Sailing the Oceans of Soul (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 33:46

The momentum of my practice is very much rooted in emptiness practices. When I'm working with an image, it can be challenging to preserve its appearance without it fading into a kind of equality or pure awareness. Sometimes I feel like I wish there was a sustain pedal I could press to keep the image alive.

One approach I've been experimenting with involves playing with lines from the Heart Sutra—you know, "form is emptiness, emptiness is form"—and changing the word "emptiness" to "imaginal." So we have "form is imaginal, imaginal is form," and so on. I found that this helps somewhat in keeping the imaginal quality alive in what I'm experiencing. I'm wondering if you have other suggestions around this challenge.

That's a really interesting question, thank you. Let me explain a bit for everyone's benefit. You've done extensive emptiness practices, and when you meditate on the emptiness of something at any level, what begins to happen is that whatever the object—a pain in the body, a form, or whatever it is—it begins to actually dissolve. This occurs because the appearance of anything is dependent on reifying it, on having an unconscious concept that it is something real.

When we look at something with a view that knows its emptiness to some degree, or contemplates its emptiness—and there are many ways of doing this—because of dependent arising, because the appearance of anything depends on avijjā, the fundamental delusion that reifies things, the object fades. Another factor that keeps an object in form is a degree of clinging. When we relax clinging, the form also fades.

So you're saying that you want to be with the imaginal, but having done extensive emptiness practice, when you work with an image, it starts to fade, and you wish you could lock it into staying formed. Your experimentation with reframing the Heart Sutra—"form is imaginal"—recognizing that images have forms, seems to work somewhat, which is excellent. You can certainly continue with that approach.

I think there are several possibilities here. One thing that might happen is that things become less fabricated—which is actually one element of the imaginal—but they might simply lose some substantiality and become more liquid rather than completely losing their form. It sounds like you're experiencing them actually losing their form entirely.

It might be valuable to identify what's operating in your perceptual lens that has become such an ingrained habit. What in your way of seeing is causing this dissolution? Is it reduced clinging? If you really decrease clinging, does that cause the fading? Are you automatically contemplating the emptiness of something in the background? If you can identify what's happening, you can ease off that particular

approach somewhat.

It may also help to tune more into the sense of eros, because eros is, in a way, a kind of clinging—it's a wanting, a form of desire. If you tune into the sense of eros within you, the sense of desire for this figure, or beauty, or attraction to it, then noticing and nurturing that can actually increase the eros, which will reform and strengthen the image. In fact, it will create more elaborate forms and increase complexity rather than simplification.

Another consideration is simply what you're tuning into. What we pay attention to often emphasizes or draws out that particular quality. So if there's an image of some kind of being, what are the specific particulars that attract you or feel soul-making? Perhaps it's the way they move—with a certain elegance or fluidity that touches you. By tuning your attention both to that particular quality and to the way it's affecting you, to the soul-making sense it evokes, this honing of attention will tend to draw out and strengthen those very qualities.

These are a few approaches to explore, but I'd also encourage you to discover your own methods as you continue working with this dynamic.

This is one of the arts, actually, especially for people who've done a lot of emptiness practice. You learn to modulate the fading. And that's in my book somewhere. So you can practice so that things really just disappear and fade, and you rest in deep emptiness. But what becomes even more of the art, once you've done that, is learning to just take the foot off the pedal a little bit.

In a way, that's what tantric practice is—playing at this edge of form and dissolving of form in emptiness. It's really a matter of learning to hold it right there in the middle, where everything is super insubstantial and holy, but formed, yet very insubstantial and translucent. So that's a real skill, to hold it that way.

Having said all that, let me add something completely different. I don't think this is quite what you're talking about, Padraig, but I'll mention it anyway. Sometimes what can happen when working with an image is there it is, very formed and beautiful and everything. And then, for all kinds of different reasons, the image sort of dissolves, but we're left with the essence of the image.

So, for example, in that vague example I gave of an imaginal being or figure or angel or whatever, it's the way they move with such elegance and fluidity. Whatever it might mean to the perception for the figure to fade, the essence of elegance remains. So one might then be in a completely empty space that's condensed the essence of that image. There's not a form there, but there's a particular quality that one is then resting in.

I don't think that's quite what you're talking about, but I'm just mentioning it to everyone. I wouldn't do too much of that, but that's one of the possibilities that might happen. In a way, then, what that means is there's a sort of quasi-jhanic state—a jhana on elegance, whatever that might mean. It's the essence of elegance without a particular manifestation of elegance that belonged with the image.

