Transformation in Soul (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 36:56

So again, please let me know if you'd rather your question or the interaction wasn't recorded. Just let me know. I'll press pause.

"I'm getting really interested in images of selves and in the interest of healing. I'm getting really interested in this interface between what I take to be my everyday self—the self that apparently needs healing because there's a lot of suffering—and the imaginal self. There's really no self, emptiness, and I was thinking that I could get around it that way with practice and healing. But now it feels like with the imaginal, it's really amazing—everything's sliding a bit and morphing, and I'm not really sure what it is that's being healed."

Let me see if I can summarize that. You're getting very interested in the interface between the senses or the images of self and healing the self and the emptiness of self, and the different pathways that are offered through that mixture. Would that be a way of rephrasing what you said?

In some Buddha Dharma, for instance, there's this teaching that the self is empty, but it has this connotation that it's kind of almost not worth bothering about—in the sense of the richness of the personality or the depth of the personality. It's just a fabrication, it's just a construct, it's just an illusion. And we're opening that out to other possibilities.

"What is being healed? What happens in your experience when you start working with imagining yourself in the interest of healing?"

So in a way, there's one pathway that says just let go of the self—it's irrelevant, just deconstruct it or see that it's empty. Then there's this psychological dictum or maxim: well, you have to have a self before you let go of it. So one builds that solid sense of self and a sense of self-identity, and then maybe you do the emptiness work. Where does the imaginal come in?

You may pick up something common in the answers I give, which is: yes, it's all good. It's all available and helpful—the different angles on things.

"It feels like sometimes that's the way to go. Sometimes, some days, that is the way. I'm really wondering what happens to the self when you start working with the deeply imaginal self."

Well, it gets given dimensionality, and it gets given a rootedness or a sense of origin in divinity, for a start. And that's huge. That's absolutely massive. That's not the typical Western sense or idea of self. We tend to be suspicious if someone has that kind of sense of themselves—that somehow they're rooted in divinity.

Not just in a universal sense that we're all rooted in, we're all children of God, we're all part of the universal oneness of whatever that universal oneness is.

But in the very particular sense that you, with the uniqueness of your manifestation, the uniqueness of your personality, the uniqueness of even the difficulties that you encounter, and the story of your life, and even the tragedies that you're handed—that this is somehow given from the divine or given to us in our uniqueness. Our uniqueness, our unique journey is actually rooted in God, has its origins in the divine. Use whatever language helps you here.

I am an angel. You are angels. All of that, and the journey that I'm on, or what's handed to me in my life—this cancer that I might die of—this is somehow necessary to the divine. Now, I'm not going to reify that and cling to it, but there's a kind of...

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view and actually a sensing with soul that I can enter into with something like this.

This is a part of the narrative of my life. It's a fact. But it's multidimensional and it has its given place, given meaning, given depth, given divinity, given a sacredness that pertains to its uniqueness, your uniqueness. Do you understand? That's healing at a whole other level, a whole other level.

And so it's like—I'll talk about me. Let's say I die from the cancer. There's a healing that happens at a whole other level whether or not I die. Do you understand?

Some of the less socially sanctioned corners and angles and protuberances and ways of our personhood might be, sometimes the healing is to soften them, to change them, to make them less dukkha, and sometimes the healing is at another level. So-and-so is still arrogant. So-and-so is still belligerent. They're always fighting for this cause and being on the edge of being obnoxious or whatever it is. What does healing look like? You sand everything down so it's all polished and kind of bland and beige? Or is it that there is an angel in that very difficulty somehow?

And then the question is an open one: how much does it need, A, transforming, so that I'm not just stuck in something that's actually not soulful? So that's always the thing—what's soulful? But also it's just not pointless dukkha. How much does it need to be transformed? How much does it need to be blessed by this other sense of it? And the healing is in that. And also how much freedom is there?

Because the other aspect of healing might be—and this may be also where it ties in with emptiness, is emptiness of self—to see that we're multiple. That's why I said you're angels, you're not just one. And so there's not so much rigidity. You see how my personality or the patterns that I manifest in my life, in relationship, in thinking, in expression, in my work, in the way I move my body—they can get very rigid. It's just like, okay, that person just always does things this way, and I realize I don't even realize that I'm stuck in it, or maybe I do realize.

So one of the things with soul, and we've kind of implied this in what we've been saying, is that there's a certain freedom in just having more range and having the flexibility. I can have the light and I can have the dark. I can have the raging God and I can have the God of infinitely soft benevolence. All as me and into me and through me, I can have, as we said today, the stillness and the movement. Do you understand? So I'm less fixated on one self being how I am and I open to the—Hillman would call it the polytheism, the multiplicity of the angels that come through me, come through you, that speak to you, that want something from you.

