Trusting in Soulmaking (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 34:41

Just to say again, you probably all have realized, the way we're conceiving of what we're calling soulmaking and the path of soulmaking dharma or practice, is really quite wide. Do you get the sense how it can actually involve the whole of our beings, more even than the dimensions and aspects of our being we're aware of at the moment? It can grow and it can move in different directions. And these different aspects and parts of the path kind of support each other.

So the well-being, the samadhi—it's an important part. The working with difficult emotions, the being able to tend to, notice, to be aware of, to care for what's happening emotionally. This is a really important part of soulmaking, of the whole frame. And desire and being able to open up desire in different ways, being able to let go of desire, emptiness, imaginal, etc.

So in terms of Q&As, please consider all that fair game. All of that's part of the package. Any aspect of that that you're working with or wondering about, or you have a question about—whether it's a difficulty or a loveliness or a curiosity or the conceptual framework. It's really open.

As I said yesterday, we are recording for the benefit of everyone, hopefully, and other beings elsewhere. But if you don't feel comfortable with your question being recorded, just say so and I'll press pause. That's completely fine.

Andrea: This is more of a surprise. It goes to Catherine as well, because you both said it in different ways yesterday, but it was the concept turning into percept. I think it was Catherine who said it that way. When we did the sound together this morning, it was a combination of all the sound that we were making in the room and then the suggestion from Catherine with what I felt was kinesthetic language. That was huge in unlocking the energy body, and then later in the exercise with moving the way your soul wanted to move.

So I guess my wondering is about different ways in to the energy body, particularly with—you know, I would have said I'm purely kinesthetic, but obviously the language makes a huge difference to getting in. Other times when I've just tried to work with the energy body and just bring the attention there, it's just not happening. But it was so easy and so effortless. There's other modes, so the question is: can you give more suggestions, or is it just kind of play around?

So if I understand the question, Andrea's reporting that in both—I don't know what to call it—when we sounded together yesterday, which I also found really beautiful, there was a way that the sense of the energy body just really opened with the sounding and through the verbal suggestions that Catherine was making and the kind of language in there. And then also when we did the moving to the urgings and the

promptings of soul, the connection there, whatever was said, also stimulated a kind of opening and awareness and connection with the energy body that can sometimes not be so available when we're just sitting down thinking, "Right, okay, energy body, let's open it up," and working with it more technically.

Energy body is part of all this business. And all this business—meaning the opening of soulmaking, including the opening of the sense of the energy body and that liquidity and the dimensionality of the very sense of the body—all of that opening can be ignited. It's really like, if we use the analogy of fire, it can be sparked actually by anything.

There's a way that we could say that all this business of soulmaking is a kind of grace. We're given it. We receive something. We receive a spark into the soul and something ignites. So that spark could be a line of poetry. It could be a certain way of languaging that connects certain elements of our being or aspects of our being that we don't usually connect. For instance, movement or resonance, a sound and energy body. It could be an idea, as you say, a concept. A concept functions as we could say a spark into the soul or a seed in the soul. When there's soulmaking, when there's imaginal perception, when there's sensing with soul, all this is going on. Body is involved.

There's a felt sense of the energy body that is different or expanded—not just spatially, but in terms of dimensionality and richness—than our usual way in our culture of feeling our bodies. There's concept involved. There's some sense of poetics involved, poetry. All this comes together.

So it's a bit like... we're open, receptive, sensitive, and sparks are given to us from teachers, from language, from reading, from listening, from poetry, from music, from life, from all of it. And the whole thing just gathers more—I don't want to push the image too much—but readiness to ignite. So that means you can then take something into practice.

A line of poetry, a word, a connection between two dimensions of being, like sound and energy, for instance, and just take that as a seed and you drop that seed into the soul. You cast that spark into the soul. Does that make sense?

