Growing the Energy Body (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 35:46

And so today, just as much as possible, if there are questions about what we've been talking about—the energy body, what that is and how to practice with it—then this is a good space for that.

Jill asked about something she had learned ages ago called the "body bubble," wondering if she had her concepts right, whether the body bubble could be one of the things on the spectrum of ways of working with energy. I'll repeat because usually people can't hear: Jill is asking about what I must have called the body bubble, which is really similar to what we talked about this morning in terms of expanding the space of awareness just a bit bigger than the body. That whole region becomes sensitized to as a field of energy or vibration or texture. Is it right to view that as one way of working with the energy body?

Yes, absolutely. For a lot of people, it will probably be the easiest and most efficacious way in. Something just happens when you open up the awareness, just like we did first thing this morning. Open up the awareness, just hang out there. Sometimes you don't need to do the breath or lights or all that stuff—it's just, oh, actually it's already a field of energy. Not for everyone—everyone's different—but oftentimes that is the easiest way to start getting familiar with and sensitized to a certain way of feeling this bodily experience. And then from there, it can expand to all kinds of other things.

To clarify, she's used it to check in, and also to infuse the space with quality—peace and so on. Either of those approaches works beautifully. With this body bubble way of working, one way is to just check in: how am I doing, what's going on? The second way is to deliberately infuse that space with a certain skillful quality—what the Buddha would call a skillful quality like peace or happiness.

With the first approach, the checking in, that's what I was talking about this morning a little bit. This way of paying attention becomes a really fine, potentially very fine discrimination of what's going on, particularly emotionally. Or as I said, checking in with an image—just the sense of, my mind doesn't get this yet at all, but I can tell there's something here for me just because of what happens in the energy body. So I'm checking in almost as the thing's going on, and it can tell me an awful lot. We can get really quite refined, developing a refined sensitivity to that.

The second thing, infusing a quality, is more what I would associate with working in certain ways when we develop samādhi. One way of understanding what samādhi is: you're really tuning the whole being—the energy body and the mind and the consciousness—to a certain quality. You can think about the jhānas that way. With the first jhāna, the quality that you're plucking out of the ether, if you like, of the space—resonating to and absorbing into, getting into—is this kind of rapture or pīti. With the second it's happiness, and so on. There are many more than just the eight jhānas. You can be quite creative and make

all kinds of cocktails and combinations.

Basically this idea of tuning to certain vibrations or qualities is really skillful. It's very helpful for samādhi. It's also part of what goes on in imaginal work, because what's happening when an image gets going is that there will be a whole constellation with it—partly not just one emotion, but several emotions: love and eros and maybe grief or tenderness, all kinds of things. You can tune to that whole constellation or different elements within it. All this develops with time.

Jill mentioned feeling quite relieved to find that she can actually do something worthwhile. As I said last night, what we're laying out is a lot, and you'll be drawing on everything you know—mindfulness, mindfulness of body, samādhi, and all this stuff.

This also relates to something else Jill was intrigued by from what Catherine said today. There are certain approaches that feel really aversive—she doesn't like the idea of them at all. Yet when she went outside and felt the sunshine, when she put her feet on the ground, that felt like something she could do, rather than some other way that felt a bit dark. So there's a question about the balance between trying something new and what feels comfortable.

Certain things to try with the energy body feel really easy and comfortable and familiar—they work, and immediately you get a sense that this is helpful.

And there are other things which really don't. So the question is partly like, what's that balance between trying new things and actually just staying with what you know works?

Personally, I don't think there's one answer. We have to try new things. Otherwise—well, you're free not to, of course—but there's a way that we won't expand beyond what we already know. Catherine and I were just mentioning earlier, talking with each other, how easy it is to get into meditation habits. And even of posture. You see, I sit a certain way, and it's fine. And it works, and I can be mindful, and I can know what's going on emotionally. But it's actually not quite fully open and upright, just the posture. And you know what happens? The whole energy state, the whole... well, energy, but also then the experiences that open up will be limited by, in this case, a postural habit, which turns very easily into a meditation habit.

