# Destiny, Autonomy, Love, and Soul (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 39:46

Just a reminder: if you would like to ask something or share something and you'd rather it wasn't recorded and made public, please let me know and I'll press pause.

Karen has a multiple-part question about duty—specifically how to relate to duty, how it intersects with emptiness, and how to relate the understanding or experience of emptiness to image and to duty itself. She's also wondering whether duty shifts over time, if it changes, and how all these elements seem to coalesce around this central theme.

Let me start at the end of your question and work backwards. The nodes of the lattice reflect each other, imply each other, contain each other, and also complement each other. Some of them are almost like different sides of the same coin—they draw each other in. So when you have a sensing of soul, everything you described I would expect. I would expect exactly these questions and this kind of unfolding.

The word *destiny* comes up, though we haven't mentioned it yet, but I would expect it to emerge. Something happens when we work with an image, with this sensitivity, with enough openness of logos that Catherine was talking about, enough conceptual framework—it starts growing. It starts expanding. More and more elements of existence, not just of ourselves but of existence itself, get woven in and sensed with soul and caught up in that whole eros-psyche-logos dynamic.

Wherever there's image, in some way or another, there's a sense of duty. Actually, wherever there's any soul-making, there's this quality. Let me give you a brief example of something that's not image. Consider jhana—the quieting of images. When you first authentically open to jhana, it's very rare for someone to simply say, "Well, that was nice." It comes with a sense of duty. It's like, "Wow, look at what is possible. Look at this vista that has opened up in terms of a realm of consciousness." At minimum, the duty might be something like: I need to explore this more, I need to practice more, I need to find out more. Maybe I need to go beyond this. Maybe I need to share this with others.

Anytime there's a stretching of the psyche in a way that feels meaningful to us, we have some kind of sense of duty with it. With an image, as you said, this can manifest in different ways.

This is really important—all the parts of your question truly do intersect. The danger in duty, of course, is the fundamentalist religious terrorist, isn't it? Someone who says, "I have this vision that sounds divine, and I'm on fire with it, and my duty is to kill"—or whatever it might be. What's missing completely—well, quite a lot actually—but one of the things missing is this: we participate, we assent, there's this create-discover imaginal middle way.

When I think about instances of duty that I might feel in relation to something soul-making or some image or sensing with soul, it can feel like the most important thing in my life, that duty. But it still feels real-or-not-real. It still has that amplitude, that breadth of the middle way ontology. For me, that's really key.

This is something we notice, something important to think about and discuss conceptually.

But I think one of the things I'm emphasizing about these recognitions is that we actually notice them. You start in whatever order it comes—you notice a sense of duty, but then you'll also notice this middle way, if there's sensitivity, if there's delicacy, if there's the energy body present, if there's openness, all the rest of it.

We can have this notion of duty, and then something gets cut off, and we engage this question about duty on a purely intellectual level. That's important—part of what I'm saying is that everything gets subsumed into soul-making, including the intellect. I point up here, but it's not really up here, is it? Intellect is everywhere. So including conceptuality, but you can also use your body and your sensitivity, your mindfulness and attention. You will discern this sense of duty that feels so touching to the soul, so calling.

I say again, for me it feels like the most important—these duties are what feel like the most important things in my life. I've said this somewhere before, but one of the things that brings me deep equanimity in relation to possibly dying soon from cancer is the sense that I'm on track with my duty. I have tried to do my duties, plural. That does something to the whole sense of existence, life and death. It's not everything, but it's immense—to die with that sense. Do you understand?

But I would never try to convince anyone else that what I sense as my duty is some kind of independently objective fact in the universe. It's something I participate in. To go back to today's framework, I create-discover that duty. And yes, it can change over time, curiously.

I can think of certain images I shared recently in a talk—longtime images that in the dance of life and image, in the infinite echoing and reflection of those, have transformed over time. So the duty is different. But that wasn't something I decided to change. It was something that evolved in this dance, in this mysterious, infinite echoing of life and relationship and that image. The sense of duty began to change naturally. It's like the same image evolved in the process of soul-making, not because I decided it would be better, or I'd have less *dukkha*, or it would be an easier journey if I changed the image and the sense of duty with it. Does that make sense?

