Soulful Movement and Elements of the Imaginal (6-10)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 43:52

The possibilities of soul, the possibilities for soul, are endless. They're endless. And that endlessness is also endless in different directions. Soul opens up in different ways, can open up in different ways, in different directions, at different levels.

We discover a lot about all kinds of things, but also about soul through stillness and through silence. Sometimes, for many of us, stillness and silence can become a kind of habit. We spend a lot of retreats where there's a lot of stillness and a lot of silence. In a place like this place this week, or a Gaia House, stillness and silence are the cultural dominance. If someone were to come in this hall and see a bunch of people sitting still and silent in funny postures, they would consider it quite strange.

So we discover, we can discover a lot about soul. We will discover a lot about soul through stillness, through the depth of stillness and silence. And yet there's also a direction through movement and through non-silence, through sound.

Sometimes what happens, and many of you will have experienced this and I've talked about it before, one is sitting still and silent in meditation aware of the energy body. Maybe there's an image or something going on, and one can actually feel the energy body moving, but to an outside observer, it would look completely still. It looks like this—I'm just sitting in silent meditation—but I feel, and there's an imaginal sense and an energetic bodily sense of the body dancing or moving, or turning cartwheels, or whatever it is. So this is a really, really fertile area of meditation, to open up that way.

Or again, an image, and there's a roaring coming through the image. No one can hear anything. It's, if you like, purely in the image, if we say it that way. But because it's imaginal, it's soulful. They go together. So I don't know if some of you have had this kind of experience.

Then of course, we can actually move. And we did a little bit of that in one of the sessions. And I've talked about this in the past as well. So, what is it, if I put the question to you rather than say what it is: What is it to practice moving and practice sounding and can that be soulful? What might that mean? What might that feel like?

We might have a practice of tai chi or qigong or something—there's movement involved. Is that soulful? How can it become more insouled? So there's a direction here, a possibility.

This came up—Andrea asked in the vigilantes—we have a culture of stillness and silence. Could it be that

we open up the sense of practice to include movement? And then this question, not so much a koan, but an ongoing investigative, explorative question for you: What does it mean for movement to become soulful, to become more deeply soulful, more fully soulful? What does it mean for sound, for voice, to become more soulful, more deeply soulful?

And a lot of it is about cultural dominance. Because I've said this a couple of times on retreats, and it can be strange, because everyone says, well, here, it's where we sit, and we're still. And it looks a bit, maybe the person thinks, oh, I look a bit weird if I'm the only one sort of moving. See how influenced we are by culture around us.

So I'd like to open that up again as a possibility. Movement can be very, very subtle, really subtle. The hands are moving, or some movement, and it can feel completely soulful. Or the sounding can be really subtle. What matters is the soul-making, not what the movement looks like to another person, or how much movement, or what it is. So we're just opening up a kind of possibility, a level of practice, if you like.

So we have sitting period, walking period. You could say sitting period, moving period. It might look absolutely like walking up and down in a delineated form. And again, there's so much to learn from a circumscribed walking path. You walk between two points and it's very contained and very, well, contained in lots of ways. There's a lot to learn that way. But it might be sometimes that you want to explore something different. There's stillness, sitting, and then there's movement.

And what is that with the energy body, with the imaginal, with the possibility of soulfulness? Some of you have movement practices, exercise practices, and still I put this question: what does it mean to deepen the soulfulness, to open the soulfulness in relation to yoga, tai chi, if you're following prescribed forms? It's an open question for you to find out, for us to find out.

So I want to return to the nodes, the aspects of the imaginal, and pick up where we left off. I don't know if Catherine's already addressed this—are they in the book? Somehow some of you are taking notes, and that's fine, that's actually great. We will try to put the list of these nodes, these aspects, up on the board at some point today.

Again, why are we doing all this? It's a lot. We're actually zipping through, and today I'm going to zip through. Really, it's like a high-speed bus tour. Partly it's to highlight, to draw your attention to certain features. What's the point?

Partly, we're interested in discernment. This whole movement of meditation—whatever the practice—is a movement into more and more sensitivity, more and more subtlety of awareness, more and more refined perceptions, ability to discriminate and discern this and that. All that is part of the beauty and the art of the unfolding. So putting all this out is really just to throw some seeds out. What's that? Can I notice that? Can I discern this and that? Making distinctions or recognizing distinctions in perception—this is all really important in soul-making. So it's for the sake of that kind of refinement and enriching of awareness and

attention and sensitivity.

