Preliminaries, Regarding Voice, Movement, and Gesture (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:21:50

I'm not quite sure what will be possible today, but I would like to introduce the fourth exercise, which could be seen as two exercises, as I'll explain when I get to it. I'd like to introduce that, and maybe the fifth one.

But before even introducing the fourth, I just thought I'd spend a little time opening up and considering some of the words and vocabulary we've been using. By now these words and terms are quite familiar to many of you who are familiar with soul-making dharma teachings, particularly as they inform and inflect and open up our sense of human being and our human person and personhood—what it is to be a person.

A few weeks ago, I was feeling really quite pressured and thrown off centre, unbalanced, pressured, flattened. There were many things that seemed like they needed deciding at the time—practical things in relation to preparing for death, my will, the future of the teachings, teacher training, and all kinds of things. Many things that seemed to need figuring out and arranging before my death. Within that, there seemed to be lots of different people's requests and opinions and voices. It was to do with those kinds of things, particularly in relation to the teachings and the future of the teachings and teachers.

At some point I realized that I'm really not feeling okay with all this. It's all gone a bit crazy. The language that came to me, the language that seemed very natural at that point to describe what was missing for myself—and that language was also very insightful—came very naturally. It was not the language of "I've lost my centre" or "I'm uncentred" or "I need to get centred, I need to regain my centre, or centre myself." That wasn't the language that came. I would understand, of course, that in those kinds of situations, when feeling flustered and pulled in so many directions with so many decisions, that would very easily be a way that someone in our contemporary society might describe to themselves what has happened and then what needs to happen.

But the words that came, the description that came organically, naturally, spontaneously—and that contained the insight, the seeds of insight for what I needed to do to redress the situation—was that I've lost my connection with the angels. I've lost my connection with the daimon. I need to somehow reconnect, find that connection again with the angel, with the daimon, with the image.

As I said, the insight was there. In the description of the problem was the insight of the direction needed for a solution—where I needed to orient, what I needed to do, how I needed to look, how I needed to relate and think about things. And that was exactly what did indeed help: finding again these connections with

the angels in relation to all this, all that was difficult, and what was at the middle, the pith of the difficulty in relation to the teachings. Most of it centered around the teachings and the future of the teachings. Finding again my connection with the angels in my relationship with them in relation to the teachings.

That's what I'd got lost. I was trying to figure out, solve, find answers to get through many decisions and things that needed to be made. It all felt quite pressured. But I had lost that connection. I'd gone into a much more one-dimensional mode of understanding and relating to all that set of issues and decisions and problems and conundrum. It was all one-dimensional. The angel wasn't there. I wasn't in relationship with the angel with all of that.

So when a person today uses language like "I've lost my centre, need to get centred or centre myself or find my centre, regain my centre," what does that word tend to imply? What's wrapped up in that kind of notion, in that kind of vocabulary? Particularly, what does it tend to imply about the human being and about the self and about the person? What's the logos, the conceptual framework of human being, self, person, that is implicitly tied in with a notion such as centering?

There are probably quite a few possibilities—it's not set in stone, and it may vary—but consider a few of them. For instance, interiority is one of them. Generally, not necessarily, but generally, the centre of gravity, my centre of gravity, and therefore my sense of balance, my point of balance, is conceived usually as somehow within me. Here one's feeling perhaps pulled out, so to speak, to all these diverse distractions or pulls or demands or questions or whatever it is. And the center of gravity, the still point, the balance point, is conceived of as within, usually. So there's a kind of interiority there that's part of the conceptual framework of the human being that goes with words like centering and notions like centering.

Secondly, there's perhaps a notion of circumscription of the human being, of the self. Like, where do I end? I end here, the world starts there, or you start there, or whatever it is. So when we talk about a center, it's about a center of something. Usually it's a center of a circle, a center of a geometrical structure, or whatever it is. Center of a limited space, a limited area. Center of a country, whatever. So there's a delimited space, a circumscribed space. Where I end, that's my boundary, that's my border. That notion also seems wrapped up subtly, implicitly with the notion of centering.

Now, I could still have a circumscribed notion of where I end. That could still be involved when I use the language and idea of connection with the daimon, connection with the angel. But what I mean by that connection with the angels, what I would like to emphasize right now by that refinding of connection with the angels, is more an expanded notion or sense of a human being. As we talked about in the talk on death and dying in Psyche's Orchard, rather than "this area is me," we have a sense of the larger human being as both image and analogue.