So yes, it can evolve like that. Yes, there's always this sense of participation, and yes, there's always this sense of free will. I was speaking quickly about autonomy earlier, and one of the things I was trying to stress is that we always have a choice with soul-making. It cannot happen without our conscious participation, without some sense of my autonomy and freedom to say no—I'm not going to do that duty, I'm not going to engage this image, I'm not going to follow this eros, I'm not going to listen to that calling.

Or I am.

So there's always this sense of both the autonomy of the image and my autonomy. Something is asking something from me. Something calls me, wants something from me. A lot of psychology would approach imagination asking, "What can I get from it?" That's part of it, but there's a whole deeper, more beautiful dimension—territories, landscapes, vistas that can open when we also ask the other question: "What do you want from me?"

In a way, it's a bigger ask. This autonomous image—it's me, but it's not me. It's part of me, but it's beyond me. It wants something from me and from my life. But I always have my autonomy. So not only am I not going to be possessed in some way, doing some zombie thing, but I can also say no.

Let me just... Yes. And there was something else.

Okay, so the destiny... Oh, I know what it was. So two things. Yeah, destiny. We'll hold on to that for a second. And discerning what the duty is.

A lot of this work, if I think back on my journey with this kind of exploration, at the beginning it was all very clunky. Describing it to others might have sounded quite dramatic, you know—pretty dramatic images with this journeying process in a landscape with dragons and all that kind of stuff. As it progresses, and this applies to other meditations as well, like emptiness, everything gets more subtle. We grow in sensitivity and delicacy.

So the question of duty—take that religious fundamentalist terrorist. It's anything but subtle. Blowing yourself up in a bus station is not a subtle gesture at all. But the duty with an image can be all the way to just: my duty is to behold it and to be touched by it and to be open to it and to have that sense of mystery. In my heart, even though I might not physically bow, something is bowing. Something has that reverence. That's the duty.

Sometimes it's just that, and no one else knows anything about it, and no one else can see any obvious manifestation in your life. You've just been touched by the poetry of something, and it's between me and the image, me and the divine, me and existence. Other duties manifest more concretely in life, but I would be a little suspicious of ones that reflect too accurately the image.

For example, and I've shared this in lots of talks, one image for me is this kind of solitary soldier. That's one of the ones that's changed—it's really not that present much anymore. But for a long time it was there. Now the last thing I would want to do is join the army. Really not my cup of tea. I was never into fighting. I didn't even like rugby and all that stuff.

But I can see in my life how combative I am when I need to stand up for something or some vision or sensibility that feels encroached, or some kind of care that feels encroached socially, politically, or in a certain scene. So there's a kind of reflection there, but I'm certainly not driving spears through anyone.

There's a kind of reflection, but it's not literal. Do you understand?

How to discern? I don't know that I have an answer to that, really. But maybe it's something to do with this other note of the infinite echoing and mirroring. There's a sense of my life, my choices, my actions, my behavior, and the image, and they mysteriously echo each other, so that as everything gets more and more subsumed in soul-making—which means everything: my body, my intellect, my sense of my journey, my dukkha, the cosmos, the sense of God or Buddha nature, materiality, relationship, everything—then more and more we get this echoing sense, this infinite mirroring.

As I said, I'm not sure when it was yesterday, we can conceive... A normal way of conceiving images in our wider culture would be something happens in my life or something exists in my psyche and the psyche generates the image of that. It's a result. It's a representation. We can play with a conception the other way around. My life is generated by the images. The image is primary in that sense. Does that make sense?

This begins to raise the question: what's my destiny? Is my destiny somehow—and tie this in with the autonomy—not given so much as I'm offered something? I'm offered something, and that thing might be a really difficult thing. It might be really...

