Soulmaking Rivers (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 51:46

Maria raised a question about God that had been troubling her since the beginning of the retreat. She noted that the dharma talks had been particularly focused on divine language—terms like angel, sacred, reverence—and while this vocabulary drew her to soulmaking, it also triggered a visceral reaction due to her difficult religious history.

"I have a very tight relationship with God historically," she explained. "When I hear language like angel or sacred, reverence, I kind of feel..." She paused, describing an immediate, gut-wrenching response that bypassed rational thought—decades of conditioning from a religious background creating an automatic recoiling.

Maria mentioned that certain ideas had been helpful, particularly the concept that God too is empty, just like everything else. But the physical reaction to these words remained challenging.

When I asked if there were alternative words that might work better—sacred, holy, angel, divine—she responded with the same resistance. "All of it," she said simply.

So let's approach this conceptually for a moment. When someone is comfortable using words like God, sacred, angel, or divine, and you ask them what they actually mean by these terms, they often struggle to articulate anything concrete. This difficulty in capturing meaning is actually one of the most significant aspects of such language—these words are inherently open-ended, carrying an essential mystery.

"How's the word mystery?" I asked, clarifying that I didn't mean Agatha Christie.

This points to something crucial: these terms carry an unfathomability, a sense that there's something present that can't be fully grasped. It's not that we can't say anything about the divine, but whatever we do say won't completely capture it. Wrapped up in this mystery is a deep meaningfulness that we can't even fully articulate.

So we're speaking of something we'll never completely understand intellectually. We might offer concepts and descriptions, but somehow it remains of utmost value despite—or perhaps because of—this uncapturability. There's a cluster of qualities here: ultimate value, essential undefinability, profound meaningfulness, and mystery.

you could make up a word or words and translate as we go along. But that's really where we're heading.

What may have happened in the past is that these words have become associated not just with certain

punitive or restrictive measures. I was also brought up in an orthodox environment, which I really didn't like for the most part. And it's almost as if there's something about this whole business—which we touched on yesterday—that will break vessels, including what any concept means, like divine, or God, all of that.

So it's almost like if you know that's where you're going, then at the moment there's a kind of encrustation based on the past about what these words mean—not just the emotional, relational associations with them, but also what they actually are. I was brought up with a very strangely narrow conception of God, as this kind of judge who was somehow separate from me. And at some point, that has to get stretched or broken. Maybe I'm just confused for a while. Maybe there's a not-knowing phase. But at some point, either that word or other words can come back to point toward and suggest—they function really as much as anything as poetic words, poetry words that suggest into the soul something of this mystery that's ultimately valuable and ultimately meaningful in a way that I can't quite capture.

There's something else worth saying about the notion of divinity. Some would prefer Buddha-nature, and there are certain streams of dharma where the idea of a kind of ultimate cosmic deity and certain ideas of Buddha-nature are pretty much the same. So there's this value, this benevolence—that's not really the right word, but something like that—wrapped up vaguely in the concept.

There's also a way that it's not separate from me, and I think that's very important as well. Again, I was brought up—if I just share about my background—with no indication that the divine or God or whatever is not separate from me somehow. It was always portrayed as something other that would judge me or discern where I would end up or something like that. There was this kind of separation there. So non-separation is also woven into this concept, along with this endlessness, this kind of endless reverberation and unfathomability and all that.

You can hear in the words I'm using many of the other nodes. They kind of imply each other. But that's the kind of thing we're going for. So it's much more open.

Does this make sense? So that's one way of just knowing that actually, this is completely normal. It could be around this concept, it could be around something else. It could be around body, it could be around emotions, it could be around relationship, it could be around what the cosmos is, it could be around what matter is. There are certain ways we get—we touched on this yesterday—things frozen by ideas or things that have happened to us or our personal history or our energetics or the way we relate to our emotions. All kinds of ways something gets stuck.

If I can find ways of entering into what we're calling soul-making—any way in—so you don't even have to go in at these words that feel difficult. Find something that does relate, and if the alchemy of that vessel... it's like yeast rising, something expands in the kneading of the dough. Something expands and it starts to gather into it other aspects of the being that aren't yet included.

