The Imaginal-Energy Body (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:17:51

I know I already said this, but I'll say it again. I'm really happy to be here. It was Catherine's turn to give teachings this morning, but if it was my turn, I just felt like saying, I really love you. We have so much appreciation and delight in you and the beauty that's here and the richness of your souls and your dedication and your complications and your wonderfulness. I really love you.

We've got a couple of practical things. One is about the culture and ambience here. A lot of you will be used to or somewhat used to these soul-making retreats and the kind of vibe we have. Some of you less so and more used to vipassana retreats or standard insight meditation retreats where you may have either received a direct instruction from the teachers or picked up pretty quickly on the sort of cultural norms—where you don't make eye contact, and you sort of shuffle down the corridor slowly so it looks mindful. And it looks a bit miserable.

That's an option. You're welcome to do that. Sometimes we need to be more inner, right? We need to be—something's going on, it needs my attention. I don't want to be pulled out and into contact. The attention needs to be here, and it's fine. So if that's what's going on, you go into that mode. If it's for five minutes, five seconds, five hours, it's fine. It's part of the responsibility, responding to what's needed. Similarly, if you see someone else doing that, well, they have their reasons to do that.

But on these retreats, we're trying to be more open in every regard. And that includes with regard to each other and the heart's connection, the soul connection with each other. You can make eye contact. You can smile. Careful what happens though, of course. As Catherine was saying, do I then have to show up in a certain way? Like, this person's coming down the corridor, I have to give them what I imagine that they want. Just that smile is going to do this or that.

So you can open up that way, make that connection. Let the body be open, let the soul be open, let the heart be open, let the eyes be open. Be with each other. It's so precious, the sangha. A lot of soul making happens in relation, not just verbal relation. So let that be here. Like everything, any choice you make comes with its risks and costs. And the risk of doing that is you smile at someone and they just stare at you blankly. And okay, then I have to handle that. I have to be okay with that, right?

The relational field is for us very much part of the practice. We're not just kind of diving deep into some kind of atomized deconstruction of this psychophysical experience. Sure, that's great, that's wonderful, and it's not the whole thing.

Second practical thing is we will start putting up some interview lists. There'll be groups and one-to-ones.

So there'll be a couple tonight after the evening session at about 8:30. Have a look. Again, for me, I'm just not sure how things roll. So I will offer as much as I can. And when I can't, it's because I feel like something's going on in body and mind that makes it pretty much not going to be helpful for you, or I'm just struggling somewhere or away at a doctor's appointment or whatever it is.

If you would like to meet to work with an aspect of your practice in a one-to-one meeting, please print your name. So if you want a one-to-one, it's about practice, something about practice, which means this kind of practice—formal practice or informal practice or soul-making practice in life. It's not just because you want to say hi or hang out or whatever. So if there's something, an aspect of your practice that you would like to work with or talk through or get some guidance on, put your name down and we'll try to get to you. One of us will try and get to you and we'll let you know when.

But that gives you also your responsibility to think about what is it that I want to explore? What is it that I feel I need some help with? You want to be quite specific.

Catherine will also offer groups, providing opportunities for both one-to-one sessions and group work—a chance to explore together.

Now, thank you for your wonderful questions. There were many of them, and they're truly great. We probably won't get to all of them, and there were a couple I couldn't quite read as well, but even among those I could decipher, we likely won't have time for everything. I've arranged them in an order that seems to have a natural thread running through, so we can weave them together meaningfully.

The first one isn't really a question—unless something is missing—but it's important nonetheless. It says: "Sometimes it feels like there is too much on offer and I get a bit lost and overwhelmed."

To whoever wrote this: you are not alone. There is a lot on offer. There is too much on offer in terms of—what?—am I going to have it all figured out by the end of the week? By the end of the year? No. There is indeed a lot.

First, it's really important to recognize this reality. Second, it's crucial to be kind to yourself. When I feel lost and overwhelmed, when I'm not keeping up, what does the mind do with that? "All these other people know exactly what's going on and they're totally on top of it, and it's just me," or "I'm a failure"—the inner critic emerges. Please really take care with the kindness. This is so important.

There is a lot. It does demand a great deal. It's very sophisticated. It asks much in terms of foundational practices upon which to then build and extend. To say otherwise would be ridiculous. Each of us is on our own journey with these practices, and that's completely fine. There's no race, no timeline. Please watch what the mind does with this, what the heart does with it. We need the foundation of kindness and compassion.

All of this might be difficult, but it's also delightful and lovely. As I think I mentioned in the last retreat, it's

like having an enormous banquet laid out and then feeling completely overwhelmed. You don't have to eat it all at once. This has a special kind of preservative—not bad chemicals, but good ones. It will keep. It's here.

Each person might also have their particular order in which they unfold. There isn't necessarily a "first you do this, then you do that." Sometimes we make it sound like there is because when you teach, you have to present things in sequence, but it's not necessarily like that. It's more like a ball of wool, and you just—well, here's this strand sticking out that seems to be in my face and looks kind of interesting, so I'll pull on that one.