Similar thing with ideas or attitudes or stances or what we're trying to do. It's so easy. Everyone here has done plenty of meditation experience. So it's just human. But within those habits, we've got lots of good habits, lots of really good habits, and lots of good things we know how to do. So you don't want to throw that out. That's part of your bank of resources and your tool set and your skills. Lovely, yeah?

And for me, a lot about this practice is about just this attitude of daring to experiment and try things. The thing about experimenting in this situation is it's perhaps not just completely like a science experiment where you try something, it doesn't work right, so you just throw it out. Because what you try one day might work—you know, might close right there and then, nothing happens. And then, you know, two

hours later, it's actually perfect. So there's this whole quality, there's this whole fact of the kind of fluidity of our energy experience, our whole being, and a necessity to respond to that. Do you see what I mean?

So I'm not quite sure about this. But let me just say something. So was it something one of us suggested?

"Yeah, okay. And so what did the ray of light have?"

"Well, it's just I've tried to do several times over several years to do this rays of light going into different parts of the body."

Okay. Something goes... Yeah. So... Maybe leave it, you know. But if you're talking about light and energy body, then there's plenty of other things, you know, plenty of other ways. Like, in a way, the light is all around, or the light's coming from inside of you, or what I mentioned briefly—this body is, that bubble is a bubble of light that you talked about. All these things. And it might be that in time, that opens up further possibilities, which at some point include this. But, you know, it doesn't really matter at all. It's not like... Boy, you're not really getting this until you can get that death ray started. Or whatever it is. It's not a fight. You know. Okay? Yeah? Beautiful. Okay.

Okay, good. Yes, Dave, please.

"It's sort of a similar question to Jill's in a way about that balance between doing what sort of flows more easily. But rather than balancing that and trying something new, the balance between that and working on those bits that through discrimination you've picked up—okay this feels important and it's something I'm maybe avoiding or not paying attention to because it's easier to follow another route. So specifically with the energy body I find it a lot easier to almost start with image. And something I've noticed in this retreat is a sense that it's important to find a way to, especially in practice, Catherine was talking us through with, you know, having you first before you then go into tuners."

Perhaps what's happening is, as you're working more with bringing sacredness to the breath or the energy body, you're learning that sacredness itself actually supports samadhi. The sense of the sacred—even without elaborate imagery—can create a quality of reverence and devotion that naturally deepens concentration.

So one possibility is that you're discovering something quite beautiful: that when we approach our practice with a sense of the sacred, it actually enhances rather than hinders the samadhi. The reverence, the sense that what we're doing matters, that it's holy in some way—this can create the conditions for deeper absorption.

Now, regarding fabrication: there are different kinds and levels of fabrication. The classical teaching is that as samadhi deepens, fabrication lessens. But what you might be discovering is that initially bringing in a certain kind of fabrication—the fabrication of sacredness, of devotion—actually creates the platform for less fabrication later.

It's a bit like using a ladder to get up to a roof, and then you can put the ladder away. Or like using a raft to cross a river. The initial fabrication of sacredness helps establish the samadhi, and then within that established samadhi, there can be less fabrication.

Another way to think about it: there might be a difference between effortful fabrication and what we could call natural fabrication. When sacredness arises organically in practice, it doesn't feel forced or constructed. It feels like you're discovering something that was already there. This kind of fabrication might actually be more aligned with the natural movement of consciousness toward absorption.

Does that resonate with your experience? When you bring that sense of divinity to the breath, does it feel effortful or does it feel like you're uncovering something inherent?

You understand? So I would say, with just pure jhānas—without the imaginal—it's an interesting thing. For myself, definitely, sacredness starts to really come in at a certain point. As you get deeper into the jhānas, it's characteristic of that. They can be more or less infused with sacredness, depending partly on how much you tinge it with image or some kind of conception.

