Reflections on the Day

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 26:41

The impresario Bill Graham once said, "The Grateful Dead are the best at what they do, and they are the only ones who do what they do." The same, I think, could be said of our next performer, speaker, presenter, dancer, spirit, Nina Weiss.

Hi, everybody. What a moving day, an inspirational day. Wow.

I'm going to do a little performance, really little, soon. But I thought it'd be a good time to... have a body. So come to your feet, yeah. And I know you don't have a lot of room around you, so we're gonna adjust to tight space, as if we're seven billion people squished into a half a mile.

Lifting your arms up above your head, and if it's available to you to interlace your fingers, do that. Some of you are really tall. Turn the palms over and reach. And if you can't interlace your fingers, just keep your arms separate from each other. But really press, press, press. And then with the gentle movement of the neck, look up. And on an out-breath, let the arms go gently and go, "Ha." Excellent.

Now roll the shoulders up and back. Up and back in circles and go, "Ba, ba, ba, ba, ba, ba." Good. And front and back and go, "Pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop."

And then gently with the feet about hip width apart—I can't see you all and you can't see me—let the chin come to the chest. The weight of the head falls and then make sure the knees are very soft, a little bit bent. And let the weight of the head carry the spine over so you're hanging from the hinge of the pelvis.

And then say that out loud: "Hanging from the hinge of the pelvis." And say it again and enjoy the sensuality of vowel and consonant. "Hanging from the hinge of the pelvis." Isn't that pleasurable?

Shake the head like you're nodding it, yes. And shake the head like you're shaking it, no. And then shake out the shoulders and go... And then gently roll up the spine one vertebra at a time.

Now take a tiny bit, a little bit of a wider stance and swing gently from side to side. And every once in a while go, "Ha!" Good. "Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha."

Then bring the knees parallel to each other again. I'm making sounds. And bounce and go, "Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha." Shake out the shoulders, spine, tailbone, "Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha."

Palms together, jaw goes slack. You shake your hands and you let the jaw flop in its socket. You go...

Lift the arm up and hold the opposite ear. And then pull the head so the ear comes towards the shoulder.

And breathe. And then let the hand go away, but the head stays. And then let the head just float back. Good.

Other arm comes up and around. Hold the ear and just pull the head so the opposite ear comes to the shoulder. And then drop the hand. Keep the head where it is.

And let the head float back. Then one more time—shake it up, add a little vigor.

Okay, you can sit down. Thank you.

You know, I think if we're going to change the world for the better, we're going to have to do a bit more of that.

So I do a form of improvisation called motion theater. It's autobiographical—I tell stories that are true, and I move around while I do it. I need a timekeeper, so Wes, you're my timekeeper. Can you give me a three-minute signal? Like wave your hand? How much time do I have? Twenty minutes? How many have I taken? Or do those not count because they were we and not me?

I've been sitting in the back of the room. It's hard to see from back there because, despite all these years of meditating at Spirit Rock, we are still in the trailer with the very low ceilings and the very lack of sight lines. So I'm craning my neck one way to see Paul and the other way to see Joanna.

Now we are nearing the end of this Earth Day, which we have devoted to devoting ourselves to ending the end of the species. We are going to end our trajectory that is leading us to our end. We are going to turn it around. We are entering the Great Turning. Somehow.

And we are coming to the end of the day, and there are a lot of takeaways. I just can't remember them. No, no, I can. One of them is: I am no longer a me, I am a we. I'm shifting from me to we. I am entering the grand we-dom of the future that may not be. And there are eight steps to doing that, which I do not remember, but there is a book in the back of the room. I'm going to buy the book. I am not going to read the book. I'm going to read the table of contents.

We have spent the entire Earth Day learning about how being outdoors in nature is the only way to really fall in love. We have to fall in love. I have to fall in love. No, no—do not despair, do not despair. Reframe: fall in love. But fall in love from the despair. It is by looking it straight on—we are ending, we are all going to die. Not just me, everyone. Everyone is going to die anyway. No—it's all going to die. It's a charnel ground meditation. The entire species.

We have never, ever seen anything like this before in the history of this species. We do not even know how to understand it. Our DNA is not programmed in a way that we can actually conceive of this magnitude.

of the extinction of the species that we are causing, but it is not my fault. And so I am going to look it in the

eye without flinching. And I'm not going to be depressed that we've been in the trailer all day. My neck hurts from craning. My shoulders are getting kind of tense.

