A Rite of Angels

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:04:39

Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. Time and the timeless—time past, present, future, and the eternal, that which is beyond time. Not lasting forever, but beyond time.

Like all these things that we dwell on and explore, these words are loose and elastic and unfathomable in their mystery. So we know what Buddha means, we know what Dharma means, we know what Sangha means. And we think we know what time means. But all of them have depths and dimensions and mysteries that we can open up and journey into and discover more.

Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, time and the timeless.

So there's kind of two parts to this tonight. And right now, a bit more stillness and meditation. Maybe settle into your body. And feel that connection with the floor, with the earth, with the earth that supports you and supports your life.

And here we have Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, time past, time future. And in your heart, in your being, in your body right now, can you bring to mind a recognition, an acknowledgement of everything that your practice has and does rest on?

Not just today, but through the years of practice that you've been involved and you've devoted yourself and all your efforts and everything that you've put up with and everything that you've explored and all the stretching and all the challenges and all the dedication and the showing up. What has that relied on? What has that rested on? What have been the bases that we have received through the generosity of others, through the Buddha and his teachings, through the Sangha?

Sangha means the tradition, the lineage from the time of the Buddha, 2500 years or thereabouts. That whole stream of teachings still alive, still healthy and flourishing today, an influx into your life, into my life, into our practice. That Sangha, the Sangha of the tradition of teachers past, some of which you never have heard of or don't even realize are inflowing into your practice, the possibilities that open up for you, and teachers present.

And just let yourself be aware of that, of the immense gift of that. And we rest on this. It supports us, it has supported us, it will support us.

And on that basis, is there the possibility in your heart, in your soul right now to recognize also the great efforts that you have made in your practice? Showing up time and time again on the cushion, in the walking room, in daily life practice. Intent on cultivation of what is beautiful, what is good, what is noble.

Devoted to kindness. Yes, we fail every day at that. Devoted to ethics. Yes, we fail every day at that. It doesn't matter.

The intention has been picked up, lost and picked up again and again in your life. Your care and your efforts, how you spend your time in those micro moments of choices on and off the cushion. So easy to dismiss this, belittle it, not see it, look only at the negative, what's missing, what's lacking, what's not good enough.

Can you let the heart soften in the face of that recognition, that fact actually, that fact about yourself, about your history, about your life. Time past, time present right now and time future. What you are committed to be, devoted to, intent on, aspiring to, how much goodness there is there, how much beauty, how much desire and eros, how much hard work.

Let your heart, even just for a moment, soften to be touched by that recognition, by that awareness, by that appreciation of yourself for all of that.

So this Buddha, Dharma, Sangha and time past and present is what feeds us. In a way time future feeds us as well, what we aspire to, what we're drawn towards like a magnet with the eros, with what we love, with what we aspire to. Just let yourself align with that, to know that, to rest on that, to look to that, inner and outer, personal and communal.

Each of us will take turns—perhaps three at a time—entering this circular corridor between the circles, moving however we feel called to move. Those forming the circles will witness this movement, and here you can choose your own level of engagement. There's no right or wrong way.

At its most fundamental, this is simply about welcoming. We're at the end of our first day together—it doesn't matter where anyone is in their practice. This is about welcoming each person onto the retreat, into this space, into this land, into the temporary community we've created for this week.

For those witnessing from the circles, this welcoming can manifest in complete silence. It might express itself through the body—a gesture, movement, even dance. There's also a musical element I'll explain shortly. But the essential gesture is one of welcome.

Sometimes we forget these truths about ourselves—we lose touch with the facts of our history, what we love, what we do and have done, the care and dedication we bring. We need reminding. And sometimes it's others who remind us. Sometimes it's through the eyes of others that we learn to see ourselves more clearly, more truly.

Do you understand? When I sense myself being looked at in a certain way, I can take in that looking, receive it, allow it to inform how I see myself.

This practice, like all good dharma, has multiple levels, all of which are optional. We can engage as deeply or as simply as feels right. The basic choreography is what I've described, though we'll revisit and refine as

we go.

The second fundamental element is metta—well-wishing. Who is this person walking before you? Perhaps you know nothing about them, or perhaps you know more than you care to know. Regardless, you wish them well. Whatever their circumstances, whatever their struggles, you extend metta to them.

This loving-kindness might manifest through your established metta practice, silently reciting the traditional phrases. It could emerge through the chant we'll engage in together, which naturally embodies and expresses metta. Or it might flow through your body—radiating outward through presence, gestures, or movement. The form matters less than the genuine intention behind it.

So those witnessing in the circles offer both welcome and metta to whoever passes through their awareness.

Now, Catherine has raised an important point about the intensity that can arise in these practices. Sometimes charge builds up—the heightened awareness of being seen, the social dimension, the sheer amount of soul present in the space. Soul can be difficult to tolerate because it carries eros with it, as we touched upon earlier. This intensity in the energy body and emotions can create impulses to discharge that charge somehow.

Let me be clear: no particular action or vocalization is inherently right or wrong. Please don't fall into that kind of judgment. What matters is developing an ongoing exploration of how you relate to the charge of eros, soul, and heartfulness. When intensity builds, what happens? Do you automatically seek to discharge it?

