Trust, Ethics, Image (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 34:52

Very violent things emerge, and in some way I can deal with it through the spirit of metta. Often these energies overflow into something that feels uncontrollable or uncontrolled, and I can get back to center—I can inhibit and work towards metta again. But I'm wondering how to play around with this a little, because it feels somehow like not inhibiting at times might allow the energy to flow more freely. Yet there's some fear. And also, sometimes it feels very real, like with people around. Sometimes I see things when things happen—I'm not sure.

"You see things where things happen?"

Yes, I see things in my imagination—streams of energy that push somebody in a direction, and suddenly they'll start walking and do something. But I don't know if...

Let me see if I can summarize and capture the gist of what you're asking. This is about aggression and perhaps relates to what we explored with movement and what I discussed this morning. There's concern and fear because you recognize a lot of what feels like aggressive energy inside, and you're unsure whether it's controllable. So there's a wanting to inhibit it at times, and a wanting to practice metta as an alternative to divert that energy.

And then the last part—sometimes you're unsure if your state of consciousness and energy is affecting other people in a real way.

Yes, particularly with respect to that aggression, because I wouldn't want that to have a negative impact on people.

Thank you. These are really important questions. The first thing to say is that the very fact of you asking and having this concern is a really good sign—a sign of health. This kind of intelligent doubt indicates that these are things you care about. You want to do what's best, what's healthy, what's right. That in itself I read as a very good sign. It's a good way to approach any of this work—with a dose of healthy, intelligent doubt and discrimination.

If that concern wasn't there and you were reporting all kinds of uncontrollable aggression, then something else would need to come in. But the fact of doubt and concern is a really good sign.

This, and probably sexual eros as well, are two areas where we understandably have a lot of concern. There are many answers or responses we could explore outside of the soul-making paradigm—practicing metta and all kinds of other approaches. But I think within the soul-making paradigm, this becomes more

nuanced to realize.

When the sexual arises—when I have attraction to someone and it becomes very real—it's definitely possible to work with this within the soul-making paradigm, but not necessarily easy, especially at first when you haven't fully grasped what it means for something to be imaginal. I know what imagination means—I can feel energy in my body and all that. But as I said this morning, this word "imaginal" has quite a richness and dimensionality to it.

When that dimensionality begins to open out—that fullness of what it means to be imaginal—it's almost like it opens up more space for something. For instance, aggression can become imaginal and holy. And the more imaginal and holy it becomes—or sexual eros, attraction to someone who's unavailable or simply the wrong person to be attracted to in the wrong situation—the more space there is.

The normal impulse we have as careful, sensitive human beings is to try and rein all that energy in. That's a valuable avenue, and we need to be able to do that. In time, with these practices, there's the possibility of letting the thing become more imaginal.

In the case of aggression, oftentimes it's structured as "I" as subject—the person with physical power and intent to destroy something. With sexual eros, we can let the object, let that person, become more imaginal. What does that mean? They become more than flatly human. They become full of dimensions, complexities, mystery, an unfathomable beyond. As all that begins to fill out, it creates more folds and spaces in which the eros can be contained.

If the eros is not contained, it has to spill out into action—we have to have that person, we have to concretize some kind of relationship or sexual action. I'm not saying that's wrong or right, but when there's not that amplitude, that dimensionality of the imaginal, then the eros or aggression or energy has to act out on a flat material level.

This is not a basic teaching at all. I have to say, I think it's really possible, though not necessarily easy. But the more we get a sense of what it means for something to be imaginal—what is that constellation of qualities and aspects and relationships—the more we trust that wherever there's dukkha, it can be made holy by becoming imaginal, by being sensed with soul. Wherever there's eros and attraction—"I want that person, I need to have sex with them"—it can also be held. It doesn't have to be acted out.

Similarly with aggression—it has, if you like, a holy dimension that we're not really taught about in this culture, whether with aggression or with sexuality. But it becomes accessible more and more. And when that space opens up, it's like more space, less pressure. You understand? Like a gas—there's more space, there's less pushing that it has to do something constantly.

But as I said, I don't think this is certainly not what I would—that's not a beginning sort of practice at all. It takes quite a lot to do that. And there are plenty of people in this room who have a lot of energy and have a lot of eros and have a lot of—you could say, from a certain psychological perspective, which is not the

normal sense, the gods are knocking loudly, asking for something from them. And there's no conceptual framework to hold or to even regard that energy that moves in any kind of way that gives it any more sanctity or depth. There are many people in this room right now who have that kind of psyche. And it's difficult. It's an art, really, to learn to open that up to different possibilities.

So I definitely don't think it's the easiest thing, but I do think it's possible. And probably the way it comes is really, as I said, just getting more and more of a sense gradually of what it means for something to be imaginal. What's that experience? What's that relationship? And slowly we begin to trust that more and more.