So for example, here's this bliss, and I regard it in that moment as some grace from the divine. Now, the Buddha doesn't talk that way, but the same experience will just be infused more with that characteristic.

So you can—again, this fork business—you can peel off and kind of emphasize different aspects. So it might be interesting, if you want to, to start with image as you're doing, start with whatever kind of mystical ideas of sacredness, kind of semi-imaginal mystical ideas, open up the samādhi. Then if you want to—it's not that you have to do this, but if you want to, just for the sake of your exploration—you could stay with that mix.

Again, it can be the whole constellation: mystical imaginal idea and sacredness and whatever the samādhi quality is—bliss or whatever—all mixed together relatively evenly. Or I can start to lean a bit more one way or another.

Within that mix that you're describing, you could lean just into the pure sensation of—let's say it's *pīti*—jus t the pleasantness, and kind of let the mystical idea or the image be very secondary or even fade out. What you pay attention to will filter out of the experience and grow.

Again, I don't think it matters too much about order. Samādhi, I would say, is dependent on happiness and inspiration. You can nail your attention to your nostril tips and not blink for a microsecond, but if it's lacking in juice and inspiration, you're not going to get into any jhāna or nothing at all. Jhāna is dependent on a certain kind of happiness and inspiration.

Now, if it takes something imaginal to open that up for you, great, so be it. But once that's there, then you can kind of play with the relative weightings through the attentions. Does that make sense?

Padmasuri asks: "I wonder about individual and collective energy body. Like Catherine yesterday sort of set us in tension with the Avalokiteśvara mantra, and all of us go into the same space and sort of form a collective energy body. Could you see it like that?"

Yeah, absolutely. So thank you for mentioning that. No question about it. Energy body experience can be individual or collective, and so can image. People can enter into a collective image with another person, or a group of people.

This is what starts to happen when you start practicing in these ways—and now we're talking about energy body, but also with image. You start to have a certain range, and then you get into practice, and then it's like, "Oh, hold on, this is a whole other thing now." Collective energy body sense. Could be in a dyad, a triad, could be a whole group of people.

And then there's also the possibility of collective imaginal sense. What I was saying was the possibility sometimes of when a group shares a ritual—you're often actually, it probably won't be everyone, but there's a kind of collective entering into or sharing of a certain imaginal sense.

There's something to repeat again: the nature of these kinds of practices is that they start expanding in all kinds of ways.

They start growing. I hadn't even thought of that as a possibility. And then you go, whoa, this is what Catherine will talk about. Eros, Psyche, Logos starts expanding and breaking into new territory. And part of what becomes interesting, if it captivates you, is the question: what supports that? What supports that?

So if you and I—we haven't talked much about live dyad imaginal practice, like in twos—but if you and I were practicing in a certain way, what allows us to feel a shared sense of energy body, and what gets in the way of that? All kinds of things can get in the way. There are psychological hang-ups and clinging and just not paying attention. We could list countless conditions that allow that coming together, that opening out of the experience of a collective energy body, and countless conditions that close it or make it unavailable. The same applies to a shared imaginal sense. Does that make sense?

So yes, thank you for saying that. And it's something that Catherine and I work with, but we haven't really put it out there yet. But absolutely, if you sense that, then that just becomes part of your experience, and if it feels comfortable, go for it.

One more question. You said today that you would like to download the information to us, but that's quite difficult. But if you have this collective sense, would information be able to go through?

Sometimes I feel yes. And there's a level where perhaps that can feel extremely mysterious or uncanny. It's almost like... Catherine and I were talking about this a while ago. It's almost like when you have electrons in an atom and they orbit the atom and they jump—it's called a quantum jump. Do you know this? The electrons jump from one state to another. Sometimes what can happen is the field jumps

together. So one electron jumps, you jump, and I just find myself jumping with you, or vice versa, and you can't even say who started that.