So what this means, again, is that there's infinite possibility here of different states that can open up. The Buddha outlined eight jhanas—the very classical ones. Now, you might find yourself sliding into some of them with practice, because of what we said about the energy body harmonizing and samadhi being available.

And so you might find something like what I've just described, a sort of essence of some quality—could be nobility or courage. What does that mean? It's just space. There's nothing but space, but it's permeated with this essence of some value or virtue or something like that.

So that's a possibility. There's the retaining of the form with all its particulars and complexities and nuances and subtleties. And then there's another possibility where there's an imaginal being, but it's a more universal being. So, for example, Quan Yin. Sometimes there might be a figure and it turns into something more universal. It's still a figure with a form, but it's Quan Yin.

What you find with, let's say, Quan Yin, is she doesn't have that much of a personality. She's compassionate and she's beautiful and divine and all that. But some of the particulars have faded. So not just with the emptiness thing, but there are different kinds of ways that things can sort of relatively fade. All those would be fruitful meditations—all those categories, whether it's jhanic, whether it's this essence of a quality, whether it's a sort of universalized deity in figure, or whether it's a really particularized, very unique image.

This is some of the ways things can open up. What we're focusing more on is the first one—just the sort of what we've been talking about with images, with particulars and uniquenesses.

"Can I just add something to what you said? Because it might be a universal image that becomes particularized for you, so I just want to include that."

Yes, thank you. So there are all kinds of shades here, aren't there? Even if you go into the jhanas—the eight—and it's really good to get them really clear, then you realize actually you can mix them in ways that seem to contradict the rules. You can bring in other qualities and mix metta with the sixth jhana and stuff like that.

So things are never as discrete as they appear in textbooks. All kinds of fluidities can happen.

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Yes, so thank you. There are all kinds of shades here, aren't there? Even if you go into the jhanas—if you really go into the jhanas, the eight—it's really good to get them clear. Then you realize actually you can mix them in ways that seem to contradict the rules and bring in other qualities, mixing metta with the sixth jhana and such. Things are never as discrete as they appear in textbooks. All kinds of fluidities can happen.

I think one of the arts of practice, though, is to know what is happening and make that differentiation. It's

not so much that this should happen rather than that, but "Ah, this is the flavor now," like that chef I was talking about. When I add that spice, then... aha, that's the difference. When I add it then, it's different. Or now this mixture is just like this. That's part of the art—this refinement.

Anyway, that's more than you bargained for, but please.

"Could a shade of that or one of those things... I sometimes feel like I can feel that sometimes an image shows up more as its particularities and then it fades more to its energy body. So I'm feeling my energy body and it's..."

Yes, so you're saying that sometimes working with an image, there's a sense that the image fades a little bit, but what's left is the sense of energy body, either just in oneself or the relationship of energy bodies. The energy body is still distinct. So what's imaginal has gone to energetic.

That's fine and lovely. I think if that's always what happens, you're going to... it won't have the full richness of possibility. So again, you get this kind of navigational possibility at any time. You can even—you'll probably find in time—sometimes just lean it that way if you want. Let's go to just the energy of what's happening and kind of resonate with that, or feel the mutual effect of energies or the mutual interaction of energies or what it does here.

That's fine. It's a conscious navigating, conscious leaning. It's great. But in that, a lot of the other particulars have gone from the image—the particular kind of beauty, for instance, or what touches you in the soul. It touches you in the energy, maybe, but shades of emotion, etc. So it's a choice, and it's great, and it's a great thing to kind of play with. But in the context of what we're doing, if you want the whole availability of everything, I probably would make sure I'm not doing that kind of thing all the time, or even most of the time. It's just one of the possibilities.

Does that help? Great.

"Yes, a follow-up question to what you were saying about discerning different states or different qualities. I find I can discern them as like A, B, or C, but I don't know what they are. Is that just a question of patience?"

Which different states are you talking about, then?

"I cannot articulate it even to myself. I just know, oh, that's interesting, that's different, and I'm having a really hard time..."

But are you talking about something with images or something where the images have faded and it's more of a sort of space or a state?

I don't know how important it is for everyone to be able to put everything into words—or as much, you know. Maybe that's just people who try and teach or something like that. But there is something about

trying. I remember being in group interviews and people just in a state—just a lot of rapture or the first jhana or something. "It's impossible to describe. It's impossible. There's just no words for it whatsoever."

And it's like, "Oh, go on, just try a little bit." Once you start just throwing some words at something, you'll get some that's not quite right, that's right... "Oh, that's right!" And then someone might help you: "You mean..." "Yeah, yeah, that's good." And it starts to crystallize.

What we want is—part of the trying a little bit, you don't... it's not like the be-all and end-all—but the actually trying starts to... here's the mystery of it: the actual trying starts to shape things more. It starts to... they start to contrast more and you get more refinement of distinction and discernment.

