Elements of the Imaginal (15 - 18)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 31:09

Good evening. There's been quite a lot of talking today, and some of you at least may feel quite full with words and ideas and sharing and listening. So I'm going to try to walk a line between not talking too much or too long, and on the other hand talking enough to at least do a little justice to the themes I want to cover. Hopefully that will be a compromise.

I'm going to talk about four more nodes in a minute, and just a few general things before that. Given what I've just said, you'll quickly see that as we go through this list—and it's all really quick, actually, like a high-speed bus tour—some of the nodes we linger on longer. For instance, today with Eternality, Humility, Reverence and Grace, we spent time exploring those for ourselves and sharing in the exercise. Some we'll just touch on to point to them, and some get full discussion.

Before I get to the nodes, let me start with some general things. First is actually an announcement: every day from now on, the lounge will be a designated space and time from the period after the morning session in the hall—after the morning teaching—from 10:45 or 10:50 until 11:30. This is designated space for silent, free, soul-making movement. Or soul-making free movement.

What does that mean? Well, find out what it means. Create, discover what it means. The question I would put to you is the question I posed when I talked about movement the other day: what does it mean for this movement that I'm doing right now, or this stillness, or this gesture, or this posture—what is it for that to become soul-making? What does that feel like? What does it look like in this moment? What supports that to be soulful?

So it's open-ended and it's an investigation. It's free and it's silent. You can walk or stand during that period as well, but during that time every day, that will be a designated space to explore that.

Sounding is okay, actually—not talking to each other with words, but if it feels like some sounding is supportive and you feel okay with people around, whatever. Not talking, unless you're talking in tongues. So it's not talking to each other with words, but if some sounding supports the soul-making, that's fine.

The thought I had was that if you go in there, that's your practice. You're not going in there to regard or watch others. This is really about soul-making. That's the thing. Is this soul-making? It's an ongoing exploration: what is it that supports or ignites or nourishes soul-making, both generally speaking and in this moment? Intention has a lot to do with that.

Now, some general things. If it's not clear—and perhaps we didn't stress or emphasize this at the beginning of this retreat as we did on other retreats, but it's worth saying again—sensing the soul is not

something that's going to be happening all the time. It's not even a possibility of a constancy of experience there.

This is partly related to one of the nodes Catherine talked about this morning: grace. Something is given to us, or from a certain perspective, something is given to us when we're sensing the soul. There's this inexplicable, unexplained gift.

And so it comes and goes. It might not be very dramatic, but in some ways we could say that just relative to conventional perception, it's something extraordinary to a certain extent. If it was all the time, it would quickly become ordinary. And A, it doesn't work that way, and B, we wouldn't want it to become ordinary. So we're not really trying to kind of hang on to some particular experience all the time. It comes and goes. Part of it is gift. That's part of the very sensibility of it. That's why we gave that grace as a note.

But what that also means, practically speaking, is that in the day, there's a kind of wide palette of practices you can move between. And you can be quite fluid and quite responsive with that. So to try and do imaginal practice all day, I think would be too much. It would somehow imbalance the being. So you want some of that. And then when is it time to kind of go more into relatively unfabricated practice? Calming, simplifying, gathering, nurturing energy in the energy body, or just being with one's emotions in a healing way, or metta, or emptiness, or working with desire, as some of you will know we've worked with on other retreats.

So there's a necessity to move between different practices, and the possibility of this kind of skillful, responsive, sensitive navigation to when and which. Do you understand?

Before I get on to the four nodes I wanted to talk about this evening, just briefly, again, if it's not obvious, there's something about the relationship between these nodes, between these elements and aspects. There's not a linear relationship there. It's not like first this one and then you get that one. We could say there's a sort of commonality of ones that are maybe more likely to be noticed later or earlier. We could say that, but actually there's no order, and it's not like in any practice. First you do this, and then you do that.

We are emphasizing the energy body, but actually any node, the ignition of any node, can then ignite any other node. The causality is every which way in this lattice. And also in terms of the relationship between them, you know, I've said this before, but again, it's worth saying. Some of these nodes are sort of implicit, or this node is really a shade of that node, or a reflection of it, or an aspect of that other node, or it's already implicit in that node. So what would an example be?

For example, when we talked about dimensionality and divinity and beyondness and unfathomability, these are concepts or senses that kind of dance around each other, weave into each other. Other nodes have a kind of polarizing quality—they move in opposite directions between a certain pair, or they're a bit contradictory or almost paradoxical.

