Follow Your Heartbreak

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 38:37

I wasn't here last week because I was on a self-retreat, which was really wonderful. Both sitting with people is really good, and sitting on your own—if you've been practicing and you kind of know the territory—has its own sweetness as well.

I went to this very small center called Silent Stay, which is just on the border of Napa Valley in Vacaville. It has room for about six people, and I recommend it if you just look up Silent Stay. The couple that runs it previously ran a retreat center in Assisi, Italy for twelve years. There was recently a CNN list of the top ten retreat centers in the world—at least that was their list. Spirit Rock was number one, by the way, and their center in Assisi was on that list too. They came back here about seven months ago and opened up this center, which is kind of a clone of the one there. They brought all their statues and art, so it's quite nice.

During this nine-day self-retreat, we'd sit a couple of times together with whoever was there—there were a couple of other people during my stay. It wasn't an intensive kind of retreat as I often do, with sitting and walking and sitting and walking, just building more and more momentum of mindfulness. I tried to be mindful in everything I did and sat maybe three to five times a day, usually about four or five times a day. I also did some writing, which was wonderful, and caught up on my email for the first four days after I'd been away.

But I also did some reading, and I've been hanging out with this book. I think I've mentioned it here once, but I've been with it for a couple of months, and the retreat was largely about digesting the full impact of this book, which is by Andrew Harvey, called *The Hope: A Guide to Sacred Activism*.

He's the person—if you were here sometime in the last few months—maybe you were here the time that I played through my computer him reading Rumi about passion. Do you remember that one? "Passion, passion, passion, passion," and then he riffs on it. That touched me deeply, blew my mind, opened up my heart when I first heard it a couple of years ago, and I play it regularly.

I decided to reach out and have a conversation with him because he's open to that at times, and we had a rather rich conversation. He said, "Okay, read the book—read my book and tell me if it feels like you want to keep on hanging out. Read that first." And I read it.

He's brilliant, by the way. And he knows he's brilliant, but he also knows his impatience and his arrogance at times. He writes all about that, about all the places inside that come with having a mind and a heart like he does. But it's brilliant.

I've been really inspired by it as a kind of guidebook to a new area that I feel myself moving into, which is

sacred activism. He presents this very sobering and very inspiring vision of where we are now as a species, in the evolution of humanity and in our consciousness. He doesn't hold back at all on both ends—both the sobering, overwhelming crisis of greed and fear, anger, outrage, disconnect from the natural world, a world gone mad. You don't need much to find confirmation or evidence. You'd have to be closing your eyes and walling yourself off in a cave to not see that aspect of where we are—a world gone mad.

What he calls being in the dark night of the species. As I was thinking about this, I thought about the Kali Yuga. Perhaps you're familiar with this—in the Hindu perspective, there are different epics of time, and many have talked about us being in the Kali Yuga now.

There are four different yugas—epochs of time—and the Kali Yuga, which if you're familiar with Kali, the divine dark mother that eats everything, that's one way to think of the Kali Yuga. But actually, as I looked it up, the Kali is actually referring to a demonic kind of Kali, not a beneficent Kali.

So if we are in the Kali Yuga, this is the prophecy for events in the Kali Yuga. In some schemas, the Kali Yuga is supposedly ending around 2025—who knows? There are others that say it's happening a whole different way. But anyway, it seems like we're in the Kali Yuga.

Some of the things that happen in the Kali Yuga: Rulers will become unreasonable. They will levy taxes unfairly. The rulers will no longer see it as their duty to promote spirituality or protect their subjects and will become a danger to the world. People will start migrating, seeking countries where wheat and barley form the staple food source as opposed to rice. At the end, avarice and wrath will be common. Humans will openly display animosity towards each other. Ignorance of the dharma will occur. People will have thoughts of murder with no justification and will see nothing wrong in that.

We just saw this in the news in the last couple of days—those kids that were just bored and shot that Australian baseball player. This is the prediction. I wonder when it was predicted, and if it wasn't like that then, what that might have been like.

