Voice, Movement, and the Possibilities of Soul (1)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:10:20

I want to experiment a little bit. In the past, some of you may have encountered it on the web or in person, I've talked about movement and its relationship with soul and the imaginal, and also about mudra and gesture. I gave some instructions and was encouraging the inclusion of that exploration in the larger scope of the practice we're doing here.

One of the things I said, and I want to offer it again as an instruction, is that sometimes you're practicing and there's an image. You're with that image and connected to that image and moved. The soul is moved by that image. Sometimes the image is in motion. For instance, recently I've had some images of dancers, so the image is one of movement. Or the image might not be in movement, but you feel a sense of something moving in the energy body as part of the interaction with the image.

An instruction—a totally valid, kosher part of our practice now—is that you can let it move the body, in here when we're sitting, as long as it's not too noisy. So that's a part of the practice. Or our walking periods—we could now call them movement periods. They may look like walking up and down slowly, as it usually looks in our culture, or they may look like something very different. You're letting the image be embodied with all the same sensitivity and care and mindfulness and relational nuances.

A second option, which I also mentioned when I introduced this, is that sometimes it feels more fruitful. The same thing is going on, but the physical body is completely still, and the dance is still going on. The energy body feels two things at once: it can feel this body sitting still and it can feel the movements of the dance or whatever. So the outer, so-called body is still, but the energy body is moving, and that's part of what you're paying attention to.

If you want to explore this in practice sometimes, you can do it in two ways. I would encourage you to actually do it, not always one way or the other, just to see, to experiment.

Sometimes the image is other. I have an image that I'm in relationship to, and that image is other. It might be that the movement—that image is not a moving image, it's a still image—but maybe I feel devotion, for example, towards that image. Maybe the movement that I then embody is a devotional gesture or something like that, or a gesture of receiving somehow. It could be anything.

Or sometimes when we're working with an image, you become the image. I am that dancer, or whatever it is. Then I might move in relationship to the world—the image in relationship to the world.

I want to reiterate and open up that instruction, open up that possibility. As I've talked about this in the past, I want to see what happens if we put a bit more emphasis and attention on it now and explore it a bit more.

One of the things I think I've already said on this retreat: when the soul-making gets going, it's like a fire. It will reach out and catch everything—not necessarily all at once, probably not all at once—so that different aspects and domains of our being get drawn in and involved in the soul-making. They become soulful, they become infused with eros and that whole eros-psyche-logos dynamic. One of them will be body, one of them will be movement, one will be gesture. At some point, if you pursue this kind of thing, it will start to involve every aspect of the being. Voice as well, which is something we'll play with a little bit.

When I introduced this before—I can't remember when it was, maybe two years ago—I talked about mudra, these subtle hand gestures, and I think it was perhaps not so attuned as a teaching, probably just too subtle for where a lot of people were at. That's fine—it's there floating around somewhere. Now I would like to do it in a way that's not just subtle, but also some really not very subtle stuff.

Also, and I did mention this before, it would be great if we could normalize this in the culture. When I introduced it, it was interesting how few people seemed to pick up on it. I think one of the things is just social pressure. It looks a certain way. Again, we're back into meditation habit and meditation mindset and attitude and conception, so that generally what looks normal in here is this.

Of course, when the postman comes, after all these years he thinks it's pretty weird that people are walking up and down like that or sitting still like this. So it's like how much we're shaped and constrained by culture, and can we actually start to normalize this kind of what we might call the soulfulness direction in movement? Can we normalize that in this culture? Sometimes we feel a little bit shy or it's not okay. So there's a desire for that.

Why are we doing it? What's the intention here? Actually, I would say two things primarily. I want to point this out because it can be quite easy to grab hold of these kinds of things with all kinds of other intentions, which is fine and great, but I'd like to highlight some possibilities that are a bit more honed in terms of what they're intending, what the purpose is.

One is—and I think it's really, really important, although not so dramatic—to sense and see, to have the capacity more often, more available, to sense and see everyday movements: your everyday movements, your friends' everyday movements, and gestures and voice. The capacity to sense that as soul. Moving my hand or the voice, the sound of the voice and the fact of the mystery of it—what is it to perceive movement, gesture, voice as soul? To have that as just part of the healing of perception that we're trying to open up: to sense with soul and as soul. So that's actually primary.