What would be an example of that? Well actually, in a way, you know the node of grace that Catherine talked about this morning and the very idea implicit in the whole idea of the lattice that you can kind of ignite a node and then it becomes more imaginal—there's this important embrace of the receptive and the active, the technique and the mystery of grace. Do you understand? And so that somehow seems really part of the art of this whole practice. It's neither always one or the other, and the balance between the two can be very fluid.

So I'm going to speak about the next four nodes on our list, and I'm going to endeavor to be brief. Just a few points and suggestions and articulations.

The fifteenth one is the non-reducibility of what is sensed with soul. So what does that mean? It means that in the imaginal constellation there's a relationship with an image or with a sensing the soul, a sense of the soul. There's a relationship with it that the concept and the sense of it is not reducing it. This only is this. It only means X or Y.

So, for example, we can reduce things under the kind of rubric and the gaze of scientific materialism. I look at the tree, or the rose, or the curtains, and I just see flat, meaningless, the dance, random dance of flat, meaningless matter according to certain physical laws. That's a kind of reductionism. Everything is made of little subatomic particles that move meaninglessly. Do you understand? And you say, now, we can view that way, but if we only view that way, that flattening, that reduction, will flatten the sense in the soul. That's one kind of reductionism.

Another is a kind of, well, different kinds of psychological reductionism. So, for example, this image represents my empowerment.

my power, my self-empowerment in life, and this will give me that. Or this image represents my compassion, or some other brahmavihara, or some faculty of the mind, or something like that. That's what this is. In that reductionist view, it's a representation, it is this, and implicitly it's that it's only this.

So it's okay that we view it as, yes, it's matter, we can understand matter in that sense, but not only. And it's okay that we could say, this is a representation of empowerment, but not only. And compassion, but not only. Do you understand? It's the "only" that's the killer, that's the flattener.

Or, again, we can have an image and say this image is arising because it's representing, it's re-presenting something from my psychological history, something from my past, something from my family. And yes, it may be related to that, but again, it's the "only" that squeezes the soul out of it. You understand? It's only—I'm having this image because it's because, and only because, X or Y happened to me when I was a child, and this is representing it.

In the scope and complexity and richness of images and sensings with soul, that can be part of it. That can be part of why that image is coming up, but only one level of it. The "only" is reducing, and that's what will kill the sensing soul. It will literally squash the dimensionality and the richness and the complexity and

the unendingness and the mystery and all of that, the multifacetedness.

So we touched briefly in the Q&A and also in one or two interviews—this image may be related to my past, may be related to some character in my family, my father, for instance. The image kind of echoes that. It's not just a representation of my father and how he was tyrannical with me, or whatever it is.

And then there's this possibility—a reductionist view would say the image is caused by what happened to me in my life, and it's representing it now as a psychic image, and that's what it is. So the causality runs from real material event in the past to image now in the present. You understand? The causality is conceived that way. If it's only, that's where we lose the soulfulness.

There's another way of thinking that images are actually primary. I've touched on this on other retreats. Images are what drive. They drive our lives. The image that I've shared in the past, the image of a solitary warrior, soldier, or the image of the lonely wanderer, the solitary wanderer—I can see that that has been generative in my life. It's like the image comes first, not so much first in time, but it's primary. It gives me my life. It shapes my life. It shapes my perception of things.

So we can conceive the causality going that way instead, or we can conceive it as coming from a whole other level, as I mentioned briefly in the Q&A. Soul, the mystery of soul, gives me, offers me, my images and the events of my life. It's another level of possible conception. But reductionism will kill, in one way or another.

Related to this, that's the fifteenth, related to this is the sixteenth—what we were calling autonomy. So, again, if I consider this image is a part of me, then it's not autonomous. It's just a part of me. Now, in certain psychological languages, I'm projecting this image, and maybe I project it onto a friend or a lover, I project my mom or dad or whatever. But then the image doesn't have autonomy. It's somehow part of me, which is projected as an image.

Versus the image is both me and not me. It's something beyond me. It's something—it has its own personhood. Like a person that we know, a flesh and blood person that we know. So, again, these nodes, you can notice them. And people reporting, it's like, after a while you start to notice, oh, this image has its autonomy. It really feels like another being.

We're talking about... You understand? Or the tree that I am sensing the soul has its kind of personhood, if you like. And so that's another aspect of autonomy. Again, we could have separated and made another node of personhood, but that's...

In considering the movement between self and image, we find what we might call the node of **twoness**. When I encounter an image that possesses genuine otherness, the eros flowing between us doesn't simply collapse this relationship into some universal unity. The image doesn't melt away into undifferentiated oneness.