It's also, as I said when we introduced it, for the sake of clarity. There's a whole conceptual framework here, and understanding the different aspects of it will help bring that clarity of understanding. But it is not—at least I hope it doesn't become—a kind of canonized dogma. Not a soul-making catechism, "I believe in the twenty-eighth..." You know? Where it gets very rigid like that. It's more like seeds. It's like, "Oh, what's that?" And even the words we use—they're maybe words that we're very familiar with in English, but they kind of have different possibilities when we use them. They're like poetic seeds. You understand?

So can there be this kind of straddling of an attitude that's both very precise and interested in refinement of discrimination and discernment, and also loose and labile, fluid enough and flexible enough?

The third point about why we're doing this is because, as I mentioned earlier, there's a possibility in recognizing these nodes in the moment, in practice, that something is activated in the whole process. For example, Catherine talked yesterday about one of those: loving and being loved. Some images, it's very obvious—they're love images. It's palpable. It's the most obvious feature of that image. Other images—and I've described these in other talks—where that's not an obvious feature, but it's there.

What can happen is I begin to notice that feature or that element, that aspect, that node. For instance, being loved. It's like this image, whatever it is, is very stern and seems a bit forbidding or maybe a bit scary. But as I pay attention more closely, I notice there's this unusual kind of loving that this—if it's another imaginal figure—has for me. And that noticing, the very attuning of the attention to that node or that element, ignites that element of feeling loved further. And that ignition of one part of the lattice ignites—the ignition spreads, so the whole thing comes alive.

So one way this all works is via noticing. We just notice—that's why we're throwing out these things. Can you notice this? Some of them are a lot easier to notice than others; there's individual variation. But the noticing ignites or activates something, and the whole thing can become, let's say, more fully imaginal.

There's the capacity to notice what's already there that we hadn't fully noticed in the field of the imaginal. It's like there is this thing that we're calling sensing the soul or imaginal perception, and we're kind of discovering what it is. So I think, "Oh, there's that." And it was just dimly in the awareness. So making it more obvious in the moment ignites something.

That's one possibility. A second possibility, which we touched on, is to be more deliberate with the nodes. Take the energy body node, for instance. I can notice what's happening in the energy body, or I can also deliberately emphasize that node and activate it. Let's say I'm in relationship with a tree, or with another being, or with a so-called internal image. Can I bring my whole energy body into relationship with that tree, with that being, with that image? I sense it with my whole body, not just with my eyes, not just with my ears, but with my whole body. Or I just start to deliberately activate more of that energy body sense. So

I'm turning up the dial, if you like, on the energy body node. And that, again, can activate the whole lattice, ignite the entire network.

The sixth element is trust. This is an example of one that could work both ways in terms of noticing or activating. Sometimes we're with an image and maybe to the mind it seems a bit untrustworthy or pathological or violent or strangely amoral or immoral even. And then we can notice sometimes that—hold on—there's something in me, so to speak, that trusts this. So we notice the trust. But trust is an element of the imagination. It's one of these elements of the imagination. Sometimes we can be more deliberate with trust.

I presume that we wouldn't be here—no one would be here—if you didn't sense that in the imaginal, even in the weird images that one might get, you'd be a little tentative about sharing them with many people. This is a strength; there's something to trust here. It sounds weird, it looks weird, it smells weird, but there's a treasure here. We sense there's a treasure here.

Now, sometimes what you can do is just deliberately—I use the phrase—just a grain of trust. It seems like a strange image. It seems like a strange experience or sense of the world that I'm having right now. Can I just sprinkle a grain of trust into the mix right there? Just a little bit of trust can be enough for the alchemy to start happening. Without that trust, everything just gets limited. It can't enrich and deepen.

All this is dependent arising. In other words, if there's not trust in this so-called subjective pole of the whole field, of the imaginal field, then everything either grinds to a halt or stops or gets limited. My lack of trust, my distrust, my suspicion, my fear, colors the image. The image is a dependent arising. The sensing of the world is a dependent arising.

Like in a nightmare—if you've ever had this experience—you've been chased by the monster, and I'm afraid of this monster chasing me. It's getting bigger and bigger as it's chasing me. If you've ever turned around to face the monster and give yourself to the monster, what happens? It transforms. Why? Because the relationship with it has transformed, because the whole thing is a dependent arising. I participate; we participate in the co-creation-discovery of what we sense, whether we're talking about intra-psychic images or sensing the soul.

So if I can just sprinkle that little bit of grain of trust, then I'm participating in the creation of this image in a way that allows it to open. I don't know about this, but I can trust just a little bit.

