Opening Talk ('To Kiss a Falcon')

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 27:41

That's beautiful to hear what people were sharing there. We've called this retreat "Foundations of a Soul-Making Dharma," and I want to say a little about that word "foundations." In a way, it implies that we're going to try not to introduce any new material—some of you are probably quite relieved. There's already a lot, and it's time perhaps to consolidate, to digest, to establish those foundations.

What may be a little different are some of the relative emphases between different elements of this teaching, this path. That may shift somewhat—we'll see. But we're emphasizing trying to condense or distill the teachings and material down to basic building blocks. What skills are involved in practicing this way? What kinds of qualities or attitudes serve these kinds of openings, these directions and avenues? What kinds of understanding—so what kinds of skills, what qualities and attitudes, and what kinds of understandings, plural—are part and parcel, are the bones and flesh of this art, this practice.

We're going to try to condense and distill and present all this. I should say right from the start that we're not trying to be exhaustive—this isn't about creating canonical lists or anything like that. There are also great individual variations. People are, of course, different in their constitution, personalities, inclinations, where they're gifted and where they're more challenged, in their history of practice and what teachings they've been exposed to. All that needs to be acknowledged and brought into the mix.

But the foundations of this art include everything you already know from your practice of Buddhadharma, particularly from insight meditation. All the mindfulness, all the sīla—the emphasis on goodness, ethics, and virtue—the samādhi, paññā, insight, mettā, the brahmavihāras. In a way, all of that forms the foundation for what we're discussing. So everything you know comes into it, and probably more than you already know in terms of other possibilities, other ways of doing things, other ways of conceiving and looking at things. What you know, plus probably a bit more.

And also, I would say, the willingness to question what you know—to question ideas we have absorbed or arrived at at this point in our lives. Ideas from Buddhadharma, ideas from insight meditation culture, ideas and assumptions from the Buddhadharma, but also about the Buddhadharma. That's actually all part of the foundations. It's a kind of shaky foundation—the foundation that shakes, that questions, that dares to question what we've received and arrived at.

This includes what we've learned from psychotherapeutic investigations or practices, or what we might have encountered from exposure to words like "imaginal" and "soul-making" and "eros." Or what we might have found in similar or overlapping paths—shamanism, energy healing, and such. A lot of the language is quite similar.

But part of what we're interested in here is—well, Mary mentioned breaking through, and while I don't want to tell you what you meant, one way that could be interpreted is that breaking through is very much part of what happens when we let soul-making get going. Stuff gets broken through.

So that willingness, that courage, that boldness is actually part of the path—along with refining clarity alongside that boldness and willingness to question assumptions. That's all part of it.

It's asking a lot. It brings in a lot. Actually, it will involve and bring into the mix everything—all the elements, all aspects of our life. And within that asking a lot, we have to bring wisdom to questions of pacing and digestion. When am I ready for this? When am I ready to question that? That's all part of it, and there will be huge individual variations that need to be respected. It's part of the maturity, part of the care, part of the wisdom.

So we're going to try to communicate in ways that hopefully support you in gaining a sense—really a sense and taste—of what we mean when we use words like "imaginal" and "soul-making" and "eros."

and also to try and open up and get a taste of what that implies, what that unfolds, and what that indeed opens up in terms of the possible visions, ideas, and senses of what it is to be a human being and what a human being is and what the world is.

There's something about this that's going to—has the potential to just really open up and give a sense of where this is all going, and the possibility of that being opened up as well. Awakening or the goal of the path or whatever—this all again comes into the mix, gets metabolized in the soul-making.

Someone said, "What brings you here?" Someone else said, "Beauty." And I used the word art before, referring to this as an art. Even just those two ideas there, beauty and art—what might that do to your whole sense of what the path is about and how we conceive of it and the kind of language we use and the kind of either clear or vague ideas of where we're going?

Some of you have been practicing a long, long time, and it might be interesting for you to just question: Where do I think I'm going with this business of awakening or enlightenment or liberation—give it any words? What do I think that is? Where is it going? What is it that I actually really want? Am I using the right language and the right ideas to support the truth of what my soul wants?

And some of you have been practicing not that long, perhaps, and that might be an interesting question to introduce.

So I used this word art, and I didn't want to mean it in a kind of facile way, where it's very easy to talk about the art of this or the art of that or the art of whatever, and to imply in that word art something like, well, it involves a skill, but there's also kind of an intuitive element, and some people can get really good at that or whatever.

