Image, Ethics, and Awakening (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:32:55

Just before Rob comes, I'd like to let you know how we're thinking about the possible endings of the retreat. First, if you've put your name on the list for an individual interview and haven't had one yet—and there are a good number of you—we'll hopefully offer a couple more tonight and tomorrow. If you're able to stay after lunch, we can see some more people then as well. If you want to check in around that or let us know when you're leaving and you're still on the list, please let us know.

I mentioned the other day that people who haven't had a chance to express their love and thanks to Rob in an individual interview, or if you had one and didn't get to do that, we'll make time tomorrow semi-informally in the lounge after the closing session here at 11:30. That's also room cleaning time, so that still has to happen, along with the books and everything else in the library. But in the lounge, Rob and I will be there, and if you want to have a moment—a minute or two or three—to have a private word with Rob, that's how you can do it, coming in and out of that space. Bear in mind there are lots of people here as well, so it won't be a full interview, but if you want to make that contact, there will be a chance for that.

We'll also do some other pieces around ending, of course. That's where the more personal and private part can happen in that way, but we'll have other forms in the ending of the retreat as well.

Tonight, one of the ideas we had—on the night before a retreat ends, often there will be a dana talk. On our soul-making retreats, Mark has done a fabulous job of offering dharma talks, as he does. Not because he's not here, but we had another idea this time, which we'd love to invite you to participate in. I'll set it up tonight, if you're up for it, where you're all sort of facing into each other with a space in the middle, semi-ritualized in a way, but where the dana talk is offered by the community. In the way that Lee Brasington does it, or some other teachers do it now, and we've done this on our Buddha Dharma Sangha camp where there's a mature community of practitioners—let's say there will be twenty statements of dana made. One person stands up or sits down and offers their statement, whatever is on their heart to say about dana. When they're finished, the second person who is called upon to speak speaks in relation to dana for this retreat and the staff and the ensouling—all of it. Then the third person. When twenty people have spoken, or whatever number we decide is good, they're not each giving a dana talk. They're offering the part that's in their heart. When twenty, if that's what we decide is the number, are done, then it is complete. It's a really lovely way I've witnessed and been part of. Rob and I wouldn't be here for that part. This would be yours.

That's not the only thing we intend for tonight, but that was one idea. Then we'll have something else tonight, and then tomorrow morning, sitting before breakfast, Nick will offer our staff coordinators'

closing information. In the closing session here, I think it's at 9:30 to 11:30, we'll have some formal ending together as well. I know there's a part where some of you have written notes and would like a place where we can bless Rob. We'll see if that's part of it too.

Hello.

Again, I apologize, I had a couple of points and didn't have time to collate them into a logical thread of order, but let's just see.

"Is there a reason you don't have a ceremony of taking some form of precepts at the beginning of this kind of retreat? I would find such a ritual very supportive in the creation of boundaries and safety within which this beautiful work can take place. Thank you."

Yes, interesting. You're probably not alone, whoever wrote that. All the retreats at Gaia House are run with the explicit understanding that everyone here will be keeping the five precepts. That should have been gone through by the coordinator before the opening. The reason Catherine and I didn't do it is just because often it feels like with these kinds of retreats, there's quite a lot that we would like to do on the opening evening. We're conscious that people have traveled and we'll run late anyway. So in a way, we're looking to minimize what we do. If the coordinators can do a bit in their opening, there's just a practical reason to hand it to them.

Of course, for some people, a coordinator sitting up here and just reading a list of the precepts doesn't carry the same impact on the soul, on the being, or beauty as a ritual might. So yes, we acknowledge that maybe it's something to think about.

But more broadly, people will probably differ. If I speak personally—and not to say everyone should be like this at all, people differ—some people, I have heard them say that at some point in their history of Dharma practice and exposure to Dharma teachings, they formally took the precepts with such-and-such teacher or in such-and-such a place in India. Of the people who say that, for some it's clear that was really a turning moment in their life and they took that very seriously, and perhaps their ability to incorporate that as a turning point was due to the ritual and the ceremony and the way it was set up. For other people who have reported that to me, I see that they took the precepts and it didn't make much difference. They're still not keeping this or that precept.

So the presence or absence of a ceremony in itself doesn't really do anything. Again, people are different. That's really important. But if I think back, I heard my first Dharma talk—I had never heard any Dharma at all. I think I was...

19 or something in college. Probably memory's a little hazy, but I seem to recall the teacher just sort of talked for I don't know how long and went through the precepts and the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path in one talk. I was like most other 19-year-olds—ingesting certain substances, partying, you know—and I heard this talk and I stopped smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol and everything, just

there. I've practiced every day since then, apart from when I had that thermonuclear explosion thing when I was actually sent away from a retreat. But that wasn't for breaking the precepts. That was for being nuts.

So my point is that the presence or absence of a ceremony may help some people. It may do nothing. To me, the precepts are just a way to live. They're completely incorporated into my being. I would say these practices—any Dharma practice—totally rest on the precepts. That's what the Buddha talked about. We talk about foundations, bases, roots, and the precepts are a foundation. You want to start playing with all this super fiery eros and things like that when you don't have a really rooted basis in the precepts? It's not going to fly. Things will break. The vessel, the ship will fall apart on the stormy oceans.

So to me, they're just completely integrated. Maybe so much so that it's a blind spot and we should emphasize them more because it might not be the case for other people. But for me, they're just how you live. They're not saying how you be on retreat or off retreat, or "now we're doing something special." It's just part of how you live, and that goes with a commitment to kindness and compassion and care and sensitivity and all the rest of it.

This isn't in the question, but I would just add—so they form a foundation. I think I seem to have been absent every time Catherine seems to have gone through this with you, but the difference between foundations and roots. You've said that. Yeah, physically absent.