In loads of interviews, someone presents something and there's just so much difficulty there. By this point, it's not that I would always use the imaginal as how I relate to looking at something, but I have, by this point, a trust in me that whatever it is, there is an imaginal way. There's a way it can open up imaginally that will redeem it, that will give it these holy roots, that will create less difficulty with it.

What to do right now, I don't know, because we haven't so much spoken about practice, so I don't know quite where yet. But it might be more a matter of leaving that aggressive thing aside a little bit, and concentrating more on just what ways the imaginal does come, and what ways you can get a sense of it.

Probably if you have a lot of aggression—or a lot of people with a lot of sexual eros or whatever—it might be that you see this is characteristic of images that arise for me. So I've shared in talks that I used to get a warrior image or different kinds of soldier images. And I can really see I have that in me—I'm a warrior, but not on a physical level at all.

Once that becomes an image and I kind of sense the holiness in it and the sense of what my duty is to that and the sense of it being neither real nor not real—that's really key, the reification piece—this is neither real nor not real, and it gets refracted into my life, not in an obvious way. So the warrior, for me, manifests in all kinds, has manifested in all kinds of ways. I've never hit anyone, I'm not interested in physical violence, etc., but it manifests. It refracts in a not obvious way, and part of allowing it to do that is getting a whole sense of what it means for something to be imaginal, which also includes this neither real nor not real thing.

So it might be just growing more in the sense, getting more accustomed to the sense of what it feels like and what the experience is of something being imaginal, and you begin to trust it more. But I would probably guess that in the process of that happening, some of the images that come will involve power or aggression or that kind of thing. And you will see in meditation, the mind goes, "Oh, I don't know, this can't be right, I don't trust this." Very normal, and again, good response, healthy response.

This is where I go back to things like trusting more the energy body sense. So let's say I have an image of some stomping warrior-like figure, or something, who seems full of power and energy and ready—he could destroy anything, it seems. "I don't trust this, it doesn't feel very peaceful," etc., is what my mind

says. But I check my body, and lo and behold, there's this kind of alignment. It doesn't feel agitated in any way, it feels open and harmonized. I trust that more than my initial mental response.

And then I pay more attention with just openness. And I was saying to someone earlier, you can put a ring fence around it. I'm just going to give this five minutes of trust. And after that, I'm going to go back to being suspicious of it. I'm just playing, because trust is one—and we'll talk about this—trust is one of the key ingredients in the relationship with the imaginal.

So I can just put a ring fence around it, trust it a little bit. And in that five minutes, slowly, you'll start to pick up on the soul-making, the sense of soul-making. There is something mysterious about this. Yes, there's clearly power and physical power and a capacity to destroy. Plenty of people have realized you can't create without destroying. Destruction is not as simple as it seems.

But I start to get a sense that there's more to this than what my little mind thinks it is. It's got, as I said, an inexhaustibility of meaning, an unfathomability, a mystery. There's a curious beauty to it. When these qualities are there, they're part of what it means for something to be soul-making and imaginal.

And slowly, slowly, I learned that I can trust these dimensions of experience.

When I was first exploring and developing all this, I used to have images that were sexual, or at least offered the possibility of sexuality. I had a dream where a woman was trying to seduce me. This was some years ago, when I was just beginning to explore the imaginal and discover what it might mean. My tendency, given all my practice history, was to think that can't be spiritual, so we won't engage with that.

It took me probably a few years to trust this kind of material. In this dream—or perhaps it was later in morning meditation, I can't remember—I was being my monkish sort of self, and she looked at me with tremendous love and said, "You're kind of stupid, aren't you?" She said it with such love: "You don't really get it, do you?" There was something about the way she said it, as if she were teaching me something.

So I gradually let myself trust that and realized that what appears as hindrance or defilement in the usual spiritual framework actually opens up to something much vaster when we approach it through what we mean by the erotic-imaginal. Yes, it includes the sexual and all that, but it encompasses so much more than we typically imagine.

I would say the same is potentially true of what you're calling aggression or power. But it emerges through relationship, and we have to discover it. That takes time—all of this takes time.

With all this work, you have to ask yourself: What am I ready for? What's my edge? What feels okay? What do I need to have in place? Some people just jump in at the deep end and start swimming, and that's fine. But I have to be responsible to this being and care for myself and my pacing with this material.

There was a reason—beautiful reasons—why I was so cautious. Partly it was spiritual indoctrination, but there was also, just as in your question, a concern that reflected love. It reflected my willingness not to just

follow what feels good. There was much more care involved.

