm not so much in the image of the body as soul manifestation. I'm going for the jhana thing, the yumminess and the nourishment there." Then what you want to do without grasping at it is to let what's pleasant be where your attention goes. And in time, and with a little kind of gentle kind of tending, let's say, that kind of pleasantness will begin taking over the whole body. It will spread, as I think it already is a little bit. And you can encourage that with the awareness in different ways, and we can talk about it if you want.

But you would focus on that one just because it's more pleasant if you wanted to go and really develop the sort of samadhi side of things with the energy body, the samadhi direction of the energy body. But it's actually all of that whole range is energy body.

So in terms of the actual image that's involved, it can be, yeah, it keeps the contours. There are countless

images that we can have in any moment of the body. Some of them will be imaginal, and some would just be like, I shut my eyes and I kind of see my body sitting here, and it's not imaginal. Sometimes it dissolves in light, and you say there's no image. Sometimes there's just space there. All of that is energy body. It's all in the range of the playground.

Does that answer it?

"Yeah, that answers it."

Yeah, okay, good, thanks. Is that Sandy?

"Yeah."

That opened up the question I had about the empty body, though you've answered that to a certain extent. The way I'm understanding the energy body, based on my experience, is that it does take the dhyana experience in that way or more. But then, with soul making, where do those seeds emerge and grow?

"Emerge, yes," I clarify. "Okay, so just to make sure I understand this correctly, Sandy. Sandy's asking—so far her experience of the energy body is very much related to dhyana or jhana, Sanskrit or Pali respectively, which refers to absorption, meditative absorption, that the Buddha talked about. We discussed this a little with Rowan about that kind of..."

I see it really as a spectrum or a trajectory—this movement into more and more well-being. This field here, this space here, becomes increasingly a field of well-being in those moments when we're entering samadhi. There's a range of experiences we can have here. The Buddha demarcated eight jhanas, but there's actually a really wide range if you look more closely.

So the question is: how does all of that relate to the soul, the soul-making, and the soul enchantment of the experience of the body? It's an important question.

Let's take the jhana piece first. Jhana means absorption—Sandy was using the Sanskrit dhyana—or something like that. The Buddha talks about eight jhanas, and the first four are called rupa jhanas, where rupa means body. One way of understanding what the Buddha's getting at there is in this kind of... One way of seeing it is he's really interested in: can you make this space here a field of nourishment, a field of deep yumminess? Not all the time, but having access to that in your life. You can basically train that—train it so that there is nice, deep, yummy nourishment in the body.

It doesn't mean I never experience anything difficult. It certainly doesn't mean that I'm not in touch with my emotions—I'll come back to that. But at times, one has the capacity to dip into different wells of well-being and bathe in them and be completely saturated and fed by them.

The first four rupa jhanas are, you could say, different experiences of this space. In the first jhana, the body has become—instead of the usual "I'm sitting here and I feel my sensations and I have the usual

image of my body"—the experience of the body has become piti, has become rapture, the kind of pleasure associated with that. The experience of the body is suffused and saturated, as the Buddha says—it's become a field of that kind of physical pleasure.

In the second jhana, you could say the body has become happiness. If you stop someone on the street and say, "What does it mean for your body to become happiness?" they'll think of chocolate or something like that. But we can actually experience the texture of the body where this space becomes joy, and one is drinking that joy, drinking of one's body.

In the third jhana, the dominant texture of the rupa, of the energy body, is peacefulness—a really exquisite peacefulness. In the fourth, stillness. In the fifth jhana, this space here just becomes space—the bliss of empty space, really refined.

So one way of understanding the connection between samadhi and energy body is basically we can use energy body awareness to cultivate well-being. That well-being has a certain continuum or spectrum to it, and the jhanas demarcate certain places on that spectrum. Does that make sense?

There are many reasons to incorporate energy body awareness. Another is emotional awareness and emotional sensitivity and emotional care for ourselves. The emotions play out in the body, and we can develop a real sensitivity to the nuance of our emotional life and ways of caring for them—all here.

It's all here. So that's a really, really good skill to take care of oneself. And I would say that's part of soul-making practice.

So you've got kind of two directions here. They overlap, actually, because joy is certainly an emotion. The joy of the samadhi is an emotion. But what about heartache? What about sadness? What about longing? What about anger? What about brokenness of heart? We really want to develop the art of being with, noticing, caring, with all of that, including the really unremarkable sets of emotions. I want to be sensitive to how that feels also.

Then you've got a reason to be with the energy body that has just to do with navigating practice - for example, emptiness practices or different practices. As I mentioned with Anna, when you're on the right track in any practice, whether it's an emptiness practice or a metta practice, the energy body tells you. Here I am doing metta: may you be well, may you be happy, may you be peaceful. And I'm sensitive to the energy body and I notice this time around - when I say "may you be peaceful," I feel that peace here. Okay, let me slow down with that word "peaceful" and say it again and ride that wave, catch that current in my sail, let it feel the energy body, resonate with it. So the energy body sensitivity is working to help me sail in different practices.