So anyway, there's a foundation. And then what happens to the precepts as the soul-making Dharma goes deeper? Or we should say this: what happens to one's relationship with ethics as the soul-making Dharma goes deeper?

When I first started talking about soul-making Dharma—I hadn't even thought of that word back then—the first couple of talks I gave were actually about ethics. "The Meditator Is Revolutionary" and "The Necessity of Fantasy." They were about ethics, climate change ethics and image or fantasy. They were probably way too long and complicated, so probably most people just heard talks about climate change, which is fair enough and fine. But part of the point I wanted to make—and I still want to make it—is that it can be easy and maybe even common for some Buddhist practitioners to look at the kind of things we're talking about and doing and worry about the ethics there. Or maybe not hear so much about ethics and think, "You're talking about all this sexual stuff and you have this violent imagery that you're saying it's okay."

What I was trying to do all those years ago is actually say, "Look, we have all this talk about ethics and we have these ethical commitments in the Dharma. Are there not gaps in them?"

Image is operating anyway, whether we have even heard the word imaginal or soul-making. So oftentimes the image, the archetypes that are prevalent and dominant and influential for a lot of Dharma practitioners are ones of passivity and equanimity. You don't get—especially in Theravadan Dharma—you

get the picture of the Buddha like this: he's got his eyes shut and he's meditating. He's very, very peaceful and fine, thank you very much, while the world is burning. It's not at all to blame the Buddha or anything like that, but images operate for us. They're highly influential.

So what can happen—I'm not saying it always happens—what can happen is that then there are crises, and the range of responses or the range in which the self, the practitioner self can then manifest and embody forth or speak up or not speak up gets limited by the archetype that is unconsciously operating. Do you understand?

So what happens when we do soul-making Dharma? Everything gets stretched. The archetypes get stretched. There is the place of the troublemaker. There is the place of the person who will not shut up, who will rage, who bellows fire, who puts themselves on the tarmac and gets arrested—as some of you have been doing. It's just a different archetype. It's extended the range of archetypes, and in the extension of the range of archetypes, it's extended the ethical response.

So you say, "I'm okay because I'm following these five precepts," and there's actually very little engagement with ethics and very little kind of creative tussling with the wrestling—wrestling with the almost impossible questions and conundrums that we have in modern times in a globalized society.

I don't know where the hell this came from. What conditions was it made under? Who suffered for this and who profited? Yet I keep the five precepts. I don't have to say anything about sweatshops in Bangladesh or whatever it is.

I'm not saying there's nothing valuable in the precepts, but when the eyes awaken, we can see where there might be a kind of complacency. "Oh, I'm a good Buddhist. I follow the precepts." But there actually isn't that real wrestling with the deeper questions: What on earth are we going to do about climate change and species loss when there are seven billion people to feed? Most of them are in poverty. These are difficult ethical questions.

And if it always looks peaceful, if it looks okay, if it looks equanimous—maybe the heart feels a little something, but there's no real engagement—then we're missing something essential.

Soul-making, I would say, becomes the foundation of ethics. It becomes a root—something organic that can grow and nourish, like the root of a tree. But then that enters into difficult territory. I'm going to piss people off. I've pissed plenty of people off. I have to be okay with that and decide: Well, maybe it's the cost of the ethical—the price of pissing people off versus something else.

So that's one point. The second point is element number twenty-seven. This is actually one that I know—I think Marian will tell me I've got it wrong. Is it values? Yes.

So values, including ethical values and moral values, are actually implicit in images, interestingly. They're not immediately obvious, but they're there. Images make us ethical beings. Again, I was physically absent,

but I think Catherine mentioned that when the word "justice" is spoken, more of the neural network lights up.

We have the human soul—the healthy human soul, let's say—and it has this love of moral values. I was planning to give a whole series of talks on ethics, but I got the metastatic diagnosis and have just been completely busy with that. I don't know if it'll be possible, but I hope so.

But the point is that values, including moral values, are actually wrapped up in images. They're there. And again, we can tune to them, turn them on, see what they say, get turned on by them.

And the whole question of values—look, humanity has been debating ethics and values since before written history. It's complex. It's one of these subjects that's so rich, it's unending and it's not comfortable. In other words, if you think you've found easy answers to ethics in your life, you're just not really engaging it as fully as it might be engaged. They're open-ended, ongoing, difficult questions that we wrestle with. And if there isn't that wrestling there, well, something else is going on. But it's not that full rooting or becoming root of ethics.

But going back to what I said before, the range is extended. So it doesn't just look kind of—speak softly and calmly and it's all very good at letting go and equanimity. It never says anything that might offend anyone. You think about Jesus or someone—of course it got him into a lot of trouble, didn't it? It didn't end so well. It depends where you put the ending.

But anyway, you get the point. To me, it's a really important area, and it's integral to what we're doing.

And if it isn't at the beginning, it will become so. It must, just because of how the soul-making dynamic works. It will pull these things in. They will become obvious. It will extend your range ethically and your ethical sensibility and moral sensibility, all that.

But yes, in terms of ceremony, we can certainly think about that.

Here's an interesting question. I actually don't know what... Well, actually, here's one that follows immediately. Can you see a place for ritual or a need for it in soul-making practice? And if so, where does it fit?

Absolutely. We usually have a few rituals as part of these retreats. Maybe less this time just because of my health and capacities and energies. But we're very keen on it. I think partly the function of rituals is, from a soul-making perspective, is that they start to... What's happening in ritual... Again, this is one of these subjects we could talk about a lot. But one of the things that's happening in ritual is that...

So when we meditate, it looks very still and the eyes are closed. And it's, you know, what's engaged? Mind, so to speak. And okay, experience of body, but action of body is not. It's still. And then typically when we meditate, we close the eyes. So there's a kind of shutting out of a lot of the sensory connection with the things of the world.