My hesitation came from devotion—devotion to whatever the deepest truth is, whatever the fullest spiritual learning might be. If that meant not simply indulging in something that might feel good, then that's what I would do. So my concern, my hesitation, my slowness was actually a beautiful thing. And she had to teach me in this particular way.

I don't know what the exact journey will be for you, but there's something in what you're touching.

I would never say everyone needs to do this work, or that it's the only way to address aggression or sexuality. It's just one possibility. But some of you—perhaps you already sense this—will feel a certain suspicion, a sense that you don't quite understand everything being said here, yet you feel drawn to it. You have an intuitive sense that somehow, even though you don't understand how it will work, this might be your thread. You follow that, and it does start to unfold. You begin to really trust, and the fullness and richness begins to blossom there.

Andrea asked about navigating images: "After that session, I went outside for standing meditation. At one point, with hands on my belly, an image came of a complicated pregnancy. The image was immediately beautiful as a concept—as a poet and writer, it touched me—but it wasn't fully imaginal. I just liked it.

"I tried to resonate with it, but the liquidity wasn't there. There wasn't a softness, and my relating to it still felt like relating to a concept, something rather dry. So I stopped—partly because, as a writer, I didn't want to tinker with something, didn't want to kill something that had beauty. If it's not ready to be written, it's not ready to be explored.

"Later, while walking and thinking I would ask you this question, I felt very soft and open out in the fields. Then there was a slight resonating with..."

And how a complicated pregnancy sparked something - looking at the loss of a possible unfathomable beauty that you don't yet know yet, and then immediate tears and immediate soulfulness, meaningfulness in that moment.

So then there was a knowing that something had aligned, and then a continued walking trying to almost resonate more or pull out more dimensionality. And they're wondering, oh, should I just have left it alone and stayed with that sense of just that beauty? So I guess this is just to express that the navigation of these things is - I seem to have a sense when it charges or when there's that feeling of soulfulness. But then it feels very clumsy, the trying to draw out more and more dimensions.

Can I briefly sum it up? Drez is asking - sometimes, in this case, what happened was a concept arose, or just words in the mind, and they seemed like they were full of imaginal potential, or even creative potential as a writer. But it wasn't really going to that kind of juicy, full, resonant sense. But later, the added idea or sense of not just a complicated pregnancy, but of a mystery that could have been born but

then was missed and not accessed, not opened to - and that idea touched a lot and felt full of soul. But then wondering if you tried a little too hard to kind of put the foot on the accelerator and extract more juice.

This is really key, I think - not to put pressure on the psyche, really, and not to put pressure on images. One of the characteristics of the imaginal is a sense of grace. Grace means receiving for some unknown reason - not deserving, nothing. It just comes, it's given. So it's not the whole truth of what it means to be imaginal - it's one aspect. And sometimes with that, there's the attitude that fits a recognition of grace, which is understanding that it comes and it goes, and it blows in and out. And we're given a whole thing or half a thing or a glimpse of a thing.

So I think sometimes that attitude is really important. That relationship with a sense of grace, recognition of grace and relationship with it, is already something soul-making, potentially, and already an ingredient that, if something is ready to come, it might help.

On the other side, there are different aspects of the imaginal. And sometimes, slowly, slowly, you can get a sense of - it's a matter of noticing something. And that noticing of a characteristic there. In your example, it may be the love - love for this unborn or this loss, and maybe some mysterious love of this that was unborn for you. Maybe that love is an aspect both ways of the imaginal, or this sense of grace. You begin to slowly get a sense of what are the things I can notice here. They're already there, they're just not obvious to me yet. And that noticing draws them out, and that allows the whole thing to come alive.

But in terms of pacing, sometimes it's hard to tell. Certainly what happened was there was this initial thing that didn't seem to go. Then there was this middle stage, and there was some juice. It's a bit like what I said this morning - there's some soul-making right there in the richness and the juice of that, and maybe to linger there and let that do its work on the heart. Heartfulness is part of soulfulness, definitely. So let that do its work on the heart and the energy body without rushing to ask, "Okay, what's next?"

There was already plenty of juice there. It's a matter of resonating with it, and that's a big part of what I said this morning about tuning and resonating and letting something work on you as opposed to you working on it. Sometimes there's - none of this is fixed. Sometimes it's "let me work on it" - more active. And sometimes the poise has to be, or the tendency has to be corrected a little bit in someone to be more receptive.

So it could be that in that middle stage you're describing, there could have been more of just hanging out with this and letting it reverberate and ricochet in the being and feeling it and recognizing the beauty in that and being touched in that. And if it wants to go to another level, it will.