Now here's the issue. There are two ways of approaching it. Here's the difficulty: we can approach it directly and inquire into the difficulty. I'll come back to that in a second. You can also not bother too much about the difficulty and just go in with whatever makes sense and resonates with you out of what's being said here and what's being taught. Go in where there's a feeling of soul-making, where there's that sense of soul-making, and just get into that. Let that speak to you, let that resonate in the being, in the psyche, and it will start doing its alchemical expansion process in its own time. Eventually, other aspects and concepts of the being at different levels that at the moment are outside of that process will get included, subsumed into that process.

So you can just trust what works and trust that we're going somewhere that is going to be—whatever words you end up with, whatever works for you as concepts—quite different from what your background is. In a way, you don't have to... it's good that you recognize there's a problem there, but you don't have to bash your head against it.

So it could be anything. Maybe something else just works for you. Or you could ask: which bit does work?

So in a way, you don't have to—it's good that you recognize there's a problem there, but you don't have to bash your head against it. So it could be anything. Maybe what actually works for you is something about—I'm making this up—or you could ask yourself, which bit does work?

"Sure."

Yeah, okay, beautiful. So nature—there's a sense of soul-making in nature, and you can sense nature with soul. You go that way. You trust that, and something happens that expands. What these words that we're using—and you might replace them with other words—but that kind of concept and idea and intimation that we're pointing to will come out of that soul-making where it works for you. You understand?

So this is a general rule. And at times you may want to, for instance, inquire into the particular kind of pain in relationship to these words. So it's actually like, you know, in a safe space—maybe with someone you trust, maybe with a teacher, with a friend—actually drop those words in and just notice: what is it? I get angry. What is it? I feel oppressed. I feel... And just notice what happens. And then what does that mean?

So as always, there are different directions in. It's really helpful to look at what's difficult and explore what's going on there. What are these walls that I have? And what do they need in terms of healing or opening? And sometimes we don't need to go towards the difficult. You can go the other way and trust this rising of the bread there, this alchemical presence, where it works for you—which is what you're saying in nature.

Does this make sense? Yeah? How does that sound for now, Mary?

"Yes. It's helped me to take away all the pressure."

Yeah, absolutely. There's no pressure. First of all, we're going very quickly through this material. And some of it just won't make sense. Or there'll be reactions—all kinds of reactions. It's all fine. It's all part of the working of the process, the turning of the soil. And you can really trust your sense of soul-making. That's like a golden rule—go with that. And at some point, there might be some really interesting kind of heartful investigation of these wounds, basically, around these ideas and those relationships.

"Just going back to the thing you were saying about trusting, so there's also a part of me that thinks—just as man kind of fabricates God to be like me—are we fabricating soul-making to give life meaning?"

Yeah, thank you. So the question is, man... well, some people would say man fabricates God to give life meaning. And the question is, are we fabricating soul-making to...

So we could say yes, but the usual way we then understand that idea is like a certain level of understanding. We say life is ultimately meaningless. And the reality is there is no God. And then what we're doing, because we can't handle that—we're a little morally weak—we invent things that make us feel a little bit better and more comforted.

That's based on a certain kind of "this is real." Meaninglessness is real. Soullessness is real. Godlessness is real. You understand? So oftentimes in the framing of that kind of question, there's already a reality assumption there.

I think partly where I want to tie all this with emptiness is—if we start with the idea of fabrication. We fabricate, we make up stuff, or stuff gets believed in or perceived or created. Then I have a question to investigate, and it's a very deep thread of a question: What's not fabricated?

So I can see, for example—and everyone in this room knows—when you experience papañca, and you're just lost in some blah blah blah, and you come out of that and you think, "Huh, that was fabricated." You gain your sanity again. So I know, okay, at that point, that's fabricated—all that nonsense, papañca and that kind of mess that we get into.

And this is real, the hard reality of that, and I can settle with that. But what if we don't stop the investigation of what is fabricated right there? What if we keep going? I've seen that papañca is fabricated. What else is fabricated?

One way of understanding what Buddha Dharma is, that journey, is to keep open that question. What is fabricated? How do I know? How can I investigate and see? So this sense of self, most people take completely for real. And then you start going in and out of different states of meditation. You start looking at what is it that makes this sense of self feel so convincingly solid and fixed, and then at other times not. What does it depend on? And then at a certain point you realize, goodness me, that sense of self is fabricated. And then maybe an even more subtle sense of self, and so on. And the same with other realities.