In ritual, one of the things we're doing is including the actions of body, the manifestations of voice, speech, as well as mind, and the objects of the world. And all that gets included, which doesn't usually happen when I sit silently with my eyes closed meditating on something.

So when we talk about sensing with soul and when we talk about this idea that the whole point perhaps, I mean for me anyway, the whole point of these practices and this teaching is to extend and expand the range of our senses of what is sacred, then ritual is very much a part of that.

I remember a beautiful ritual that Catherine led. Some of you were here. It was a few retreats ago. And I think it was this on the floor. And then she spoke a little bit about certain words and things. And we had these tangerines, if I remember. Were any of you here for that? For me, through the ritual, the tangerines right then, in that space of whatever it was, half an hour, they became sanctified. My sense of the tangerine was of sacredness right there.

So this is part of the function of ritual, that it starts to include the things of the world, the objects of nature and the senses, and supports and opens our capacity to sense them with soul, to sense them with sacredness, as sacred, including this self, other selves, bodies, the actions of body, the gestures, the movements, etc.

So in a way all the stuff we haven't done on this retreat, we did a bit of movement. I think we had three or four sessions of movement on one of the retreats. And again, the function is the same. It's really, look here I am fiddling with my hat or moving my hands. If I'm sensing with soul, this very movement of hands, it's just automatic when I blah, blah, blah. The very movement has this poetic sacredness to it.

So it's part of the function of ritual to make things like the ordinary movements or ordinary objects, food, tangerines, whatever it is, and sanctify them, bless the eyes, bless the senses that they can sense that way, sensing with soul. That's one of the functions.

So absolutely, I think there's a place, and I never used to be into ritual at all, and now I totally love it. Just, yeah, like I said, this retreat had to be limited, unfortunately, somewhat, but there's still time, so we don't know what might happen.

Here's the question I didn't quite know how to answer really, but I'll say it anyway and see what comes. Do you think any consent is needed before relating to someone as image live in the moment? For example, over soup yesterday I had a highly erotic encounter with the person sitting opposite me. My energy body was very alive and it felt soul making. Really, I'm very curious about what seeing others and self as image whilst interacting with them or live as it were in the moment can open up question mark the benefits, the risks.

Yeah, I don't know about the consent thing. I think that... So I don't know, that's my main answer is I don't know. But I can tell you the kinds of things I'm thinking is that if the elements are there and they're switched on, in other words, if it's really fully imaginal or towards that end, then there's no danger, there's

no intrusion, there's nothing like that whatsoever. Why?

Because it's not real. It's neither real nor not real. And there's humility and there's the sense of divinity and there's love which implies a respect for the other person's being. And anyway, to perceive that way takes an extraordinary amount of sensitivity. So it's not that in the seat of that sensitivity one's going to be exquisitely sensitive to how beautiful they are and how much eros one is feeling and completely insensitive to another person and their space and what they might need. I guess it's possible, but it's highly unlikely.

So I think my answer is I don't know, but I would think that if all the elements are there, then actually it's completely safe. If they're not there—in other words, if a person hasn't really tasted it, if they just randomly pick a talk on Dharma Seed and start listening, "What the hell is this?"—and then they write to whatever the international Buddhist authorities are and say, "Do you know that there's these people in Devon?" That's all based on trepidation and fear, and the assumption that it must be unethical. But that's all based on just not having tasted it, not having understood. I think if a person really knows this work, then they'll recognize these elements and they'll recognize the non-intrusiveness of it.

One thing I've thrown out once or twice is this: when we talk about energy and energy body and the energy field between people, most spiritual cultures tend to think of that as a real thing. There are concepts like psychic vampirism—such things may well exist. But that's not what we're doing here. More importantly, I think when things really get going, the sense of the energy is neither real nor not real, not just the image, not just the object, not just the self, but also the energy. And that does something as well—it makes it unintrusive, uninvasive.

But if these pieces aren't there and you just hear a bit of this and then feel like, "Oh, basically it's just saying it's okay to do whatever," I would get a little nervous with that. So those are some of my thoughts about that.

A new question arises: "I am still very new to the imaginal practice. Could you outline very briefly again what it is that's important or necessary to pay attention to when just at the cusp of entering into a specific imaginal practice or when bringing in an image to be worked with? What are the important questions to be asked to oneself or the image? Is a certain amount of resonance, aliveness, or meaningfulness of the image a prerequisite to be able to work with it in the imaginal? Or can anyone be brought alive by slowly tuning into the elements?"

Again, the simple answer is I would point to the elements, and they don't necessarily have to be in a specific order. There are many examples where I might be sitting—maybe not feeling so well, maybe affected by medications, maybe not; it's kind of irrelevant. The point is that the mind drifts off whatever I was trying to do. There are bits of daydream floating around, and some of those daydreams initially seem

uninteresting. But there are many times where for some reason I decided to take one of those daydream fragments and actually bring it in and work with it, and it becomes imaginal.

One that often works for me is music. There's just music going on, and then I work with that and very rich imaginal territory opens up with the musical daydreams that were happening. So it's not the object per se. It's more the way of looking, the way of relating. Everything that we've been talking about in terms of energy body and attention to the nodes, seeing if I can ignite this or that element, balancing, seeing if the self can get involved—all that will fertilize and support whatever is going on to become more fully imaginal.

As I said when I gave a short talk on the elements of the imaginal in that lounge, there's this tension, this kind of creative contradictory relationship between some of the elements. The very first element of the lattice is just the lattice itself. In other words, it's saying: look, it's not the object, it's the way of looking. Remember that. All these elements are part of the way of looking. Nothing is inherently imaginal.