So there are a couple of parts to that. The first part has to do with circumscription. The second part has to do with singularity. But just to stay with circumscription for now. Image and analogue. I, in my life to the best of my ability, more or less at different times, am the analogue of that image, of that angel. And where

then do I end? If I have this more expanded notion of self, I am actually this whole—"system" is too technical a word—but this whole gestalt, this whole constellation of image and analogue, maybe images and analogues, and that's all me, then where do I end in that? Where is my circumscription in that, exactly?

And anyway, the image, because the element's the imaginal, the angel, the image—where does the image end? Because that's going to be unfathomable and have unfathomable beyonds. Where do I draw the line then of self there? Of my human being? And so where then exactly is the center of it? If I can't draw the line of the edge of the circle or whatever, I don't know where to place the center. I cannot say the center is here or there.

So that's another aspect: interiority, circumscription, but also, as I mentioned, singularity. Sometimes, usually with this notion of centering, there's the sense of the singularity of self. I need to find my center. I, as a singular self, need to have recourse to myself, find my resource in myself, in my center. And the sense then is the self as singular.

Now, a person in contemporary society could say, "I feel terrible, I feel really pressured," and reach out to friends and colleagues or whatever it is, reaching out socially, horizontally, to the horizontal sense of society and friends. But one could also reach out more plurally, not so much just to the singular self, not only reaching out horizontally to the flatly conceived society of others in which I exist, but rather conceiving of the self as a plurality.

Just the fact of conceiving of the human being, conceiving of the human person—as described and as I tried to really emphasize in that talk on death and dying—conceiving of the human person actually phenomenologically: when we have a deep sense both of ourselves and of another, and when another has a deep sense of ourselves, that the experience is not necessarily completely singular. And I don't mean it's fragmented in the way sometimes anatta gets taught. But I mean it's plural, or rather not simply singular, in the way that we are both image and analogue, or images and analogues. Several angels, perhaps, and servant to, analogue to that plurality even of angels.

So, quite different notions there. Interiority, circumscription and borders and singularity are not the default mode of sense of the human being, the human person. And they weren't in that case, and as I find more and more these days when things are difficult, when there's challenge in different ways, that the sense—and I mean that word in its double meaning, the sense, the actual perception and the idea of my human being or another human being—is more along the lines of this image and analogue, having angelic dimensions which are refracted into the human life, more or less, at different times, with a duty to that. There's a kind of doubleness there.

So it's also not—and we think about centering, that word centering—taking a fourth aspect or fourth notion that might be wrapped up in it: that one then encounters one's self, or one's true self, or one's core, at the center. Introspecting, one then finds oneself at the center. And, you know, maybe not Dharma 101,

but pretty soon in the Dharma, you're going to encounter the idea—and it's not just particular to Buddha Dharma—that when I look for the self, I can't find it, actually.

So we're not talking about centering as needing to encounter the self at our center. It could be that what we're expecting at the center is a kind of infinite depth of still nothingness—of stillness and nothingness, which is a wonderful sense. One can look inside and discover different kinds of nothingness, different kinds of stillness, but that infinite depth of stillness and nothingness is what one perhaps encounters at the center.

In the Christian tradition of the twentieth century, there was a re-stimulation, a re-vivification of some contemplative practices in the Catholic tradition—centering prayer. Originally it meant just that: at the center is this still nothingness beyond any image of God, beyond any word or directive—just a kind of emptiness. This is tied up with the Via Negativa, the apophatic tradition. Looking deep inside myself, I encounter nothing, and that nothingness is the same—the depth of that nothingness is the same as the depth of the nothingness of God.

This is wonderful, and this is a real mystical resource. But it still means something quite different if I'm not gravitating toward that notion and movement of centering and needing centering. It's not that I'm expecting to encounter myself at the center, nor am I hoping for an experience of still nothingness at the center, which may of course be very helpful at different times. Rather, there's a need to reconnect with the angels.

The angel, the image, is other and self. It's both and neither. It's me and not me, and it's not me and not not me. This angel, in the mystery of their being, the mystery of this angelic constellation, this angelic relationship—this angel is both other and self, but it's the theophany. It's a face of the divine. It's an expression of the divine, which is different than an emptiness. Emptiness is not a theophany. Emptiness is usually construed as an essence—a transcendent essence beyond all attributes. A theophany is a face, a presentation of what we could say are attributes, or is a being in itself, a person in itself.

So rather than encountering myself at the center, rather than encountering a deep well of still nothness—wonderful as that might be—actually, not at the center, but in relationship with a theophany. Not at the center of anything, but in relationship with. Where exactly is that? In space.

These are quite different notions, and some of this will be familiar to different degrees if you're familiar with soul-making dharma—some of the ways we use these words, and really what I'm pointing to is where the words point to, the direction of possibility in which these words and terms point. As opposed to the words themselves defining this or that, circumscribing and delimiting. More to get a sense that the words are directions—directions of soul possibility, directions of soul experience and soul conception.