All that, I suppose, is the case. I don't know what it means to be really good at soul-making. But I think I

mean the word art in a slightly fuller and potentially more radical way. When we really think about art, making art, and great art, it's like—what's the purpose of it? Why art? Why do people make art? Why do we love art? What is it that we're after? Where does the process or the engagement with either making art or loving art—where does it lead us? What's the goal? What does it serve?

Some may not relate to the word art. It's just one way of conceiving what we're doing. And if that doesn't really relate to you, there are other ways of opening up the sense of what this might all open out to. And there might be another fantasy rather than that of art. But also in relation to art, there isn't really—I think we're trying, but there isn't really—a dogma here, much as there isn't with art. And it's not really a question of truth in the usual sense we think about that.

Some of you have heard teachings around soul-making and stuff we've talked about before. So there's a kind of—if you like—a particular relationship with notions or ideas of truth and reality. There's a particular relationship that we're interested in. We'll talk about this as the retreat goes on, if some of you have heard this before. But it's that particular kind of relationship with the whole idea of truth and reality that opens things up in certain ways that they wouldn't otherwise get opened up, opening up a different domain and range of experience, and giving us a different sense and idea of everything—everything.

Actually, if you linger with this idea of art, I think—even when it's not obvious, when it's not spelled out in words or pictures that make obvious sense—I think that all art that I would call wonderful, beautiful, meaningful, soulful art is, even if it's not in an obvious way, it has an ethical dimension. It has a dimension that addresses us in terms of value, that touches our sense of value, makes us want to live differently somehow, makes us want to be alive differently. Someone—you know, you guys know I like John Coltrane—is just playing some sounds. There's nothing in the title, there's nothing, and it does something to the sense of existence, and there's goodness and ethical values wrapped up in that. Art touches on that. So I use the word art in relation to the practice that we're doing in all those senses with all those implications.

Someone sent me a lovely poem, a really touching to me poem, not too long ago, a week or two ago. And she said in introducing it—this is not someone I know yet—"Yesterday was my birthday, and I have a tradition of getting up early and writing a poem on that day." It's a nice way to spend your birthday mornings. And then she said, "I think you'll find the teachings, the soul-making teachings influencing here."

So this is the poem:

"This year, a Syrian girl gifted me a red poppy.
This year, the sunflowers grew as tall as the roof.
This year, Annette's son died a week before Mother's Day.
This year, I kissed a man who was also a falcon.
This year, I was a cloud, and when I rained, she cried."

This year, the long-tongued deity taught me wild equanimity. This year, I prayed naked, and the gods loved it. This year, on winter solstice, we laughed so hard we peed off the edge of the mountains. This year, I traded babies with a miner to our mother. This year, I was a gazelle eaten by a lion. This year, children reminded me that you can become a robot when it's pretend real, that we can share mermaid dreams with the dog, and that kings make bad fathers when they've lost their bones. This year, the electronic billboards lit snowfall in Nanjing. This year, a pair of cranes landed on a river when the sun fell. This year, Steve and I were still learning to dance. This year, I played peekaboo with a blue-eyed spider. This year, an insane amount of people decided to keep loving me. This year, a few decided to stop. This year, the crow finally flew from that windowsill and we became each other.

And she continues, in this birthday writing: "I am not being abstract. These things happened to me. But I'm also not claiming that any of it is real or not real. It's just that life whispers in many tongues. My dear Western culture, my darling inheritance, in all your brilliance and brutality, this year I've come to realize that you've forgotten many secret languages, especially the ones that make us most human. The 'let me create you and you create me' love languages. The languages of belonging. Let's keep remembering, shall we? This year I discovered how to belong."

Beautiful. So "let me create you and you create me" love languages. She mentions in there this inheritance that we all have of Western culture and its brilliance and brutality. And there's so much gift in terms of science and social infrastructure and that kind of way of thinking that we are heirs to, that we benefit from.

And I think it's become clear—it's becoming clear—that the culture, the intellectual inheritance and the inheritance of sensibility and outlook, metaphysics and all that, has a brutality to it as well. It comes with a cost. We see every day there's something in the news. Unfortunately it's usually way down in the back pages, but every day there's something of some kind of ecological, environmental crisis somewhere. We are living through multiple environmental ecological crises that are somehow the result of our vision, our brilliant and brutal and limited vision.

We're living through environmental crises, ecological crises. I think we're also living through anthropological crises. What is a human being that we look on each other these ways? Anthropology means the logos, the ideation of what a human being is, in one sense. In a way, humanism that came with the Western Enlightenment—there's a kind of crisis in it, you could say.

