This Retreat

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:02:02

Good evening, everybody. Welcome. I see lots of really familiar faces, and a good number of people that I don't know as well. So welcome.

Rob is hopefully coming to join us tonight. I think you all know from either knowing him very, very well—which many of you do—or maybe knowing him less well, but from the letter that we sent out, that his health is variable. He'll say more about that. But he's in the loo right now, and that will be some of what happens during this retreat. It's quite challenging for him, as some of you know very well. But he'll come and join us.

Welcome, my siblings in birth, aging, sickness, and death. Hello. I want to welcome us here in this, our universal greeting. We set the table here. And maybe have a look around. This isn't going to be one of those eyes-down, all-on-your-own retreats. Do have a look around at your fellow siblings, sisters, brothers, siblings. These are the ones this week we will be create-discovering with, learning how to make soul, how to expand and restore open senses of sacredness, learning how to engage perception in ways that bring more beauty.

Here we are. This is us. And welcome to all of you in all the ways that you know yourself to be—all the particularities, all your peculiarities, all your strengths, vulnerabilities, sensibilities, blind spots, gifts. As you know, as probably all of you long-term Dharma practitioners do, the Buddha Dharma has not always had an easy relationship with particularities. It's very, very good at understanding how we are the same.

Oh, welcome! I think people might want to say hello before I carry on. Welcome to Rob in all his particularities and peculiarities.

Yes, I want to welcome us in this too. And in a moment, I will hand over to Rob. But welcome in all the things that make you you. And I particularly want to welcome aspects or ways you know yourself that are not always guaranteed a welcome wherever you go—whatever they are, really, really welcome.

Whether they're overlooked or undervalued or actually oppressed here or in the wider culture: welcome to all members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer community. Welcome to all people of color. Welcome to people of all genders. Welcome to all people, whether visible or not visible, who are in states of non-optimal health. This looks like a pretty middle-class place here and is—welcome if you identify as working class. Welcome to those of us in this group who are at the very young end or at the very older end of our ages. All heritages, all first mother languages that are closest to your heart that we may never know a word of, welcome. All religious and ethnic groups, welcome.

And whoever I've missed, I'm sorry. Tell me after. Maybe you can call it out now, actually. Welcome. And to all of us in everything you bring here—all the things that make you you, your heritages, your gifts, your sensibilities, your aspiration, your courage, your nobility, your love of soul-making Dharma, your desire, because you wouldn't have gotten here without that. Welcome and bring it all to the table here.

We need for the soul-making dharma all our particularities, all of them. Let's learn to welcome each of them, even the ones in us that may not always look welcome, so that we can learn to make soul for whoever and to serve whoever and whatever you serve in your life, to see all of this in ways that bring more beauty, more richness, more meaningfulness, more sacredness. Let's do this together for whoever and whatever you serve.

Thank you for that beautiful welcoming, Catherine. Hi, everyone. I'm really happy to be here. It's really lovely and very touching. So I also want to welcome you in the fullness of your being, in all your beauty, your beauties. All the ribbons of your glory, even if they seem a bit tattered sometimes or like they've fallen off. All the colors of your soul, including the muddy colors, the shit, the difficult. All welcome and all can be made into soul.

So I'm really happy to be here with you. Really, really happy. It's like a real privilege. I don't know when Catherine and I started talking about this retreat and thinking about what we might do, but it was certainly some months before I got this new diagnosis, which I'll come back to in a minute, by the way. We were starting to feel and we wanted this retreat to be an opportunity and a space and a kind of crucible where in a way you could make it yours more. You can make it tailored to you and your needs and your soul needs and the trajectory of your practice, not just through this week, but with a long-term view in mind.

Some of you, not everyone here, but some of you here will be involved in these practices, these kinds of teachings and related teachings for maybe decades, really. What is it to think about that long-term trajectory? And what's needed? And what do I need? And where perhaps are my blind spots? Or what are the areas that need development or more understanding? It's actually, in my experience as a teacher, it's quite a rare faculty. It's a rare ability for a person, for a practitioner to actually be able to discern what it is that needs growing.

What it is that needs working on.

Sometimes we have so many ideas—"I really need to work on my focus. My mind just drifts"—and we buy into that. We simply believe such an idea, and it might be true. But it's actually quite a maturity, quite an ask to even have that kind of discernment. It doesn't have to be solely introspective; it can be in dialogue with teachers and friends. But to actually have that capacity—what's needed here? What's needed on this path?