And so there's something that's liberating in the sense of breaking out of a rigidity and an enclosedness in recognizing the multiplicity of what's coming through me and what's being asked of me and what my soul relationships are—angels, divinities, images, etc.

Where that ties in with emptiness, again, this is a little bit related to what I said this morning, is that, again, with a certain kind of—I would say—not fully deep understanding of emptiness, then we say, oh, the self is empty, therefore it's worthless, therefore we just kind of would be better off without it somehow. And we have this image like a liberated person sort of doesn't have one, or they're kind of—so what, what is that? And is that even something that I want?

So there's a kind of just—it's always put down and put aside or it's tolerated. We tolerate, you have this personality, Keval has this personality. It's okay. It's just personality. It's just form. And we don't get too hung up about it. So it's kind of neither particularly attacked or celebrated or seen as divine, the self and the expression of the self.

If we go deeper into emptiness, like I said this morning, you see that the very fact that any self construction at all is empty means that I'm free to construct the self any old how. And if I'm strictly in a Buddha Dharma gear, I'll say the constructions of self are for the purpose of reducing dukkha. If I'm expanding that a bit more—and there are all questions here about paradigms and where they fit—but if I'm expanding that a bit more, I could say the constructions of self at any time, the images of self, can be in the service of soulfulness.

And that may overlap completely with the quieting of dukkha, the dissolving of dukkha, or it might be—it's not quite that simple.

But the very fact of the emptiness, of the thorough, complete emptiness of self, totally—any conception of self is empty—allows us to fabricate and the self to be fabricated in different ways. We see it's all play, it's all theatre, and we can be moved by theatre and play. Do you understand? Does it make sense?

And like you said, there's always this gear too. We're not emphasizing it so much on this retreat—on the last retreat, partly because we called it "Of Hermits and Lovers: The Alchemy of Desire." So we didn't want everyone blowing fuses and things. We just spent a day talking about letting go. That's a gear too. And this gear of shoring up the self and getting a really solid sense of self and where my boundaries are and who I

am—going back to what I said right at the beginning—it's like, all good. All these directions are good.

Sometimes I think, as a general point, the only mistake we can make is to be stuck in one way of seeing things. One way of thinking about the self or relating to the self, for example. Whatever that is. Without that flexibility, that malleability, that fluidity, that range that is, I think, a result and an expression, an embodiment of freedom—range, flexibility in thinking, in acting, in relating, in meditating. So I'm just echoing what you said, that actually they're all good. And then the art is like, when? When is what helpful when and in what ways?

So basically, Nick's saying that even if she's in the mode or the thinking of shoring up boundaries and shoring up the self and really setting boundaries and being clear about that—something that is maybe more typical of modern psychology in the West—even that endeavor and even that way of viewing things can be, in the language we've been using, sensed with soul. So that whole idea and that whole movement and that whole endeavor and everything that's involved in that can have all the dimensionality and all the divine referencing and context and blessing and sacredness and divinity and all the other business. It's the same thing, but it's seen with, it's sensed with soul.

And there's a big difference between that and seeing it more rigidly—which can still be really, really helpful—seeing it more flatly, if you like.

Robert had his hand up before, so I'll come back. "I'd be grateful if you could explain how strong emotions other than love relate to sensing the soul."

You mean more difficult emotions? So the question is how strong emotions and more difficult emotions like anger or grief relate to sensing the soul, emotions other than love.

The first thing to say is love can also be soulless, relatively—or everything's a spectrum. So I can love something and it doesn't have that dimensionality and divinity. Love is an aspect of sensing the soul, but it's not by itself enough.

Anger, for instance. Are you saying how would you work with it, is the question? Or just how does it fit conceptually?

It relates to Nick's question a little bit. It's like whatever is coming through can be spun off into papañca, can be ignored, dismissed, ridiculed, transcended somehow, or related to in a way that opens up soul movement. So we participate in everything.

Here's the anger. We'll weave in the practice and the concept. I'm sitting. Maybe I don't even realize I'm angry at first. I just feel hot and bothered. Or maybe I feel depressed.

Actually, it's something about just like, you know. And then I say, okay, the emotional awareness is absolutely indispensable. It's like an absolute part of the foundation of the practice. So I feel into this depression, the kind of heavy cloud of it—and I'm just making this up as a possibility. I feel that heaviness,

and it feels like something's pressing me down, and I'm with it, and I'm just like, man, I feel like I've been pressed down a lot in my life. And then it's like, you know what? I'm really pissed off at being pressed down. I get angry at the depression, for instance. And then I'm with something slightly different. The depression has maybe got both depression and anger. I'm just making up a possibility.

And I say, okay, that's interesting. Let me feel into the anger. Energy body—what does it need? Maybe it needs love. Maybe it needs metta. That would be one approach. Maybe I just need to kind of let that anger be in the energy body and see what it does. And so there's kindness in the approach, but I'm not trying to change it. And I'm not either just watching it as sensation.

