Soul Making Dharma (Q & A)

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

Naomi began by raising a question about fullness of intention and working with all the elements that have been taught in this paradigm. She wanted to understand where this approach sits in relation to awakening - how it fits and how participation relates to awakening. She noted that there were aspects of what had been experienced that felt like what some people describe as aspects of awakening, though she understood that the logos of awakening is also fascinating territory.

Another participant wondered about the dynamic between creating and discovering in this work, and about the role of Logos as one of the stars in the constellation. They had a sense that there were times when something felt soul-making without having all the explicit frameworks in place.

There was also interest in the word and idea of "soul" itself - a request for some near synonyms or poetic alternatives to help understand this central concept.

One person shared that while they didn't have distinct memories from previous practice, they recalled moments when something really worked or clicked for them. They were aware of the emptiness of perception, of how it all works, yet these moments felt very much like what was being discussed. They sensed implications in the teachings about connecting experiences, but weren't quite grasping the full question they wanted to explore.

The inquiry touched on how we're naturally drawn toward moments of beauty and the sensing of the autonomy of another, even when we don't have these frameworks or vocabulary to understand what's happening.

Andrew raised a question about engaging with the energy body and working with the imaginal in practice. He drew a comparison with metta practice, noting that we don't simply wait around for loving-kindness to arise spontaneously. There's intentional cultivation involved, an effort required in practice. He wondered about this same dynamic with imaginal work - the balance between effort and settling back into simplicity. While the teachings mentioned we can't do imaginal practice all day long, and he'd noticed times when practice needed to settle into something more simple, he sensed that intentionality was still crucial. It's not just a matter of waiting passively for an image to arise.

Finally, there was a question about the teaching that "you love the image and the image loves you back." This reciprocal dynamic wasn't quite an exchange in the ordinary sense, but the questioner hadn't quite gotten their hands on what this mutual love actually meant in practice.

These questions wove together themes of intentionality in practice, the relationship between this work

and traditional awakening, and the mysterious reciprocal dynamics that emerge in authentic imaginal engagement.

So where shall we begin? Perhaps with James' question about using the word "soul" and whether I can offer a poetic image for it. Actually, I would prefer not to, and there's a reason for this reluctance.

In this paradigm, in this teaching, we're not so much prescribing images. Whereas in other traditions or religions, you receive prescribed images—the Eucharist, Christ on the cross, whatever it might be, which is beautiful in its own way. But there's a kind of meta stance here, where images will be individual, created, discovered.

So while concepts, although an image will also be elastic and will evolve, for me, I feel tentative about prescribing or offering out images. Concepts seem like looser pointers in a direction that can then evolve.

One of the fundamental concepts about all this is that concepts need to be loose. They need to be elastic. There's a real tension between defining them too tightly and rigidly so that they can't grow, can't gain depth and meaning and width, on the one hand, and on the other hand, not bothering to delineate precisely and with discrimination between concepts so that there isn't much fruitfulness. There's this dance and tension between these poles.

Soul, almost more than any other concept we use, falls right in this space. But we could offer circular descriptions. Soul is, in one way, simply shorthand for a sense of soulfulness, with all that implies. But another way is to point to it in a more subjective sense, as it's usually used—you have a soul, or the soul has you.

What might it mean there? Again, it needs to remain very open, but circularly speaking, soul is the organ or the instrument of perceiving soulfully—perceiving in ways that are soul-making. The more we do this, the more that organ grows in its powers, its range, its capacities.

Seeing in ways that feel soul-making means engaging the eros, the beauty, the meaningfulness—all that eros-psyche-logos dynamic. Sensing in ways, whether internal or external, thinking in ways, relating to the body—the whole instrument becomes an organic, alive, multifaceted organ for soul-making perception in more ways than we're going to discover.

This leaves it very wide for me, but gives a sense of what it might be.

James offered a slightly cheeky follow-up: "If the word 'soul' didn't exist, do you have a sensible word you might use instead?"

Psyche.

Now, what happens in this growing of range and the kinds and depths and even modes of perceiving soulfully is that they are created and discovered. We discover them. Something happens.

There may be a word in English that means something like both created and discovered simultaneously—not partly created and partly discovered, not this bit created and that bit discovered, but something that somehow means both completely, in one. I don't know if there's such a word. Magic, perhaps, or I simply use "create/discover."

What this does for me is reflect the actual sense we have. Much of the language we use gives words to things that, if we just let this process happen, we'll naturally sense. A bit like the real/not-real phenomenon. Sometimes you ask someone working with an image, "Does it feel real or not real?" And they'll say, "Well, kind of neither and both," and that's just natural—a natural evolution of the soul-making process. It's what we begin to notice and sense about soul-making perception.