Lord of the Rings movies are not inherently imaginal. I mean, they might be to someone, or they might be to someone in a certain state of mind, but they're not inherently imaginal. They have ogres and—I'm not really into them, so I don't know what else—princesses and wizards and elves and hobbits and this whole Middle Earth landscape. You might think it's totally imaginal, but it's not inherently so. Mythical content doesn't equate to imaginal. Imaginal in our language means the elements are coming alive, and the more they come alive, the more fully or authentically imaginal something becomes.

So what this means, in terms of this question, is that on the one hand you have this encouragement: it's up to me to finesse and work with and shape my way of looking, meaning my whole relationship with this object or image or whatever it is right now. Maybe in doing that, in that technical art—the art of the technique and the technique of it—it helps the most seemingly irrelevant thing to become fully imaginal. It was just this "blah blah blah" that went through my mind, but actually because the relationship has been worked, because I've done that actively, it transforms.

So you have that on one hand, the encouragement to be active, to say you can change the way of looking, you can play with the relationship. And if you do that skillfully and with art, you're going to create a kind of relationship in the moment that allows the image to become fully imaginal.

So you've got that on one side. On the other side, you've got element number I don't know which - grace - with the implication that, and maybe you've tasted this, a lot of these elements are to be noticed. So it's more like, it was a grace, it was a gift. I couldn't have made that up. I couldn't have choreographed it in the very precise way it mirrors my life or my dukkha or my situation.

So you've got this kind of inexplicable gift, grace, on one side, in a somewhat contradictory relationship with the encouragement to develop one's techniques and skills. But basically, I would point back to poise. There might be something in terms of that node of grace - a certain posture that's open to grace, that goes

with humility and reverence. So a certain poise is very much part of these kinds of practices.

It's not all about "let's fix this thing," nor is it all about passive waiting. There's something balanced there. But if we're talking about grace, grace also requires a certain sensibility to open to it and to receive it. It's actually quite a delicate, beautiful, subtle poise of the being to be open to grace and to notice grace.

So there's a tension here. I wouldn't point to any one particular thing. It's often good to start with the energy body, but it doesn't actually have to be linear at all like that. I think that answers your question.

Now, someone asks: "How to deal with sexual eros in 'real' relationship after the retreat - for example. A bit of guidance is required." I have no idea what I'm trying to aim at with the response here without more specificity.

I wonder whether what's prompting the question is awareness that sexual desire can harm people. In fact, mostly when sexual desire is involved, at some point someone or other gets hurt in some way or another. And certainly there's the possibility of intrusive or unwanted or abusive sexual desire being acted out and being devastatingly harmful.

So I wonder whether the question is coming from a concern about that and therefore not quite trusting the soul-making practice and one's own capacity to tolerate eros, to be aware of it within this imaginal middle way, neither real nor not real.

Again, I would point back to more practicing and not encourage someone to practice with sexual eros if it actually feels like "I don't have the vessel yet to handle that." I wouldn't practice with it in meditation if it feels like I'm spending twenty-three and a half hours a day under the cold shower. You do need a certain capacity and therefore a certain skill with energy body, with view as well.

One of the things I mentioned in a talk was a list of things you can do when it starts to get really hot and it's almost intolerable, the sexual eros. One of them is expand the energy body. Why? Because eros is not a problem. What's a problem is craving. Craving goes with reification. Craving also goes with a contraction of the energy body. Every time there's craving, the energy body contracts. If you don't know this, study it until you absolutely know it for certain. A hair's breadth of craving and you can feel it in the energy body. Relaxing of the craving, the energy body opens. Open up the energy body and sometimes the craving soothes and that craving can then become eros.

So what often happens - it may happen more for men than women - is that sexual energy often gets contracted in a certain area of the body and then there's enormous pressure in that area. It can feel hard to contain and then we must act or release or this or that. But a really simple thing: practice, practice, practice. The more space there is in the energy body awareness, the more that sexual energy can actually fill the whole space. And like a gas, when it has more space, there's less pressure.

Did they teach you this about gases? So more space, less pressure—that's one very simple thing.

A much more sophisticated approach in this list—which I cannot remember now, but is somewhere in the Eros Unfettered series—is available if you're able to do it. Again, this will only make sense or be accessible if you've already done quite a bit of soul-making practice and imaginal practice. The question becomes: this desire, this eros, this sexual energy—whose is it?

Of course, the normal human response is: it's mine. I don't even think it; it feels like mine. Either I feel bad about it or whatever, but it's mine. I'm identifying with it, just as we normally identify with anything happening in the body.

Typical—or rather mainstream—Dharma can ask "whose is it?" and answer that it's anatta. It doesn't belong to anyone. It's not yours. Don't identify with it. If you take something happening in the body—let's say sexual energy that's uncomfortable—and you decide to see it as anatta, contemplating again and again that it's not me, not mine, there is this energy, there is this sexual energy, there is this discomfort, rather than thinking it's mine...

You do have the idea that it's yours—that's just the normal human way of functioning. But in the mainstream Dharma approach, one of the contemplations called the three characteristics is contemplating it as anatta, as not-self, not me, not mine.

What happens when I take any experience and keep regarding it over and over as not me, not mine? I know you know the answer. Come on, humor me.

It fades.

The sexual energy will go away. At first, you have to develop skill in this—it's practice you gain facility with. Initially, probably nothing happens. Then if you stay with it, what occurs? There's a bit more space, a bit more relief. You have a bit more distance from this sexual energy. It's not so compulsive, not so painful and difficult and oppressive.

If you develop your skill with that anatta contemplation and keep practicing it—whether with sexual energy, knee pain, or anything else—it starts to fade. The perception itself begins to fade. And so bye-bye problem, bye-bye sexual eros as well.

This is really, really skillful, really wonderful to devote time to developing that kind of practice. But the main point is not the relief it can bring in those situations. That's actually completely secondary—way down the list. What's much more important is what this reveals about emptiness and dependent arising in the long run, and that view.