But it comes, so I have to say yes to that. This cancer could just be cancer. It could just be death. It could just be pain. It could just be ordinary suffering, or it can be sensed with soul. It can be transformed. So that's not a destiny so much as an offering: Do you want to pick this up and sense it with soul? And then it becomes a destiny. We make it. We soul-make. Do you understand?

So again, even the sense of destiny is created, discovered. We participate in it. We retain our autonomy, and yet there's something possibly calling us. And all of that is both a kind of concept and an image, really—of life, sensing the soul of life—but also conceptual ideas that arise out of the alchemical process of soul-making. I would expect these things to emerge. Everything, everything, everything will get woven in. Soul wants to grow. Soul, as I said sometime, loves soul-making and will just reach out and draw in everything into that process. Do you understand?

*Participant:** How's that for the first part? The other question I think is quite a big one and it sort of shades into some of what you just said. It's about evil.

*Rob:** Evil, yeah.

*Participant:** I wonder if other people would... I'm not sure about... I don't know what to do. Okay, so it might be a much shorter one, actually. It's just about... So I get that sense in some images that it's really dark and that sometimes I have had that experience of being quite terrified. But also there are feelings that are in the dark space, the loving that you have in the cross. And there's a kind of... And then, so I just kind of wonder about, and I'm thinking about a particular person, whether that's the same thing or, you know, then obviously there's like a whole area of mental health...

*Rob:** Sure.

*Participant:** Sorry, that's a little bit...

*Rob:** Yeah, so the questions about evil and images that feel evil, and then images that are terrifying or dark but not necessarily evil. And how does it fit in with mental health and other cultures where they're much more comfortable? People believe in spirits and spirit possession and that sort of thing.

I can just say for me, I can't say about your friend because they're not here and I haven't met them and I don't know. If I'm with someone who's agitated in some way that maybe suggests something like that, I guess I, for me as a teacher, have a certain sense of whether there's a possibility there to convert an image, even if it seems evil and terrifying, for that to become imaginal. We talked about this spectrum. On one side, *papañca* and that kind of reification, the clinging, the terror of that.

So sometimes people might come with something that's really disturbed them, but there's something in what they're saying that shows me a possibility. And then we can work together with a lot of skill. And other times—and I can think of several examples—where a person wants to work with the imager, but I can see they're really not ready. They don't have that capacity yet. And so I would say, absolutely not. Not for you.

Not for you yet. And they might need other kind of help first.

Part of our conceptual framework is that the image is a dependent arising, like everything else. So it arises according to conditions—how the image appears, whether it seems evil or, as you say, dark. This is really, really important if you haven't grasped this yet: an image can be dark and involve dukkha, but yet have that love in it somehow, and the beauty, and it feels soul-making. Really, really important to know that.

There's the light side and the ethereal side of soul, and there's the dark side, and there's not any greater beauty in one or greater soulfulness. This is really, really important. So there's that range of what an image can be—the tonality of an image, let's say, in terms of light and dark in the broad sense of what those words mean.

But in our conceptual framework, in our logos, the image is always a dependent arising. That's partly what the lattice is saying. It's saying that the image does have a certain autonomy, but at the same time, when we talk about the imaginal, or what's imaginal, we're talking about the whole thing—the whole mix, gestalt, of all the lattice, some of which seems objective, and some of which seems part of me, subjective.

So when we talked about trust, it's like if I can just sprinkle a grain of trust there, the image changes. The image will become less threatening because I've now put something into the alchemical vessel called trust. I've put this substance called trust into the alchemical vessel, and the alchemy of what then happens is changed. Do you understand?

What Catherine mentioned today—logos is also one of the nodes. So what actually arises depends on the

conceptual framework. In a culture like Thailand, for example, they live and breathe a conceptual framework of spirits and ghosts and possessions and all kinds of phenomena. When they have a certain experience, they are bringing—even the least intellectual person there—that whole logos, not as a big articulated philosophy, but just kind of implicitly. And that colors the experience too.

Now, if that's not shiftable—Ajahn Chah is not going to sit down and teach them about dependent arising and all that necessarily—but he will introduce something like love. And so, again, the node in our language, the node of love, is something I notice, but also something that I can bring. My loving the image—it's like the trust—starts to change something.