There's always a range with all practice. When we talk about emptiness practice or samadhi, there's always a range between active and playful and deliberate and receptive. And for me, that whole range should be available. Whatever practice I'm doing—metta, emptiness, samadhi, jhana—there's always this range. I would like everyone to feel really comfortable with that whole range. I'm not just stuck, always just waiting and hoping, or thinking whatever happens is fine. That's a really good mode, that extreme of sensitivity. But also there's the capacity to play, to engage in the art, to know things to try, and to respond to what's going on.

Like an artist—when you talk to someone who's really into their art, there's that range. Where did this come from, that music? Where did that come from, that poetry? I don't know. It was a gift. There's a receptivity. But there's also this working of the elements.

Someone was thinking about categorizing people as more kinesthetic or visual, placing them in categories for what sparks work for some that might not work for others. I think it might be that people are more kinesthetic or more whatever it is. But again, if we're talking about soul-making, what happens as the thing gets going is that it starts to reach out and involve every aspect of our being, and actually even create and discover more aspects.

Someone who, for instance, hasn't been very kinesthetic or hasn't felt the way soul can move in the body—after a while of soul-making, they don't need to force that. It might be that they go in via the concept, but they're working with the energy body. At some point these sparks will connect, this spreading of—it's a good image—the tentacles of soul-making will start involving all these different dimensions and aspects of the being so that they start to come alive even when they haven't been alive before.

But we don't need to force that. We can just go where there's soul-making. You invite it into this field, soul-making, and you just are there in the ways that we're talking about and work with it—it will spread. It will spread into other perceptions, will open other aspects and dimensions of sensitivity of the being. And you'll still have people who are more like this or more like that, and that's fine, but there's this kind of multi-dimensional, multi-aspected reaching out and evolving and growing.

Hannah asked about twoness, particularly about how she finds her way into images very sensorially, and it's easier when moving. Because of that, it feels like she embodies the image, and it feels soulful, but there's not so much twoness there.

That's a really good question. A lot of the time the way that images come alive or the way of entering and engaging with images is through the kinesthetic sense, through the body and sometimes through movement. And the image becomes soulful, but you feel like you're embodying the image, you're becoming that image in a sense, perhaps. So then the question is, where's the twoness there?

One thing I could say is if you just let that happen, let that embodiment happen, let yourself become that and just feel that out more and more. And one possibility is what happens is that you then, others or the rest of the world becomes consonant with that image. In other words, let's say I become a dancing deity and I'm some kind of dancing deity and I'm really embodying that and I'm in that...

And then the world around me, in what we call cosmopoiesis, becomes an other to that deity in some other way, or other beings. And that deity, as I am, is in relationship with other. But that might emerge in time as you just let yourself embody the image more. So that's one possibility.

Another possibility might be—you know, it's strange. If you think about, or if you consider the ways we're aware of body, it relates to all the aggregates: body, aspects of mind, feelings and vedanā and perception. I can feel like they're me, or I'm looking—so I'm looking at my hand, and there's a kind of two-ness now between my sense of me and my hand. But at other times, there's a sense of I am my hand.

So even when you're embodying something like that, it can move between a sort of vantage point of being

inside and being identified with and a vantage point of some objectivity or two-ness. And that's just normal to perception, even in terms of our own bodies and minds. You say, "strange thought I had"—it's like it's something else, other. From another perspective, it's not other at all. It's me. Who else am I apart from all this stuff? And I feel that I'm that.

So what happens is—and that's just the basic way identification works—it moves between two-ness and identification. So if you just hang out more in the experience, there'll probably be a couple of ways that you'll start to notice two-ness, different ways. Does that...

"I wonder if it's important to emphasize the two-ness at all? Like, try and encourage it?"

Hannah's asking, so I'm just repeating so that people can hear. Is it important to emphasize the two-ness?

Two-ness is one of the nodes, one of the elements that we're going to go through. And what I would say, more than that—or rather slightly differently—is these nodes are things we can notice. So I would put it there. It's less pushy at first. As I said, the more you hang out in these experiences as they open up, with all your sensitivity and all your enjoyment and all your curiosity, it's almost like your eyes get used to the dark and you start to notice, "Oh, there is two-ness here. I hadn't noticed that." And that noticing ignites it.