Now that's a long and profound journey, but at the end of it, let's say, one realizes it's all fabricated. So there is no "life is like this, the universe is like this." There is godlessness. Meaninglessness is an existential fact. And we're just fabricating on top of a basic reality to kind of paint things pink. It's actually that it's all fabricated. That's an extremely deep insight.

But I'm not asking anyone to believe that insight. Some people will just have an intuitive belief in that insight and that's fine. But what if I'm actually, if I'm really ruthless and rigorous and I say, let me find out what is fabricated and what is not fabricated. And then I just keep going with this question. I don't see, for instance, that papañca is fabricated or that meaning is fabricated. I follow it and I go even deeper. Meaninglessness is also fabricated. Godlessness is fabricated.

So that's one way of going through. We have chosen the word soul-making because it emphasizes the fact of fabrication. So it's actually, yes, we're fabricating. Yes. And then it's like, why is that not justifiable? And actually, is that something beautiful? So participation is a much deeper, more fuller word. We participate in the creation and discovery of all of this, all of this.

So it's really good to be skeptical and doubtful. But if you're going to be skeptical and doubtful, be vigorously, rigorously skeptical and doubtful. That is, to everyone. Do you understand? You've got this question. It's like we settle so easily for answers and we rest in assumptions as human beings so easily, sometimes without even recognizing, oh, I don't know that. It's just an assumption. So what happens if we just keep this? It's a bit like what Catherine said today. It's like "I know what reality is." Can we keep that open as an exploration? Do you understand?

There's another thing that reminds me. The other thing that we assume is that the generator or the fabricator, me, or whatever, is a real thing. So it's like this self is fabricating soul-making. Actually, again, when we go deeper and deeper, you start to realize that self, too, is empty. The fabricator, the mind, the soul, they're all empty. And that's like there's no ground to any of it.

And it might sound a bit, I don't know how it sounds now, where it lands in different people, but the deep felt realization of that is something truly magical.

It's something wondrous and mystical. It's not something like, "Well, that was a drag." It's something—it's hard to convey in language—but there's this thrill of that journey as well, of simply keeping this question open: What is fabricated? Is there something unfabricated? Is that real? There's an integrity and power and beauty to that thread of questioning itself.

And to me, it doesn't come out somewhere nihilistic at all. It comes out somewhere magical and mystical, with so much blessing to it. But maybe those aren't nice words. So, yeah.

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This is still forming, but I've been reflecting on what's alive—these layers of personal soul-making, this

collective here, and then, if you could imagine, the soul of the universe soul-making together, and thinking about that in relation to social context.

The other day you used the word temenos, I think, as a vessel or sacred space. Over the last few months of doing these practices, it has felt to me that what you could call my "image library"—just to simplify it—is shaped to some extent by dominant culture, both personally and collectively. In some of my work, talking with other people and hearing their images, I've realized... A colleague was giving an example—he's Afro-Caribbean—and he was talking about the Juba dance, which arises from this collective archive of trauma. It's performed and then it disappears, and it's always new every single time. That was really rich for me, and I would not have known about that.

I think, but I'm not sure, that temenos is also meant to include all archetypal, cultural elements—that it spans cultures, that it's not just specific. So I guess I was wondering how... you've elegantly woven us together in community, and you even talked a little bit about the environment. Thinking about this group—it's not hugely diverse, so if we were in Ghana we would be having very different images—is there a way, or is it important to think about, how could we collectively contribute to a kind of "image library"? We can read about things, but even hearing yours and Catherine's, it's like, "Oh, this is..." I forgot about that, or I've never been exposed to that.

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I was using the word temenos only occasionally so far to mean a kind of... It's as if when there's an image, whether it's just on my own practicing or whether I'm practicing with others—like when we did the sharing practice yesterday—there's such... We need an alchemical vessel. It needs a vessel or container. When there's eros, it also needs a vessel, needs a container and a boundary, without which the soul-making can't happen. It doesn't really catch.