The second intention here is to open up the range and the channels of soul. We're not trying to—and we're going to do some exercises in a minute, movement stuff—we're not trying to kind of develop into these

sort of movement artists, just able to do amazing stuff and kind of channel their soul in their movement in some wonderful way. I mean, fantastic when you witness something like that, it's just gorgeous. But that's not what we're aiming for here. If it happens, great. But it's more these two other intentions: to sense everyday movement, voice, gesture as soul, and to open up the range and channels of possibility for soul.

When we start to do this and we talk about this, it's quite a lot. Some of this, in different ways, might be a stretch for many of us in this room. So really, with all this stuff, think of it as a kind of gradual evolution. People are in very different places—their relationship with their body, their relationship with movement, all that. So it's very normal and it's really okay.

If we think about it, it's quite a big deal just to be mindful of the body, isn't it? And to be in the body and aware of what movement feels like. Most insight meditation, most of the training is either sitting still or walking up and down. So what is it to do other kinds of movements, still just have that really basic mindfulness? So that's one level. It might be that's actually the level I'm working on right now. Super, absolutely super. I just have to pitch where my edge is, where my growing is.

Then we've talked about energy body. So it might be actually to be aware of the more subtle energy body effects of certain movements. It's a slightly different thing than just the mindfulness of sensation.

Then there's a whole issue—another kind of stage or aspect of this—just what about self-consciousness and social anxiety if you have to wiggle in a certain way in public or whatever it is. So that's a whole territory or level that might be an edge and might be just, "Oh, this is what I'm looking into with this."

Just having a connection between self and movement—I don't know if you can see this—for some people there's a very direct connection with self-movement; for other people it's much more blocked, it doesn't flow, there's something a little constrained there. Wherever we're at with this, whatever reasons and history, it's really fine, but these are all different aspects of what we can be slowly looking at, opening up.

Another aspect is the freedom to move, the fluidity. Again, you can see sometimes it's really there—a person is very fluid in their body and free to move in different ways—sometimes they're not there. And it's really perfect, whatever it is, and there's room to grow.

And what is it to be able to express with movement and through movement? There's starting to be more of a connection with soul there. And then as I said, what is it to sense with soul and as soul? To actually sense movement imaginatively—my movement, your movement, whoever. And there's a possibility of becoming soul movement artists or something. That's not what we're aiming for.

I really want to say, so it's kind of like there are pitches here. Everyone's different. We've all got very different histories with this, different practices. So wherever you are, it's good.

It's really okay. There's going to be something for each of us to learn and explore, wherever we are in our practice.

So why don't we play with this a little bit? I should mention that I'm not going to be doing the movements myself—I've done something to my ribs and back and need to be really careful at the moment. But in a way that's a teaching, because for anyone who feels that certain movements are not okay for your body, just either don't do them or find a movement that somehow seems related or similar that works for your body. Really don't damage anything.

And also, if something feels like just a bit too much of a stretch for the soul, that's okay too. Either leave it for now or come back to it later, whatever feels right.

So why don't we start by moving the mats to the side again, and then we'll see what we can do here. If we can be somewhat spread out in the room—given the number of people, just the maximum possible space between us, which isn't very much, but still. You'll have to excuse me; I'm just going to either sit or stand for this since I don't feel my body is able to participate in the movements at the moment.

Let's start with just feeling the connection with the ground. Feel the whole body. Is there the possibility—feeling your body—to feel your body is blessed, whatever the condition of your body: health-wise, appearance-wise, skill-wise? You sense your body is blessed.

Maybe begin by doing a few of those sort of tai chi twists, where you swing your arms. They don't have to be wide swinging—just to loosen the body a little bit. Then whatever movements your body needs to do right now to loosen up, bring mindfulness there. Let the whole body be filled with awareness, just feeling what this feels like.

There's always some problem or other with the body, so it's never going to be perfect.

Exercise number one—or rather, game number one. You're drunk. You're completely plastered, off your rocker. And you're walking around the room. This is actually just a bit more of a loosener. See how much you can give yourself to being totally blotto. How does that show itself in the movements? Just get into it as much as you can, wandering around, using the whole space. Take care not to harm each other.