After a while, as I get the hang of this, I see: oh, it's connected to this other strand. And that starts to unravel that one. All aspects of the teachings are completely interrelated.

My suggestion: please take care of the kindness. Watch the conclusions that the mind makes about yourself. Practically speaking, if this resonates with you, just choose one piece—either something you can't avoid because you keep bumping into it, or something that's actually interesting to you. Something where you think, "Oh, I had a glimpse of something with that," or "That sounds really intriguing"—and just go for it.

If the whole week is spent on the energy body, great. If the whole week is spent on the energy body around emotions, fantastic. It's one piece of the teaching, and it's priceless. Absolutely priceless. And the rest? It's being recorded. It's out there. Don't worry.

So be practical, and things will unfold. Does that make sense? Really, really important—take your time. I know this as a dharma practitioner myself.

I know it as a musician. Learning so many different skills involved in being a musician—whether as a jazz musician or anything else—can be completely overwhelming. Take a little piece, put a little box around it, dive in and get creative and practice. It will start to suggest other things and expand. That's okay.

One question here is quite direct: What is the energy body? It's actually not that easy to answer.

Let's go back to something we're all familiar with—mindfulness of the body. We're used to practicing with the body in a Dharma context, so let's ask: What is the body, and what is it to be aware of the body? Let's leave the term "energy body" aside for a moment.

When you're a Dharma practitioner being mindful of the body, there are actually three interwoven aspects of bodily experience. When I'm mindful of the body or aware of the body, there is first a felt sense of experience or sensations, usually in this location here. That's one aspect—the felt sense or the sensations.

The second aspect, not always so talked about, certainly in insight meditation circles, is the image of that body—the image of what it is that I'm paying attention to. When I shut my eyes and the teacher says to be

aware of the sensations of the feet or the sensations on the bum on the cushion, subtly or less subtly, there's an image. It's probably not an imaginal image; it's just an image, some kind of representation of this body. Notice I'm looking at Mary right now, yet in the back of my mind, there's still a kind of picture of this body, Rob's body. It's just part of my awareness. It has a certain form. In usual consciousness, it has the form of two arms and two legs and whatnot.

The third aspect is the idea of the body, the concept or the logos of the body. What is a body? Most of us are totally saturated and indoctrinated with a Western materialist view of the body. Wrapped up there will be a whole bundle of ideas about atoms perhaps, or solidity, or what matter is, what a body is. Maybe mixed with that are ideas of what constitutes an attractive body and whether mine is one or not.

So there's felt sense, image, and idea.

When we start talking about energy body, we're simply saying: let's take those three aspects and open them way, way up, so that the possible range of felt sensations becomes infinite. There's no limit to what the felt sense of this space might be.

Usually you stop a person on the street and ask what they're aware of in their body. Of course, most people are not that aware until they hurt themselves or experience some intense pleasure. With practicing mindfulness, you become more aware—oh yes, the bum on the cushion feels neutral. There's warmth, pressure, maybe a little tingling. There's a certain expansion of the range of awareness.

As you practice, as you open that up, the range gets much larger. So it could be anything. The felt sense might feel like completely empty space, or dense rock, or a kind of warm field of ethereal energy. It could be anything, absolutely anything.

So when we talk about energy body, that range opens up. The image, too. When I first started teaching about energy body, it was really more about that felt sense. I gave it the words "energy body" and "subtle body" to help encourage the range of experience to move more into this open, ethereal, harmonized, energized sense that tends to occur when there's samadhi or letting go.

But actually, we want the range even more than that, so that the image, too, of the body starts to open. I don't necessarily have to have this usual form that everyone would agree on.

I could have a body of fire. I could have the usual form, but it's bellowing fire from my mouth. I could have wings or be made of water. It's infinite—the image of the body. So the body itself is given permission and possibility to become imaginal. The imaginal body. Does this make sense?

When I started using the words "energy body" in my teaching, it was in the context of teaching samadhi, jhana practice and samatha, and teaching emptiness. And that, as I said, tends towards a certain range of experience. Now we're doing soul-making practice. We keep all that as possibility and we add an infinite range, absolutely infinite range of the image. So we can talk about the imaginal body or the poetic

body—those were two terms that Justin, who's not here, suggested a little while ago. The imaginal body or the poetic body. Does that resonate?

So there's the felt sense that has opened its possible range. The image of the body has opened its possible range. And the idea of the body has opened its possible range. Meaning I'm not—I include, yes, atoms and chemicals and biochemical processes, of course, all that that we're schooled in and used to, but I'm not limiting it to that.

In a way, the energy body is really an attitude more than an experience. It's a poise of the awareness that allows an openness, allows an opening of the range of the felt sense, of the image, of the ideas of the body. To include our usual conventional ones that everyone on the street would agree with and every mainstream dance practitioner would agree with. But it opens up beyond just that. Does this make sense?