Let us linger on this word "angel" a little bit. We've used it quite a lot over recent years, but I want to say a few more things about it. Be careful, for instance, of a limiting idea that the angel or an angel or an image

kind of shows up out of the blue and will help you with something, or give you an idea or creative impulse—whatever it is, a seed or something. It might. It might show up out of the blue.

We've talked about—and I can't remember when—the phrase "soul-making poise." In other words, taking care of the stance, the poise of one's being, one's energy body, one's attention, one's receptivity, one's humility, and all of that. In that poise, in the soul-making poise, there's a sort of opening of the space, priming and preparing the space—thinking now of parallels with the Jewish tradition of preparing for the Sabbath. The Sabbath is the reception of the Shekhinah, the reception of the Sabbath angel who visits, who comes on that evening, on that day. The human being's job is partly to prepare—to make the space and the time beautiful, ready, prepared, holy, special, hospitable.

So it may well be that with an attitude of humility, we learn to take care with that soul-making poise. In that way, we are in a kind of humbly waiting and primed or prepared space. Our being becomes that space—a space of hospitality for the angels. They may visit then, sort of out of the blue, and with that there may be a gift. We may be helped with this or that in our lives, given something, given an idea, given creative seeds, whatever.

But be careful of that as an idea that might limit our sense of angels and what they are and how they arise and what our relationship with them is. Because it's often the case—and this is something I've shared before—it's often the case that one has already started something. Perhaps it's a creative project or a big piece of work, an idea. Perhaps it feels like a lot. It feels like a stretch or a challenge.

And the angel comes then. Then, and the coming of the angel might be the actual work itself, or this project itself becoming imaginal. It becomes angelic.

So it might be there's me, and there's this project, and there's this third character called the angel that's going to help me in my relationship with the project. But it might also be that the work itself, or the idea that's beginning to take shape, that I'm grappling with, that I'm kind of gestating, or is wanting to come through—whatever it is, or this big project that I need to do—that it becomes angel. It becomes angelic. It becomes imaginal person, with autonomy, with desire, its own eros, its own desire.

So, careful again of not delimiting too tightly what we mean by angel. We have to delimit it somewhat—we're not just open for any old ideas about angels and all that business. As I said, the words, the concepts are pointing us in a direction, pointing us along a road, but that road is infinite. It has boundaries. It's not like anything can fall under the scope of that road and we can just call anything angel, which is, you know, in some circles fairly common—just using that word too easily, whether it's used completely unspiritually, just as a kind of term of endearment, or in certain spiritual New Age circles or whatever. We're not using it in those ways.

So maybe that's a good analogy. It's like we're pointing in a certain direction, and we can just keep travelling in that direction. And the road changes. The road develops. The terrain around the road

develops as you walk down that road.

But another way of saying this is an angel is also, like everything, a dependent arising. So in what I was just talking about, it's almost like—or we could say in the first instance—it's dependent on the poise of soul-making. The visitation of the Shekhinah on Shabbat is dependent on the reverence and humility and the eros of the soul and the love of the soul for the Shekhinah and for the Divine. And expressing that by the way it takes care of creating the space for the Sabbath, in terms of body and house and setting and environment. Of course, all this applies in so many ways to soul-making and imaginal work and ritual and all that.

But an angel is a dependent arising also in possibly another sense, which is that something is already there. It's already stretching me. And then the angel visits in response to that stretch, in response to that task that I'm given, in response to that work that I have to do. And it might be that one possibility within that is that the work itself, the task itself becomes angel. It becomes imaginal, angelic.

So I've touched on this before, actually quite a few times—this question of someone saying, "I don't get any images," and sometimes people are okay with that, but sometimes it's like people get a little bit frustrated or wonder why don't I get images? Or they might say, using slightly different language, having heard other language being used, they might say, "Why don't the angels seem to come to me? Why don't they seem to come to other people? Or I hear this person or that person talk about the angels coming or the angel coming or whatever. Why don't they seem to come to me?"

Or it might be voiced as, "The angels, the gods, they don't seem to want anything from me. I hear this person or that person talk, and I hear them talk about the demand of the angel, the demand of the imaginal, or the duty, or this or that. But they don't seem to come to me, or they don't seem to want anything from me."

So this whole constellation of ideas and perceptions and things that people might think—I've talked about quite a lot over the years. Why don't I get images and what do we actually mean by image? And what are the kinds of preparations, poises of soul, but also relationships with one's emotions and energy body and all kinds of other factors that support the generation, the arising, the creation, discovery of images, angels, etc. So there are lots of reasons which I've elaborated elsewhere.