So there's the normal view: it's mine—of course, I don't even think it, I feel it, I identify with it. There's the possibility of a traditional Dharma view of regarding it as not me, not mine. And then there's the possibility of a soul-making, an imaginal view, which sees this desire, this sexual eros—however hot and lusty it is, however uncomfortable and forceful it may be in one's being—as mine and not mine and God's.

It's the divine's. It's Buddha nature's.

It's not just what they call a non-affirming negation—"it's not mine" without saying whose it is, as you do with anatta. You're actually entertaining a kind of triple view at once. Mine? Yes, of course. Not mine? Yes. And God's.

In other words, through this—through my eyes, through my lust, through my passion, through my desire, through my body, through my libido, choose your words—the divine eros is operating, is seeing, is desiring.

Is that an absolute dogmatic truth? No, it's a poetic point of view. We're entertaining a logos, a certain logos. And what happens when we do that?

A whole other level of beauty and soul-making emerges, but also the pressure comes off because the tightness of identification makes it uncomfortable. When desire is seen as part of the divine or Buddha nature, the problem dissolves while the eros remains—unlike with anatta practice.

This is quite a sophisticated approach, but it exists as a possibility.

Regarding the question about how to navigate sexuality or relationship after the retreat—I'm not entirely sure what lies behind this inquiry. Perhaps it concerns a long-term relationship and the level of intimacy, with one partner feeling called to open to another dimension while uncertain if the other is interested. I couldn't possibly address this without understanding much more about the specific relationship and its possibilities.

Like all retreats, even mainstream dharma retreats, we must be careful about what we, in our enthusiasm, attempt to impose on others—particularly those close to us who may not be interested, ready, or wanting what we've discovered. If you suddenly start speaking Greek to them lustily, it may not be well received. They might wonder what you're even talking about.

This work, like any retreat experience, requires tremendous sensitivity and care—both for others and for yourself. You're going to be deeply sensitized, primed. Certain profound soul desires will awaken and ignite, and we're essentially saying: let yourself have that, let yourself open to it—it's part of who you are. Everyone else here seems to be allowing that. But then suddenly you return to the world where this isn't the shared agreement, isn't the prevailing view. You encounter the old structures again.

So we must truly care for our own openness, sensitivity, and vulnerability, as well as that of others. I'm sorry I can't offer more specific guidance without knowing more. There's always the opportunity to ask again or write if you'd like to explore this further.

Lauren, could you share your question about image-sharing?

Thank you, Lauren. Could everyone hear that? I think this is indeed important, and it feels like a natural

outflow of the richness of practice.

We've done some formal exercises in recent retreats where images were shared—not necessarily seeing the other as image in real time, but simply sharing images. Those of you who participated, or who might explore this through recordings, can sense how potent this is. We're touched by the poetry of someone else's image. Images can be infectious, shared. Often in interviews, someone shares an image and I find myself living that image right there, as if my perception of it is as valid as the person's original experience. Or it stimulates another image entirely.

If we had more time and capacity on this retreat, we would have explored more of this practice of working with another person, seeing each other as image in real time.

Two considerations arise here. First, if you're already with your partner and there's established intimacy, then you're working within that existing container. This avoids the complications that could arise if practicing with someone who's married to another or bound by agreements that don't include openness—where eros might fly around without appropriate boundaries. That's a significant challenge to navigate.

One reason I'm cautious about sharing some of this material is that I feel these teachings are so new and need safeguarding. Even if three people went out and practiced with great enthusiasm, crossing established boundaries, upsetting others, starting rumors—this could affect the entire paradigm. Guhyasamaja House might question whether to allow another Soul Making retreat.

I feel extraordinarily sensitive to the various ways this approach needs protection, especially at this nascent stage. Unlike the Buddha's time, or even when insight meditation arrived in the West in the 1970s, we now have the internet. Someone says something here, it appears online, and someone in California is already doing something questionable with it.

I feel both responsible and hopeful. In many ways, I feel dependent on and vulnerable to you all—not just because I might not be around much longer, but because we're all responsible for safeguarding this work together. It's so easy for teachings to become diluted or misconstrued.

and acted upon, either irrationally or without care, creating ripple effects that influence other people in this room who may have no idea what transpired. This is one of the reasons I'm somewhat cautious about these teachings.

I can't remember my other concern now—apologies, my mind has gone blank. Perhaps if there's time, we could record some specific teachings about this practice. I think it simply needs tremendous care. I'm sorry, I can't recall what else I wanted to say.

How does that sound, Lauren?

[Response: "Yeah."]

Perhaps at some point we can explore this conversation further. Let's see how things unfold. Did you want to add anything?

[Lauren's response about the richness and intensity of the practice]

Yes, there's quite a lot to say. The remarkable thing about this kind of practice is that it's abundantly rich—not just in terms of erotic charge, but profoundly rich in multiple dimensions. It's like turbo-charging the entire process, though this isn't always the case since sometimes there won't be that particular spark between people. But when it's present, it asks a tremendous amount of practitioners. It requires the capacity to handle great intensity, both within oneself and within the dyad.

[Questioner asks about Jung, Hillman, Nietzsche and whether soul-making dharma offers a smoother path]

This touches on the difficulties that meditators sometimes encounter, such as kundalini experiences or what Jack Kornfield describes as "dark night" phenomena. These are enormous topics that could easily fill hours of discussion, so I'll be necessarily brief.

Something struck me about Hillman's observation regarding Jung's early explorations. When Jung began his investigations, the Jungian tradition—perhaps less so nowadays, but certainly for many decades—used language describing the unconscious as this terrifying abyss of darkness populated by monsters and unknown threats that might emerge to devour you. This became almost a preconception, and as Julia asked yesterday, when you operate with such preconceptions, lo and behold, that's precisely what gets created.