So it's a curious thing. Someone asked why I mentioned before that I wished I had called "energy body" by a different name—what would I have called it instead and why? Well, a couple of things there. One is, actually not just with the word "energy body," but also with the words eros and image and soul—I don't know, any of these words we use. I wish if I could go back in time, we just had different words right from the beginning, because it's possible that someone has studied something, studied eros in a different context where it means something slightly different. It means something different than what we mean, or imaginal, or image, or soul.

So that's one of the reasons—it would be easy, and I think it's quite common, to just because words are the same assume that we're talking about the same thing. And then what happens is a certain direction gets washed over or diluted or mixed with other directions. Not better, not worse, but just different. There are certain possibilities that will open up through this path, where we're talking about the energy body, where we're talking about imaginal and soul, that won't actually open, whether you've done it in your psychotherapeutic training or shamanistic training or this or that, tantra, whatever. Not better, not worse. Some overlap, but different.

And so if we're not a little careful with words, there's a way it can all just be, "Oh, I know that." And something collapses and gets confused and diluted. So that's one of the reasons.

The other reason is just what I just said. I used the words "energy body" and "subtle body" originally because it was in the service of samadhi experience and unfabricating of perception, emptiness experience, which tends towards very ethereal, very open, harmonized, etc., and the kind of blurring of the form of the body, so that the boundaries dissolve. It's just a kind of field of light, for instance, or a field of pleasure. It's great as one portion, but if we want to extend the range into more the imaginal body and the poetic body, then we have to kind of stretch these words.

All these words that we're using—I've said this before—whatever they are, eros, humility, soul, they have to be loose and elastic. There's a balance between them needing to be very precise and differentiated,

what we mean, and then actually stretching as our experience grows and they become infused with soul.

So back to what I said before. We could talk about this energy body as really "energy body awareness"—it's a kind of poise of the attention. A kind of stance or attitude or modulation of the attention that allows rather than shuts down the range of possibility. So it's curious. It sounds like it's a thing, the energy body, and it must be a certain experience. No, really it's more a kind of awareness. You understand?

So that's another reason why I use the wrong words sometimes. The energy body is more on the subject side of things, while the object side—the range of what can be experienced—can be huge. It's a poise, a stance, an attunement that allows an expansion of the range of sense, felt sense, image, and idea of what we call body. On top of that, it's also a poise that is more particular and that at any time attunes itself to what is appearing.

This is a little more difficult to describe, but it's almost like... you know, if I say I'm going to look at that notice on the wall over there—I can't quite see what it is—I put my attention in a certain location. But that's not quite an attunement. An attunement is something more to do with the modulation or delicacy of the attention.

Sometimes when you're listening for something delicate, it's not that you have to scrunch up and force your attention. Actually, you need to somehow make your hearing attention more delicate. Something similar happens with the energy body. There's a kind of poise that needs to be commensurate with, in tune with, what the experience is. If what's happening is I'm practicing and there's a lot of lightness and ethereality in this space, that actually takes a kind of delicacy of attention. It's a delicate perception which needs a kind of delicate attention.

When we say energy body, we mean this kind of poised stance that allows an open range—that doesn't box it into what we've been taught or what we're used to in terms of felt sense, image, or idea—but that also potentially tunes to what's happening now in a helpful way. Either helpful meaning it's supporting the samadhi, helping me navigate, helping me sense if I'm letting go or if I'm craving. And also helpful in terms of the soul-making. So tuned how? Well, tuned in a helpful way—either for soul-making or helpful in terms of letting go.

How has my experience of the energy body deepened over time, and what are examples of how shifting the experience of the energy body shifted the range of image? Well, maybe I'll pick up on what I said before. When I started with the energy body, I learned it from Ajahn Geoff—some of you know Ajahn Thanissaro—in relation to breath meditation. It was very much to do with samatha, developing samadhi and jhana. I also did a little qigong and sort of put those two together and just started experimenting on my own. But it was in the service of that.

So the range of experience that I had, because that was my idea and because those were my intentions,

stayed pretty much within that realm of possibility. Ethereality, density, contraction, openness, harmonization, energization, and so forth. Once I started getting into imaginal practice and opening that, then these other possibilities opened up—of the body becoming image or energy becoming image, which is a slightly different thing.

You can feel, for instance, the energy between two people, and you think, "Oh, that's what's happening." But it can also become image as opposed to just a rarefied energy feeling. And so then all kinds of possibilities open up. There are fire bodies, fire bellowing. I've shared lots of these before. The body is here—it's almost like there are two awarenesses of the body at one time. I can feel the body sitting, the sensations. I can also feel the sort of energetic tone or texture or vibration of this space. And at the same time, there's some image or other, and I'm flying over there. And I have this double awareness at the same time. This is really sophisticated, but it just happens. And it can happen to you.