One I've touched on, I just want to touch on again, and that actually has to do with desire and need—maybe two aspects. Sometimes someone says, "Why don't I get images?" Well, I don't know. Other reasons that I've elaborated elsewhere aside—so there may well be, actually for many people, this isn't a relevant reason, what I'm about to say. Maybe there are just other things there, not relating in the right way to their emotions, or whatever it is. But sometimes it's like, actually, if you really, really deeply wanted images, they would come. You would have images. Images would visit you. They would arise. If you really deeply wanted them.

So something sometimes, for some people, the issue is one of desire. A person who wonders, "Why don't I get images, or they seem to get more—this person seems to get more than I do"—it may be that actually it's not something we really deeply want, and so they don't necessarily arise. Maybe, sometimes for some people, this actually is the relevant factor.

Or—and maybe they're related—it might be that for some people at some time, again this is not going to be relevant to some people, or in some instances it won't be relevant, but it may be: why don't the angels seem to come to me? Why don't the gods, the angels seem to want anything from me? It may be that you and I and the imaginal figures, the angels, don't need each other. They don't need me and I don't need them. They don't need you and you don't need them.

Because there's nothing in the way a person is living and the choices that a person is making that needs the help or presence of the angels, of the imaginal figures. There's nothing really on the line, so to speak. There isn't really a soul stretch. We touched on this before, if you remember—I can't remember where. There isn't really—they're not living and choosing in their life in ways that really stretch their soul or that open them to soul risks, if we might use that phrase. There's nothing really on the line.

They might be stretched in all kinds of ways, might be very busy, might be stretched doing something very helpful in the world, whatever—but it's not actually a soul stretch. There's no real risk there. And maybe it's that the angels, the imaginal figures, the daimons, don't need and won't choose someone who is not willing to stretch. Stretch themselves, stretch their lives, stretch their soul. So this is also a factor to consider. It won't be relevant in a lot of instances, but sometimes it is important to realize this is actually what's happening, and this is a reason why something is not happening.

It may also be that the—and again, this will be even only perhaps some instances of the instances that I've just talked about where that is the case—it may be that the kind of stretch needed to invite or call forth the angel, the angels, the kind of stretch to which they respond, maybe it needs to be one which involves or must involve a sense of antinomy. Remember that word from the ethics talks, from Sila and Soul and the Image of Ethics.

Antinomy is deeply felt in the soul. Having to choose, faced with that antinomy—the branches, the roads of their divergent pulls and callings felt sharply, deeply, genuinely in the soul. One is almost crucified, pulled this way and that, by two opposing values, by the love of and the duty to antinomical values. And it may be that that kind of stretch, that kind of difficulty, is the kind of stretch that sometimes—or maybe, I don't know, maybe it's in every case—is needed. That's part of what it means to be stretched. Maybe that's just a certain kind of stretch. I'm not sure.

So all these are things to ponder. And of course, some people—like I said earlier—well, it might not actually bother me that much that this sense of angels that I hear people talking about, or images, don't come to me. If it doesn't, okay, leave it. But if it actually does, then these are things that you might want to include in your inquiry and self-questioning.

Just briefly, I heard someone saying something about Soulmaking Dharma, and basically one of the pieces was—well, I'm sure it's all really great, but I'm very much paraphrasing—"I don't really relate to the word soul." This was from a person who'd been practicing Dharma a long, long time, who'd been teaching for decades and decades. Which is probably quite a common reaction, I imagine. Not really relating to that word soul at all.

Oftentimes, it's the "making" that people don't relate to. The word making—of course, if you understand the whole track of exploration of ways of looking and fabrication, fabrication is just another word for making, and how that deepens and how it opens out and the understanding it opens out—then the word making is almost an indispensable word in Soulmaking. But for a lot of people it's very puzzling because you'd usually put a kind of—you'd usually think of the word soul or have a sense of soul, use that in a very rarefied way. It wouldn't be something that we make; it would be something that is, or we discover, or that just is a level of being, or whatever.

Anyway, this person, it was the word soul, and I thought about that and know them a little, and said, "Well, it's interesting—do you really relate, you know, you've been involved in Buddhism for thirty, forty years, whatever it is—do you really relate to the word aggregate, khandha, skandha in Sanskrit? Or put the question in the past tense: did you really relate to that word when you first heard it, or the words emptiness or anattā, no-self, those kinds of words and concepts?"

Probably not. But what's happened—it might be sometimes with words like emptiness, you know, sort of a predisposition that many people, many Dharma folk have, to that kind of intuition, if you like, of that insight and that whole direction, and that whole teaching even before one's even encountered the teaching. But a word like aggregate—it's hard to think that one would really relate to that immediately when one hears it. Might be, but probably not.