Can drunk people get excited about something? At least for as many moments before they forget what it is they're excited about. How would such a person move?

Beautiful, beautiful. And now—with the magic of the mindfulness bell—this drunken lout is transformed into mindful stillness.

Beautiful. That was really great. Let's take just a few breaths.

Hard work being drunk.

Let's take just a few breaths. Feel the feet. Feel the whole body. Let the breath come and go, animating the body, giving its blessings to the body, receiving breath. Can you feel this body is blessed? Can you know this body is blessed?

Now for a second exploration. I might need someone to demonstrate this. What is it to engage in a movement where the body expresses something or is carried by something where there's ferocity, power, courage—all the energy and intention flowing through the legs? Squatting, connecting with the earth. There's power coming from the belly and from the root. There's strength, and the body is expressing this courage and ferocity and power.

That's good. It's actually scary, you know? It's intended to show—it's a warrior. Maybe that's a way of putting it. The whole body expresses this. It's a lot in the body and the hips and the belly, feeling that connection, that power. It's really about power and strength and this unmovable warrior determination.

It also comes out through the mouth. The tongue comes out like those gargoyles or tantric wrathful deities—in the tongue, in the voice, the throat, everything's coming out. The chest, the whole body is involved. And the eyes—can you see that? The whole body is channeling something, embodying something, expressing something.

You can do this in cycles—do it a little bit and then pause, then do it again. If you feel more comfortable doing it facing a wall, just do it that way. You might prefer not to have anyone watch you, or you don't want to see others—that's perfectly fine. Just face the wall.

So let's try this. You are some kind of wrathful deity or warrior. Just do it in your own rhythm, in your own time.

Now we'll add the other levels of this awareness. Going back to what I was saying before, there are different levels of awareness or sensitivities as you're doing this. The body is doing something, and then the awareness can pick up all kinds of things. One thing can simply be: what does it feel like to stand like that?

What does it feel like in the throat? What does my face feel? Just simple mindfulness of sensations. But then there's also what does it do in the energy body? And then there's a whole other level of sensing the soul, possibly.

So it's not like there's a right or wrong. It's more like what can I notice here? And it may be that the whole thing, if you like, becomes image a little bit. Does that make sense if I say that? The sensibility, the sensitivity picks up on different aspects or nuances of the whole experience. Like, what do I notice here and at what level? And any of it is good.

So let's do another round of that. You can do a few. Probably some of you will hurt your voice if you just do it continuously. Do it in rhythms and see what happens.

Fabulous, okay, good. It's quite tiring, yeah?

Why are we doing this? So, why are we doing this is a good question. Well, it says here. So the purpose here is not to prescribe a kind of soul expression. Now you all need to—this is what all of you need, or this

person or that person needs. Nor is it the kind of—sometimes what you get is like, oh, we're supposed to kind of balance our archetypes. So I have my, whatever this screaming warrior is, and then I have my, I don't know, little angelic cherub sort of image or whatever it is. In this system, we're not aiming for some kind of wholeness as a balance or a complete set of archetypes that are all in perfect balance. Some systems do that. That's not what we're going for.

It's rather to open up the channels of possible soul, images, energies, movements, postures, expressions. The emphasis is on possible, so that if soul at any time wants to flow that way, it is available. It's not a no entry. So that certain images can constellate. You know, the mind affects the body, but the body affects the mind. And if the body is not open in a certain way, sometimes the mind won't open in certain ways. It won't go down certain... Certain things won't arise. Certain images, certain energies, certain expressions, certain characters. Does this make sense?

So, if soul wants to or has a sort of momentary impulse to go in a certain direction and it's blocked or it's rusted or broken, then that thing cannot manifest—it cannot, either internally or externally. Mind and body mutually dependent, so they feed each other.

I mentioned this this morning: we're not aiming for some kind of catharsis, like I'm really angry and if I kind of bellow in this way then it will be out of my system and gone and purified. We're actually more trying to loosen, loosen possible channels, if you like, or avenues of expression, an embodiment in the body, in gesture and movement, in energy, and therefore in psyche, so that they become an available color, an available style, an available resource, an available image or archetype. Like when we talked about frustration and dynamism this morning.