So I don't need to do anything so much as just notice when it comes. Some of it might be quite subtle. Two-ness can be really extreme, or really alienated from something, or it's much more subtle, the sense of two-ness. But the noticing it brings that sense of two-ness alive, and that helps the whole thing become, as I explained last night, more fully imaginal.

What we might say is, I would make a distinction between experiences of oneness—like melting into union with something, which is really important as a mystical direction or spiritual direction. It's important in the whole soul-making business. But when we talk about imaginal perception, sensing with soul, there's more this two-ness. So oneness is great, but if you find yourself—after all these years of practice, and this may not be the case with you—after all these years of practice, having a tendency to melt and find, or melt into different kinds of oneness: a oneness of light, or a oneness of love, or a oneness of awareness, or whatever it is, a oneness of materiality—it can be lots of things. Then it would be more, let's find the two-ness, let's retain the two-ness.

I could stop there, but when there's eros in relation, when there's—in this case, your embodiment, that movement—and if it is like a deity moving through, or a goddess, or whatever it is, then the body can become your beloved other. So then there's an erotic relationship between... This body, as it's felt right now in whatever is happening, becomes the erotic imaginal other, becomes the beloved other. And eros retains a sense of two-ness, even when it knows oneness. I know this is one. I know we are one. Some part of my mind knows that. But it preserves the erotic tension of two-ness and actually creates even more bifurcations and things—but I'll just throw that out as a seed. How does all this sound?

I was thinking today about something else entirely, about emptiness. There's a phrase—I don't know who

said it originally in the Dzogchen traditions—"Trust your experience but keep refining your view." And to me there's so much wisdom in that. When we talk about, okay, what is natural, what's not, is this right, is there enough of this or that in these nodes that we're elaborating, it's to say things can unfold more, richer, more soul-making. But we have to trust our experience and go with that. So in terms of what's unfolding, you can really just—if it feels soul-making, you're on the right track.

I don't know where else. I'm not aware of other traditions exploring this territory, certainly not in the way we're talking about. There's, of course, as you mention, Indo-Tibetan sadhanas and vajrayana practices that employ the imagination with the concept of emptiness and all that. There are overlaps there, for sure, but I would say it's a little different. There are definitely overlaps, though.

The curious thing here—and this might frustrate or confuse some people, while others might find it liberating—is that if I just answer personally, I feel like I can conceive of it in different ways. I can conceive of what we're doing and map it in different ways, mapping its relationship to different Buddhist traditions. And for me, that flexibility of conception is also part of the soul-making process. It arises out of soul-making. And actually, it's also part of emptiness, in some ways construed.

One of the things it's saying is that things are not tightly definable. They're not findable. They're not rigid like that. Our concepts don't reflect some kind of ultimate truth. So when we say emptiness is form, form is emptiness—mostly in my teaching I tend to avoid the Heart Sutra because I think it can be interpreted in so many different ways, which is great.

So if I turn and ask you a question: what do you feel you need right now with this? Because different people will need different kinds of working answers or working hypotheses about this relationship between Buddha Dharma and soul-making at different points, depending on their personality and history. So if I give it back to you for a second, what would you say you need right now?

"I think for me the question is whether there's something I can say that other people understand."

Sure. If I, at the risk of being irritating, push the question one stage further and say, why? What's going on? And what's going on for you perhaps emotionally with that?

There's no right or wrong answer here. It's just that what goes on for me in my relationships to the concept—or the concepts that we're unfolding and exploring, actually creating and discovering—the whole meaning set of concepts, but also the affect and love and reliance and community of Buddha... that's quite a lot involved.

Well, I think that's a big question, but maybe you have an answer right now. There's heart and soul and idea, and there's quite a lot involved. Do you see what I'm getting at?

"I started thinking, but then you just went on and on."

Sorry. Okay. The short question was: why?

Yeah, okay, so your turn.

I think because—gosh, I don't know whether I've got it or not—it's not just going to peter out completely. One thing is I find it very uncomfortable sitting with uncertainty, which I'm kind of recognizing, but actually that's fine. I can come into a sort of familiar relationship with that, and that's okay.