What has probably happened instead is one has been trained and trained oneself to use words like aggregate as skillful and helpful concepts, and then perhaps even as ways of looking. One has been trained in the use of a word like aggregate or a concept like aggregate, trained to use them and think of them in skillful and helpful ways. And they're not ultimate truths—this is something I've said many times. Five aggregates is not at all an obvious way of dividing up a human being. It's hardly, I would suspect, a way of thinking about self that one would have arrived at by oneself if one wasn't actually handed this teaching: five aggregates, and this is what they are, and—

It was handed to us by someone in a position of authority, with the authority of 2,500 years of Buddhist tradition, and then we trained ourselves in those words.

So just the fact that one doesn't really relate to a word that one is not familiar with means nothing much at all. Couldn't the word "soul" be similarly unfamiliar at first, but eventually, with practice and understanding, actually become—like the word "aggregate"—very fruitful? And in fact, couldn't the word "soul," the concept of soul, be something that contributes to and supports the reduction of particular sorts

of suffering, just as the concept of aggregates does?

That's the function of the word "aggregate." It's not an ultimate truth. What the teachings of the aggregates do, or are supposed to do, or are designed to do, is just that—they're a group of concepts in the service of reducing suffering. It's not an ultimate truth. And couldn't "soul" be something similar? Unfamiliar at first, but with training, with practice, as understanding grows, it becomes very fruitful as a term of vocabulary and a concept—fruitful in many ways, but in one particular way: reducing certain kinds of suffering.

For example, the word "aggregate" will not on its own authentically and finally reduce the suffering of soullessness. Again, if we open up the question: what does that first noble truth mean? What kinds of suffering are there? And therefore, what does the third noble truth mean—ending suffering?

We could say these days there is the suffering of soullessness in our society, in our culture. The suffering of meaninglessness. We could bundle it all together as the suffering of soullessness. It's also to do with lack of beauty and aesthetics, lack of depth, refusal of dimensionality—all kinds of things. But the word "aggregate" on its own will not finally, fully, and authentically reduce that kind of suffering. In fact, it might even support it. The suffering of soullessness may be worsened by the teachings on the aggregates if I'm not careful how I pick them up and when I put them down.

We could choose other words as well, even words from our contemporary culture, not from Buddhist culture, like "trauma." It's an idea, and actually it's a whole conceptual framework. When we speak psychologically and draw on that word, we're actually invoking "trauma" and implying a whole conceptual framework of psychology there. I don't really relate to that. In other times, other cultures, other periods of history, it would have been quite a bizarre notion—or even just the broader notion that early parenting experiences shape psychology, or are a dominant factor in shaping later psychology.

Again, there's a whole conceptual framework—actually there are many conceptual frameworks, many alternate frameworks which overlap—that we're invoking when we use words that point to these ideas. They could be really, really helpful, but we may not relate to them at first. They may be very useful, these words borrowed from psychology and these psychological concepts and notions.

Even when we use the word "brain"—certainly in the Buddha's time, they were aware there was an organ in the head. They had their word for it; I've forgotten what the Pali is. They had looked at corpses and dissected them. But the way we use the word "brain" now, or the way many people in our culture use it—as synonymous with mind—might not be, or definitely was not at all, how the Buddha meant it. The Buddha didn't see mind as something that was necessarily primarily physical, or certainly not completely physical.

So there are lots of words and concepts. At this time in history, in culture, or at this time in my evolution and my practice and my journey, I don't really relate to this word. So what? It doesn't mean that it cannot then become, with training, a very useful, very fruitful, very freeing idea, word, term of vocabulary, and

concept.

Going back to that word "aggregates"—even if it's just picked up as a notion without much skill in using it as a way of looking in terms of anattā, it still functions to fabricate less. As a term of vocabulary, it fabricates less suffering; it certainly fabricates less self-sense. It dissects and undercuts self-construction, self-fabrication. It might do that at different levels, depending on how much skill one has in actually practicing with that notion.

But as a term, what it does is move in the direction of less fabrication of suffering and of self—of some sufferings and of some levels of self. But in so doing, in its movement towards fabricating less self, at the same time, the other side of the coin is that it doesn't honor and respect and keep in focus the person. The person as someone in relationship, in meaningful relationship—that gets lost.