One more thing and we'll try something else. And I mentioned this too—you know, for many of us, we're creatures of habit. The mind is, one way of understanding what the mind is, is a set of habits. And the body is also a set of habits. Like we get energy and expression, gesture, get crystallized into certain habits.

And sometimes what happens is there's a habit of the energy body and even the amount of energy to be limited. And as I said, sometimes it's not obvious. It's not at all obvious in a person, unless you're really thinking this way and kind of attuned in this way. And the person doesn't even think, realize that or notice it. Everything's fine and functional, but there's actually a limit on what manifests in terms of how much energy, what kinds of energy, what kinds of images, and what kinds of then mental and experiences in consciousness.

So partly, one of the things we're doing is getting used to just having more energy and more energy flowing.

And sometimes that can be really challenging - oh, I'm just not used to this. I think I mentioned, you know, just on a much more subtle level, that long breath that we played with very briefly on the opening day - that also gives more energy. And sometimes people spending more time with that practice need to get

used to having more energy.

When the energy is limited in different ways, when the energy body is limited, then also the emotions and the images - everything can get limited and constrained.

Okay, so let's try something else. This is jumping from something quite gross that we just did to something much more subtle, okay?

Catherine is going to demonstrate. So you can see Catherine. Just standing - yeah. Maybe if some people sit down near the front, then the others can see. Good idea, thank you.

So, feet are sort of hip-width apart and loose at the knees. And really, really subtle movement, really not dramatic. The head is just tilting up and down, repeated tilting, slowly tilting up and down. That's it. Actually, that's one part of it. And, if you want, the arms can outstretch. The arms are outstretched, and the head tilts up and down.

So already she's noticing something - I don't quite know what yet, but this noticing could be at any level. So of course you move the head or you hold the arms and there's just physical sensations, and we all know that from mindfulness. But there's probably movements in the energy body. There's probably some kind of subtle emotion being constellated by the movement, and possibly an image, an imaginal sense constellating of that body in movement.

You don't have to share, but do you want to say a little bit or not?

"The first sense I have is a heart sense of a kind of tender... assent means to say yes to something."

So you can already hear in what she's saying, there's already a sacredness there. She's tuning the level of attention - not that this is right or wrong, but she's tuning right to a soul level with the emotional level. It's all quite subtle.

Do you want to say more, is that good? Have you got more to give? Don't have to.

"There's a shyness... some kind of become more humble."

Okay, beautiful. Thank you very much.

So it's not like this is exactly what's going to happen if you stand like this and wiggle your head up and down. It may. It might be something completely different. What's important is the sensitivity and the particularity. And particularity means individuality. And it might be, okay, not much happens, or I don't notice much apart from the bare sensations, but there's a direction here. And as I said, wherever we are is just completely fine.

So should we try this together, this one? Yeah, just enough room. Come into the space a little bit, yeah.

And so the arms are outstretched, and the palms sort of facing forward. And there's not an exact posture. So just find kind of what feels somehow like it's a fruitful or helpful one in whatever ways that is.

And then very slowly, and again at whatever pace and whatever range of movement, both feels doable and comfortable and not harmful to your body. And also somehow right. You're moving the head, tilting it up and down.

And bringing this receptivity of sensitivity and fine noticing to that. So actually the key thing is not the movement. The key thing at this point is the sensitivity.

And that can be at all different levels. So where's your playground of discovery for this particular exercise? What level or domain of attention and sensitivity? And if it's simple basic mindfulness, then that's beautiful and wonderful. And if somehow the movement itself becomes imaginal, becomes image, that's also beautiful. Your experience, your body, your care.

When you're ready, just come the arms down to the side and bring the body to stationary stillness. Feel the contact with the floor, feel the air on the body. Is it possible to know this body as blessed? Mystery of movement, the mystery of a sensitive body, a sensitive soul, all kinds of sensitivities. Can you know this body is blessed?

The next exercise—some of you may be familiar with it. Again, it's quite a subtle one, reasonably subtle. It's just a small smile. Eyes shut. And just as much of a smile as feels natural happening. What happens? Again, bringing the sensitivity there. What do you notice in the whole body, in the consciousness, in the soul, at whatever level, in whatever way? Just a small smile.