Hillman, writing decades later with his characteristic sarcasm, pointed out how the unconscious had essentially become domesticated—something people simply journal about, no longer scary or overwhelming. So what's the truth here? It depends significantly on the conceptual framework we bring to the exploration.

Nietzsche presents an entirely different consideration, and I'm not certain he was truly engaged with what we're discussing anyway. Let's not venture into Nietzsche territory right now.

Regarding whether soul-making dharma offers a smoother or safer path, particularly concerning phenomena like kundalini experiences or "dark night" episodes—some of you may be unfamiliar with these terms. Jack Kornfield's "A Path with Heart" and similar books describe or borrow the term "Dark Night of the Soul" from St. John of the Cross, though he meant something completely different—utterly, utterly different.

The modern interpretation within Theravadan Buddhist circles has come to mean that when you practice insight meditation with great intensity and begin penetrating deeply, profoundly uncomfortable experiences arise. Disturbing and unpleasant phenomena begin manifesting, perhaps creating a sense of mental instability, physical illness, cycling endlessly through these difficult states. People have adopted

this borrowed term "dark night of the soul" from St. John of the Cross, who intended something entirely different. Similarly, kundalini experiences involve explosive energetic phenomena, resembling the thermonuclear dynamics I alluded to earlier.

I feel quite strongly about this issue. Looking back at my book on emptiness, I realize there was so much I thought would be obvious if stated subtly and gently, but clearly it wasn't obvious at all. I should have been much more direct and emphatic.

I believe these phenomena represent complete misunderstandings and mistakes. Why? Because everything arises through dependent origination. If I feel ill from practice, it's because of how I'm practicing. If I feel agitated, sense I'm losing sanity, or experience cycles of depression, it's because of how I'm practicing.

These phenomena—whether kundalini experiences or "dark night" episodes—tend to manifest when two particular factors are prioritized in insight meditation: the contemplation of rapid moment-to-moment impermanence combined with an extremely narrow focus of attention, attempting to atomize awareness as much as possible. So when there's pain in the knee, the instruction becomes...

How microscopic can I get into those sensations? And how fast can I see them change? And the more microscopic and the faster I can see it change, the better my practice and the, quote, deeper I'm going. And with that, there's a lot of intensity of effort encouraged.

Put those three things in a box. What do you get? A box of mad frogs. Not for everyone. It also depends on the psychophysical type.

If I think about my psychophysical makeup—look at me, I'm even thinner than I usually am—I'm thin, I'm kind of wiry and wired and sort of hyper alert. This is the wrong body and psyche type to do that kind of practice. You get thermonuclear frog parts all over the place. And it's almost like you can just wait for it to happen.

You put someone else in who their body type—it has words in Ayurveda, I can't remember what they are—but they're more kapha. They're more plump and more slow, more grounded. That kind of person can often, and also their mind is not so fast and intense, that kind of person can do that kind of practice all day. It's not a problem. It won't do anything to them. Partly it's to do with the psychophysical makeup.

But what's also happening there is it's prioritizing impermanence as the main one of the three characteristics. And it's seeing anatta, seeing not-self, through the approach of impermanence. There is no self because all I see in here is impermanent things. And there are other ways to do it—you can find it all in the book or in recordings.

Then the whole insight practice unfolds very, very differently. I'm saying it now—I think it's a little bit ridiculous, to be honest. A lot of people suffer a lot or get really proud that they're going round and round

in these cycles of misery as if it's some badge of accomplishment. And I'm really near to throwing up because it's really, really miserable.

So to me, there's all kinds of problems with that. But one of them, and probably in a way the most serious, is that the deep insight isn't there. One's just seeing impermanence and things are exploding or disappearing or going nuts or energies flying all over, whatever it is. But where's the insight into dependent origination? Where's the insight into deep emptiness? One has seen impermanence, impermanence, impermanence. It's not a deep insight. It's not the level of insight that I think is more beautiful, more mystical, more transformative.

When we come to our practice—and sorry, that sounds opinionated. I'm partly in response to, as I said, trying to say things so subtly and gently that it seemed like no one saw that they were there.

When we do this, we're emphasizing there's a lot of softness. Even when we say open the energy body, put the energy body in relationship with something, it's a lot softer than kind of burrowing my attention into some microscopic point and then just holding it there. So the whole inclusion of the heart and the sensitivity and this kind of encouragement to modulate and attune the attention—all this is soft and subtle and open. So that the path deepens in soft, subtle, and open ways for the most part, and it doesn't need to be all these explosions and difficulties and crazy, crazy-making stuff.

Is it safer? Heavens, why don't I just stop now while you're hanging around? Say yes.

Now, here's a question that went with a long question about the loving and being loved. Is it okay for the person if I read the longer note? How are they going to respond to that? Is it a yes? Yes, okay. So here's a longer version of it.

I partly don't know the answer to the main question, so that's actually interesting in itself. But it was such a beautiful image, and I just thought to share it. And I can answer some of it, if that helps.

"Late in the retreat, I know, so I understand if you cannot answer my questions. I feel moved to share an image anyway and trust that in its sharing, something will reveal itself. A logos of keeping what is sacred, safe and protected inside will be stretched by sharing this one.

"After the sharing last night, my energy body contracted in contact with the thought of Catherine and all the whispering angels' grief. This morning, an image arose of my sister, I think in part response to this, which touched me deeply..."

My sister is passionate, beautiful, with a soul that naturally loves soul-making. She is imaginative, highly sensitive—perhaps too sensitive and passionate for this world at this time. Since age eighteen, she has suffered from schizophrenia and is now completely housebound. The outside world is simply too impactful for her.