The minute we start emphasizing talk of the aggregates and a view of the aggregates, we simultaneously lose sight of, lose sense of, the richness and multidimensionality of personhood and the relationality of personhood. Again, I'm going back to that talk—I'm pretty sure it was one on death and dying—where we're thinking: what could we use this word "person" to mean when we're talking about a human subject, a human being that's more than just a subject because they're in meaningful relationship? They're more than just self. They become a person if we really want to honor and respect and keep in our sense, in our senses, and keep making sense of the personhood of a person.

Looking at these divergent directions or modes - the notion of the aggregates versus the notion of soul - we find something fascinating in the later Vajrayana teachings. There, we discover the possibility of seeing the aggregates, the five aggregates, as divine, as holy. But even then, we actually lose the personhood of the person. It dimensionalizes in a different way.

Each aggregate, depending on different tantras, becomes associated with a different divinity, a different Buddha or Buddha's consort or dakini. So there's a wonderful kind of dimensionalizing and divinizing that can emerge through that approach, but it still misses the person - this beautiful range of practices that still misses the person.

The term "aggregates" and the term "soul" almost instigate mutually exclusive opposite movements. Almost. So we can talk about soul, talk about angels, talk about all this, but in dyadic practice, in soul-making practice, and even in some of these exercises, all this that we're pointing to now - when we talk about these different words and all the different shades and meanings and scopes and dimensions of what these words mean, what they point away from, where they point towards, and what they open up - all this emerges naturally, I would say, through the process of sensing the soul.

You've probably experienced it if you've done dyad practice: at certain points, the question arises - who am I in relationship to here? Who is this other, or in triad work, who are these others? Sometimes when we've been leading that on retreat, you'll hear on the recording how we stimulate a shift in the sense

towards sensing the soul, towards sensing the other as angel, others as angel, just by asking the question. When there is soulfulness, when there's soulfulness in the field, and then asking that question: who are these others? Who is this now that I'm beholding?

Just asking the question in a field of soulfulness can stimulate a further opening of the sensing of the soul. We begin to perceive other as angel. Other times we might deliberately suggest: can you see them now as angels? Or we deliberately start speaking of these others as angels, or a person makes that deliberate shift in their sensing - like deliberately calling up an image, deliberately deciding to sense, see other as angel.

But all these words - angel, soul, image - they imply an unfathomability. They also imply, going back to something I said earlier today, a kind of neither simple singularity nor simple doubleness. If I'm seeing this person as angel, I'm seeing them as neither simply single nor double. They are unusual Tom, Dick, or Harry and Tom, Dick, or Harry's angel. There's a mystery in the impossibility of finally dividing them up as one or two - this being that I'm encountering, this being whose soul I'm sensing.

Whenever we use words like angel or soul or "my soul," or any time we talk about image, there's that unfathomability present. There's this quality of being neither one nor two - not really simply - as well as the dimensionality, the divinity, the infinite echoing and mirroring implied in the words angel, soul, image.

This infinite echoing and mirroring flows from the angel into this person's life and being, and this person's life and being becomes the infinite echoing and mirroring of the angel. The angel also serves as a mirror and echo of the being in a kind of two-way exchange, echoing and mirroring each other. The mystery of that kind of sense and notion is also wrapped up in our understanding of angel and soul.

As, of course, is also the imaginal middle way - neither real nor not real, the theatre-like quality. When we use these words - angel, soul, just like image - all this is wrapped up there. And also eternality.

The angelic dimension is the timeless dimension. To perceive this person as angel, to perceive an angel or just an image, or the angel that I'm in relationship to, or the soul - eternality is implied. The angel, as we said in that talk on death and dying, is not of space or time. The being of the angel, the dimension of the being of the angel, is not located in space. It's not inside me or next to me or behind me or above me or below me. Nor is it located in time.

It's refracted, this angel - he, she, they are refracted into space and time. There's a sense, too, of participation. The angel is something - going back to examples - when I say "I need to reconnect with the angels," there's also a sense of re-participating in something, or reconnecting with my sense of participating in something, in the mystery of that word.

When we use these words, all these other notions become woven into their meaning. They become very rich words - soul, angel, just like image. Again, similar to the analogy I offered about these words being like roads, they point in a certain direction. That road goes on forever.

It's another way of saying all these words and concepts and perceptions, especially like soul and angel, have soft and elastic edges. Actually, all those words - participation and divinity and eternality and all of them - soft and elastic edges. They will stretch. So our notion of what we're talking about when we say soul and angel will stretch over time. It will deepen.

It will be deepened, complexified, and variegated as the sensing of soul is encouraged, as soul-making goes on, as the soul-making dynamic is allowed to do what it wants to do. Soft and elastic edges—they will stretch, deepen, complexify, and vary again.

So let's introduce what we might call the fourth exercise. We might consider it two exercises—the fourth and fifth—or a set of exercises. This one is in fact a dyad exercise, as are these next two.