The same is true for create-discover.

Because there's a sense that I am doing this—I am creating this. But there's also a sense that I'm discovering something, stumbling across something. Something was given to me.

This element, create-discover or magic, reflects both, or is designed to reflect both. As you practice, you'll notice this—and there's a word or phrase for it. Oh, this is characteristic of soul-making experiences, characteristic of sensing the soul. It's got this strange amalgam of the two.

But it's also intended as a guide or balance point. When I remember that this is an element, then I remember something of my participation in the creation and the discovery. This has to do with participation. And that does something that's connected to neither real nor not real. It does something to my whole relationship with what I'm perceiving, whether it's something in the world or another or something purely internal.

At first it seems to narrow things because we're saying, "Oh, not that, not that, this thing in the middle"—create-discover, or neither. But it's like the old phrase: narrow is the gate, narrow is the path, but then it opens. By virtue of going on that path, just for a while, it might feel constraining. "Well, what are they talking about, and why do I have to constrain it to that, and why can't I just feel it this way or that way?" It's all good, but there's something about this narrow gate in a lot of these things that then opens up way wider than either of the other two—which is "just what I create" or "just what I discover."

So it's something to remember occasionally in practice, and that remembering starts to shape my sense of what's going on. My sense of what's going on shapes my relationship with what's going on, and that determines what then is possible.

Some of these concepts are tricky. Like I said, there's not really a word in English because a lot of the way we think in English about reality and about self and object is dualistic. And when we go to non-duality, we just kind of go to a kind of all-one soup or something like that. And this is neither. Both of those are great—it's fantastic to perceive and conceive dualistically at times. It's really important. And it's a lovely range of experiences and really important mystical experiences that happen when everything dissolves in

some kind of mystical soup. But there's this other thing, let's call it in the middle, that seems narrow at first and then opens up a whole other range of experiences.

We don't really have the language for that, partly because language is based on notions of subject and object, and the verb is this thing done by the subject in relation to the object. There's something curious about this certain range here that really is not well captured, certainly in English language. I don't know enough about other languages, but I presume not so well either.

So it takes a while, but again, a lot of these elements are things that we notice. We're teaching kind of from the front here, but we could just say: if you just keep doing this stuff, at some point, these are things you'll notice anyway, regardless of whether you've heard them. If you're practicing with enough sensitivity—what's going on, what's the feeling here—I think you'd have some kind of sense of things when it really feels soul-making that is exactly that. You might put it in your own words, but it will be reflecting the same thing.

And that's very related to participation, which is actually just part of fullness of intention and awakening.

There's so much to say about this one. I've talked a lot about it. If you're interested, you can hear hours and hours of me exploring this territory.

But yes, there are many, many hours exploring this. There's a recent talk called "What is Awakening," and there's a whole series—I can't remember the exact title—of talk segments in "Eros Unfettered." A couple of years before that, in what I think was the November solitary retreat here, there was a talk called "Questioning Awakening" with two follow-up parts: something like "Buddhism Beyond Modernism" and "In Praise of Restlessness." That forms a three-part set, and there are probably others. Maybe some of you can point to additional material, but there's extensive exploration available. This is really key.

I suppose what I want to say briefly about this is—again, this is actually one of those subjects that I think by definition I would like to approach as endlessly expanding. This is not typically how we think of awakening. We tend to think of awakening as: I've got it, or I don't, or I'm halfway there, or whatever it is. In this paradigm, the notion of awakening is actually ever-expanding. And that relates to this buffet of treasures that I described the other day—this glory upon glory of beautiful creation and discovery.

Having said that, just to make a historical note that contextualizes all this: if you're around enough, even just around Gaia House, let alone going to Japan and looking at the history of Dharma in different countries, and you ask teachers or retreatants, "What's your idea or image of awakening? What does an awakened person look like? Where is this all going?"—you're going to get, just from Gaia House teachers, just from the Gaia House teacher council, a huge range.

This is the historical state of Buddha Dharma. You could also say there's a reason why we have this range that has more to do with the nature of soul, but I'll put that aside for now.

So you ask people, and sometimes awakening means coping with the existential, obvious reality of a meaningless material world—your birth and death within that—and just bearing up with it. That's what awakening means: trying to be kind within that reality and trying to have the courage to face it. For some people, that's awakening.

For other people, awakening is just a moment of awakening—this fresh perception of things that doesn't seem to have much ideation or will to it. That's a moment of awakening, and there's no grand awakening beyond that.