So let me just create a little frame. I can allow myself to play with trusting this, experiment with trusting this image or whatever I'm sensing right now for ten minutes, or twenty minutes, or five minutes. In that way, I'm not saying I have to sign up to a lifelong marriage with this weird monster or whatever it is. I can just create a time frame, and at the end of that time frame, I can step out. This can be a helpful approach.

In terms of trust, there's also trusting a particular sense that we have, a particular image. There's also trusting the whole process that we're engaged in—all this business of soul-making and the logos. There are

different kinds of trust. If we can find a way in practice of just allowing or encouraging a little bit of trust, that helps the dependent origination in the process. It helps things become more fertile, to open up.

Let me move through some points very quickly—just sprinkling seeds.

The seventh aspect is that images, by definition imaginal images, elicit, open, nourish, support, and ignite soul-making. Something is not really an image unless it has that quality—unless we recognize the resonances, all the different kinds of resonances that it has in the soul. So the sense of soulfulness is a characteristic aspect of imagining.

There's another part of this which I'm just going to mention because I've talked about it so much before in previous series of talks and retreats. An image stimulates, opens, supports, grounds, and nourishes soul-making. What is soul-making? This is why I'm not going to explain so much. Just to say, soul-making involves what we've been calling the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic and the way they weave into each other and inseminate each other and open and expand and deepen and enrich and complicate each other. I'm not going to go into it right now. We can talk about it if you want another time.

Soul-making has this quality—something expands in soul-making. There's a sense with soulfulness of something stretching the psyche, actually, if you like. Stretching the sense of things, the idea of things, the perceptions of things. That stretch can happen very quickly, very suddenly, or more gradually over time. The arising of soulfulness, the supporting of soulfulness, is an aspect of the imaginal.

And soulfulness is more than heartfulness. Heartfulness is very important. Heartfulness is a part of soulfulness. But soulfulness is more than heartfulness in many ways.

I'm going to just flip the order because I'm moving through quite quickly. So I'm going to jump to what was the tenth on our list and then come back to the eighth and ninth.

The tenth was that in the imaginal, with the imaginal, the boundaries are elastic and soft. The boundaries are not definite and fixed—the boundaries of self and the boundaries of other, the boundaries of the image. This elasticity is related to what I said about the soul-making dynamic, the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic, having a tendency to expand.

So here's this image, for instance, or here's myself as image. The sense is—here's what I thought it was, it seemed like it was, but as it gets caught up in the soul-making dynamic, the sense of what that being is, and what the self is, and even what the world is, expands. The idea—there's Robert, there's Natalie—the sense of what's involved in a Robert or a Natalie, who they are, what they are, grows, gets more complex, gets richer, wider, deeper. So we could say elastic edges. Things can expand and move. This applies both to concepts and to images.

Soft edges means—just right now, try two things.

First, think of someone—actually, someone you love. Consider them, and get a sense of their being if you

can.

Now, you might have a really sharp visual imagination. You might see every little hair of stubble on their chin, or whatever it is. So in that sense, the image may be very visually precise as a form—it may be very sharp-edged rather than soft-edged. But I'm talking about their beingness, their essential being.

So this person that you love—get a sense of their beingness. Does that beingness of this person, their kind of essence, does that have an edge? Does it have a sharp edge?

I mean, maybe it has some edge. There's a sense of "Well, Mark is over there and I'm over here. Mark is over there and Eamon's over there." There are edges there, and that's fine. At another level that doesn't exist, but that's fine—we're retaining a certain level of those edges.

But there's a feeling to Mark or a feeling to Eamon that there's no sharp edge to a person's being. Do you understand? You get a sense of that immediately. That's how persons are. When we put sharp edges to a person, people say, "Whoa, buddy, back off." We don't like it if people do that to us, or if we do it to ourselves—we don't feel well.

An image is the same. Whether it's a tree that I'm sensing the soul of, or a flower that I'm sensing the soul of, again, it doesn't have a sharp edge. This soft-edgedness is part of the sense of an image. Do you understand?

So that's the tenth aspect: elastic and soft edges.

Related to that—and many of these aspects overlap, while some point in different directions and are even a little contradictory to each other—is the eighth aspect: a sense of dimensionality. This is also somewhat implicit in this soft-edgedness business.

When I think of my sense of Robert, in that blurriness of his edges, first of all, I wouldn't want him to have sharp edges. I lose something of his beauty, of his mystery, of his essence if he's got sharp edges. Do you understand?