So I've got energy body, I've got this—maybe it feels like there are these glowing embers in my belly and I can feel this and it's mixed with frustration and it's confusing, etc. I'm just with it and I'm holding it and I'm letting something emerge in the energy body, in the emotionality, in the way I'm tending to it.

And then there's a lot of energy wrapped up in anger, a lot of emotional energy and a lot of psychic energy wrapped up, and also in some depressions. It's actually a kind of energy that's just trapped and either attacking oneself or just locked. There's not all depression, but a lot of depression has a lot of energy. When I start relating to it in this way and being with it in the energy, when you're being sensitive to it and allowing it, but in a very intimate way, then the energy, the psychic energy in the emotion may liberate an image. It may generate an image.

So it was maybe just embers, and then out of the embers comes some kind of fiery, wrathful deity stomping around and roaring, and he's got a trident and a nine-bladed sword and all that. And maybe I'm a little bit scared of this. And maybe I feel like I've become that. Or maybe he's looking at me and engaging with me. Then I'm in the realm of the imaginal.

Now, with that, as one of our nodes or business, is a sense of duty. So I'm going quite quickly here. But I then would engage this figure, or either feel what it feels like to become that figure, or engage him in relationship. I'm in meditative, mindful, sensitive energy body emotional awareness to the resonance, relationship, or how does it feel to become this deity and to see the world and to feel the world and what does the body feel like and what do I feel like.

At that point, when it has become imaginal, to the degree it has become imaginal, there's something felt. The anger could still be there, but it's transformed—but not so much into love or softness or equanimity. It's become a kind of wrathful deity. It's become a creative anger. There will be a feeling of liberation.

Before—I mean, certainly in the example I just gave—I started depressed. I felt so... Then when I feel angry, I start to feel a bit bigger, but I still feel caught in the anger. So usually we have an unskillful relationship with anger. We just feel tied up in it, knotted in it. When it becomes soulful and imaginal, it doesn't feel like a problem anymore. And it's not that we just kind of give ourselves license to buy a shotgun and kill whatever, and just shoot our mouths off. Something's changed in the whole nature of

what it is and what it feels like.

And maybe there's a situation. Maybe I have felt depressed because I'm in a situation or I have been a long time in a situation where the rules of engagement in the organization or the family or the relationship or whatever are actually constraining me. So I've got a situation that I'm actually angry about as well.

Now the imaginal, we have to be very sensitive and very attuned here and also careful. It might give me a duty and a perspective in relation to that situation. Do you understand?

And that might look like I say something and it has not unkindness. There's a difference between unkindness and wanting to hurt. The Buddha says non-cruelty is one of the three primary intentions in the Noble Eightfold Path. But it can be sharp and it can be cutting and it can be strong and it can be powerful and it can be angry. But it's a very different thing. And the purpose of it and the sense of it and the purpose of it and the whole experience of it is much expanded and again given dimensionality and a rooting in divinity.

Some of you know this. I wrote a letter some years ago to the Insight Meditation teachers, and it was about climate change and what we're doing, or actually what we're not doing in relation to that. There was anger in it, and it was obnoxious, or it would be easy to read it as obnoxious, and I could certainly see it that way, and I think a lot of people found it that way. And it certainly pissed people off.

Now, I could be completely off here, but I don't regret doing it. And with all whatever consequences it made. And I think I will feel that till I die. There was something right about it and right about the tone. And there was something, to my sense, kind of archetypal coming through. I'm not saying that's the only answer. It was maybe part of a beginning of something that needed lots of other energies. But it felt at the time like there was anger there, there was frustration. And there was a kind of calling that actually in this case needed to manifest.

Now, if we go back to the example that we said before, it might be that the duty involved in this image is just that. I've just opened it. I've just got a different sense of the situation. And I find that something's liberated. There's still the heat and the force and all that. But I don't feel I need to do anything. I could, but I'm not being asked to do anything or manifest or speak. And other times we do get a sense of some kind of duty that's involved. Does this make sense?

So it's not so much that anger itself would be a node as much as, again, anger, like anything else, is something that can be related to with more or less soul-making.

I'm visited by a couple of images whose beauty and divinity seems somehow dependent on anger and grief, respectively. And regardless of how long I spend with them...

Yeah. Right. And so, you know, is that not a part of life? There is tragedy in life and one can look at and conceive of tragedy in lots of different ways—as a kind of flat existentialist, "well, that's life," or given soul.

So again, it's not that somehow the child miraculously comes back to life and everything's rosy and happy forever and ever. There's something in that particular image that you're describing, that there is this holy grief, there is this redemption that happens without transformation. It's a transubstantiation more than a transformation.