Not that it should or shouldn't, but it's a possibility. So there's this... Somehow my energy body is over there flying or turning cartwheels in joy or whatever it is. And I'm somehow aware of how that feels. And I'm somehow aware of how this stationary body that everyone can see and would agree on—Rob is sitting there—I'm aware of how that feels. It's a kind of... not splitting because it has negative connotations, there's a kind of double awareness. So that would be an example.

Let me share something that happened this morning on this note. Catherine did her lovely instructions and she said about touching the body. And so I, as you did, I started touching my body, and immediately became aware of the weariness and weakness and depletion in my body from illness and treatments. So grief comes.

So immediately see what's happening. There's certain instructions, very conventional, so to speak. And it might say, even with the intention of love. But I'm including the emotion. So that's already something bigger. There's story involved. So this is an option.

In other words, the narrative of my life, the narrative of the illness, the possibility of my dying, the probability of my dying—all that is there. Compassion. There was compassion for this body and for the trials and tribulations and what it has to go through, what I have to go through.

What happened to the self-sense at that point? It could be with the toucher. I am the one touching this body. Or the self could be identified with the touched, the one touched. I am the body touched and these hands are touching me. Do you understand? So this is normal about self. Self-identification will go here or there, or it can move around what it identifies with.

In this case, it just happened that I was, let's say, more identified with the body that was weary and wounded, et cetera, and being touched with love. And whose hands were these? Well, you might say, they're your hands, Rob. Don't be silly. But actually, no. I didn't know whose hands they were. They were angels' hands.

When we stopped touching, the hands were still there. And blessing and loving and tending to all that. And with the sense of it, I don't necessarily, I don't have to go into just sensation, no story—no, no, I could, that's a certain mode. And we're used to that from mindfulness, you know, get in right close to the so-called bare sensations, et cetera. But in imaginal practice, and when we talk about opening up the energy body experience, there's all kinds of possibilities.

So this included, as I said, the narrative of this body. Actually, I've been ill since my 20s, but the narrative of that—not just the bodily narrative, the narrative of my life. My death, my death has already happened. I'm already dead from an imaginal perspective. There's this... Some of you have heard me tend to, what is it to see, to sense things, to sense one's existence, one's life and death, from the perspective of eternity, from the perspective of beyond death, of the eternal. So that got mixed up with it.

Now you see how this simple bodily experience that could be as simple as I touch my chest and what do I notice? There's warmth and pressure. There's some kindness as well. Great, that's great, but it's quite a narrow range. Not good or bad, it's just that's a normal narrow range for dharma practitioners. And this opened up to include and draw into it all kinds of other elements and aspects of my being that were becoming insouled. Is this making sense?

So the emotion was there, the grief, the bodily experience, the weariness, the compassion, the angelic nature of it, the self, the narrative, the life, the death, the eternality—all that was there. The mystery. Invisible hands kept doing that. It was very beautiful.

So there's, for example—and we could give so many examples—just one example of a way the bodily experience started to become more imaginal. And the idea of body, all that I said about felt sense, image, and idea, starts to expand, starts to draw in all kinds of other elements. It doesn't stay necessarily that small.

Now it wasn't that my mind was wandering and I'm just going blah, blah, blah. It's not that. There's quite a lot of stillness and containment, but the range has gotten wider and richer, more multi-dimensional, more multi-aspected.

So when Justin suggested these two words—a poetic body or an imaginal body—I really liked it. Everything has drawbacks. The drawback with "poetic body" is that for some people it will emphasize too much an idea of poetry without the felt sense. And for me, insight meditation is so rooted in the felt sense. So that was one reason for keeping the word "energy body."

How does energy body relate to the concept of aura? It will depend. It's not a word I use a lot. I don't have any problems with it. It's just that, in my experience, the word "aura" and the context in which it's used—let's say very loosely, it's what people talk about in certain circles, maybe certain healing circles or so-called New Age circles, perhaps shamanic circles. It's the perceivable energy field of human beings or trees or anything, and animals—a perceivable energy field. And it's usually perceived visually, perhaps

with colors or certain levels, sheaths or something like that. Or maybe you see the chakras or something.

So it's really fine. One of the differences is in terms of reification, meaning that usually the context in which the concept of aura is used is a context where there's an assertion, either explicitly or implicitly: this is a real thing that we're talking about. And one day we'll be able to measure it scientifically. And if you can train your awareness, two people will read someone's aura the same way. It's objective, it's independent, it has inherent existence.

With all of these teachings, we're tending away from reification. So energy body is an experience that's created, discovered in the moment and is not postulated either subconsciously or consciously as real. This is the way it is. This is a truth. This has inherent existence.

I tend—this is a really, really important distinction. It's massive. It makes a huge difference. Huge, huge, huge.

Already in the aura concept, there will probably be some limit given by that concept and the context it's in, of those ranges of felt sense, image, and idea. There'll be some limit and it will be a rarefied one.