If you find yourself wanting to discharge that energy, that's perfectly natural. But consider this an opportunity to investigate your psychological patterning. Perhaps you might experiment with holding that charge a bit more, accommodating it rather than immediately dissipating it. This becomes a lifetime inquiry rather than a matter of correct behavior.

Beyond welcoming and metta, there are two additional levels of awareness for those witnessing.

The third level recognizes that each person moving through the circle carries their own particularities—their unique history, their personal dukkha, the specific shapes and colors of their psychological suffering. But more than this, they also bear the particular ways that the world's dukkha is held and refracted through them. Each of us feels what's happening to our planet, to humanity, to all species, in distinctly personal ways. We respond differently, bear it differently, struggle with it differently, and are impacted by it uniquely.

You may not know the specific details of how someone carries the world's pain, how they struggle to tolerate it, or what they manifest in response. But you can recognize that their journey is unique, particular, and unfinished wherever they currently stand. The awareness of this uniqueness opens space

for blessing their entire path.

This level expands beyond the people in this room to embrace the whole of humanity and all species sharing this planet. Somehow, this broader community enters our ellipse of awareness and care.

This naturally leads to the fourth level—the possibility of seeing each person as angel. For those witnessing from the circles, you might sense the being before you with such depth that you recognize their angelic nature. What does this mean? Simply that their image, their very essence, is rooted in the divine, in Buddha nature.

We could say instead that we see their Buddha nature—for now, let's use these terms interchangeably, though I offer this as poetic seed rather than theological doctrine.

The term "Buddha nature" has been used across the tradition in many ways over centuries, so its meaning encompasses quite a range. At minimum, it refers to the potential for awakening that exists within every being.

And any human being has the potential to become awakened just by virtue of the fact that the mind is impermanent and malleable. So no matter how messed up I am now, in time and over lifetimes, that can change and I can become awakened. So that's the minimum understanding.

If that's what you resonate with, great. You're seeing the Buddha potential in this person. At the other extreme of what Buddha nature has come to mean is something much more mystical and cosmic and mysterious. This person already is the Buddha in some way. The essence of their being is the Buddha, is awakened, is the cosmic Buddha, is the primordial Buddha. If that doesn't resonate, leave it. Find your pitch with all this. It's not right or wrong. It's part of the tuning that we're talking about.

The musical part goes with this. So as we're moving, there'll be a chant. Catherine and Chris are going to lead this chant. It's fairly simple.

What it can mean is we are all emanations of the primordial Buddha, particular emanations. The primordial Buddha needs these infinite varieties of faces, of expressions that we each are. And we recognize that. That's a certain level of it, a certain way of sensing another person.

We could also say, back to the potential thing, that so often with these kinds of practices we've been doing, it's really difficult. It's really a stretch. It relies on a lot. You need this skill, that skill, that skill, that skill. Sometimes we can feel like, well, I'm not going to be able to do all that. I can barely sit still for ten minutes or whatever. So we get into a self-view of ourselves as practitioners that's very limited and limiting sometimes.

Again, sometimes we need the eyes of others and the blessing of others to remind ourselves of our potential as practitioners. You can be creative. You can be playful in your practice. You can be at ease and delight in the realms of subtlety and improvisation and playfulness. You can have that range. Sometimes it

feels like, not me, maybe these other people. So this is also a way we are being seen as having this tremendous potential of creativity, of playfulness, of wisdom, of responsiveness, of subtlety, of improvisation.

All right. The musical part. Last piece before we do this. It has two parts—a high part and a low part. Just see which you want to join in and you can change. Chris, do you want to start the low part?

The lyrics are very simple. The low part, the lyrics are om ah hum. Om ah hum. And om ah hum are mantric seed syllables of the body, speech, and mind. Om ah hum of the human being, but also of the primordial Buddha. If we are manifestations of that, that means this person is the manifestation. What they manifest through body and the form of their body and the actions of their body. What they manifest through speech. What they manifest through mind and intention and thought and creativity and perception. Om ah hum. The forms that manifest in our lives, through our lives. Om ah hum.

When Chris sings it, it's quite chunky and delineated and stately, because that's what form is. Forms make distinctions.

And there's a second part, which Catherine will teach us, and the lyrics for that are *amita*. *Amita* is a negative in Sanskrit. *Amita* means something like limit or measure. So *amita* means limitless, without measure, immeasurable. And it has connotations of emptiness.

So form and emptiness together. Whatever manifests in body, speech, and mind must take form, but it's also empty, and we never forget that. And the primordial Buddha and the body, speech, and mind of the primordial Buddha which manifests through us—also empty, also malleable, also limitless in its scope. So these are just poetic suggestions. Find your way in to relate to this however you like.

Chris will teach us the bass part, and then we'll do Catherine's part, and then we'll try to put them together and then we'll nail it.

So there's this cloth here just in front of where I'm standing. When you get back to where you started, then you just join the circle, and then you become a blesser again—a blesser, a welcomer, a lover, an angel. You understand?