My question builds on the first one. I work more with images that don't share the ethics of my own life—images that act in ways I wouldn't act. This connects to something I explored a little yesterday. I feel strongly pulled to certain energies that come up frequently for me imaginally, but I'm afraid. I have a fear that as I work more with those images, when there isn't the strength of the imaginal container, that energy

is strengthening in my life outside of it in ways that are totally not what I'm trying to do with my life. I'm feeling in the midst of that and curious about it.

So, energies or images?

Images. There are often images where the imaginal self is wanting worship or wanting to be worshipped. That's one of them.

Thank you. That's beautiful, and I'm really glad you said that. There's a tension between our usual culturally dominant ego psychology—our regard for what is a healthy ego and what's too much ego—and some of the things that soul-making opens up, some of the things that images open up.

When an image arises, even if I feel like I'm inside that image or I am that image, even when I'm identified with the image, there's still a sense of, well, it's me and it's not me. This is really, really important. It's part of what I meant to say this morning but didn't have time—what I call the middle way of the imaginal. It's real and it's not real, it's me and it's not me. That sense is crucial.

Even when the image is other, it's not me and it's me somehow. Tuning into that sense amplifies it. The more I notice this—that it's me and it's not me—that's part of what I call the middle way of the imaginal. It takes its place between real and not real, between me and not me.

At first it feels like walking a tightrope between those polarities. As I get more of a sense of this neither real nor not real, me and not me, this tightrope becomes actually a wide open boulevard. It feels like the most spacious place to be—in that neither real nor not real. It opens up doors. What was a narrow entranceway or pathway actually becomes huge.

Again, as we said with the bodhisattvas, it's a matter of getting a taste for this and beginning to trust it more. So it's me and it's not me. And who's the not-me part? Part of the not-me is—pick your language—the divine, the Buddha nature, the angels. Or it's soul.

It's me and it's not me, and the part of not-me is its divinity. It is soul. And I would say soul wants to be seen. Soul wants to be seen as sacred. And soul wants to see as sacred. So the wishing to be worshipped, or recognizing that worship is appropriate, or that sense of devotion—it belongs to the nature of soul sensing.

This is a very heady idea, but the more I sense this, the more comfortable I become in this me and not-me, and it's the divine. What soul yearns for mostly is to sense with soul. Soul yearns to see and be seen, to show itself and reveal itself in images, and to have the soulful response to images.

That's what soul wants. You, unfortunately—as we all are—are just instruments of soul from a certain perspective. We're vehicles for this process, amazingly delicate and very unique instruments for this process to happen.

Is this making sense? It's a very different conceptual framework, a very different way of understanding what's going on. If it remains abstract, it just doesn't make any difference. But there's a way in the practice, in the thick of the practice, where you can get the senses of these things.

Related to the earlier question, the more I sense this, the more I sense that I can trust this. It looks like something we would be suspicious of in our usual psychology—whether it's aggression or sexuality or what appears to be some kind of ego amplification. But something potentially much deeper is being played out there in the theatre. As you get a sense of that, the ego doesn't tend to identify with it so much. It doesn't need to have the thoughts of superiority or whatever, because we're tasting what is superior—we're tasting it and getting the blessing of it, but not as "me" in the usual ego sense.

Again, this might all sound very far-fetched, but at this point I absolutely trust that this is what will happen if one goes into it with all the sensitivity and care. This is what will open, as opposed to becoming more egotistical or demanding that everyone bow at your feet.

This business of trust is hard, but I think it's probably the case that most of you have this glimmer of trust in something. We tend to think from one level out—these images are mine, they reflect me, they're expressions of me—as opposed to recognizing that you are an expression of an image. Actually, you are an expression of many images, some not yet born. Your life is that. Turn everything upside down.

I'm not saying this is the truth—it's a concept. And that concept itself is a potentially soul-making concept. It's rich, it's beautiful, and it does something to the ego needs. It just does something.

Certainly there are other ways of working with ego, and Buddha Dharma is full of them, and that's great. But there's also this soul-making approach which looks like it's going in the wrong direction. But it's not, because things get filled out and amplified, given their archetypal roots, given their dimensional scope and their sacredness—and that changes everything.

It becomes about divinity, if you use that word, and not about me, or only about me insofar as I wish to somehow live and express and sense divinity. This business about fullness of intention—why am I practicing? Why am I doing this?—eventually becomes more about that level. It's what soul wants, or it's what the divine wants. And that becomes the primary reason, as opposed to me and my personal development, or anything even more grubby than that.

These things take time. It might help, me saying this, but it's really in the sensing... We're talking about ideas now, but you can sense these things in practice, and slowly, slowly, it's like: ah, there's a freedom here, a whole other dimension of freedom and possibility that we wouldn't have otherwise discovered. You have to taste it for yourself. It usually happens gradually.

Let's have a bit of quiet here.

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