Now, in the blurriness, as it transitions into the vastness, we could say there's a kind of dimensionality. It's like sensing into Robert, sensing into this tree or this flower. When I sense it with soul, it's as if there are other dimensions that we sort of pick up on or intuit or dimly sense. Sometimes we clearly sense them.

So it's like I sense Robert and I sense him as the angel there. Now, I can see Robert, and I see his striped shirt, and I see him sitting in his form, and I know a little bit about his history in the human realm. And there's another dimension—the angelic dimension. Actually, there are multiple dimensions. Some of them will be clear to me, and some of them kind of recede into this blurriness.

I just got muddled because you were talking about Robert, and for a minute I thought you meant yourself.

Oh no, sorry, I meant him. Well, I could mean myself. So thank you for saying that, Ron. I could mean

myself, so I'm also a Robert. But in this case I meant that Robert. But it doesn't matter, because whatever we sense with soul—whether it's Robert Broderick, whether it's Robert Verbeer, whether it's the rose—whatever we sense with soul will start to come alive with dimensionality. We will start to notice the dimensionality, the angelic dimensions. So whatever it is, really. Does that make sense?

Now, we could say, so we're still on this eighth one of dimensionality, and we could kind of separate it out and say, okay, now we can separate out something called divinity. Or we could just lump it together and say this dimensionality kind of shades into a sense of the divine and of sacredness.

Now, divine is either a word that means absolutely nothing to people or it's a word that we have bad history with. Or it might be a very rich word. To me it's actually an infinitely rich word. We can never exhaust what the word divinity means, what it represents, what it holds. It is itself an infinite concept, infinitely rich with possibility. Dimensionality, shading into a sense of divinity.

Sometimes that divinity is very clear. That's a very palpable sense. Sometimes we're even quite clear what we mean by divinity or the concept. But some or other concept or sense of divinity, clear or kind of vague or obscure, is an aspect of the imaginer. Is that okay?

One of the characteristics of divinity is, as I said, whatever we say about it, however clever we are at theology or philosophy or whatever, we're never going to—it's always going to be bigger. There's always going to be more. There's a kind of infinity of beyondness to divinity. And that ties in to the ninth aspect.

As I said, these are kind of implicit in each other, but with an image—it could be my self-sense, I've become, I'm just sensing into, I'm sensing myself with soul, I've become a deity, it could be the rose, it could be another person, it could be an intrapsychic image—there's a sense of beyondness. So there's a kind of—we said, "I perceive this. This is what I perceive," whatever it is, and maybe that has some dimensionality, but there's a sense of, there's more, there's more. There's more that I can kind of intuit, and that's attractive. That beyond has an allure, and that's partly what's related to the eros.

So we get this sense of there's a beyondness to an image. It's not just a form, a flat form. It's got this, again, dimensionality to it. And that beyondness is unfathomable. There's not a sense, again, "I can reach the end." So images, the imaginal, what we sense with soul has a sense of unfathomability to it.

But the dimensionality, the beyondness, the divinity, the unfathomability—with the sensing the soul, with the imaginal—it's not something that loses the appearance. I just want the unfabricated, the quieting of perception, the fading of appearances, the blurring into oneness. That's all really good and important. With imaginal perception, with sensing the soul, this sense of dimensionality, beyondness, unfathomability, divinity, is in and through as well as behind the appearances. Does that make sense?

No.

Okay, so, in a way you have to give some context, so it's good that you asked. Certain kinds of meditative

practices came up a little bit with Maitri Devi's question last night, which I didn't actually pick up on last night. She said a lot of times in Buddhist teachings, a lot of what you get in Buddhist teachings... I could talk a long time about this, let's see.

It's worth saying again. I've said it before, but it's worth saying again. We could divide the thrust or the intention of the range of Buddhist teachings. We could divide it into three, okay, in terms of what gets sort of taught and what gets emphasized.

So one is, and this is the more traditional Theravadan way, is that there is basically—here we are in the world of complexity and appearances and all the tussle of that, and we practice, and we practice seeing emptiness, and we practice letting go, and we're basically letting go of appearances.

A quietening emerges—a blurring, a gentle fading of perception, a melting away. Eventually, some kind of sense of oneness begins to dawn in our awareness. There unfolds a spectrum of this fading of appearances into different kinds of oneness—love, awareness, pure being. Ultimately comes what we might call dissolution into emptiness, or dissolution into what is sometimes called the unfabricated or the unconditioned. It is simply the complete relinquishing of all appearances, a profound letting go in relationship to the world.