And then you might let it go and rest for a while, then bring it back and just notice the ripples from this tiny movement. The ripples in the energy body, in the consciousness, in the being. Allow your whole body to be open to whatever reverberations of such a small movement. What effect does that have on the heart, on the soul? Maybe it becomes imaginal in some way. Maybe not. It's all fine. What can I see? What can I sense?

Some people call it a half smile. You just play with how much and what it does.

Okay, and then letting that one go. Again, just coming into contact with the floor, the sensations of the feet on the floor.

This next one is a vocalization, and we're going to hiss. And you can try it two ways. Try it just with a sssss, and that might have all kinds of emotional flavors with it, so you see what that is. Just with the voice, and then do it sometimes with the voice and anything the body wants to do with it. Does that make sense? In your own time, in your own space, in your own rhythm with this as well.

So hissing. Hiss. And again, find the pitch of the attention and sensitivity. Whether it's simple mindfulness or energy or image, or emotion, or some or all of those. Sometimes just the voice, and sometimes the voice

and the body, however it wants to be. And again, the key is sensitivity as much as anything, and noticing. And if it doesn't feel right for you, if it feels like just a step too far, any of this, remember you don't have to do it.

Last few seconds of hissing.

And then let yourself again come to stillness. A sense of contact with the floor, a sense of the whole body. Opening your eyes, taking in the room.

The last little game is optional, as all these are. And I think actually, Catherine and I will demonstrate, is that okay? This, yeah, well, we can sit and do the cushions. It's in pairs, so if you don't want to be in a pair and if you don't want to do this, then while the people who want to do it in pairs do that, you can just move however you want your body to move and let the attention be on yourself and what that movement feels like or what you want to do, okay? But it is in pairs and what we would do, so some people sit so we can see.

You can find partners in a minute, don't worry about that yet. But if you're working with someone in a pair, then either both stand or both sit. Do you have a preference?

Okay, so we're going to both stand. In other words, we're at the same level. So we're going to face each other, probably two or three feet apart, something like that. You can decide whether you want to sit or stand.

Having played with the balance of attention, then one of the pairs will move—can move in any way they want to move. And the other is still and witnessing. Both people are paying attention with all the sensitivity to what happens.

So if Catherine will move, my job is just to witness. I'm bringing my whole energy body into relationship, into the witnessing. I'm knowing with not just my eyes, but with my whole body. She might move and move... You'll be conscious of it, but primarily you're just moving how you want to move, though you'll feel me in relationship.

My job is to notice how her movement impacts my energy body or my soul or my emotion or my mind or whatever it is. Again, there's a pitching of the attention to what feels most fruitful. Some might be hard to articulate. When you do it together in pairs, you don't have to report "I felt this" or anything. You just notice, and then you'll swap.

So eyes are optional—contact or not contact, or you can go in and out. Sometimes when we do this pair work, I think there's a bit of pressure like "I have to lock eyes and if I don't I'm a sissy," and we stay there thinking "Oh my god, when are we going to ring the bell?" But that's actually not how human interactions are—at least not healthy ones.

So let it be. Sometimes there's already something when we make eye contact. There's a lot here just in the

contact itself. I can feel it in my heart, in my energy body. There's a lot of possibility here for sensitivity, but neither of us have to remain glued with eye contact. We can, or we can go in and out, or not, or whatever. But obviously I need to have my eyes open to some extent to see her move.

So I'm completely still. I'm not doing anything. Occasionally a bit of a smile comes or whatever, but basically I'm not moving. She's moving. We did this a couple of weeks ago just as an experiment, and the movement was much more elaborate. But in a way it's really great—there was very little this time. It was quite subtle. But again, if I'm attentive, I can see that with each movement of her eyes, there's just a change in the direction of her eyes.

I feel it in my energy body.

This is not about what you do, it's simply an exercise in developing sensitivity in different ways.

You don't have to do this - you don't have to do any of it. I mentioned this at the beginning. But if you want to play, then find a partner. If you'd rather not, then perhaps find a space where you can explore your own movement just for the period of this exercise, focusing on yourself.

If you're with someone, you want to stay really close to them. Like Catherine - you can see she moved over there, which she didn't when we practiced this at my house, but that's fine. I mean, if she went way over there, it would be a bit much because you'd be wondering where your person went amongst all the others. So keep it in a fairly tight orbit if you're going to move at all.