But anyway, as Andrew Harvey talks about this dark night of the species, the inspiration is that it's held in a perspective, in the context of the potential of birthing an awakening of humanity that's never been seen before. And he's not the only one that holds this. If you're familiar with the harmonic convergence, there was that same kind of Mayan prophecy where there'd be a window of time where there'd be a lot of dukkha with the potential to shift things. That there can be, through the dukkha, through the suffering, a kind of new emerging of a consciousness and connection to the planet and to respect for life.

He talks a lot about how the divine feminine is going to play a key role in this, which I have felt for some time. The guys just haven't done such a good job. He talks about many different elements of both the death and the birth that is potentially here.

So that kind of perspective gives meaning to the tragedy and the heartbreak that probably many of us feel.

It's like the system needs to crash before it can reboot. That's one way of thinking about it.

I'm not just going to focus on this global level, but I want to see it as a natural process on many levels—global unfolding of the species and the personal spiritual journey. I'd like to talk about and focus a bit more on that, and then we can open it up to looking at the bigger perspective as well.

We can see the same process that Andrew Harvey talks about—this very chaotic, confused, frightening place that the species is going through as an emergence, as a necessary emergence to something greater. This is exactly the process of our spiritual journey.

If you're new to this kind of work, I'm reminded of a line from Trungpa Rinpoche, who was one of the most quotable beings I ever met. In one lecture he said, "The spiritual journey is fraught with perils and dangers. So consider very carefully before you start." Then he paused for a while and said, "But once you start, it's best to finish."

It's not that it's some kind of mistake, some kind of warped sense of humor that would set up the game like this. This is an essential unfolding in our lives.

Anyone who's done a retreat knows it's not that you sit there and say, "Oh, how nice it is to be with the moment," and then that's how it is for the next five or ten days. "Oh yeah, they talk about being in the present, and how lovely—now I have ten days to just be in the present. How cool. This is better than Bali. What a cool vacation."

It's rare that that's somebody's experience. It can happen, actually does happen at times. But it's not usually your introduction to sitting there with your mind and your heart for however long it is. By the second day, the common question is: What am I doing here? Why did I sign up for this? What was I thinking? Or what was my friend thinking when they said it would be a good thing?

There's ups and there's downs and there's challenges. That's an essential part of the trip because in that journey, how else can you discover you have the capacity to be with everything? How else can you discover that you have the courage and the strength and the wisdom and the compassion and the love and the peace that can hold all of that, that can go through even all of those challenges and difficulties? How else could you find out? How else could you discover for yourself what's called verified faith, where you know absolutely the power of presence and the power of a loving presence or a kind awareness?

This is the way of this journey. It's forged by facing the very demons that we usually distract ourselves from. Through that being forged through the heat, there's a tempering, like iron is tempered into steel, and a strengthening that opens you up to places you didn't know were there. One could say it's a trial by fire.

I don't want to frighten people saying, "Oh my God, he just said sign up for a five-day retreat." No, it's not always this and it's not this every moment, but there are parts of it that are like this and that are okay. There's also being present in a way that you've never seen before and waking up to being alive and

waking up to your own goodness and feeling a connection with life. There's, as the saying goes, the 10,000 joys and the 10,000 sorrows. You get to be here and sit with it all and see through it all.

You know that line, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger"? Well, not that you're going to get killed, but you are challenged. More and more, what happens as you go through those challenges, you have more and more confidence that it becomes less and less scary. It becomes more and more a place that you're drawn to again and again because you touch something that's so pure that you can't keep away. It's something that calls you.

It's just like something has called everybody here, even if it's just out of curiosity for the first time, that has called you through whatever challenges you've gone through in your life that has kept on pulling you through and facing you in the direction of being hungry to awaken to truth or love or whatever you want to call it.

There's a line that I like from Helen Keller. She says, "Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved. All the world is full of suffering. It is also full of overcoming."