In the first part—whether we call it two exercises or one exercise in two parts—we work in a dyad, setting it up with whatever is needed in terms of the *temenos*, the space, the presence. In this first part, one person in the dyad blesses the other, and the other person receives that blessing. One is blessing, one is receiving.

We've done quite a bit of this in different ways in the past, but I want to add a few more pieces, a few more variations. Some will be familiar, and some perhaps less so.

The person who is blessing offers their blessing through movement, gesture, and voice. But what you cannot do as the blesser is use any known language—any language known to human beings. You can utter sounds, use your voice, but not any known language. Somehow you're conveying blessing and emanating blessing, expressing and manifesting blessing.

One thing here is: what does that word "blessing" mean? And again, back to what we just said about these words—soft and elastic edges that will grow and deepen. The meaning of the word "blessing" may already be very wide, or it may not. I'm not even sure what it means exactly. But it is potentially wide, deep, multidimensional, open, elastic—soft and elastic.

As we practice more sensing the soul, especially in relation to blessing and being blessed, we can hopefully create and discover more and more of what blessing might mean. It might start, for instance, as just *metta*. "I'm not really sure about that word 'blessing,' but I know what *metta* means, and I'm familiar with that." So it might just start there. Let it start as that.

Maybe it includes praise—what they call doxology. Words of praise, or in this case, movements, gestures, and vocalizations of praise. So maybe that's a slight expansion from just the notion of *metta*. Maybe it includes gratitude—that in one's praise there's gratitude wrapped up in it. Remember that word "Eucharist" actually means thankfulness, gratitude in Greek.

It may be that as we work within this exercise, or as we repeat it, or as we generally do more soul-making practice and our sense of soulfulness grows and the range of experience and ideation grows, this whole

notion grows of what it means to bless and what it means to be blessed.

In the exercise, it might be that as we're doing it, the self, the sense of the other, and the sense of the world, the environment—maybe even time or whatever—all this can become image. Maybe as I'm trying to use my voice without language, trying to bless but without language, the sounds—not even words, but the sounds uttered and heard—become image. They become imaginal.

And who is blessing? Who is blessed? All this becomes image. In so doing, it becomes imaginal images, and its meaning expands and deepens.

you're in a dyad, you're facing each other.

One person takes the first turn to be blessed. So the other person becomes the one who offers the blessing. For the one who is blessed, their task is twofold, but it really has to do with silent sensitivity and receptivity.

They want to notice—they're looking at and listening to and opening their whole energy body. We've done all this kind of thing before. Open the whole energy body and all the senses to the other and their blessing, their movement and voice and gesture. Open to the sound and the visuals and all the sense of the whole energy body in relationship with, sensing with the whole energy body. But then also sensitive to one's own experiences—one's own experiences as the one who is blessed, one's own experiences of the energy body. And that includes whatever emotions, whatever soul resonances arise and pass within that.

So for the one who's blessed, it's a task in sensitivity and opening the energy body and the senses to that really full relationship with the one who is blessing, and then tracking, noticing what happens primarily in the energy body and the emotions as this person blesses you.

One wants to establish that—a really good energy body and emotional sensitivity and awareness. And then on top of that, when that's ready—probably that needs to be there before one then opens it up to include any sensing the soul or soul sense of the whole relational field there. The whole experience of being blessed, the other, the self, the moment, all of it.

But practically speaking, or at least from the outside, one is just silent and still and open, and the task is one of sensitivity—the energy body and the emotion, and then the soul sense. So one's not responding.

Then maybe after ten minutes—well, you can time it yourself; ten minutes might feel like a lot doing something like this. So it may be that this is really quite difficult. Some people find it's really quite difficult. They're a bit baffled or stumped what to do, how to do this at all. But hopefully it could also be fun.

So after about ten minutes you can reverse roles, and maybe you need some silent meditation or something in between perhaps to gather—maybe not, you'll have to see. Ten minutes as I said may feel very long, or it may be that it feels very difficult and awkward and one isn't quite sure what to do and what sounds to make. Or it may be that actually it needs ten minutes or it needs a little longer to get going,

to get into a kind of groove because it's unfamiliar. For some people it may not be at all. But either way, even if it's difficult, hopefully it can be fun as well—lots to discover there as an exercise.

So if you're in the blessing role, then you can improvise your utterances. Improvise what comes through your mouth. Take your time. It may be very fast—a very fast flow or a very slow flow. It may be there are pauses in between utterances or movements or gestures, or that it's just continuous streams. Or maybe a continuous stream, then a pause, or whatever. It may be loud or soft.