This works because the image is dependent arising, but also the conceptual framework. So again, if in my conceptual framework there's the idea of it as a dependent arising, there's just for a little bit entertaining the idea that soul has treasure for me, that there's something redeemable in what appears dark and what is dukkha. And redeemable doesn't always mean making what's dark light. It means seeing the beauty and the soul in the dark. Do you understand?

But that's part of the conceptual framework. The idea of dependent arising is part of the conceptual framework. So in some situations, you simply can't change the conceptual framework. It's too big a job. Someone asked me, "Can you recommend some talks that explain the conceptual framework?" Well, yeah, but they're quite long. The thing about conceptual frameworks is they're quite heavy machinery. A lot of it's unconscious.

But eros is something that can flicker up very quickly and die down very quickly. Image can flicker, but tends to stay around a bit longer. Logos is slower. And some of the logoi that we have are really entrenched. We don't even realize we have them—like about what matter is, or about what the universe is. We've inherited that from hundreds of years of Western culture. So that's the slower piece in all of this, which is why it's hard to sit down with someone and just get them to change their conceptual framework.

After a while with this kind of practice, you can actually just go into seeing things with this conceptual framework. When soul, when concept and conceptuality and the thinking mind and logos gets involved with soul, then it ignites it, it fertilizes it, it makes it active. It will push out, it will expand, it will gain complexity and also gain flexibility, so that it becomes quite possible to just change a conceptual framework right in the moment.

I just see it this way. I just conceive of it that way. So going back to your thing about duty, I just conceive of it as given to me as destiny. Or I'll conceive of it as, no, I'm completely autonomous. Or something else. So that becomes, with practice, really quite flexible. You can just step in and out of different conceptual frameworks.

But the main point here is that the image and the tonality—in terms of evil, good, benevolence, dark, light—the image arises as a dependent arising, dependent on concept, affect, trust, sensitivity, energy,

body, awareness, love. We participate. You can't not participate. And it's just a matter of realizing the full beauty and extent and depth of the participation we have.

Let me turn to Jill's question about loving and being loved—how that works, especially the being loved. When you ask how does it work, Jill, do you mean what's the conceptual mechanism there, or how do I recognize it?

Let me take the recognition part first. Some images are just obvious because it's a grandma that's hugging you, or some actual images just tell you, "I love you." And again, we said, what does the image want? It wants you to know that you're loved. It wants to communicate this love. And your duty—if we can link it—my duty is to see that and recognize it and let that in. So that's very obvious, and it could be sexual, erotic love. But it could manifest in all kinds of different forms, more or less obviously.

But if we can link it to something we said with Gareth, a lot of what happens is the whole feel of things can expand its range to include what's much more subtle. So it's interesting—I'm with this tree, or whatever it is, maybe it's a real tree, a physical tree, or I have an image of some kind of stone. How do I recognize this more subtle communication?

I have to be very delicate in my attention. It's not obvious. It's not going to do something obvious in terms of its communication.

It might, actually, because the tree could speak or something. But sometimes the range of things just gets more subtle. So that means we just have to be quite delicate and open about how we might feel that.

One interesting thing is if you—so everything's interconnected, so it might be some other node that starts to ignite this node, but it might also be that this node's really a pair: loving and being loved. So if you communicate your love somehow or other—in words, in gesture, in image—it might then, in the reciprocity of things, in other words, your love ignites its love, and then it becomes more visible. So sometimes the communication acts as a kind of alchemical spark. So I don't think there's an exact answer so much as just to know that it can get really, really subtle.

Does that make sense?

The conceptual mechanism... I mean, in a way, it's part of the sense of the autonomy of the image. So, in other words, this image has personhood in the sense that it has soul. So it has its own sensibility, its own way of knowing, its own intelligence, its own affect, its own love, its own eros. It desires you. So there's... it's totally... yeah.