For others, awakening involves this transcendent, unfabricated experience where one encounters in meditation the deeper and deeper fading of things, opening to a realm completely beyond anything we can put into language. This tells us something about all this—which might be a kind of rejection of it all. None of this matters; this is samsara, worthless, nothing. The best thing is to escape this and not be reborn again. The one who is not reborn is the awakened one. Stages of awakening measure how near I am to not coming back to this world of perception—just samsara, just worthless.

It could go on and on, the different shades of understanding. What does it mean? And then even tracking back: awakening relates to the third noble truth in relation to the first noble truth of dukkha. But then we ask, what is dukkha? What actually are we addressing when we say suffering? Some of it's obvious, but if you expand the range of what that can mean...

I find all this absolutely fascinating—and fascinating how easily we can become really closed around a certain point of view. What's the place of soul in that, whether we're conscious of it or not? Why does a person choose to opt for this vision rather than that one? It's not just because it makes sense intellectually, because I see how the pieces fit together.

When I choose a vision of awakening, I'm actually choosing a cosmos. I'm choosing a vision of the cosmos and a vision of the self in response to that cosmos. A person can choose a meaningless cosmos in which the nobility of the self is to show up and bear with that reality, to have that kind of dignity and bravery and openness. Or a person can choose a magical cosmos—layers and dimensions and the participation of the soul in the creation and discovery of perception.

Psychologically, I think it's an incredibly interesting question: Why? Why choose this one or that one? What's going on for this personality or that personality? Without any right or wrong, but just seeing the whole thing from a soul perspective.

We can look at what we're doing here, this "improper dharma," from the perspective of "proper dharma"—fit it into, okay, so there's a lot of papañca going on, clearly.

And clearly there's a lot of craving. And there's a lot of overthinking.

But one can also turn things around and look at certain other versions of Dharma from a soul-making

understanding. Again, why is the soul gravitating towards that? What is it about? And again I go back to what I said the other day - when we're in love with the path, any of those versions, those people who have those different visions love it, and there's eros there. They might not have that language, but basically something has become an image and a whole set of concepts that are meaningful to their soul and attractive to their soul. So then you have a whole soul psychology, kind of not deconstruction but perspective on conventional approaches. There's all that.

So then there's this question of suffering and dukkha and how it relates to the fullness of intention. I can only speak from my experience of dukkha I meet and what I'm dealing with and have had to deal with in the past, and also working with people, working a lot, especially one-to-one, with abuse history, sexual abuse and trauma and all kinds of things with this paradigm.

What it seems to me at this point - I think I said it somewhere or other - at this point I just have an absolute trust that all kinds of dukkha can be healed through imaginal work. Not necessarily they will be in this session, or a person is quite ready for that, or even quite ready to look at things that way, you know, to bring that perspective. But I just have that sense.

If I'm working with someone one-to-one, is that doorway open? Can I sense that this may be available for this person right now? My experience is that there is a healing available through the imaginal that addresses hurts and pains and soul torments and histories that other psychological paradigms - which I'm quite well versed in some - don't seem to do. And mindfulness doesn't quite do it. And even emptiness doesn't quite do it.

That was really interesting to me. I've seen that over and over again. It's to the point where I just trust it.

What makes that work better is this fullness of intention, kind of semi-paradoxically. Healing can be part of what I want - this ending of this dukkha. But if I can include a sense of actually, I want that in something even bigger, which is this fullness of soul-making and sense of sacredness. I want to ensoul my dukkha. I want to ensoul my history and the pain of my past and whatever it is. Somehow, if that fullness of intention can open up, then it becomes easier for this multi-spectrum, multi-level, far-reaching, far-penetrating sort of healing to happen.

Third thing - I mean, I could talk for hours, but I'm not going to. This is the last thing I'm going to say about this. I've shared this again in some of those recent talks, and I would say that - so again, what does suffering mean? We talk about awakening, the third noble truth, in relation to the first noble truth. What does dukkha mean?

It might be that different ages - certainly different people, but different ages, different eras, different cultures and different times have different kinds of dukkha. There probably have been in the history of humanity many cultures and societies and eras where a crisis of a lack of meaningfulness, or what we might call a lack of soulfulness, just wasn't a pain. It wasn't there, or rather it was very, very rare.

Whereas I think a key stratum of the dukkha of our society now, at this time, is the dukkha and the pain of soullessness.

One of the things I shared - I could again - one of the things I shared in those talks was about when I had cancer and was going to chemotherapy at the hospital in Plymouth. It's a huge hospital, and it was so hard for me. It was really on the edge of my practice. Yes, it was hard physically. There was an enormous amount of dukkha there.