Second, I tend to be quite kinesthetic, which means that I tend to feel things in my energy body rather than see them. So if I'm working one-on-one with someone, sometimes I feel like I can feel what's happening in the other person's energy body. But some people are more visual. So you may actually find that's more your modality—that it's more visual.

I'm conscious of how much these teachings may be shaped by my personal proclivities to be not that visual and more kinesthetic. I don't know the answer, but that's a thought.

Aside from materialist and modernist logos ideas and concepts, what other common conceptions limit people's experience of the energy body? Well, one of them is just that one might be too limited in terms of the idea of an aura, for instance, or the idea of chakras and where they are. One has been taught a certain system: this is the energy body, it looks like this, this is in this place and that's in that place and that's how it is. And it just gets taken as a truth and reified and not understood and not participated in as something that is created, discovered. So that would be one way.

One could get equally trapped in that kind of logos, that kind of concept. But actually, any idea can become limiting.

If we return to the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic—which we'll leave for another day—the soul-making dynamic stretches things. It will stretch everything. It will stretch whatever logos, whatever idea, whatever concept, whatever belief, whatever experience in its time. As it ripens, if we do not get in the way, if we allow it to do its work and ferment things—like fermenting bread or fermenting yeast—it will rise, it will expand, and it will push against ideas, images, conceptions, beliefs, views, ranges of experience.

There could actually be absolutely any idea about the body: that the body is here and not there, that it's separate, that it's mind, that it's countless—you know, countless possibilities. There's something inherent in the soul-making dynamic that will eventually, if we let it do its work, push and either shatter or just stretch these conceptions.

So it could be anything.

*Question**: "When the energy body collapses, how do I discern between constriction of the energy body or a change or shift of my way of perception? Or are they both the same?"

They're both the same. The energy body is not a certain experience. I can sit here and be aware of the energy body and report that it feels contracted or tight or small or whatever it is, and I'm still aware of the energy body. If I make my awareness big, there's a difference in the awareness stretching.

If I open up the awareness to include, let's say, just this much space—sort of a bit bigger than my physical body, my obvious physical body—and if I just am sensitive, delicately open and attuned to the vibration, the texture, the felt sense there, the possible image (which may be completely conventional), and possible ideas (which again may be completely conventional at that time), then my energy body awareness is open. That's all I have to do.

So it's not a right or wrong experience. It will get contracted. If you're not seeing that the energy body experience feels contracted or constricted many times a day, in and out, you're not paying enough attention. It's just—whoever you are, even if you're a Buddha—it's going to do that. Maybe not a Buddha. I don't know about Buddhas.

The experience, the object, can have this huge range, but I can always just open up the field and just be there with this kind of open, delicate awareness. Everything is connected, though. You'll see that what the actual experience is in the energy body depends on the kind of attention I give it. It's not like I can separate this subjective and objective pole.

If my attention—if I keep opening the attention—the experience of the energy body will tend to open up. It will tend to lighten. It will tend to harmonize and energize. Because experience of anything is dependent on the way I pay attention. Not always, and it might take some time, but that's all I have to do. I don't have to say that this is the wrong experience, because it's not the wrong experience. It's more the poise, the stance of my attention.

But that poise—for instance, if I go back to the example I gave—if in my attention as well, either deliberately or by the grace of the angels and the divine and the Buddha-nature, some compassion, some love comes in, or at least any judgmentalism and reactivity lessens, then I've got a different kind of attention. And that different kind of attention, because everything is a dependent arising, will give rise to a different, will seed a different experience.

Everything depends on attention, on the kinds of attention, the modes of attention, the way of looking. Everything depends on the way of looking.

*Question**: "You have mentioned the energy body can feel twisted or negative. I only feel it when I feel expansive, connected, absorbed, not when contracted. How is that possible, or have I misunderstood?"

I wonder if that's connected to what we just talked about. The energy body is not just this kind of experience or that kind of experience. It's an infinite range, way broader than certainly most people in the culture will be used to—even the most insight meditation cultures will be used to.

So if I'm feeling whatever it is—depressed or angry or fearful or reactive or withdrawn—or if there's simply some clinging, I will notice that happening in the energy body. That's what the energy body is at that time. That's what it feels like. And I can give that more attention and see if I can take care of the kind of attention I give it so that it's helpful.

What kind of information can I read from a contracted or expanded energy body in the face of another person or event? And is intentional expansion always a skillful response—creating space internally or externally to receive further response options?

This question touches on both the balance of attention and two-ness practices, as well as the energy body itself. When the energy body is contracted, it means there's some clinging, some craving. When it's more open, it means there's less clinging and craving. That's the most basic information, and it's really, really important. Dharma-wise, this is fundamental navigation. Is there clinging and craving here? Because that's going to lead to dukkha. That's going to tie me up in *papañca* and reification and all that misery. Or is there less? Where is it moving? This is a really important read.