Some of you might have noticed already—you're in a group, or you're in one of those fours or in a dyad, and someone says something, or Catherine or I share an image in a talk, and that image lands in your soul and functions either as a spark for other images or becomes an image for you. Do you understand? Or someone becomes an image—Catherine or I or someone here or someone you know becomes an image for you. Or, again, you hear images. So there's a way that happens, but it needs a kind of temenos to happen.

There are different aspects. Part is just sensitivity, presence, care. I think formalism also helps.

In terms of the conceptual framework, what we're trying to do is a little bit what you could call a meta-framework. In other words, we're not so interested in gathering together around a certain image. For instance, in Christianity, the cross is one very potent image, or the body of Christ, or all kinds of things. And there's a gathering together around a certain image—community around an image, a commonality of people resonating with the same image, maybe in different ways and at different depths.

We might do that temporarily. Even when Catherine laid out those artifacts today, we're sharing an image

for the space of a ritual. And some people will feel it more or less. But we're not choosing certain images and then making a religion out of those.

Maybe it's something to do with Western culture. Maybe it's something to do with our personalities. I think what we're aiming for is this sense that images are infinite in possibility. What we want to do—the business of this work—is the question of what's common to the whole process and the experience and the constellation around any particular image. Do you understand?

So that's what we're teaching - principles you can take anywhere and use in relation to any image or sensing of the soul. We're exploring what's common to this whole process, the elements that help this work flourish.

This approach may partly respond to our time and place in Western culture - a culture of individuality that we cannot now erase. This certainly brings difficulties: the alienation so common today, the loneliness, the persistent self-judgment and social anxiety. *Do I look okay? Am I okay? Do I measure up? Am I good?* All this is endemic in Western culture, arising from the birth of the Western sense of self centuries ago through slow, gradual, complex processes.

This inheritance brings challenges, yes, but also gifts. It offers the possibility that any one of us can receive images in any direction suitable to our soul. We can be fed by anything at all, following our own unique path.

Perhaps this reflects simply my inclination, Catherine's inclination. Or perhaps something in Western culture at this time needs this kind of openness, this deeper legitimization. Not only in Buddha-dharma, but in our larger culture, we lack real, deep legitimization of the imagination. Maybe what's needed is a structure that legitimates, supports, and deepens practice while remaining much more free and individual.

Regarding what you're calling the library of meanings - absolutely, you have to discover what works. In talks over recent years, I've tried offering a whole range of images: some ethereal and blissful, others seemingly violent, devouring, bloody; some very sexual, others peaceful; some unremarkable, others incredibly dramatic. The point is to show the range - it's endless, infinitely possible.

Sharing images or receiving them from other cultures could seed ideas for you, for others. We can do this with each other. But what really helps seed images... when I open a book of mythology, I often get bored quickly. Yet when someone tells me an image that's alive for them, or when a writer writes with that aliveness, something about the soulfulness, the soul-making spark in another, travels and plants a spark or ignites something in me. That may then become soul-making. We could create a library, but perhaps we also need that spark of ignition - we must receive the soulfulness, not just *this is what it looked like*.

About limitation and shaping - as the soul-making process unfolds, everything eventually gets woven into this vortex of soul-making. Even difficult things that happen to me, the events of my life, both beautiful

and challenging, are sensed as given by soul, felt as part of the grace even when tragic.

This understanding expands further. What's given to us culturally - in both personal and cultural history - comes from the world soul, the *anima mundi*. There's an intelligence, alongside the deep non-intelligence, in our culture's unfolding, in the images and difficulties we face: environmental, political, social challenges. These are given by soul to us collectively. This is what we're faced with, our soul food - what we need in the dough for soul-making to occur.

Any situation can remain just a difficult circumstance, or a wonderful cultural gift, or it can be transformed into soul stuff. This offers an entirely different view of what gives us both images and our history, this culture and its challenges.

Again, the concept, the *logos*, expands into such a view. Then we receive a completely different sense of what life is, what the cosmos is, what's actually happening and unfolding. Am I trying to convince anyone or argue this as absolute reality? No - it's a poetic idea that can have tremendous power, beauty, and possibility to open the soul. While the whole question of ontology is vast, this view can have real soul power.

So there's that journey, and there's the possibility of the fullness of that journey, then emerging through different states of unfabricating into the unfabricated itself, opening to that. Some people would stop there. Some people would stop before that. Some people would stop there. But it's possible then to go even beyond that.