That's one reason why the Buddha starts out with a very sobering fact. There's suffering in life. He doesn't sugarcoat it. There's suffering in life. And he says, the more one can learn to open up to suffering, the more the possibility of coming to the end of suffering. As probably many of you are familiar with his response when he was asked, "What do you teach?" He says, "I teach about suffering and the end of suffering."

But you can't bypass it. Awakening joy sounds good. "Okay, I'll just go for feeling good." Awakening joy, an essential part of it, is opening up to all the difficulties and challenges in your life.

I also want to mention another classical teaching that talks about this in another level besides just going through one retreat where you go through your ups and downs. And that's over the course of one spiritual journey. The classical model of awakening in the Theravadan teachings called the Progress of Insight. You can look this up online. It's no secret. But sometimes it's a little warning not to read too much about it because then you kind of see, "Oh, where am I? Have I made progress? Oh, no." It's like chutes and ladders. But it's good to have a sense of the different places that one goes to so that you don't get confused if you're finding yourself not on a bliss trip, even after you've been doing this for a while.

In the Progress of Insight, which kicks in after one has done some practice and really seen in a profound way some basic realities of life, some basic principles of life, after one is deeply moved by seeing the arising and passing of everything—what's sometimes called a mini-Nibbana, a mini-enlightenment—

After the profound awakening experience—that glimpse of the arising and passing away of all things, sometimes called a mini-Nibbana—you might feel absolutely certain you've reached full enlightenment. But you haven't quite arrived there yet. However, something fundamental has shifted. You don't forget

what you've seen.

As I share this, I must offer an important caveat: don't try to match your experience exactly to the progress of insight maps. The journey doesn't always unfold so neatly or linearly. But in the classical textbook version—which sometimes happens and sometimes doesn't follow such a tidy progression—after glimpsing that profound understanding of everything arising and passing away, you often begin to notice primarily how everything is dissolving.

This marks what's called the dissolution stage, where there's no solid ground anywhere because everything reveals itself as utterly empty. You see the complete insubstantiality of all phenomena. Where is anything, really? There's no security, no place to stand. While this recognition of emptiness and insubstantiality is profoundly important, when that sense of solid ground begins to give way, it becomes unsettling and shaky.

The next classical stages unfold predictably: fear emerges as you realize everything is dissolving and there's nowhere to stand. Then comes what's sometimes called the "rolling up the mat stage"—misery so intense that the yogi simply wants to pack up and go home. This refers to the meditation mats used in India, Burma, and Thailand. Remarkably, this represents a very high stage of practice, though it can last anywhere from a brief moment to an extended period.

Following this comes terror, then loathing and disgust, where you find yourself asking, "My God, what was I so attached to? There's nothing substantial here. What was I craving so desperately?" This is the Pali term *nibbida*—seeing the essential emptiness of everything. Sometimes this manifests as complete dispassion.

This profound seeing naturally leads to the urge for deliverance. A deep longing arises: "I want freedom. I don't want another ice cream cone—I can see that won't satisfy me. I want true liberation."

In recognizing the insubstantiality of all phenomena, you also begin to see that your fears themselves are insubstantial—the terror, the misery, all of it. While you're not as frightened, you're left wondering: what is there, really? What will truly fulfill?

Eventually, you begin to see both the beautiful and the terrible with equanimity. You recognize that everything unfolds on its own—that whatever you do won't fundamentally change the nature of things. This opens into a space of profound balance and equanimity around all phenomena.

This equanimity becomes the direct precursor to genuine freedom, to liberation, to Nibbana—the unconditioned reality that can manifest in various ways.

I share all this not to frighten you, but to offer comfort. If you find yourself experiencing terror, loathing, or disgust, it's reassuring to know this could indicate a very high stage of practice rather than spiritual failure. In touching such immediacy and intensity, in allowing your heart to be broken open, you're passing through necessary fire. For some, this process happens quickly; for others, it takes longer. But as

long as you maintain sincere direction and genuine desire for freedom, it must be answered.