The image that arose: my sister lies curled on the floor of her flat. She is naked. Her features are not

distinct, yet I know it is her. What strikes me most is the room itself—tall ceilings, a space that feels holy, sacred, like a chapel. The light is dim, yet there is luminosity. The colors are muted hues of brown.

Her body is twisted and contorted, indicating immense pain. But there is a sense that she is assenting to this pain, choosing to remain in this room, taking on the suffering of other souls who cannot or will not. Around her lies a chaotic collection of eclectic objects—crisp packets, popped balloons, rubbish, trinkets. I sense a bird building a nest around her, offering these objects to her. The bird is not visible in the image, just a vague sensing.

You see how much detail emerges here? You get the sense of an image, an aspect of an image, but it's not necessarily visual. It's all part of the imaginal. Don't get hung up on the visuals. The antennae are up, attuned to what's resonant. There's a bird, but I can't see the bird. I sense it, I intuit it. How do I know? I don't know how I know. It doesn't matter. What matters is the feeling of it and the sense of soul-making.

This image became like a holy altar. My energy body filled out fully, and inwardly I bowed. My heart center opened bright despite being moved to tears. Bearing witness to her suffering feels beautiful, despite—or even because of—the pain.

This image immediately opened my perception of the previous night and of all fellow retreatants as angels bearing their own particular joys and pains. The conception of individual suffering—theirs and my own, and what I and all of us have been asked to hold in this lifetime—expanded.

Already it's doing something to the heart, to the soul-sense, to perception. This is a new image, almost a snapshot in time, yet with a sense of the eternal.

My question is: where in this is the eros? Is it between me and the image, the holy altar? Or is there something in the bird's tendings and offerings that do not ease the pain and yet...? Or is the eros toward the poignant beauty in the image?

I would say all three. There is eros between the meditator and the image, toward the holy altar of this scene, toward its poignant beauty. But also within the characters of the image, there is eros. Most of the nodes are alight within this image.

But love and being loved? With a human or animal image, I understand this, but with a snapshot image—who is being loved? I feel love, but I'm sure I will figure it out if I stay longer.

I don't know the answer to that. There's definitely love in the image, and maybe you don't need to figure out where exactly the love is. It's so full of beauty, so much soul being touched. You can trust that. We don't have to think, "This is all going swimmingly, but there's just that one node," and then worry about it. It's working. Don't worry about it.

Maybe we'll receive some expansion of the teachings here that we haven't thought about yet. It's quite possible. As you say, you feel love there—there's somehow love present. There's love for your sister, so

there's love that way. There's some portion of it already present, certainly between the characters in the image.

I don't know the answer actually, and I find that interesting. It may well be that as you hang out with this image, it becomes clear. I just wouldn't lean too much on that question, at the risk of disturbing the natural soul-making fermentation that's happening there.

Do you want to say more? It's beautiful.

It's ten to six. There are actually only a couple more questions. One asks: "What would you have called Eros Psyche Logos instead? Please expand a lot."

The notion that there might be a single word to replace these terms brings up something interesting. Actually, I'm not sure what I would have called them instead. The only issue I have with those words—I know some people resist the Greek terminology—but in a way, the Greek serves us well precisely because these terms are, to a certain extent, unfamiliar. This unfamiliarity prompts the question: "What is that? What do you mean when you say that?"

If we used words like "love" or even "desire," "passion," or "lust," they carry such common usage that we tend to think we already know what they mean, what their range encompasses. Giving these movements of soul slightly unusual names helps support that sense of inquiry—what is that? I don't quite know what it is yet.

I truly have no idea what I would have called them in retrospect. The only reason I sometimes wonder about using different terminology is what I mentioned the other day: these words appear in many different practices, settings, and traditions these days. As much as I understand about them, it's clear that we also mean something different by them. It's very easy, when using the same words, to assume the same meaning is intended.

This is less true with logos. Logos was once widely used in Western culture—it opens St. John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the logos," though it gets translated as "the word." That term carried rich meanings from Platonism and other traditions, but it's fallen out of common usage. The only place I encounter it now is in the Ridwan teachings, where they speak of "the logos of the teachings"—meaning the conceptual framework and paradigm of the practice.

So I'm less uncomfortable with logos simply because it's rarer and therefore less likely to be automatically categorized with what we might have encountered elsewhere. As for eros and psyche, I don't know—perhaps we could invent entirely new words, but I'm not certain it matters that much.

Regarding the lovely image of the sister, I don't think the question relates to the snapshot quality. That's simply a particular temporal style the image took. Some images appear as snapshots, while others unfold as narratives—like what Karen shared, where an image carried an entire narrative background. I don't

believe this temporal quality relates to the question of love and being loved.

There's another question I didn't fully grasp yesterday, though the person asked again today. Let me read it, and perhaps you can help clarify: "To be willing to experience fully the grief of extinction of life on earth, of humans, of ancestors, and all the blessing of their particular lives or lines. To be willing to fully accept this also means to stay connected deeply to everyone else and their grief, rather than freedom from suffering. Isn't this the Bodhisattva path? I'm also referring here to the four-part talk you gave about awakening, asking what do you want."

Could you expand a little? I'm not sure I understand the question completely.

"There's something about when I've been in a very good place with positivity, I sometimes turn toward the suffering of the world. The myth of the Bodhisattva, as I understand it, is to not pursue full awakening—not seek freedom from suffering—in order to remain with the plane of the world, almost in solidarity with it, or in connection with it. What you described sounds similar to the Bodhisattva myth. When you asked 'what do you want,' what's important to me is staying in contact with myself. My sense was that's what you were doing."

Thank you, Ron. I appreciate that clarification.