Because when you go that far, then you've got the unfabricated and the fabricated. And there's a kind of duality, which some Buddhadharma is very dualistic about. This is all—it's just the realm of samsara and dukkha. It's really not worth much. It's only a place to get out from, not to be reborn in. It's not popular teaching these days, but it's quite classical. There's a duality: the unfabricated is good and the fabricated is not.

One can go—Mahayana picks up and goes beyond that and sees even, we might say, the emptiness of the unfabricated. I'm just touching on this very quickly to get to something else. And then what that does is open up the possibility of fabrication, because fabrication is holy too. It's sacred-making. So there's no duality.

Now, the imaginal practice—as I think about it and as we've been exploring it—is fabricating. It's creating images. It's imagining. It's making more complexity, not less. So it's moving in a completely different direction than those three paths I mentioned: the insight into emptiness, the metta path, and the samatha path, which all move toward less fabrication.

The imaginal is moving toward more fabrication, but it's doing so in a way that's conscious and artistic and soulful. It's sacred fabrication. And when one has gone through that whole journey I described—into the unfabricated and then beyond that duality—then fabrication becomes possible as sacred art, as sacred

creativity.

So in that sense, the imaginal practice is not a path to the unfabricated in the way those other three are. But it can be a path of sacred making, of holy creativity, of soulful fabrication. And that, in its own way, is just as sacred, just as valuable, as the journey into the unfabricated.

This is why I say soul doesn't want a full stop. Soul wants the endless creativity, the endless making of meaning, the endless weaving of images and stories and possibilities. Not because it's running away from the unfabricated, but because fabrication itself can be holy.

It all becomes the possibility of all becoming sacred. Is this okay so far?

With the imaginal, in a way, it's interesting. We could go around and ask everyone—we won't, but we could—how much or what kind of permission and legitimization do you need to get into imaginal practice or sensing the soul? For some people, it will be exactly related to this question of fabrication. For some people, it will be related to where it fits in the context of Buddhadharma. For some people, it will be something about, "Well, isn't it dangerous?" For others, it will be, "What about all that eros?" People will need different kinds of permissions and legitimizations.

But there is a legitimization that can come strictly from that kind of really deep understanding of emptiness that liberates the possibility and legitimates the possibility of fabricating beautifully. Why? Because fabrication is empty too. There is no duality with the unfabricated. One has sensed the equal holiness and non-duality of all things. So that legitimizes it.

A lot of people—there's probably a real minority in this room right now of people who've actually practiced all that way with emptiness in order for it to liberate the permission for the imaginal. That happened to be my path, but it's not common. Other people need a different approach. I'll talk about this tonight just a bit. What we need, though, is this sense of neither real nor not real with the imaginal. And that can come through art, through that sensibility, through poetry, through literature. We have that sense there. But I don't need to necessarily go through all that practice with the emptiness. Do you understand?

Some people approach the imaginal—they're attracted to it and start practicing with it before they've done all that emptiness business, so they've only done a little bit of it. And they find that, for instance, like we were talking with Nick yesterday about one of the things you might see with the self-view is just this multiplicity of self-sense. And you live it and you feel it, and so it brings with it this kind of "Which one is the real me?" And it brings a loosening of the self-sense, for example, and can bring a loosening and a liquefying of the world-sense and the other-sense. So there's a way that something similar to the emptiness process—the loosening of that, the un-reifying of that, de-reifying that—can happen through imaginal practice. So that's more emptiness, in this understanding of the non-inherent existence of things.

In terms of the unfabricated, this actually relates to a couple of the notes I had. So what can happen? A couple of people mentioned in their notes—meditating on an image. In this case it was infinite Aslan

space. Do you know who Aslan is? The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. It's the lion. When I first read it, I thought it was infinite Asian space. Anyway, it's infinite Aslan space.

So, in other words, she's got—Aslan is an imaginal figure for her with a history. And what can happen sometimes is the image, the form of the image fades and we kind of get to the essence. So it wasn't just space or just infinite space. It was space imbued with the essence and the character of Aslan and what everything—all the richness and the unendingness and the complexity of what Aslan meant—but without the form. You understand?