This progress of insight corresponds beautifully to what Joseph Campbell identified as the Hero's Journey—that archetypal pattern he discovered running through all great myths, fairy tales, and folk stories across human cultures. Campbell's insights into humanity's journey toward freedom are truly remarkable.

The Hero's Journey begins when something motivates the hero to leave their complacent routine—a call to quest that says, "Yes, there's something more." In answering that call, they inevitably encounter hardship. This pattern underlies virtually every action movie you've ever seen. Through that hardship, the hero faces great challenges, ultimate tests—the dark night of the soul.

And through that, there is victorious triumph. The hero or heroine wins and there's freedom. This pattern holds true whether we're speaking of Perseus in mythology, all the great heroes and heroines, Ulysses, or the Buddha himself.

Consider the Buddha going through his quest. Just before his enlightenment, there is Mara throwing everything at him after six years of the most intense asceticism and hardship. And there he is, with Mara saying, "Who the heck do you think you are? What makes you think you have the right?" Mara tries to frighten him, tries to seduce him with visions, but then comes the final test—doubt. The Buddha touches the earth and becomes enlightened, declaring through his gesture: "By all the work that I have done, I know I have the right to be here."

Or consider Jesus on the cross, going through crucifixion and reaching that point where he cries, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" And then comes the resurrection.

In modern representations, we see this in the Star Wars movies. Luke Skywalker embodies the ultimate hero's journey, particularly in The Empire Strikes Back. There he is, going through his training while Yoda counsels, "Just slow down a bit. You've got to slow down." But Luke is impatient, filled with impetuosity. "I've got to do it. I'm ready," he insists.

"Okay, you're ready?" Yoda responds. "Take that lightsaber, go into that cave, and face your darkest demons. Hopefully one of you will come out alive." That's how he becomes a Jedi Master—by facing his greatest demons.

Or consider the recent Hunger Games with Katniss Everdeen finally making it through her trials. This is the path. There's no way around it.

Andrew Harvey makes a profound point: both on a personal level and on a global level, we have to let our hearts be shattered. We have to be willing to let our hearts be shattered. You can't protect yourself anyway. You might try, saying, "Oh no, I can't bear it anymore." Sometimes protecting yourself is important because the overwhelm becomes too much. But at some point, when you have the courage to

become a warrior for goodness, a sacred activist, you have to let your heart be broken.

And in that breaking, it breaks open, just like on retreat. It breaks open to all the possibilities inside. Here lies this incredible paradox: in our protection, we cut ourselves off from all the good stuff within. But when we let ourselves be broken open and shattered, when we reach that point where we finally say, "I give up," when we feel we've hit rock bottom—that's the time we're reborn. That's when the ego truly surrenders and something mystical enters. But it requires our willingness to be shattered, and that means being shattered on purpose, not only on a personal level but also on a global level, emerging on the other side as warriors for goodness and peace.

In Harvey's beautiful presentation of death leading to rebirth, he speaks of all the awful conditions that are part of our death. But in our rebirth emerge aspects that have never been here before. Let me mention just some of the most important features of this birth to offer you some uplift as you go through this process.

The crisis itself demands a response, and people are responding and waking up in a way that has never happened before in this human experiment. Never before.

As my friend Roger Walsh says, we're in a race between fear and consciousness. Who knows what's going to win? If we have enough time, I always think that consciousness trumps fear. But whatever happens, the darkness brings out the light. So the crisis and our response to it become inseparable.

One of the responses he explores comes from Paul Hawken's book, *Blessed Unrest*. Hawken set out to discover just how many progressive movements—devoted to environment, human rights, gay and lesbian rights, animal rights, and so on—have been sparked by where we are. What he discovered and calculated is that there are between one and two million organizations on the earth now actively working toward ecological sustainability and social justice. In his book *Blessed Unrest*, this is not just hypothetical. He goes out and takes a look at what's actually out there. That's a little encouraging, isn't it?