So I don't, you know, it may be they change, and images can sometimes change, sometimes over long periods of time, long, long periods of time. But it may just stay that, and there's something iconic for you in those images, and they've got something for you. They're teaching you something. They're part of the soul-making.

And the mind can't quite wrap it. This is really important. If the mind feels like it's figured it out, it's always got this part of the beyondness.

It's got this quality of beyondness—there's just something I get, sort of, but I don't quite grasp completely, and yet it speaks to me profoundly. It does something. You understand? So your job is opening to that, resonating with that, following that thread of sensibility and sensitivity.

Did you have your hand up, Jim? Okay, should we do that? Okay, last one.

"I have a quick question. I think I'm not the only one that's relatively new to this, but I'm beginning to feel things start to coalesce. May I ask a simple question: what is soul? I know you probably talked about this in other courses."

So Jill is saying she's a beginner and... I'd say we're all beginners, actually, and I definitely say that about myself. And the question is, what is soul?

The first thing to say, just following on from what we said to Robert and what I touched on at some point, is that there are some really deep ideas in life that we will be poorer if we put them too much in a box and get too polished, rigid, tight definitions around. So it's like the concept has to have these elastic edges that I was talking about, and it has to have some mystery, and that's where its fecundity comes from. So soul is a kind of nebulous concept at one level.

Having said that, we could say soul is actually just shorthand for a kind of experience—which is all this business that we're talking about. So that's putting it as though it's not a thing at all. It's just a way of experiencing. That's one conception.

A second conception is, without giving it inherent existence, we say the soul is some kind of entity or belonging to my being or given to me or bigger than my being. Some kind of entity that operates by seeing and sensing in these ways that we're talking about. Now that instrument or organ can get really shrunk. It can get atrophied. It can lose its blood supply so that it barely functions in our life. Or it can grow and get powerful and gain more facility and accessibility at sensing that way.

How does that sound?

"That sounds good. That sounds very good. So I'm assuming that all practices can be soulful?"

All practices can be soulful. Yes. Yes, all practices can be... because the soulfulness is in the relationship to something, okay? So anything can be soulful.

However, if there's a practice that has built-in conceptual limits—that, for example, disallow imagination, disallow any kind of... they just have a rigid conception of how things are—then they will be soulful up to a certain point for you. If they're new to you, they're all very exciting. So, for example, I trained a lot in a kind of atomistic Mahasi style—look at the moment-to-moment sensation of everything. It's moment-to-moment viññāṇa and consciousness and all this, and the body is just atoms and all that. At first, that's all very new, and it's exciting, and everything explodes into this mist of atoms, and it's all really fast, and it's thrilling.

But then when the implicit or explicit teaching is, "This is reality, that's it, anything else is delusion and nonsense," then the soul has kind of... it's been stretched up to that point. It's like all this is new. There's the expansion of soul-making there—the expansion of new vistas, new senses of things, the excitement of the eros. But then when it's been there for a while, there's no more soul-making.

So there's something dynamic in soul-making, something expansive, and if it reaches a wall, either it pushes that wall outwards so there's more territory—new discoveries, new ideas, new perceptions, new senses of things, new sense of self, new sense of the world—pushes it, usually quite slowly. Or it just blows through the damn wall, and I've talked about breaking the vessels. It just shatters things. And that can be a bit like, "Whoa." And then maybe you build new ones that are bigger. They've got more range in them.

Or the walls are stronger than the dynamic of soul-making. And the psyche and the life just stay within those walls. And then what happens? Well, it's stuck, or something gets... it just grinds to a halt. Yeah, the soul-making dynamic does... And then we feel that in our life.

But because we don't have that language in our culture, we cannot articulate what's happening—or more precisely, what's not happening. Without this context and vocabulary for soul-making, we remain unable to recognize when these dynamics have stalled or ceased altogether.

So oftentimes in our lives, we encounter what we might call wolves—those challenging forces that confront our established ways of being. Even when we're not consciously aware of it, we carry walls: walls of habit, walls of energetic patterns, walls of conception, walls of emotion that block our soul-making. This is completely normal.

The question then becomes: what does this situation need? Will these walls stretch smoothly, organically, slowly over time? Will they need to be burst through more dramatically? Or will it require some other kind of work—a deliberate examination and engagement with these walls themselves?

When we can recognize these dynamics, when we can see the interplay between the soul-making impulse

and the structures that both support and constrain it, we gain a different kind of navigation system for our lives. We begin to understand when stagnation arises not from external circumstances alone, but from the way our inner walls have become too rigid, too small, or simply inappropriate for the soul's current needs.

This is the gift of developing this language, this sensitivity to the movements of soul-making. It allows us to participate more consciously in our own becoming, to recognize when we need to tend these dynamics with care, and to trust the organic intelligence that knows how to grow beyond our current limitations.

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