Following on from what Catherine shared this morning with the exercises involving another in relationship, in dyad, in two-ness, in the balance of attention—it's not wrong to sit down in front of another person, notice someone coming toward me down the corridor, and observe a contraction. Then it's time to get interested.

There could be all kinds of possibilities. It could be that I simply notice the contraction and find a way of opening it. Or I might become genuinely curious: What's happening here? Is there a specific fear? Perhaps I'm afraid they're going to judge me. Maybe I feel a bit dull today and think they're going to judge that. Or I feel not interesting, or ugly, or whatever it is. Or perhaps I really want them to see how handsome I am. All of this is good to know. "Oh, that's one of my patterns. I see this arising again and again." Now what does that mean? We don't know the answer because it's going to be specific, but this is really valuable information to be able to read.

When there's *eros* rather than craving, the energy body tends to open and move toward harmonization—more ease, more delight. So that's part of the navigation. "Ah, now there's *eros* here, or at least openness"—and that's good to know.

This also tells us when we're on the right track. If the other is an event or an image, this is *soulmaking*. It's part of how I sense that I'm on the right track in my practice—through reading the energy body. If I'm cultivating *samādhi*, the energy body tells me whether what I've just done is working. I give more intensity to the attention, really drilling into the breath or whatever, and then notice my energy body contract. That's telling me that perhaps what I've just done with the attention is a bit too much and is causing contraction. Or I do that and energy arises and there's openness—oh great, it's the right thing.

It's not always going to be the same answer. So you're always like a sailor at sea, receptive to how the wind catches the sail, feeling it in your whole being.

I can see it, I can feel it in my arm. So practice is like that—it's like reading the billowing of the sail. Whatever I'm doing, if it's samadhi, if it's metta, if it's emptiness practices, if it's imaginal practices, this energy body is one of the aspects that gives a really good read on navigation in the moment.

But in addition to that, there's a whole range of personal psychological issues and patterns that's so important. We talk about roots of soul. Catherine and I were having a conversation some months ago, and she reflected on how it's a bit like this: someone starts regular dharma practice, not necessarily because they want to get rid of suffering, but let's say this hypothetical person senses the possibility of the mystic, of mystical experience. Or they hear about the unfabricated—they don't understand what it means—or emptiness. "I don't understand it, but something of that pulls me, calls me."

So they book on a retreat, and that's their heart's desire—they want to know that, for example. And then day two, day three, that's not what's going on. It's their knees screaming and their mother and their father and their siblings, or whatever. They may have to work with all that stuff—heal it, understand it, make it into soul eventually. These are parts of the roots, roots of soul.

Now that happens again, not in a linear way, not according to some dogma of order. It's not like you first have to do this in therapy and then you can proceed—not necessarily. For some people it is. But these aspects of psychological or relational difficulty, they're part of the information, the kinds of information I can read from a contracted or expanded energy body. Where is my joy? Where are the kinds of ways I contract and what does that need? So a lot of this is just about psychological awareness and relational skills in awareness.

*Question:** I have noticed that my energy body has a dark side and a light side, changing at the midline. In vision too, one eye has warm light, the other more blue. Is this just an epiphenomenon, or can I use it for soul-making, even if it is just an epiphenomenon?

Wonderful! I've never come across anything like that before, but so what? Is this just epiphenomenal or can you use it for soul-making? You can use it for soul-making. Do you have to? Not necessarily, but it's possible. Exactly what that would involve, we don't know. Anything can be made into soul.

Now, if it turns out that they call you in for a brain scan and the doctors say, "Oh, Hazel, we found this

curious thing in your brain that causes you to experience this," and they say, "That's what's causing this," and you say, "Oh, it has nothing to do with soul"—no! Because in soul-making we don't reduce to one causal explanation. Sure, I've got a funny thing in my brain and it might cause something from a certain perspective, but because soul-making involves our participation, we're asked to create, discover.

So anything, even if the doctors or whoever says it's because of this, can be made into soul. But you don't have to. You might feel drawn to, and then it's a question of being creative and playful and navigating and sensing: where is the soulfulness, where is the sense of soulfulness with this experience? How does it start to complexify? And you can follow your sense of soul-making and allow soul to be made through this probably somewhat unusual experience.

*Question:** At times I can get very high, manic even, especially when working with desire, with the heart's desire in the energy body. Can you say something about this?

I'd probably have to hear a bit more about the specifics, but first thing is not to—again, okay, so I feel manic and high. "Manic" already is a loaded word to me. It has a lot of negative connotations. So my first question would be: is it really, does it really have those negative connotations, or is it just an energy state that I'm not yet used to and that most people in the culture aren't used to and most meditation circles don't talk about?

So again, watch what the mind is doing. Because it might just be—and what will happen, and actually what needs to happen with some people—is the range of their capacities, energetic capacities, needs to grow. Without realizing it, the person is kind, is mindful, is calm and clear and knows the teachings and practices well.