So Chris will teach us the bass part. The body, the speech, and the mind are the primordial Buddha. Your body, your speech, your mind—blessed, unfathomable, mysterious.

And so let the soul, as much as you want to, whichever level you're resonating as we do this, let it express in these seed syllables, in your voice. Let it come out.

Now if we just listen to Chris do the bass and Catherine will sing the treble on top of it, you can learn that for those of you that want to sing that part. So just listen to Chris and Catherine together.

You're radiating and emanating *metta* through your body, through your voice, through the syllables,

through your song, through your gesture, through silence, through your intention. And the person moving is moving however they want to move and receiving, receiving that.

So as always, it's an exercise in perception as much as anything else. I mean, just playing with these poetic perceptions, these soulful perceptions.

So we might have two or three people in the circle at the same time. Let's say two. We might even go around again or something.

So two volunteers to start, to be in the circle. Should we just start and go for it?

Just once, but take your time. We want it to—I've said this so many times, it's hard to make soul. It doesn't just happen, okay? So that means this thing about: Am I discharging? Am I going too quick? Am I going too slow? What's my attention doing?

So let's do this. Just try to do it as an experiment, as always, in a way that you feel that it's soulful, that it's soul-making somehow or other. If you need to sit, it's fine. It doesn't matter if the people in the circle are sitting or standing.

There's no obligation to go. If you don't want to, you can just stay in the outer circle. Simply gauge what's happening, how busy it is in there. If there are collisions and multiple angel pileups, just gauge that and let's see. Let's try.

So let's root first. Feel again, whether you're standing or sitting—I think standing is preferable if you can, but do what's comfortable for your body. Feel this earth that supports you. Feel your connection with the earth, organic life and organic sustenance, solidity, ground, bounty, gift.

Already there's blessing. You can bless the earth in gratitude. The earth blesses you up through your feet. And again, this hall and the walls here can bless you, hold you. The deep, dark, velvet night has its blessings too, right now, on body, on heart, on soul.

Then we are aware of each other, of this temporary community of a week, of how we hold and support each other, care for each other this week.

Let's start the chant and just, before anyone goes, before the first people enter, we'll be with the chant and the multiple meanings and whatever it might mean for you. Make it yours. Let your body and voice and soul resonate with all the richness of possible intentions and meanings there.

So Chris, when you're ready... Let the blessings radiate through your voice, your whole body emanating the magic of mantra from your whole body. It's coming from you and from beyond you. It comes from the earth. It comes from the sky. It comes from the tradition. From all our teachers. From the unseen beings. It's yours and more than yours.

Beautiful. And then, whenever you're ready, you can lean into it now. Include your body, whether you're

witness or walker, however you like. Dance, gesture, stillness, whatever.

Angels are seeing you right now, looking on you with love, sensing more in you than you can even know, seeing you as angel, knowing your potential. Let yourself be touched by and delight in their recognition of your beauty. Yes, let yourself receive. Soak it up.

These manifestations of Buddha nature—you, with dazzling and limitless potential as a practitioner, as a meditator, as a soul. You know that angels are grateful for human beings, for what they manifest. They are grateful for your past, for what you're manifesting right now, for what you will manifest, for the particular shapes and colors. And that includes your dukkha, your pain. What breaks your heart and what's hard to bear. They love you for this. It's unique. Only you can bring this into the world. Only you have the duty to be you.

So some more people can come into the circle. It can hold a few more, I think. However you want to move.

Om Amitabha. Om Amitabha. Om Amitabha. Om Amitabha.

It's okay if you forget your potential, if you forget who you are. These angels have your back. They see you when you can't quite see yourself. They know you when your vision is limited.

Om Amitabha. Om Amitabha. Om Amitabha. Om Amitabha.

Om Amitabha.
Om Amitabha.
Om Amitabha.

Whatever difficulty, limitation, or contracted self-view arises—it can all be redeemed in soul, made into soul. The view of the angel is patient, unswayed by the contracted mind. Welcoming, loving, seeing deeply, holding something for others when they can't hold it themselves. Reminding, blessing—animal, angel, human—that we are Amitabha. Amitabha, celebrating this particular being, their sensitivities, their stories, their struggles, their joys and gifts.

Feel free to embellish if you feel comfortable.

When we have shame, an angel is unflinching in their gaze of mercy—merciful eyes. Peace.

Om. Aum Aum Aum Aum Aum. Ah.

Angels know your depth. Aum Aum Aum Aum.

Oma Oma Oma Oma Oma Oma. Beautiful. Oma. Om. Om.

Aum Aum Aum Aum Aum Aum. OM AH OM OM.

So if you think you might want to move around the circle, I'd encourage you to take the opportunity. If you

want to move in the circle, now's the time.

Om. Om. Om. Om. Om. Om.

There are these possibilities for ourselves in life—not all the time, in and out, in and out of the possibility of perceiving oneself as angel, as reflecting, informed by, emanating angel Buddha nature, and seeing others that way. Knowing that you are blessed and that you can bless.

Thank you for that, everybody. Thank you very much.

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