There's all that, all those different aspects, and then when it comes to soul-making, we've got also a navigational sense. When an image is potentially soul-making for us, the energy body is one of the things that tells us. There will be an alignment, a harmonization, or something. I'm giving you more than you

asked for in the question, but I think it's important. It's part of the navigation.

Then we get a whole other level, which I don't think I've really talked about so much, and it's what we mentioned with Anna. When we say energy body, what we've mostly been emphasizing so far is the aspect of the felt sense. What does this space feel like? But there is also at any time an image of the body. That image can be not imaginal. I just shut my eyes and I can see the configuration of my body right now. But sometimes what happens with the image of body is it becomes imaginal, becomes a soul-making image. And as I said with Anna, there's an endless possibility there.

This morning, I can't remember at what point - it was maybe after Catherine did her instructions - I was just sitting with you, we were sitting together, and I actually had the sense of your beauty, all of you, and the beauty of souls here. A vague image arose. In other words, it was more the sense of a rosebush woven around a trellis and reaching out with lots of budding roses on it. And my body became that rosebush. It was also you. Or that rosebush became my body.

At that point, I've got a choice. I can go into the image of that, or I can... That image itself, just the initial arising of that image, had a certain perfume and opened the energy body a certain way. So I can lean more into the image, with some energy body awareness, or I can take the perfume and the way that's opened up the energy body and just lean into that as a more energetic sense. Or I can walk that middle line between and have the best of both worlds. It's not that there's a better or worse; there are just different ways you can sail. But there's a sense of the body had become flowering roses, beautiful pink flowering roses, and it was really gorgeous. So there was an image of body and the energetic body sense, felt sense.

There's felt sense, there's image of body, and that can become imaginal soul-making, and then there's also the concept of the body. What is a body? What is matter? We go to high school and you get taught: matter is this, and it's made of atoms, and it functions like this, and it doesn't mean a damn thing, and it's random. That's just the typical scientific materialist view. And then there are all kinds of other views. Matter is love. Matter embodies itself, forms itself as angels.

Here, this very moment, this body exists within a constellation of possibilities. We hold concepts of matter and embodiment that may be more or less soul-making. Does this make sense?

When soul-making unfolds, all three dimensions participate simultaneously. I need not engineer this process so deliberately. Rather, this becomes something to notice: there is usually a subtle concept that nourishes, supports, and stimulates the soul-making. There is usually some image involved of the body, and there is the felt sense. As these elements—particularly the image and concept—begin opening more fully and supporting the soul-making, this is how that aspect of the practice develops. Does that make sense?

This overview speaks in general terms, though naturally the art lies in all the nuanced details. Is that

sufficient for now?

So what exactly is soul-making? For the most part, when soul-making occurs, when soulfulness arises, it involves image. That image typically dominates the experience—it is the primary element. Sometimes, however, it can be secondary.

Consider this example: you might be deeply in love with the Buddha's path, devoted to practice, cherishing the Sangha and all that this encompasses. You may never have encountered imaginal practice or soul-making teachings. Yet I would suggest this can still be soul-making. Your love of practice, your devotion to Buddha-dharma, and that sense of tradition—these carry profound meaning.

We rarely recognize this because we lack the language, both in Buddhist culture and in the wider culture. When you love something in this way, when you engage with such devotion to practice, there exists—whether realized or not—a subtle fantasy operating, a delicate image of the whole: the tradition, the Buddha, the lineage, the teachings, the Sangha, yourself upon the path, the beauty of that journey, even its struggles. This functions as a kind of background cloud of fantasy, in the most beautiful sense, feeding inspiration.

Most often when we speak of soul-making, we refer to something truly imaginal that captures our attention, something we recognize consciously as image. Yet there exists another dimension of soul-making that operates as this background cloud of fantasy. We might stretch the term in other directions as well.

For instance, when consciousness, when the soul opens to something it discovers anew—you mentioned the jhanas—when you traverse that process for the first time with its sense of wonder, moving through the second jhana with real discovery unfolding. That opening into new realms carries beauty and meaningfulness.

This doesn't primarily involve image—in fact, it represents the opposite. Imagery grows quiet in the jhanas, usually. Yet this can still be soul-making because of the opening itself. Ideas expand, the sense of things deepens, the sense of existence and selfhood and consciousness transforms. That opening, that discovery, that beauty and meaningfulness—all of this belongs to the package of soul-making. But primarily, no image exists at that point because the jhanas involve the quieting of images.

Does that make sense?

Let us have a bit of quiet time.

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