But I think in terms of communicating to other people, there's this funny tension. Some people need clarity and need to know that there's a way to go or something to do, and other people are maybe happy with the uncertainty. And I think I'm struggling sometimes—I just think I sound incredible to people who want clarity. I think it's easy for people to get lost because, like you said, there's no single answer. It can just go any which way. It's so vast.

And so you gave two parts of an answer, and the first one was saying about being comfortable with not knowing. Not knowing what?

I think not having the comfort of "oh, this is definitely the right way to go." For yourself.

Yeah, yeah. It is around clarity, actually. I think the question is just around clarity, around how difficult it is to have clarity in this area, whether for myself or for other people.

Yeah, okay, very good. Should we just take a couple minutes? I feel this is really important.

So let's start with what you said last—the business about clarity. For yourself, I would say something brought you here. Something brought you, as you said, after years of Buddhadharma, to end up in the imaginal. Why? How? You don't need to answer that now, but if I might offer an answer: the soul loves soul-making.

Soul loves soul-making. Actually, you could say that's a core concept, and everything follows from that. Soul loves soul-making—all the conceptual framework will come out of that. Soul loves soul-making, and you have a compass for soul-making. All of us do. We can feel when something is soul-making. You're going on and on—what the hell are you talking about? I'm not quite clear.

Don't worry so much about the clarity just yet. Or rather, I would say you can trust navigation even when things are a little bit foggy. The compass says go that way. I can't see more than ten yards ahead, but the compass is saying go that way. So that's the inner sense of soul-making. And you feel it in the energy body, you feel it in the heart, you feel it in ways that you couldn't even actually describe. That's where all these aspects come in.

So I would say soul loves soul-making. You have an instinctual, visceral, mental, emotional, soulful sense of what soul-making feels like. And you can trust that as a barometer.

I do think clarity is important, but it will come. The other thing I want to say about all this—it's complex. We're building or discovering or uncovering or whatever you want to say, a kind of complex structure of

subtle and sophisticated ideas that all support each other. So that journey to clarity and precision and understanding how it all works together will be gradual for everyone—everyone, okay? Even the brightest person, it's going to take time. So that's okay.

I think the conceptual aspect is part of soul-making. The soul loves concepts as well—concepts that feed soul. It likes the intellect. It wants to include that as one of the aspects of being that can ignite it. So that's important too. But let it feed the soul, and let it come gradually, and ask questions. At this point, there's actually loads of material available, and there's another forty hours or something about to come out.

Just warning you. So you know, it's a lot. It's sophisticated. But you have a compass anyway.

The other thing about clarity I want to address—and this will come in our explorations of the aspects—is that there's something, as I said, kind of contradictory about the whole endeavor. Precision is beautiful and fertile. I understand the concepts. It's clear. And yet the very concepts we're using also have these shady boundaries of unclarity to them. Why? Because that's part of their fertility. Without that, they won't be soul-making.

If I start putting something in a rigid, tight box—"I feel, phew, I understand it"—poof, goes the soul-making after a little while. So there's this strange tension between clarity and precision on one hand, and open-ended, fuzzy-edged, elastic understanding on the other. I'll talk about this again.

Later in this retreat, we may bring up this question that several people have raised: "Oh, I want to teach this material." And so we may discuss amongst ourselves where we all are with that. What feels right or ready? What's a good idea? And what's maybe, "Hey, let's just wait a little bit."

I'm not sure how else to answer this question about speaking to others and teaching, because if it's not clear for you, it may just confuse other people. Or you might find that you can make little poetic suggestions which open things up for people without explaining a whole structure. Does that make sense? You can actually introduce... there are all kinds of possibilities. You're just throwing out poetic sparks, like that, until you're ready to say, "Now I'm clear how it all fits together." How does that sound?

These are actually big and important questions. Again, they're multi-aspected questions that involve the whole being, all of this. Is that okay for now?

Okay, let's have a minute of silence together.

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