Without realizing it, the energy and the range of energy that can move through that being is actually quite tightly limited. There is not the possibility of a lot of energy. And with that, there is not the possibility of a lot of emotion, and there is not the possibility of a real fecundity and richness of soul-making image.

Since nothing is a root cause, everything feeds everything else. But it might be that for some people, something does need to shift—I need to learn how to tolerate more energy, to allow more to come through, to be okay with that. It doesn't mean I have to have some bonkers Kundalini experience for five years and then melt down. Hopefully not. Having been through that kind of thing years ago, I don't recommend it.

But generally speaking, some people are unaware of the ways in which their whole experience—not just of energy and body, but also of image and emotion and therefore of self and life—is actually contracted. It's not at all obvious that there is a kind of lock on that, and actually there's a very minimal amount of energy being admitted into the system.

So one thing is to watch the judgment, the conclusions that are being made. Another, just practically speaking, if there is a lot of energy—and I'd have to hear more about the specifics there—is expanding the

awareness, giving it more space. It's like if the container is too small, the pressure is higher. There's more air in a smaller space, so it's higher pressure, more uncomfortable. Just expanding the container and giving it some holes can help.

If it's really a lot, the energy may want to come out in certain ways. What does it want to do? Maybe it wants to shoot out the throat or at the back of the neck and the throat, or at the heart, or at the feet, or at the top of the head. Just let it do that. Let the imagination do that, so you're kind of modulating it that way.

It also depends how much skill—obviously I don't know who wrote the note and what experiences, what teachings they're familiar with—but if I reify it, if it's a real thing that's happening, this energy state, and I'm convinced of its reality and its concreteness, then that adds to its difficulty. So can I see it as theater? Can I see it as empty? Even if I feel I'm not very advanced in this emptiness business—see, it's theater. That tends to take some of the pressure off and release.

I think I would need more specifics before I could say more.

Another question: "I sort of think energy body plus the presence of the aspects of the lattice, the elements of the imaginal, in meditation is soul making practice. Energy body plus the presence of the aspects of the elements of the imaginal. What are your thoughts on energy body and presence of the elements of the lattice in singing, art, movement, play, anything? Would you consider this soul-making practice? Could you elaborate, please?"

It depends. It depends on a number of things. One of the things it depends on is what the intention is. Certainly, soul making practice is not confined to any posture or any activity. It could be anything at all—in relating, in making art, in speaking, in walking down the road, in whatever it is.

What does make a difference, I think, is the intention. We talked about the elements and one of them is fullness of intention—meaning that the intention is not limited to, for instance, me as an artist. An artist has specific intentions. My intention is to make this piece of art and to do it well, to find the right words or to find the right colors or whatever it is. So I'm tuned to the aesthetic product. I care about that. I have a responsibility to that as an artist.

If that takes over my intention, then it's art practice that may feel soulful, and it's great. Fullness of intention means that it's not just the product, it's not just the healing—it's the soul making that is also included in the intention. It's a full intention, a full range of intention. So that's probably one of the things that makes a difference.

As a composer and poet, sometimes the process just felt wild, crazy, very unmindful even, because I was so intent on getting the product just so. In creating that product, you might go in and out of a sense of soul making, but my responsibility as an artist was to the product, to the art, to the piece.

People have very different relationships with the artistic process, very different.

So I think you have to go with your sense. I'm a certain personality and a certain artistic personality, so I wouldn't want to put that on everyone. But going back to everything we've said about soul making, it's like keep it open. Whatever you know and whatever you experience, just be aware there may be more. There may be more at the edges that you've yet to encounter and come across. But I totally appreciate what you've shared, and I think that's important and right.

I would really love to do this next question. Following Catherine's instruction in the morning about ensouling the energy body work and the tunis exercise, could you say something about the possibility of letting the energy body move towards or move into jhana absorption within a soul-making framework?

On the one hand, in jhana there's meditative absorption in some kind of yumminess—and there are different flavors, lots of different flavors of yumminess. The Buddha outlined eight in particular, but actually there's more, and there are gradations. It's yummy—a Pali word. On the one hand in jhana, there's a desire and movement towards absorption and merging rather than two-ness. And I seem to remember Rob contrasting them on a number of occasions, jhanas and soul making.

On the other hand, on my personal retreat lately, I've been encountering the first jhanas and it felt related to imaginal work in various ways. First, the jhanas themselves appeared as many-faced others, and relationship with them felt rich and nuanced and highly erotic. Even when there was strong movement towards merging, there was still a sense of self as that which is merging into the other—so never fully one, but it might just be my inexperience.

Then also, each jhana had specific images that were felt as her emanations or manifestations, not fully imaginable in some aspects but richly so in others—like a condor gliding on hot air currents, or a human body floating at sea for first jhana; the scent of jasmine, or a deer drinking from a spring for the second. A fully imaginal image that's very dear to me of a young man looking for gold in a stream became linked to the second jhana, and each could lead to the other. The jhana could lead to the image, the image could lead to the jhana.