I don't remember exactly what I meant in those talks, I'm afraid. But I do think one significant development has occurred since the Buddha gave his teachings. However some people might try to extract certain elements from the Pali Canon, the Buddhist teachings remain deeply embedded in a worldview that assumes rebirth—the possibility of being reborn according to your karma, suffering repeatedly until you awaken and escape that wheel of rebirth.

If we take that out, and a lot of people no longer believe in such a cosmology, then we're left with fundamental questions: What does awakening actually mean? When you remove this ending of rebirth as the ultimate goal, what you get is a multitude of different interpretations.

I feel it's quite important to be on a path that feels authentic. You need to be on a path—I need to be on a path—that feels authentic to me, that makes sense, that I can really get behind in terms of what I'm trying to do and what the goal is. So I don't know what I meant in that previous talk; it was probably within a certain context, and I don't want to hazard a guess right now.

But this principle remains: What do you want? If your sense is that this is what you want from your life—to be in solidarity, not removed, to be available, to be in service to the world and the planet and its suffering—then you should trust that. The question becomes: How can I support that? What do I need? How do I make this a sustainable path and a beautiful path?

Historically, even the notion of the bodhisattva has undergone significant changes across different cultures and over time, particularly now in the West. If you went back and read Shantideva or some of the

original teachings on the bodhisattva path, he speaks of wanting to sacrifice himself for all beings. He expresses this through very florid poetry of renunciation and self-sacrifice. Then you turn the page to the next chapter, and he's saying, "Right, let's get away from all these people and find a solitary place where I can meditate and become awakened, where there's no one around and I'm not disturbed by anyone."

This idea was wrapped up in what it means to be a Buddha. In the Mahayana understanding, a Buddha is someone who—and this is really complicated—is somehow a transcendent being but has emanations here on Earth. Whether they're actually suffering or not becomes a whole question in itself.

Somewhere along the way, the bodhisattva ideal came to mean someone who would postpone their awakening—though this didn't originally mean that. More recently in the West, it's come to mean simply someone who sees their path as much about service as about meditation, or even more about service than meditation. That's what they want to do—they want to be in the marketplace, in the thick of things, in the refugee camps, or out on the pavement with Extinction Rebellion. And that's their path. There is a certain freedom in that—there can be.

So the word means something different now. But I think the more important thing is this: because the whole metaphysic is completely up for grabs these days, I would give the question back to each of us.

What do you really want? You don't know when you're going to die. You don't know how long you have. You don't know how long you're going to have your faculties and your energy. What do I want? Can I let that go deep and burn deep and stay steady with that, and have it translate into my life and make it a priority? That will be different from person to person.

We live in this predicament of postmodernity where there's no agreed-upon metaphysics. So you're free, basically. Now that it's not universally agreed that the end of rebirth is what awakening—full awakening, arahantship—looks like, the question becomes: What do you make of it? What do you want? What does it mean to you? What do you most deeply want for your life?

So I would give it back that way.

Just one very brief thing within that framework. You're going to notice—I noticed some years ago, this was more than twenty years ago, maybe around twenty years ago—I had been focusing a lot on jhana practice and really getting into it, making some headway and feeling super excited about that. I had been on retreat and was back home in my life rhythm, practicing. I would notice that on the days when the samadhi was really good, my heart didn't feel as tender and open as it did on other days. Sometimes when my heart was tender, those were the days when the samadhi wasn't so available—when the jhanic samadhi wasn't so accessible.

That really struck me. It's similar to what you're saying. In a way, we'd like to think there's this state of mind where you can just access everything and have it all right there, where everything's available and perfectly harmonious. I'm not sure that's how it works. It might be more fluid than that.

It's interesting to me that when the Buddha talks about right intention—the second factor of the Eightfold Path—he sometimes puts things in the negative.

He describes right intention using negatives - an intention for non-harming, an intention for non-cruelty. To me, this always implied the possibility that if I'm right there in the fourth jhana, I'm not actively doing metta. I'm not thinking about it. I'm not even that sensitive. But I'm in a state of non-harming and non-cruelty. It's an absence.

So I wonder whether he put things in the negative because he realized you can't be in any one state that's going to have all of that. What we want is a life that has access to these states - that they're never too far away, that you can fluidly move between them. If you're an activist, you need some deep resources. You need some recharging, some rest. And that samadhi, that experience of just being with yourself, is so helpful when you then go out and meet the suffering in the world, or when you want to do something courageous that takes a lot of energy and work. So the going back and forth becomes really skillful.

In a larger context, on a longer time frame, I look at my life and feel very called to serve in different ways. But I've also obviously been very called to explore meditative depths and that whole dimension. I've done long retreats. At one point I spent most of a three-year period on retreat. Even at the time, amidst all the joy and seclusion, barely speaking to anyone, it was always clear to me that this was a portion of a journey in the service of something that wasn't just about getting to feel good.

Some people have figured out a life that's kind of balanced, just balancing these things as they go along. If I look at my life - and I'm not saying there's a right or wrong, just different styles - I can see rhythms where it's much more contemplative and rhythms where it's actually a little bonkers, where I'm way too busy, but I'm in the flow of service or whatever. So I look more at that balance.

But anyway, if you're dedicated to serving and caring and compassion, to embodying and expressing that, you're going to need to take care of yourself as a minimum. So those periods when you feel a little less in touch - it's okay. When you're fast asleep, no one would say you shouldn't fall asleep. You need to rest. Things get turned off. The world gets turned off when you're asleep. We need that.

I would give you back the question: What is your vision of what's beautiful, what's noble, what calls you? What is the life that you feel, if you were on your deathbed looking back with a clear mind, you would feel you don't have regrets? Not that you achieved everything you wanted to achieve, but at least you went for it. That's important. And only you can answer that. I can't answer that for you. The Buddha can't answer it.

So that feels really important to me - to know that, to be clear about it, to stay close to it, to stay true to it, to live that with passion.

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