But what was really hard for me was the soullessness of the place. Everything was plastic. There was this kind of cheeriness. Death was in the room, and people were sort of... and the way one is looked at by the medical system - basically, I'm a bag of chemicals with some really not very promising statistics attached to it. All of that, primarily the plastic and the lack of aesthetics, and despite all the physical dukkha and all the possibility of dying - that was the thing that was just on the edge of my practice. Sometimes it was really, really hard. I couldn't quite... while I was sitting there with these plastic pipes and poison being pumped into the body... that was the thing that was really hard.

There's a dukkha of soullessness.

That's a level of dukkha that, again, in the Dharma, we don't really have that language. We don't have these words to open up something. Look, there is a pain for many people at that level—the need for meaningfulness, soulfulness, and such.

So again, when we talk about awakening, in the third noble truth in relation to the first noble truth, what do we mean by suffering? What kinds of suffering are there, and what do they need? How will they be healed? This is some of what's in there.

The logos piece—is that okay? When we use the word *logos*, we don't mean anything necessarily obvious. Those two experiences you described in relationship and moving—there wasn't any kind of heavy edifice or machinery of philosophical structure there. But just the fact that you could say it felt soul-making implies that there's something like what we call soul-making, even though you haven't delineated it, and something of a soul and something of a value to that. So that's enough logos right there.

When we use the word logos or concept, we mean everything from something very complex, sophisticated, subtle, conceptual structure, all the way down to what I said earlier today: any perception whatsoever of subject, object, and time. That's already concept. It's percept. So it could be just the most bare sense of momentary awareness with nothing happening. And that's what I perceive—nothing. And it's happening now, in this moment. That's already concept.

So we're talking about something really, really subtle. It doesn't have to be complex. And yet one of the possibilities is a kind of quietening of the concept, but there's still a bare concept there, subtle.

One of the other possibilities is that while we're working with an image and it's touching the heart and the

energy body is responding and we're moved and the soul is resonating, the mind can actually be kind of intuitively flickering and getting insights and seeing how—I don't know if you've had this experience—how different elements fit together and how the structure works, how soul-making happens. So sometimes, in the process of soul-making, it really involves the intellect, just in a kind of very automatic way. So there's that possibility too.

Derek, I didn't quite understand the question, but let me say something to see if it's accurate. Maybe part of bringing out this vocabulary and making these discernments is to say that this kind of stuff is going on anyway. This is just what the soul does. Either we have so-called intrapsychic images arising in meditation, and it comes out. And people have told me, "Yeah, I've been meditating for twenty years, you know, vipassana, insight meditation, and I never tell anyone these things that happen because it doesn't seem like it's welcome." Maybe it's not welcome.

So the soul does generate, create, discover—it's part of what it does. There's that way, and then there's also the fact that if you love something, if you are devoted to something, it has become fantasy for you. It has become image, which means the sense of sitting there on a hot day and working and dedicating yourself, the sense of the Buddha, the sense of the path, the sense of *metta*. It's all part of the love and dedication and devotion and eros to the path, whatever it is.

Yeah, you've talked about that before, but it's just interesting for me to hear about it and to think about that perspective on the practice. That sense of that's already happening and then coming towards this and going, "Oh, okay, I have these tools for working with something that's already wanting to happen, a process that's already going in that direction."

Yeah, that's part of it, exactly. Giving us the tools, the concepts, the refinements of skill and awareness that can navigate that. But there's a second thing to me, which is also—and I think I must have said it yesterday morning when I talked about desire—when we don't have the words and no one talks about certain concepts, we almost blind ourselves to them. And so I ask you: is that really what you love? Is that really what you're doing?

Is it for just the decrease of suffering? That's what draws you to Buddha Dharma? It's almost like just giving us the concepts and talking about it makes us realize, I think in many cases, oh, there's more going on here—yet we haven't had the language for it. And when we don't have the language, it's almost like we can't fill out the psychological understanding and see what it needs. Does that make sense?

Which to me is an important part of just psychological awareness of self. Like, what's going on in my life? What is it? How do I operate? How do I get drawn to something and become galvanized and all that? And that's, for me, a really important piece.

So that's a crucial element. I would say all practice, or deepening in any practice—we could be talking about metta, samadhi, emptiness practice, mindfulness, or whatever—as it matures, the deepening

involves a kind of learning to play with the gas pedal: a little bit more, a little bit less. In the larger sense, as in deciding to take a break from retreating, or sitting late into the night. But also in the micro sense of how much effort, how much pressure, how much direct intentionality—the direction of intentionality and activity—is present in the moment.