"I find that's what I've been doing, different words and seeing what they resonate. And sometimes I think, oh yeah, that's that."

That's beautiful. There's an infinite number of words. There are, especially if you start adding Greek and things. So I wouldn't tie yourself in knots about this. It's not so much "Am I able to describe accurately?" It's more like "Can I refine my capacity to differentiate and discern?" That's actually part of this practice. It's a part of any practice, whether it's emptiness, whether it's jhanic, whether it's imaginal.

Sometimes what happens, let's say in an emptiness practice, what I've described with Papañca...

Things fade, and because there isn't yet the discernment, everything fades. It feels like nothing is happening. But actually, there is something still happening. What is this something that continues? Well, space is still here, for example. So there is indeed something that's happening. Or perhaps space fades. Well, what's still here then?

Why am I emphasizing all this? Because this capacity to discern is actually crucial. If I can't discern—let's say at that level where everything fades—then actually I won't be able to go any deeper. I just get stuck in a kind of pretty nice soup, but I can't take it any further. I won't reach the unfabricated; I won't discover other realms. I know people who hang out in that state for years and years and years. I mean, that's a choice or whatever, but partly it depends on this discernment that allows further movement.

Now, if we talk about eros, part of what eros does in relation to... I realized this morning—sorry, I realized that I didn't finish a sentence earlier. So there was a smaller definition of eros, and the larger definition encompasses much more.

That smaller definition is just the beginning. But once eros is allowed to do its thing—which means impregnate images and generate and create, discover shades and push the logos—once it's involved in the eros-psyche-logos dynamic and that movement is happening, then all of that is implied when we say "eros." You understand? So when we speak of eros, this entire process is contained within that word.

Part of this eros-psyche-logos process, as it unfolds, is making more and more discernment. Here's my beloved other, my image, and as I said, the eros wants more. One of the ways it finds, creates,

discovers—creates slash discovers—more is actually by making more discernments and delineations.

Instead of seeing just "oh, it's just a human being, you know, just another one of those," there are infinite discernments and shades of the imaginal faces you can embody, infinite theophanies—faces of divinity that you can be. So there's something about discernment and differentiation, both perceptual, sensible, and conceptual, that goes hand in hand with eros. It's part of that whole unfolding, part of revealing the beauty of what's happening.

One more little thing. I was talking with someone today about whether we need to be able to describe everything. Sometimes you don't need to. And sometimes with images... well, part of the inexhaustibility of images is that you won't be able to describe them fully. The very process of differentiating and describing is part of what generates more. So you're never going to reach that point where you can say, "Now I've summed it up completely."

And part of what's actually beautiful that can happen between human beings—relating to Roxanne's question the other day about working in dyads with this kind of material or with others—is when you have an image that you begin to share. Maybe you feel, "I've just been completely inarticulate about that, I haven't captured it somehow." But there's a magic in human communication, and in the imaginal as well. You can start to say something in the most clumsy, inefficient way, and I sense the image—I pick it up, or it sparks an image in me. So don't worry too much about perfect articulation.

Have I answered your question? Okay, very good.

"I was just wondering, in the same way that we're talking about articulating different states, I was just wondering about movement."

"Yeah, sometimes I definitely feel like moving."

Several people have expressed this same question: can a concept become an image? This is a really important inquiry to explore.

Let me address this directly. Yes, absolutely—a concept can become an image. In fact, this is one of the beautiful possibilities we're working with. A concept might begin as something quite abstract, quite mental, but through our engagement with it, through our sensitivity and openness, it can transform into something much more rich, more multidimensional, more imaginal.

Think about how this might happen. You might start with a concept—perhaps the concept of compassion, or freedom, or even something like justice. Initially, it might feel quite dry, quite intellectual. But as you stay with it, as you open your sensitivity to it, it can begin to take on qualities that move beyond the purely conceptual. It might develop a sense of presence, of energy, of particular qualities that you can feel in your being. Colors might emerge, or textures, or a sense of movement. It might even begin to take on a more personified form.

This is part of what makes the imaginal so rich and accessible. We don't need to wait for dramatic visions or elaborate mythological figures to appear. Even our most everyday concepts can become gateways into the imaginal realm when we approach them with the right kind of sensitivity and openness.

The key is in how we relate to the concept. Are we just thinking about it, analyzing it, staying at that mental level? Or are we allowing ourselves to feel into it more deeply, to sense what it might evoke in terms of energy, presence, and meaning? When we make that shift, when we open that sensitivity, concepts can absolutely blossom into images that carry all the transformative power of soul-making.