The technologies, as destructive as they have been, are also leading to possibilities that have never happened before. We have instant access to all information that has ever been. Isn't that amazing? Think about that—all the information that has ever been. Never before on this planet has that been available. And not only available to some, but as he says, there are new forms of democratizing media. It's available to all. And it doesn't matter what the powers that try to control things are—the jig is up. The cat is out of the bag. There can be attempts at suppression, but it's too late for that. It's available to all.

There's the mystical renaissance. There has never been a renaissance of spirituality that's not just defined by one doctrine or dogma, but goes way beyond any one religion to the point where it's emerged above organized religion in this renaissance of spirituality.

The evolving philosophy of non-violence has emerged—which, just in the last hundred years or so with Gandhi and then Martin Luther King and the Dalai Lama and Nelson Mandela, shows us new ways of

dealing with our struggle for sanity in this insane world. Non-violence, the power of non-violence.

The return of the divine feminine—as we can see just in the last fifty years, the feminist movement being such a key thing in bringing more compassion and more love and more understanding to the world, growing more and more in its power.

And then the last, as he calls it, the divine willing and blessing the birth of the divine human. That gets into something mystical. But he's saying if you look at all the signs, there is this birthing of a consciousness that wants to manifest more and more through all of us, through all the ones who are sacred activists.

And he talks about letting your heart be shattered—not just as bad news, but as the doorway to how much you feel and care and are connected with life. As he says, if you want to know what to do, how can I contribute in this world? He says: follow your heartbreak. Follow where your heart is broken, which might be gay rights, might be human rights, might be animal rights, might be the environment—there are so many to choose from. Follow your heartbreak because that's where the juice is. That's where the aliveness is, right there, if you let it lead you.

And out of that, there is this sense of joy in letting all your frustration and fear and anger be transmuted into love, into caring, and into compassion, into making a difference that awakens that same quality in others that you touch.

So I want to ask for a moment, as I stop my speaking, to reflect inside and see where your heart has been broken, how your heart has been broken—whether it's some personal challenge that you've gone through or your heart broken by picking up a newspaper and what really touches you or gets to you.

Let yourself first, for a moment, just breathe. Just breathe. You need to breathe. You need to give yourself all the space and support you can. You can't do this all in one breath or session, but just a little at a time. See, like in the Tibetan practice of tonglen, that it's possible to take in the suffering and have it held with something much deeper than that suffering—with that beautiful seed of enlightenment, your bodhicitta, your true nature that can hold your broken heart with compassion.

See what either you've learned from heartbreak in the past. You might reflect on that for a moment before we go on. Just heartbreaks in the past. What have you learned? How have you gotten stronger? How have they supported you in your development? How have you discovered places inside that you didn't know were possible, that were there?

To connect with some verified faith for just a few moments. And then, in your breaking heart, wherever it might be these days—maybe somebody that you care about going through a hard time, or going through grieving or loss or some challenge, something that touches you—what can you see? How can you possibly envision awakening to a new level of wise, loving response, to a new level of awakening that not only benefits you, but everybody who meets that awakened heart?

Don't be afraid to touch it. Touch it in whatever doses work for you. And if it gets too overwhelming, then you can always back off. But don't be afraid to touch it because right in there is the secret. Right in there is the possibility of transformation. Right in there is the hero's journey or heroine's journey that you're on, and that we're all sharing together.

And celebrate that you're on this journey. As scary as it can get sometimes, as scary as the world might seem sometimes, there's transformation—there's the dying and the being reborn on every level, from personal to global. And what an amazing opportunity and gift that we are given, that joyful responsibility that we are given as we go through this together.

Seeing how it's near the end of the evening, we'll just close with sharing merit. May our own journey be used for the benefit of all beings. May we awaken to the courage and the strength and the love and the wisdom that can hold all of the dark, frightening places. May confusion dawn as wisdom. And may our own practice be a gift to everyone in our lives and the world and the planet that so welcomes us in that way.

So thank you for your attention. That was what was coming out this evening. Have a good week and share your practice with the world.

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