See if you can let your sense of any soulfulness that's there, any sense of soul-making, let that sense guide you, just as we use that as a guide in imaginal practice. And again, you want to be feeling, sensing the energy body, the resonances in the soul and the energy body. You want to be putting your whole energy body in relationship with the other as your blessing.

It may be that you deliberately bring in or play with the deliberate introduction of an image of yourself, that you inhabit a certain image perhaps that you're familiar with or certainly that's arising at the time, or an image of the other, a sensing soul of the other, or of the space you're in, or of the movements and gestures and utterances themselves—that you bring in deliberate images, a deliberate imaginal sense of what they are.

It may be that there's an image that you bring in that's a third, so that this imaginal figure is somehow coming together or in touch with you, and through you they are blessing the other. But it's really coming from this. So there are all kinds of possibilities here.

For some people this is going to be really quite strange and may take a little getting used to. It may feel a little awkward. Others will just—maybe not at all—and it's just easeful and delightful and fun.

Then a few variations. One is, you can—the only rule is no words. You can make any movement or any gesture or any vocalization. So any movement, gesture or vocalization is okay, but not words. So no language.

A second possibility is—

You can make any movement or any gesture or any vocalization. So any movement, gesture or vocalization is fine, but no words—no language.

A second possibility is no words and also no vocalizations. You can only use movement and gesture, no voice. It's still about how you bless, just through movement and gesture—what wants to come, what feels soulful there. Can I sense that, be in relationship with it, and follow that thread?

A third possibility is no words, but no movements or gestures either—only vocalizations. So you have three variations: movements, gestures and vocalizations all permitted; only movement and gestures; or only vocalizations.

Sometimes it might occur to you to sing a melody if you're allowed to vocalize, and that's fine. Maybe humming or singing something becomes part of the blessing. If you do choose to sing, make sure that sometimes you try it without melody, without singing anything. We're interested in really opening up ranges here.

The second part—which you could conceive as a separate exercise or simply segue into—involves the same thing, but dropping any idea of attempting to express or convey some meaning. In other words, something that could be put into words. Even blessing may contain aspects that could translate into words, but now you're taking it to another level, really dropping any attempt to express or convey meaning—something that could be articulated or an emotion you're trying to convey. You're not expressing an emotion or an image or an event or a story—your story or anyone's story. There's just movement, gesture, and voice, and you drop any sense of attempting to express something with that, to convey something meaningful.

Remember, we have this element of the imaginable, meaningfulness, yet soul is also not reduced to a single meaning. What happens when we recognize that soul is more than this or that meaning? Even if meanings are important, even if meanings matter to soul, soul is more than any particular meaning. And soul is also more than heart.

What happens now? Perhaps the notion of blessing itself gets altered or dropped. In this second part, we might say we've gone beyond blessing in the usual sense. Blessing is an interesting word—it occupies an area at the edge of what could be put into other words. But in the second part of this exercise, we're encouraging what we're doing through movement and gesture and voice to extend beyond the notion of blessing in the usual sense, because we're trying to drop any attempt at expressing or conveying meaning or anything that could be put into words.

I think we'll stop here for today and add the fifth exercise at a different time. Hopefully this is enough to work with and makes sense—you can play with these variations.

As I've said, it might feel very awkward or strange for some people, and maybe not at all for others—everything in between is possible. It might feel difficult; you might feel very self-conscious. All kinds of reactions can arise. But it might also be fun.

Wherever it starts, it can grow. Even if it feels nice and perhaps you're used to similar work from different retreats we've done, it can still grow and deepen and complexify, becoming much more subtle and involving much greater sensitivity—both on the part of the one who blesses and the one who is blessed.

In the second part of this exercise, we're perhaps talking about something beyond the notion of blessing as we usually understand that word. There is simply an exercise, a dyad using movement, gesture, and voice with the purpose and intention of deepening sensitivity, extending range, and being receptive to soul—receptive to soul and a vehicle for soul, a vehicle of soul.

All of this—the sensitivity, the opening up of where we can sense soul, how soul can express through us, and what we can recognize as soul—

All that becomes the main point, and that has an extraordinary range of subtlety that's possible there—sensitivity and growth and dimensionality. So that's really a big part of this practice: exploring range and depth, sensitivity that includes subtlety. Of course, it doesn't have to be subtle only, but it can move into that territory more and more as the practice matures.

So that's what this exercise is for. That's the purpose of this exploration. That's the invitation I'm offering you—to step into this realm where blessing becomes a vehicle for soul, where sensitivity opens doorways to dimensions of experience that can transform not only how we give and receive, but how we understand the very nature of our interconnection and the sacred possibilities that live within the simplest human exchanges.

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