Now there's another one here which is a lot more complicated, and I think I'll maybe talk to the person if I can just extract a couple of things from this. This is a person—it's a complement to what I've just said about the Aslan. So that's something very beautiful, goldenness, and it's the kind of simply pure, noble, etc. Everything that Aslan would kind of represent and more.

I'll have to move through this next example quickly because it's complex, but it's really fascinating. This person had more complex images involving destruction, death, and suffering. They had an image of a skeleton that had been around for a long time, and then the skeleton dissolved. This was quite surprising. What was even more striking was that there was huge love and joy emanating from the image, yet the practitioner was plunged into sadness.

So unlike what I'm guessing was the Aslan image—quite lovely, radiant, noble, and uplifting—here was a more complex, emotionally nuanced experience. When the image faded, there was a space filled with what they described as "liquid light slash love slash limitlessness" but also sadness and grief. Something had happened. This image hadn't quite captured the essence of that original form, but it had transformed and gone into a kind of boundless samadhi space, similar to the boundless Aslan, which captured certain values and emotional resonances.

This isn't on the Buddha's map. But what you find if you really delve into jhana practice and explore it extensively is that the Buddha outlined one path, but there are all kinds of cocktails, mixes, shadings, and variations—a whole realm of infinite possibilities.

So occasionally, this is possible: the form of an image fades and its essence remains. It could be an essence of loveliness. Perhaps there's a goddess, or a friend whose angelic form I'm meditating on—their particular loveliness. Then the form fades, and I'm left with that loveliness. But it's particular, carrying the essence of that specific character. Do you understand? It's not just universal, generic loveliness. It could take another step toward universal loveliness, but then we'd have to say we're no longer doing imaginal practice because the image is gone, the particularity is gone. Yet it might still be soul-making because, as you said, "wow"—there's something the soul is expanding into and learning.

For those experiencing this, the sadness is fine. This practitioner continued: "I have leaned into it, stayed with it. It is not a sorrow that contracts." Here's a clue—there's something soul-making and beautiful

happening. "It is as expansive in the energy body as love and very beautiful. The sorrow was beautiful." This is characteristic of soul-making; we can recognize it by these qualities.

Returning to your original question, I view it all as one integrated practice. Whether it's samatha moving toward the unfabricated, metta, emotional awareness, psychological healing, imaginal practice, or emptiness—it's all part of this big mandala, this vast range of interconnected practices, and it's all important.

There are ways of entering the imaginal that loosen our understanding of emptiness. There are ways of entering the imaginal that reach this essence and then move toward unfabricating, toward the fading of perception—like the jhanas, but different. With practice, you can learn to lean one way or another.

For example, taking the simpler Aslan case: here's this infinite Aslan space, and it's genuinely lovely. Within that mixture, there's probably some fundamentally jhanic quality—let's say equanimity—mixed with all the qualities that Aslan represents. I could lean toward that, find it in the mix, attune to it, and it will amplify out of the mixture. If it's equanimity in that mix, I just tune more to the equanimity, and it will move into classical equanimity of the fourth jhana. Or I can stay tuned to the Aslan quality itself, and it remains a variation. Or it can move somewhere more universal.

There's also a way it can move toward the unfabricated, though this is quite rare. I wouldn't recommend pursuing this all the time because if it becomes too universal, you're losing the richness of the imaginal practice itself.

It's great, but if you do it all the time, then you're losing the particularity of the imaginal practice. So it's there. There are so many tributaries. It's an endless world of wonder.

So you can do that. If you do it all the time, it will take it a bit out of what we're calling imaginal. Or you can stay with the essence at times, but you have to make sure that it's got this particularity to it. So that would be the same as saying an image could be very vague. I have the vague sense of a presence. I don't see it visually, but it's something quite particular and it's speaking to me with all those particular resonances. Okay?

Great. One time... This is super quick. It's completely related.

Is the phrase "to see or think this image" equivalent to the phrase "to see or think with this image"? Or are they kind of two sides of the coin?

It's not quite equivalent, but they're related. Maybe we can pick that up. Maybe I'll pick it up tonight.

Let's just have a bit of quiet, then the tea wash rappers will go, and we'll all meet back at 8:15 instead of 8. Is that okay?

All right.

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