Instead, there's an attractive pull, an erotic tension that maintains the distinctness between myself and this beloved other. The differentiation is preserved—not dissolved in some white light of unification or absorbed into a blissful melting union. This is essential: the erotic tension sustains the particularity of both self and other.

Even when I become an image—when the boundaries shift and I find myself inhabiting its perspective—differentiation remains. Perhaps twoness isn't immediately obvious in such moments, but distinctness of particulars continues to be preserved in soul-making perception. We're not moving toward some undifferentiated oneness, but rather maintaining the fertility that comes from the dance between separate and connected, distinct yet related.

This differentiation can manifest in various ways. There might be the image and the world in which it exists—each with their own particularity, their own texture and qualities. Yet alongside this differentiation, there often exists an implicit sense of underlying oneness. The image and its world are separate, yet in some mysterious way, the world *is* that image. They are the same thing, but this recognition doesn't collapse the relationship or melt away the distinctness.

The modes of relating to an image are fluid and dynamic. You might sense it as completely separate at first, then find yourself becoming it—fusing with it, entering into its experience, seeing the world through its perspective. Then the relationship might shift again, returning to separation. This fluidity is quite normal and part of the natural rhythm of imaginal engagement.

If you notice your relationship with images tends to follow only one pattern, you might deliberately experiment with different modes. If an image always remains separate, you could explore: What would it be like to be this monster? What is it like from the inside to be Aslan, to inhabit his fierce tenderness? Allow yourself to discover what emerges when you shift the quality of engagement, when you consciously explore different ways of meeting the imaginal.

The last mode I want to explore tonight is the eighteenth: what we call the theatre, or the imaginal middle way.

This quality emerges naturally when we work authentically with imaginal images. If you ask someone deeply engaged with an image whether it's real or not real, they'll likely find those categories inadequate. There's something that exists between real and not real—a different kind of reality altogether. This is something we can actually notice and cultivate when we linger with images.

Sometimes Catherine and I explore images together, and we've learned to distinguish when our practice shifts into different territories. One of the hallmarks of imaginal work is this sense of theatre—this quality of being neither real nor not real. To me, it's profoundly beautiful, liberating, and potent.

We might call this the imaginal middle way—the middle path between real and not real. Consider the experience of truly excellent theatre in an intimate setting, where the actors are close enough to touch.

You know it's play—literally a play, not real in the conventional sense. Yet it can be utterly vulnerable, powerful, and transforming. The imaginal realm carries this same theatrical quality.

This is what it means to recognize artistic truth or poetic truth—a different kind of truth with immense power, yet distinctly particular in its nature.

People sometimes ask in our sessions whether all this emptiness work is necessary—the gradual reduction of fabrication until we reach the unfabricated and see its emptiness. It's an open question. I don't believe it's strictly necessary. Some people naturally develop this middle-way perception through emptiness understanding. Others access it through their artistic sensibility or poetic understanding of reality. Still others simply notice this middle-way status of images, this theatrical quality they naturally possess.

Consider the eternality we explored today. Is an image real or unreal? The most obvious truth about images is their impermanence—they come and go, just as the sensing soul comes and goes. Time's passage and change are completely apparent. Yet simultaneously, there's often a sense of timelessness, of something always already happening. The image becomes iconic rather than narrative, existing as an eternal presence somewhere in the vastness of psyche.

We can be sensitive to this quality of timelessness and eternality while never losing sight of impermanence. Bodies are impermanent. Lives are impermanent. Everything is impermanent, and images certainly are impermanent. When we see both truths simultaneously and hold them together, we avoid landing in either camp as ultimate truth.

Each of these modes contains profound depth, richness, potency, and liberating efficacy. Entering this particular node of theatre liberates something essential while retaining the power of poetry, art, theatre, and the middle way itself.

All the nodes possess tremendous depth and richness, along with potency and liberative efficacy. When we enter into some of these nodes—like this theatre of perception—something genuinely liberates. It truly releases something within us. This power endures: the power of poetry, the power of art, the power of theatre, the power of the middle way.

These are not mere intellectual constructs but living doorways to freedom. Each node offers its own particular gift, its own way of opening the heart and mind to what lies beyond our usual fixations. In the theatre of perception, we discover that we are both the actors and the audience, the dreamers and the dream, participating in a drama that is both utterly real and completely insubstantial.

The middle way shows us that we need not choose between these apparent contradictions. We can hold the fullness of experience without grasping, witness the play of phenomena without being caught by it. In this way, the very impermanence that might seem threatening becomes our greatest teacher, pointing always toward the freedom that lies at the heart of all experience.

Shall we sit?

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