Now, I'm not saying, and I don't think Catherine would say either, that what we're doing with soul-making is the solution, and absolutely not. There's plenty of people addressing these questions and there are many possible solutions. But what we're doing and what we're wanting to bring into this, and the way practice opens up the being—it does address those issues of what it means to be a human being and what the world is and what our relationship is organically, naturally with other human beings, ourselves and the world.

So, as I said, in our time, there are many views and ancient traditions and practices and epistemologies and ontologies that are resurfacing or being resuscitated to address some of these questions. And there's so much of value there, so much of value. And there's so much need for it and so much hunger for it. All this stuff comes up and in a way then it lands on the table. And gradually, gradually, we can start to sort and sift what's there—these different ideas, these different practices, these different understandings and outlooks.

And I really absolutely don't want to say this one path is better or this conception is worse or that way of practice is more advanced or anything like that. But they are different. There are differences there. And to sort them, to understand what's been brought up, resuscitated and brought to the table in attempts—multiple attempts—to address these kind of predicaments that we globally face now. I think making delineations, making discriminations and discernments between these different ideas and practices and outlooks is quite important.

Actually, some of you might know already or have heard us say that this making of discriminations is actually an element of soul-making. The more on-fire soul-making is, the more discernments and delineations and proliferations and complexities and faces of things open up. We will explain this. It's what happens when what we call the eros-psyche-logos dynamic gets going. All these differences and different aspects and faces—worlds upon worlds—open up. And part of that is delineation and discrimination. And in all that, there's a maturing of understanding and of practice that's possible.

So that one element—certainly not the be-all and end-all, but quite central in this whole soul-making process—is the realm of concepts and conceptual frameworks. There's a dance here, I think. A dance to be witnessed, to be entered into: a kind of middle-way dance between precision of conceptual understanding and precision of conceptual delineation on one hand, and elasticity on the other—fluidity, flexibility, capacity to stretch.

In all that, what can be allowed in this dance between precision and elasticity is the creation and discovery of more and more facets of soul, more and more worlds, more and more dimensions, more and more realms of being—a proliferation of richness that happens with the whole soul-making dynamic. This feeds and requires developing sensitivities to make these discernments and differentiations.

We're talking about what you could call a soul intelligence, which is not just an abstract, intellectual thing. It's lived, it's felt, it touches the soul with beauty. It involves a great deal of present-moment, alive flexibility of conception and ways of looking.

So eventually—for some of you it already does—this soul-making dynamic will involve eros for ideas, eros for the conceptual, eros for these differentiations. Some of you might find that very hard to believe. But everything gets subsumed. Everything starts to burn, come on fire. Everything. Even more things than you can think of when you hear the word "everything," because in the process of create-discover, we discover more things that we didn't even know were there that come alive, that come into the dimensions of our

being.

I'm highlighting one element tonight, not at all to say it's the most important one. The conceptual is part of it—part of what will be involved, part of what will be swept up into the flames and the flowering of soul-making. In that, you will come to love that ongoing refinement of ideation and conception and ways of looking. Your love, your care for these kinds of discernments and discriminations, because you realize it's part of the creation and discovery.

If we just throw everything together and say it's all one, it's all the same, all paths are the same, I don't know that this reflects the utmost care. Someone who really cares about cooking—a really top-notch chef—doesn't just say, "It's all good." They relish the subtleties of discrimination and the nuance of tastes and aromas and the visual. It's a sign of their care.

I'm not talking about something that's an intellectual abstraction. I'm talking about something that opens up awareness and avenues of experience and practice and sensing—actually sensing. So I really want to encourage you to play and experiment and have fun with this: first-hand experiential understanding, first-hand experience of the creation and discovery that's part of soul-making.

Experience and idea, praxis and logos—they can unfold, they can open, they can be enriched together. There's tremendous beauty in all that. Tremendous beauty. Riches.

Finally, practically speaking, I wish sometimes when teaching retreat that there would be some way of instantaneously downloading all the teachings in one go. Samsara being what it is, that's not possible. Things have to happen in a certain order. But the order we do things in doesn't imply any inherent sequence—first you need to do this, then that. They all feed into each other. Given the limitations of how time is structured, we're going to try to build things so that what comes later builds on what comes earlier, so it can make sense that way.

You've heard us emphasize this quality of play and experimenting and letting yourself taste what opens up when you bring those attitudes. So I really want to encourage that.

Thank you for listening.

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