So again, this is something that we could have played another game on this retreat, which is just given some instructions, and I could have had a sealed envelope, you know, like they do on some game shows or whatever, and it would have the nodes in it. And you would each have a sealed envelope. And I would just wait, if it was a longer retreat, just wait in interviews for you to come and report which node. So it's

something that you'd notice, right, in the mystical unfolding. But it's something we can also activate as well.

How does it happen? It happens because... let's relate it to what Catherine shared about the soul-making dynamic, this Eros-Psyche-Logos. Here's an image, which we call as part of psyche, as image. And that image has something beautiful and attractive to it. And in—feels like here—arises my eros. There's something, I'm drawn to this image, or I want to fill out in it, or there's some kind of dynamic that wants to kind of be more intimate with it, inhabit it more, or touch it more, know it more, or, you know, that's what we could call eros.

If the logos decides that, well, an image is just a—you know, for example, it's just some brain neurons firing, it's just some nonsense—nothing's really going to happen with that. It might give you an idea of what you might chase in life, but you'll have to go looking for it out there.

If, though, the logos and the sensibility allow a kind of expansion, what happens is the image itself starts to get more rich and more deep and more imaginable, more multifaceted, and it starts to come alive, really, through this kind of dynamic of eros, which is looking for more. Eros is always looking for more—not in a problematic way, if it's allowed to expand, if the image is allowed to expand.

And as the image expands, it begins to feel like some of these things, it begins to feel like it's asking me something and it's loving me and it's got this dimension and that dimension and this aspect and that aspect. Do you understand? So the wanting more, it's like it inseminates something and it starts to expand. And because the logos allows it to—because the logos we're starting with, the logos saying, "Just maybe there's a treasure here, maybe imagination has something, the imaginal has something of value, and maybe there's something to discover here." So that, and then the logos can expand even more to... you know. And so the image gains dimensionality, aspectedness, complexity, multifacetedness, all character, personhood.

Does it make sense then? It's got... because, like a person, you then are in relationship. And just as with a person, you wouldn't say... You know, you would grant them full personhood. You would only—someone with some kind of cognitive incapacity would not be able to sense the personhood there, the fullness that there's eros there, there's love, there's intelligence, there's a kind of knowing, even if it's very different than what we're used to.

So this image of a stone, it's like, how does this stone that has come so alive with soul, how does it know? It knows in a very different way than I know. It doesn't have all these fancy ideas and doesn't talk for hours on end.

Yes, precisely, it communicates exactly, yes. So there's a resonance and again there's this kind of mirroring—infinite kind of mirroring of you and the stone, for example, or whatever. And it's very multi-leveled.

Rather than getting simpler and simpler, it gets more and more rich, more and more complex and diversified and multi-dimensional, multi-aspect. And then because of that, there's more for eros to fall in love with. And it's more. And there's a sense of, I see more and I sense even more that I can only dimly... and that attracts the eros even more. So the eros kind of wants more, things expand more and more and more. And that's actually infinite. And then everything starts getting, as I said at the beginning, caught up in the soul-making dynamic: self, other, sense of world, sense of eros itself.

All of it becomes imbued with soul—given this quality of holiness, dimensionality, depth. Everything is sensed through this lens of sacred meaning.

And so we come full circle. The soul-making dynamic reveals itself as this infinite spiral of deepening perception and expanding love. Each moment of recognition calls forth more Eros, which in turn reveals more beauty, more mystery, more of what calls to be loved. The self that perceives, the other that is perceived, our sense of world, even our sense of Eros itself—all become woven into this sacred dance of meaning-making and love.

This is the gift of the imaginal—not as escape from reality, but as a way of seeing through to the soul of things, to the inexhaustible depth that lies waiting in each moment, each encounter, each breath. When we learn to see with these eyes, everything becomes a doorway, everything becomes an invitation to fall more deeply in love with the mystery of existence itself.

Let us rest now in this understanding, letting it settle into the spaces between thoughts, into the quiet depths of our own being. May this exploration of soul-making continue to unfold in your practice, in your relationships, in your daily life—revealing ever more of the sacred dimension that is always already here, waiting to be discovered anew.

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