I don't know about the word "advanced." I think we've used it occasionally. But certainly these soulmaking

teachings ask a lot. They're demanding. They're subtle, deep, sophisticated, difficult, challenging, stretching. Definitely. And a lot is required. A lot of aspects need developing.

So the encouragement for this week—and I'll explain a bit more—is for you to really start thinking about that. We put it out in the application forms: start thinking about your process in this trajectory. Hopefully, in a way, you will lead the retreat. It comes from you, and we'll be offering material, but we'll be responding. There will be interchange based on your sense of navigation, discernment, need. So that's already asking for a step up, and it was there in the application form. It is demanding.

There's an enormous amount to it. It's complicated. "What the hell are they talking about? All these words." Don't get overwhelmed. Really don't get overwhelmed. Think of it as a journey. Think of it as something that can and will happen gradually. It will.

All of this—every concept we use, whatever it is: eros, logos, humility—all of them are a journey. It's very easy to think, "I don't get that," as if it's an on-off switch. We'll talk more about this, but it's a journey.

If you can somehow cultivate this art of having that openness: "However much I know, there's more about a particular thing." Do I think I know everything about eros? Forget about it. Even the teacher doesn't know—get a better teacher, because I don't know. I know some.

What happens with soulmaking is that it opens more. It opens. The very thing that comes alive, that comes alive with soul, that is made into soul—whatever it is: eros, body, energy, emotion, relationality—all of that starts to unfold and become unfathomable. It becomes more, and it becomes a journey.

So please, when the inner critic just wants to give you a red cross marked "failed"—and sometimes we need that humility of "I don't quite understand that yet"—don't fall into extremes. On one side, not lumping things into "Oh, I know what that is because I took a course in shamanism a few years ago and it's just like that," or "It's just like whatever this or that." That would be one extreme. The other extreme is to simply say, "I failed. I don't understand this or that."

Every aspect of these teachings is a journey. Do you understand what I mean? If we can see it that way, it's a kind of middle way. There's something much more soft, much more open, much more of an adventure—and kind of unended, unending.

So certainly we think about what comes up this week, and of course we deal with that. But also, if we can start thinking about the long term. In a way, this gives—we're giving you a responsibility here. We're going to share responsibility.

This shift in responsibility creates something much more organic. Rather than me arriving with predetermined material, we're crafting this retreat together as it unfolds. It's your retreat as much as ours—perhaps more so.

We envision theme days emerging naturally—perhaps a day exploring the energy body, or diving into

questions of Eros, or whatever calls to us collectively. You can leave written questions on the board, and we'll weave them into the teachings, allowing the dharma to respond to what's actually alive in our community right now. These themes won't be rigid categories—nothing in the dharma ever is—but fluid investigations that interpenetrate and inform each other.

This collaborative approach was our vision months ago, but it's become more necessary given my current medical situation. The combination of medications I'm taking has profound effects, not just physically but mentally. There are times when clarity simply dissolves, when I couldn't articulate a teaching even if I tried. So rather than preparing extensive new material as I might have previously, I'm inviting you to help steer our direction.

I want to be transparent about the practical implications. My treatment schedule means I have a week off chemotherapy during the retreat—a fortuitous timing that seems to repeat itself. However, I remain on other medications that create unpredictable fluctuations throughout each day. I may need to leave suddenly, perhaps even mid-teaching. I may not be available for interviews. The entire schedule will need to remain fluid, responsive to how I'm feeling moment by moment.

Please don't be alarmed if I simply get up and walk out—it's likely just a practical need, nothing dramatic. But I do feel some apprehension that my responses may occasionally be less attuned or clear than usual. My mind is sometimes affected in ways that concern me. I hope this won't be an issue, but I want to acknowledge the possibility and ask for your patience if my usual clarity wavers.

Since some of you may not know the full scope of my health situation, let me offer a brief update. After three years on low-dose chemotherapy and a period of remission, the cancer has returned extensively—what we call metastases, meaning it has spread throughout my body with multiple tumors in various locations.

In medical terms, when this type of cancer metastasizes, it typically signals that the end is approaching. Most doctors would say I'm in the dying process now. The timeframe remains uncertain—it could be months, it could be years. There's always the possibility I might die of something else entirely far in the future. The uncertainty is complete, which is both challenging and, in its own way, liberating.