So yes, definitely explore this. Notice when concepts arise in your practice, and experiment with opening to them in this more receptive, more feeling way. You might be surprised at how readily they transform into something much more alive and nourishing.

Absolutely. Or another way of saying it is a concept gets soulful for us. It could be beauty—again, it's a kind of abstract thing—or it could be just a logos, a conceptual framework. Several people have mentioned this, and I can't remember some examples now, but absolutely, it's possible.

Someone was talking about the concept of evolution, biological evolution of species, and how that as a concept actually can become very enriched and multidimensional and very fertile. So a concept can, absolutely.

"Because when I was working with... I had the concept of respect, because that's something very important. But then when I wanted to work with it, it would be helpful to choose an object, an image of a physical object, a tree or something, to work, to deepen it."

Maybe and maybe not, you know. So again, I would let the soul-making be what navigates you. So it might be, I just have this idea of respect, and I don't really have any particular image or object that goes with it, but I can feel it working on the soul. I feel the resonance, the beauty of it, and that's working. I don't need to do anything—I just let that stew and let myself be touched by it. If images come, great. If they don't, great. It's already become a soul-making object, you might say. So that's really wonderful.

"Actually, it relates to what she was saying about the movements. I was thinking about sound. We were playing with freaking sounds in a hall, and we don't usually do that outside, like holding or making noises. But I wonder if you can use that in the same way that you use movement, or listening to sound, too, to create the soul."

Absolutely. Again, there's just not time. That was one of the things I was thinking of offering you, is that kind of thing. We may or may not get to it. But yes, anything can. Basically, anything at all can become infused with soul, can become sensed with soul.

So it's making sounds, listening to sounds, and there's a whole mystery here. Look, we have a voice. What happens with our voice, what gets communicated, all the mystery of communication and kindness and

insight and ideas and beauty and connection—it's happening through the larynx and the throat, and there's mystery there.

So even just the sense of taking up the mysterious sense of this vocal capacity. And again, maybe it's vocalizing that allows you to connect with that. Maybe it's being quiet, just similar as not moving and letting the energy body move that puts you in touch with that. Does that make sense?

But yes, try it. Try all of it. And sound, certainly—I've shared lots of images where birds and things become infused with a soul-making sense, and the sound becomes imaginable in all kinds of ways, interacting with the body and beautiful things.

So the possibilities are literally endless, I think. Just open the doors and play, and see.

"Just a simple question..."

Did you consider using the term "icon" for an imaginal image instead of "imagination"?

Yes, I have used it. I think I mentioned it once in the hall, in contrast to narrative image. Essentially, it's the same thing. An icon is an image, and anything can become an icon in the sense that we're using the word "imaginal image." Absolutely.

There's actually a whole set of talks newly on the website—eight or nine parts of one really long talk called "Between Icon and Idol," using Greek terms again. It's just another way of saying image.

Is that somehow related to French theology? Jean-Luc Marion?

Yes, the way he uses it—as far as I can understand him, and some of these French theologians can be quite challenging—there's this infinite depth of the icon and our participation in that. Absolutely.

I perhaps avoid the term because of the word "iconoclast." Some people who consider themselves iconoclasts are actually... Marion contrasts icon with idol, I-D-O-L. We're interested in destroying what's reified, flat, lacking depth. Some who call themselves iconoclasts—or maybe not iconoclasts so much as just anti-spiritual or anti-sacred, opposing imaginal figures that are sacred—are actually setting up other idols under the name of iconoclasm, without realizing it.

What would you say about destroying the idea of an idol?

Iconoclasm can become a cultural term for someone who has the courage to crash through things that have become ossified or falsely holy. But some people who might see themselves that way, or are seen that way, might actually be setting up idols under the name of iconoclasm. They're setting up other idols—things that don't have depth or sacredness, but to which they're still attached.

I have a related question. Catherine mentioned yesterday that you don't really like the word "imaginal," and you prefer "sensing with soul," which is a new term. I find it very helpful because, as you've said

many times, it's not just about images. But images get so emphasized here that I got confused—I'm more tactile. When I tapped into sensing or embodied awareness, my whole body became alive, without trying to impose the need for an image, even subtly.

Absolutely. As I said at the beginning, if there were a way to instantaneously download everything, you could have used that right from the start, and probably others could as well. It's wonderful that you've got it—that opening of possibility. It's a matter of timing when there are so many different people at different places.

Even though we try to say an image doesn't necessarily mean something visual, it's embedded in the word and hard to escape. Maybe another retreat will start with that idea—sensing with soul—and take it from there.

I think we need to end. Let's have a bit of quiet together.

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