So if you want to play, if you want to see - find a partner. And if not, as I said, just find a space where you can explore your own movement. I'll guide you because we're going to work with the balance of attention as well.

First, simply close your eyes and ignore the other person. Come into your own space, into inhabiting the fullness of your experience, your energy body right now, whatever is happening in that space.

Then, if you're not already, without opening the eyes, just become aware of the fact that you have a partner in this exercise sitting in front of you, standing in front of you. Let that into the consciousness, into your awareness. Just notice what happens with the attention. Does it go all into that fact of someone there, or do you find yourself having to keep reminding yourself that someone's there because you're mostly with yourself? Just notice the tendency.

Really bring a lot of kindness to this, whatever you notice. This business of two-ness of attention is not easy. You'd think it was, but it's actually not very easy at all for most people.

Remain aware of your energy body, your emotions, and just gently, gradually open your eyes. You don't have to make eye contact, but you're bringing more fully the other person's presence into the possibility of your consciousness.

Now let's try this kind of proportion of 80-20. Eighty percent of your attention, if you like, is with your own experience, your own space, your own energy body. And twenty percent with the other. Sometimes for some people it's easier as a fluid going back and forth - eighty percent of the time with yourself and twenty percent with the other. But there's enough rapidity to make it stay in touch.

Most of the attention on your experience, your energy body, your space, your emotions.

Then, is it possible to play with 50-50? Again, either spread in a kind of whole space of attention, or a fluid back and forth fairly rapidly between the two of you, so the attention is balanced between both of you.

It's not an easy exercise. You'd think it would be easy. It's not that easy, and that's really okay. We get better at it.

Let's take a few moments to radiate metta toward your partner. You may know them, you may not know them. Just wish them well. Wish them peace and ease, well-being and health. Maybe there's eye contact, maybe there isn't, comes and goes - it's all fine.

Now, as you're giving the metta, can you also be aware at the same time that you are receiving metta? Again, there's a kind of balance of attention there. You are the recipient right now of goodwill, of well-wishing, of kindness.

Giving and receiving both.

Now perhaps among you, if you can fairly—without too much fuss—decide who's going to be the first mover and who the first witness.

So the job of the mover is to move in whatever way they feel moved to, within this space of staying in relationship or even in one spot. It's a movement that's still somewhat in relationship with your partner. And you can move however you want to move. It could be really subtle, it could be quite expressive.

The job of the witness is to simply witness. And of course the mover will also notice what happens as they do this—how do they feel, what happens emotionally, what happens in the energy body. What images arise? How does it feel to be witnessed like this?

The witness stays stationary and just notices what the effects are in the body, in the energy body, in the emotions, in the soul—at every level.

When you're ready, mover number one, you'll have probably somewhere between one and two minutes, so don't think you have to choreograph a whole ballet. When you're ready, please begin.

[Movement period]

The last ten seconds or so... gradually coming to stillness again.

Just checking in, each of you—what's reverberating in the body, in the heart, in the mind, in the soul right now?

And offering metta to yourself, to this mystery that you are and this mystery of body and sensitivity. And then including your partner in the reach of the metta, in the sphere of metta, so you're offering metta to yourself and to your partner both—wishing well, wishing ease, wishing happiness.

And again, recognize that at this moment you are the recipient of intentions of well-wishing, of metta, of kindness. They are being directed, beamed your way.

Gently letting the metta-intention just drop to the distant background. It's always a base of what we do, but not so conscious.

And when you're ready, mover number two can begin. Again, let your movement be at least somewhat in relationship. Be conscious of the relationship as well. You're moving in relation to.

And the witness—with the whole body, the whole senses, all the senses and all the sensitivity—witnessing, sensitized, open, noticing.

[Second movement period]

Again, last ten or fifteen seconds of moving and witnessing... and gradually coming to stillness.

And again the metta—starting with metta to yourself. Metta for this body, this instrument. Metta to this heart and mind and soul, perfect where it is, how it is. And then adding, including your partner in the sphere of metta.

And recognizing the giving and the receiving simultaneously. You are giving and you are receiving. You are the object of loving-kindness in this moment.

Bowing to your partner, or some way of thanking them—whatever feels right.

Thank you for listening.

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