That's it. Just in case people—it would be a bit strange if people didn't know that was the case.

Maybe let's pause here, actually. So it's a lot to put into the field. Let's pause with hearing this in this context. Even though this is probably not news, in this arena, it's news to be in physical community together.

So take a moment to breathe with your body. You don't have to close your eyes. You can still do what you need. See what needs to be tended to and cared for in your heart and soul right now. And you may still wish to be seeing Rob, or not, with your eyes open or closed, as you need.

Check you have your breath. And see if there's anything in your heart and soul that needs your tending, your tender care right now.

Maybe somebody might have just frozen a little bit. And if there's a freeze in your body and soul, tend to this. Wait for your body to breathe. Because we're here in this setting, and it's where we're practicing. You know, it was quite hefty to apply for this retreat—it was a lot of work. We love this work, we love this soulmaking dharma, this gift that Rob has brought forth for us. So tending to whatever the responses are in this context is part of tending not just to yourself—it's part of tending to the field of this retreat.

So now, or at times during the retreat perhaps, if this calls you—Rob, Rob's health, your relationship with this, his possible dying, his probable dying, his maybe not dying. Whatever it elicits: your heartbreak or your grief, your love, your commitment to practice, your steely determination, your inquiry into death. Whatever is brought forth this week, that's part of tending to the field of this retreat. It's part of tending to each other, actually.

Have you got your breath? And if we can care for this—if it comes up for some of us, it will be more intimate than for others. There's no right or wrong about that. We're all in different places in the constellation with this. But if we can care and tend, then we may be with these beautiful teachings, with the lenses that we're learning to see with and sense with—that maybe this news and this truth can become part of the soul of this retreat.

Learning to see whatever arises in ways that bring more sacredness, more meaningfulnesses, more dimensionality, more beauty. Because death and someone's death are absolutely the terrain of soulmaking.

So breathe with whatever's here and what we thought. Do you want to say anything else, or I was going to make a space where we could just be quiet? Do you want to add anything?

Okay. So let's just pause. And we thought that we would offer a couple of things at this point—that we can just be together in community with this, with Rob. Wish you well. And I'll offer a compassion chant. And if you know it, some of you will know it, please join in if you wish. It's not one that we've done before in this group. But join in if you wish and you wish to bring your voice to it. And let whatever is here for you just be here. And we'll meet together on this channel.

And thank you for opening with this, Rob.

Om Mani Padme Hum, Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum, Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum, Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum, Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum, Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum, Om Mani Padme Hum

Om Mani Padme Hum, Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum

We'd like to give you the chance, if you wish, for a few minutes to meet in a group of three. The thought was that you'll have two, three minutes with your two colleagues witnessing, where you can just say how you're doing tonight in arriving here. Express anything that needs to be expressed that may or may not have to do with our beloved friend and teacher. It may, but it doesn't have to. Anything that wants to be expressed in your soul to help you to arrive.

Rob's going to share—absolutely, anything that wants to be expressed in arriving here. I really want to get into this work, or gosh, I'm really—you know, whatever is here. I'm really excited to be here, I'm excited and I'm... et cetera.

So if you would like to do this, find yourself in a group of three and then just be silent, and I'll guide us into this exercise. If you don't want to do it, that's fine. Just opt out. If you do, turn around and find some others. So three, sit in a triangle.

And sit a little bit formally so you have access to your body and your energy body.

There's no right way you have to be here. You might be super excited and full of joy and enthusiasm. Please remember we're here in our particularity. We're not trying to see how it is I'm supposed to be. Really important.

The two witnesses will have your eyes open. And the person who is going first, you can have your eyes open too, but you don't have to lock in contact. But you are in relationship, right? So open your eyes, just see your two companions, say hi in that strange way that it's tricky with three because one of you looks one way while the other one's looking the other direction. If you can do it easily without a major meeting, one of you willing to go first just raise your hand to the others. If you're willing to speak first, yeah. And why don't you nominate who's going to go second and then it's already sorted. And then that leaves the third, okay.

Be there with your eyes open for these two people. These people have filled in a hefty application form to come on this retreat like you. They know this work enough that they know what their weaknesses are and the places they want to move into more. These are people who love this work, okay? So I'll time it. I'll ring the bell and it's not a conversation—just bear witness to your colleague. Then I'll ring the bell after three minutes. Please begin.