This movement—a transcending of the world, of appearances in the world of complexity—receives tremendous emphasis in some traditions. I think it is indeed very important, but I don't think it constitutes the whole story.

Other Buddhist traditions, especially more commonly in different cultures, emphasize what we could call simply being with things as they are, or mindfulness. Rather than attempting to go beyond or through into realms of emptiness, the focus becomes this world, this moment, this sensation. There develops a quality of just being with this, just with this, as it is. Don't add anything. Don't try to eliminate anything. Simply meet the facts of existence as barely as possible. Practice becomes about dwelling with that reality—a approach extremely common nowadays in certain cultures and streams of Buddhism.

Now there exists a third way, which we could call the imaginal—engaging with appearances, but without believing so firmly in the notion that there exists some fixed way things are. If there is no singular way things are, then I cannot simply "be with things as they are," because there is no such fixed reality. We participate in the creation of things. We participate in the very sensing of things.

This understanding opens the possibility of imaginal perception. As I mentioned, I can be present with Robert over there, and then allow an angelic perception of him to emerge—an image that we can acknowledge as fabricated perception. It is not unfabricated; I am allowed to play with these perceptions.

The appearances become important not merely as flat facts, but because of this fertility of the imaginal and because of the divinity that dwells within them. The divinity is not only beyond appearance—it is in the appearance itself. The dimensionality is in the appearance.

One way of understanding Buddha Dharma is recognizing that it is fundamentally about understanding fabrication. Fabrication means: what is being created in perception? What is being woven in the realm of our experience? How does experience actually come to be?

As I understand this more deeply and begin to release the clinging that creates experience—that fabricates experience—awareness moves increasingly toward the unfabricated. I cling less, release identification, let go of all the grasping and pushing and pulling. Things simply fade more and more.

When I realize, going deeply enough into this process, that everything is fabricated—absolutely everything, without exception: not the fabricator, not the mind, not consciousness, not time, not space, not things, not nothing—all of it fabricated. Diving deeply enough into this recognition, I see that the whole notion of fabrication itself is empty, because there is nothing that is actually fabricated, no time in which fabrication occurs, and no fabricator.

Taking this process deeper and deeper reveals that if I go only a little way into it, I think, "Okay, there is something that is fabricated. This particular thing is fabricated."

That leaves a duality between fabricated and unfabricated. But once I start going deeper, I eventually come to a point where it's all fabricated. There's not even an unfabricated, because there's no fabricated. There's no fabricated, really. Fabrication itself is empty. Therefore there's no unfabricated, really. So the whole duality of fabricated and unfabricated collapses.

Where does that leave me? I'm free then to play with different ways of looking and participate in the creation—or discovery—of being, of forms, of phenomena, including the imaginal. That understanding of emptiness at this level starts freeing things up. What it does is legitimize what we could call skillful fabrication or soulful fabrication.

This makes sense when we consider those three ways that Dharma gets taught. You have the approach that's all out for the unfabricated, for oneness, for going beyond appearances. You have this legitimization of fabrication that we're discussing. And that middle approach—the mindfulness one—when I believe "this is what things are," doesn't legitimize the imagination.

Someone who believes in the reality of bare attention and mindfulness would see imagination as exactly the wrong thing to do. It's exactly nonsense, exactly non-reality, exactly a waste of time, exactly what's going to get you into trouble. Because Dharma, in this view, is about being with something called "things as they are," or the facticity of things, or bare attention.

Once you expose the myth of that, then you realize that this mindfulness business is really good as a kind of stream. We don't want to lose it. But if I say that's the only thing, then it leaves me straitjacketed. And this whole business would be just utter delusion—we'd be spending a week in complete and utter delusion.

Delusion is a Buddhist word, though—avijjā. At a deep level, delusion means this non-realization that everything is empty. So to the degree that I'm deluded is the degree that I believe in mindfulness as more than just a tool. You can do nothing without mindfulness—it's really important, it's crucial. It's just how it gets framed and believed in and rigidified, as if it has become an ultimate truth. Even if people aren't using that language, there's this wall and absence of questioning.

So we're doing a bus tour here. I've talked longer than I intended, but this is just a quick tour through these aspects to prick up your ears and senses. You can start noticing: "Oh yes, there is this sense of dimensionality. Maybe that word doesn't quite work. Or maybe the word divinity—I thought it meant this, or I made it just mean this." You have to feel your way into these concepts, sense your way into these nodes. Let them come.

Discover them for yourselves. Do you understand?

Let us now rest in some quiet together.

Thank you for listening.

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