Lastly, various kinds of images seemed to tend to lead the energy body towards different jhanas—soulful sexual images or concepts charged with eros to the first jhana, images of non-sexual love-eros-metta to the second. And they could be held rather vividly throughout the first jhana and most of the second. Even when disappearing towards the deeper end of the second as I so far know her, their scent remained. Thank you for creating this retreat where such a question can be asked. On rereading, this seems a rather dry list, but the experiences themselves aren't dry or clear-cut at all, but mysterious and constantly transforming.

Lovely. Totally what I would expect. Completely.

I think it's good to be clear about the intention and leaning at any time if this kind of thing is happening, or if it happens later on for you when you start getting into this kind of territory. Some of you have heard

me use the analogy of a bird, like a bird of prey. If it just wants to change direction, just tilt the wings a little bit and ride that thermal that way. If you want to go that way, just tilt the wings and ride that thermal that way.

You can go deeper into a jhana and the image will fade. Even if a certain image might have triggered that jhana—at the beginning, for quite a while at the beginning of jhana practice, people often find certain images that either come up in the jhana that seem to express the jhana, or that trigger the jhana, that open the door to a certain jhana. A certain memory even, or an image brings delight, and then I can go with the delight and suffuse the body with delight.

So even if that's how I kick-started it, eventually one doesn't need any images. One can just remember a jhana and go into it. But that's quite a stage—of an image perhaps triggering. There can be all kinds of things. And of course the Buddha gives images for the jhanas as well.

So even if I started, I kick-started this pleasant state with an image, then my navigation comes in. What am I doing now? Where am I going to set my dial? Just fully into the nice feeling, the meanness, and just really get into that and let the image really go to the background.

Maybe I can use the image just like a glider aircraft - they get pulled by another plane and then you can let go of the rope, and then it can fly. I just don't do that indefinitely. Do you understand? So it's a matter of navigation and intention. There's not a right or wrong, but I'm clear about what I'm doing. What was my intention at any time? It's fine.

If I want to go more into the samadhi, I just steer that way. If I want to go more into the image and the soul of the image, then I may be aware that there's all this yumminess and lovely feeling, but actually I'm more focused on the nuance of the image and the soul aspect of it. Or I might be somewhere in the middle territory, and that's fine too. So it's really a matter of intention and clarity of intention at any time.

The jhanas are going to be rich and filled with eros, even if they're not imaginal. When they're new, the soul, the psyche, is opening to new territory. If you're doing jhana practice and you come to me saying, "I opened to the second jhana," and I ask how it was, and you say, "It was nice," I'd say that's wrong. Well, not wrong exactly, but you should be coming to me saying, "Oh my goodness, that was just the most fantastic experience I've ever had in my life!" It touches you to the core of being - the beauty of it, the loveliness of it. So there is eros. The soul is expanding, the psyche is expanding - the gorgeousness, the love, the attraction, all of that.

Even when there's a strong movement toward merging, there's still a sense of self as that which is merging into the other. There will be. There's less self-sense in a jhanic experience, but there is still self-sense. There is not complete cessation of self-sense. So there's still duality. No matter how merged and melted you feel, there's still duality. It's subtle. People don't notice it at first. After a while, your eyes get used to the dark and you think, "Hold on." Then people think, "Oh, I'm doing this wrong." They're not. It's natural.

Only in a cessation experience is there the absence of any self-object duality.

Have I addressed the questions? Is there something I'm missing?

One of the aspects of jhana practice we can talk about is the degree of absorption. If I push on that pedal a little more into deeper absorption, then basically there'll be a fading of images and it comes more to this sort of amorphous, unformed experience of energy body or light or that kind of thing. But you don't have to do it. If you want to learn jhana practice, then you're going to have to do that sometimes. And that sometimes might be months and months - that's what learning how to do this involves. But there's no right or wrong. You can play with where you are on that spectrum.

Also, partly what I would expect - with the second jhana, the rapture in the first jhana oftentimes does feel very sexual. People say, "Oh, it's like an orgasm," or similar descriptions. So you would expect sexual images to accompany that. Oftentimes with the happiness of the second jhana, there's a lot of love in it. Sometimes people think, "Oh, the second jhana is primarily love, not happiness," but actually it's primarily happiness - it's just that sometimes there's a lot of love mixed in with it. So again, sometimes we'd expect the metta and the love to be blended with that. In other words, the kinds of images you're experiencing are exactly what I would expect.

Let's just have a few moments of silence before we close.

The kinds of images that arise are exactly what I would expect given the nature of this practice and these states of consciousness. The visions, the sensations, the qualities of experience that emerge—they all align perfectly with what we understand about the deeper movements of the heart and mind in meditation.

Does this make sense? Are we clear about this relationship between the inner landscape and what manifests in our awareness?

We really do need to bring our session to a close now. Let's just rest together for a few moments in silence before we part ways.

[A period of shared silence]

Thank you all for your deep listening and sincere practice today.

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