When there's a lot of openness between people, when there's a lot of sensitivity and attention—again, we could list these conditions—when there is this kind of sensitivity to these things, that sort of occurrence can happen. But we could make this into something grandiose.

Two things about that. First, just think about sharing a joke or you saying something or us cracking up about something together. What is going on there? There's something of the same kind happening. We understand something. How are we going to put that into words, and what happens in the field? There's something magical and mysterious about that, and a similar kind of thing is occurring. This is an everyday thing, hopefully. So this is not something so strange.

Second thing to say, and it relates to what I was saying about realism: I don't know how to say this. I'm really not sure how to say it, but I think the distinction or the mapping out of what we're calling imaginal and, say, ESP or remembering past lives or seeing ghosts—there are distinctions there and some overlap.

For me, it feels—and I'm not at all suggesting that you're doing this—but if we get a little bit interested in the paranormal sort of thing, it might be fascinating and interesting, but it won't be the same as opening up the soul-making. And again, this goes back to the intention. There's a way we grasp at the paranormal as something real. It's unusual and interesting, but it's real. The imaginal leans more towards the neither real nor not real. And that opens up experience in a very different way, with different kinds of sacredness and blessing that other approaches won't offer.

So there's a subtle distinction.

And yet there are relationships and overlaps between these domains. Not that this was implicit in your question, but just as a general clarification. Does that distinction make sense? Good, thank you.

Sampo is asking about his experience working with emptiness practices where the energy body is involved, but primarily in two ways. First, it serves as a navigating mechanism—registering whether I'm on the right track, sensing whether there's letting go happening or contraction arising, and if there's contraction, finding ways to release it. Second, there's what I mentioned earlier as the fork in the path—you can be doing an emptiness practice and move into samadhi with the energy body.

But all of this, as you point out, even including the different tones of samadhi that can arise, represents a much smaller range than what I was describing earlier and what you're alluding to—the full spectrum of what's involved in soul-making perceptions and what becomes available through the energy body.

So yes, much can be more subtle. I'm not sure about the "not bodily" aspect you mentioned. Perhaps what you're referring to is that many of these qualities—meaningfulness, the sense of soul-making—are what we might call mental qualities reflected in the body, or they're not as tangible in the usual sense. If I'm

understanding you correctly, then yes, basically I agree.

Again, it's a matter of having been comfortable with this particular range of practice, and now it's opened even more. There are all kinds of colors and shades, directions and possibilities, and we're slowly getting used to that, becoming comfortable with this expanded territory.

Is there a question in this, or are you simply sharing your experience?

Ah, perhaps what's challenging is that it feels like a new kind of sensitivity is required. Sometimes there's a sense of numbness, as you mentioned—the qualities we're especially looking for, the sense of being, sacredness, or soulfulness, aren't as immediately apparent as we might expect.

This relates to some of the earlier questions we explored. You don't need to push too hard on what feels like it's not working or not as vivid as you imagine it should be. If there's an image present, a sense of soul-making and meaningfulness, and you're registering that somehow—even if it's not quite as vivid in the energy body as you might wish—it doesn't matter. Simply enter into it and enjoy it.

Recognize that sense of soul-making, tune into what feels soul-making, and just register that. From this engagement, the experience naturally enriches and expands. We become more sensitive, as you noted, but without forcing what feels underdeveloped.

For navigation, you don't have to rely solely on the energy body aspect. There are other qualities available—mystery, for instance, or unfathomableness. Consider sexual desire: when it becomes contracted and small-minded, it loses that sense of unfathomableness—of the object, of the subject, of the eros itself. It misses the mystery, the dimensions of beauty. Some of these qualities you can recognize anyway as indicators, without requiring immediate reflection in the energy body.

You understand? So trust—it's already there for you. You trust these other indicators, and the other elements of the experience will begin to fill out and come alive slowly.

Very good. Let's have just a bit of quiet before we end.

[Brief period of silence]

Thank you for listening.

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