And that's not an on-off switch. It can be really, really finely tuned in any practice. I would say that's a crucial part of any practice deepening—again, the sensitivity, the skill developing. And the same is true of soul-making and imaginal practice.

I think there's something almost intrinsic to soul-making. In the create-discover dynamic, right there you've got the "create" which is active and the "discover" which is passive. You've also got one of the nodes which is grace. The thing about grace is that it's inexplicable gift. It's just like, why was I given this? I didn't do anything. It just showed up.

And you've got the first node, the idea of the lattice, implicit in which is: hey, we can do subtle things that support soul-making. So right within those twenty-eight nodes, you've got the implicit dance of not just effort, but also attitude. I can see it as grace. I can see it as something that is an art for me that I can play with. You understand?

So there's effort, but there's also attitude and a kind of way of looking, a way of conceiving. And I think with a lot of soul-making material, it requires quite a delicate poise. So even just to have the intention to be receptive to an image—it's very different when you say, "Oh, an image will show up sometime. Maybe, probably not," with that kind of attitude, whatever.

There's a kind of real... there's already a kind of humility in the poise of "Let's see what comes." And in opening, I can feel there's already a delicacy, there's already sensitivity, there's openness, there's possibility, there's already humility of a kind. I may not even know to what—to soul, to psyche, to the divinity, Buddha nature, whatever. And there are the beginnings of all these qualities.

So that poise is a kind of place on the intentional spectrum, and that's very much part of it. It's much more delicate than, "Right, I'm going to..." whatever it is.

This is very, very delicate. Sometimes the energies that come and the eros that arises is really strong, but a lot of it is really, really subtle and delicate. And the kind of poise of intentionality or receptivity—it's the intention to be receptive much of the time, as much as anything.

So that poise is a kind of intention or a kind of place on the intentional spectrum, and it's very much part of it. It's very much more delicate than simply deciding, "Right, I'm going to do this or that." This is very, very delicate. Sometimes the energies that come and the eros that comes is really strong, but a lot of it is really, really subtle and delicate. The kind of poise of intentionality or receptivity—it's the intention to be receptive, as much as anything.

Does that make sense? And as always, it's not a fixed place. It's an arena, this whole thing. Intentionality, grace, receptivity, humility, activity, art—they're just an arena for us to play and experiment in and see what happens. It's never like, "Ah, nailed it, now that's it." Just as it is not with any practice. We can't just bandage the gas pedal in that position and leave it there. It's always very subtly modulated in the art of response.

One last thing about the energy body. Is there a kind of danger in alerting attention to the possibility of, for instance, breathing in certain ways where the energy body can have more energy? Potentially, yes. My experience meeting loads of people over the years is that most people don't have enough energy. Or rather, the energy is moving in their system in a way that it's just jangled and not really harmonizing in a way that actually creates a lot of available energy.

For most people, either the energy doesn't harmonize, or there's a kind of restriction on just how much energy they will allow—how much energy we're used to flowing in the body. So I think, if I'm not taking too much care to be completely comprehensive, I'll lean towards that side. You know, I go teach places, and I can just feel—there's every good reason for it, lots of reasons—but oftentimes people tend to feel quite chaotic and agitated inside when actually it's a state of not much energy. So if I haven't got much time, I'll lean on that side.

But yes, I guess there's a danger, though in that context I wouldn't harp too much on the possibility of too much energy. I feel very much that in a lot of cases when there is too much energy flowing in different ways, it's a lot easier to fix and liberate than a lot of people say. I don't tend to get too anxious about that stuff. For a person who has that experience with me, I know how to make it not so much a problem.

It's true there is a danger. Putting these teachings out about following imagination and eros—maybe some people would just take it and run with it, you know, make crazy choices. It's there. I think just the balance of things for me felt a calling that it was necessary to do it.

But it's also possibly a smoother path, isn't it? A smoother path in terms of both energy and ease. The way we tend to work with energy allows it to smooth more and not be so problematic. There are ways of working with energy body where you're just lighting fireworks to some kind of powder keg, and it's often not that helpful. So the way we tend to do it is much more organic, gentle, and things can open in a much more harmonized way.

I think it's a matter of just having that idea that it's possible for you to notice, but expanding the idea of what that could possibly look like or feel like or mean. When we think love, we tend to think, "Oh, it's going to look this way." But sometimes it can be fierce or very stern or whatever. So just expand the range and then just look. "Oh, yes, there's this kind, but I hadn't really thought of that as a kind of face of love before."

Let's have a bit of quiet.

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