[Bell]

Thank you. Thank your partners. Don't worry if you didn't say the definitive thing. It's okay.

So we'd like to do a little exercise also as part of arriving and setting up the retreat and being here in as full a way as possible. And it's going to involve us moving around freely in the hall. So we're going to need

to move all the mats and the cushions to the side. We'll probably be doing this several times—well, we may be doing this several times on the retreat. Maybe there's a clever way of doing that. There is a clever way of doing this. I'm sure you know what that is. Yeah, so let's do the clever way. Let's really fill the room so we use the space.

Okay. Let's just start by feeling the connection with the earth, with the floor, in the feet. And keeping that root of connection, opening the awareness to the whole body. What is this body? We tend to think of the body in ways we've been taught to think of the body. What is this body standing here? Whole body awareness. Open to the possibility of the sense of the body, of the energy body.

Opening also to the space. Many of you know this place. Many of you know this hall. Many of you love this place. Many of you love this hall. It is already soul for you. It's already imbued with soul. What is it to stand here in the mystery of your body, the open-ended mystery of your body, the possibility, the poetic possibility of your body in this room with the magic of the room and everything that has transpired over the years in this hall?

The walls and the floor and the carpet and the space itself is blessing your body. There is some influx, mysterious influx, multidimensional, unfathomable. The floor is blessing you, blessing your body, blessing your arrival here, blessing your being, blessing your practice. What does that mean? Your mind doesn't have to figure it out. Wishing you well, wanting you to know something about yourself, wanting you to open the doors to create and discover more about yourself.

And let yourself, with the body awareness, with the connection with the earth, with the connection with the space and the room and the history, also be aware of the others, your colleagues, your fellows on this week. Who are they? Let yourself move around the room in whatever way you would like. You can make eye contact as much or as little as you like, but be aware of each other.

What would it mean and is it possible to bless each other? We see, we think of human beings, complex certainly, but we limit what they are. What is it to know each other as angels? The mysterious roots of your being are in divinity.

Don't worry about getting it right. Let yourself move however you want to move. You may want to be still. You may want to walk. You may want to dance. Let yourself bless each other. Let yourself feel blessed, even if you're not even sure what blessing means. Let your body receive blessing. The mystery of your body receives the mystery of angelic blessing.

And let it pour out of you—pour out of your pores, pour out of your body, pour out of your gestures. And if that comes out in dance, let it be so. And if it comes out in stillness, let it be so.

And the land—the luscious, rich, fecund Devon countryside—blessing you too. There's an influx from the land, from the night sky. All of this pours into us in ways that we can only sometimes even vaguely get a sense of. Don't try to figure it out with your mind. Blessing each other and receiving blessings from each

other—no such thing as doing it wrong.

If it weren't for these angels here right now in the room, we wouldn't be here. You wouldn't be here. This wouldn't be happening. Your practice, your retreat, is supported on so many levels by each other, by the hidden dimensions of each other's being.

Don't believe a thought that doubts whether you can bless. "Who am I to bless?" It's your birthright to bless and to be blessed. It's who you are—your roots in divinity. Each of us a theophany, a face of the divine.

Your whole life, your whole narrative—your birth, your story, your death—it's all here. It's all angels, all face of angel. Yes, impermanent, but eternal in some mysterious way. If none of this makes sense, just let it be poetic. Let it be poetic suggestion, imagination.

You know, playing with these perceptions of angel, of being angel, of blessing, of having one's roots in divinity—it shapes and informs how we see ourselves as practitioners. The sense of possibility, the sense of magic, of wizardry and witchcraft. Not just me trying to watch some sensations at the tip of my nose. Dare to see yourself poetically in that way, imbued with magic, with the divine, with the bigger nature. Blessing each other's practice.

So just coming into stillness for a few moments, again the feet and the whole body. And we'll talk more about this, but what do we mean by body? And aware of each other, everyone in the room, the space, the land, the night. All of it alive as theophany, as face of the divine, as expression of the Buddha nature.

And just silently welcoming, welcoming everyone here on the retreat, blessing their practice, blessing the possibilities of their practice, blessing the possibility of knowing oneself and knowing others as angel, as image, as divine. So in this moment you are seen that way, you are sensed that way by others, you are blessed and blessing.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.