Now enter the grief. The Bodhi sought the courage to grieve and then fall in love. And out of the love, I can't remember what comes next.

I was at the Raphael Theater a few weeks ago to see Chasing Ice, that big film. Has anyone seen it? Made by the geologist, the photographer who worked for National Geographic. Despite his knees falling apart and his hips, nevertheless, he put on pitons—is that what they're called? Crampons—and climbed into the remote regions of the Arctic and Antarctic and Siberian tundra in these freezing cold conditions, clamped onto the sides of disintegrating glaciers.

He photographed these amazing glaciers disintegrating, melting away, and it was the most symphonic music, grand ice landscape, beauty, beauty, beauty. I was sitting in my seat with my popcorn just falling in love, falling in love. And then the next year when he went back, the landscape was so different. It had all turned to a kind of brown gravel. These grand ice-blue sculptural, massive, unimaginably large sculptures of ice were gone. They had receded so far that he couldn't even recognize the landscape anymore.

As I left the theater, there was a young woman standing in the aisle. She had very dark hair and bright, freshly painted red lipstick. She was probably wearing a vegan leather jacket. And I noticed that her back was shaking. She was quietly sobbing. And she couldn't move. We were the only two left in the theater. These tears were just cascading down her cheeks, and the mascara was making tracks and collecting in her cleavage.

I didn't know—should I touch her or not? So I stood very close and she said, "Where is everybody?" We were the only two left in the theater. "Where are all the people my age?" she said. She looked like she was maybe twenty-eight, thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two—you can hardly tell, but younger and in that arena. The language when you're weeping is fragmented: "Where... they can't... the where..." And she said, "I have to stop crying so I can get outside."

And I said, "Don't stop. Don't stop." I needed her not to stop crying. "Keep crying and go get the people that are your age." It's like giving her a mission to weep. "Keep weeping. Keep weeping," I said, "and I will weep too." We went out of the theater kind of metaphorically hand in hand, devoted to weeping.

My friend Catherine Sneed tells a story. She was working in the prisons. She was working in the San Francisco Police Department. She's African American and has wild hair and this gap between her teeth. So when she smiles, you kind of celebrate the gap. She's broad-shouldered and kind of broad-waisted and walks with this kind of assurance that she seems to have downloaded from the police department.

She went into the jails and noticed this vacant lot that was full of hypodermic needles and condoms and broken glass and bits of marijuana—roaches, they're called. You kind of hold them with a special piece of equipment.

She decided to make a garden.

So she had to jump through a lot of intensely bureaucratic hoops until she got permission for an hour a day for the men in their orange suits to come out and first clean out the bicycle parts and gear shifts and old tires and hypodermic needles and used condoms. They had to use gloves. Tampons, Barbie doll heads. And then they brought in the shovels, the kinds with the pointed edges, and the kinds with the straight edges, the wooden handles, and the hoes, and the spades. And they turned over the earth.

And then they carried in—these big guys with muscles, because they work out in the jail, shaved their heads, proud of their lost teeth. And they turned the soil with compost and amendments, and then they planted food. Carrots, sweet peas, green beans, cauliflower. When the cauliflower came up, they didn't know what it was, because they hadn't been fed cauliflower. Mustard greens, collard greens, kale. There's a movie you can see.

And what started to happen is the men got released. They missed the garden. So they committed small crimes in order to get back. One of these men looks into the camera and he says, "I planted a seed and the seed sprouted—carrot, the little frilly leaves. And if I didn't water it, it died." He said, "Nothing ever needed me before. And I fell in love with the carrot." And there are tears streaming down his tattooed face because he fell in love with a carrot.

She realized it wasn't such a good plan that the men had to commit crimes to get back to the garden. So she found a vacant lot in Hunters Point and started an out-of-prison garden project, as opposed to the in-prison garden project. And she started to jump through the bureaucratic hoops, but got bored with the tedium of bureaucratic hoops. Because, as they said today, certain systems just are not working, and don't imagine that they ever will.

So instead, they climbed the fence. She and some of those big guys took their shovels and the bare root trees because they were going to turn the vacant lot into a garden in the middle of Hunter's Point. They climbed the chain link fence and dumped the shovels and the hoes and the spades and the amendment on the other side. And they began to amend the soil after ridding it of the needles and the car parts and the condoms with the gloves and the Barbie doll limbs. And they dug a hole.

And as Catherine was kneeling down to plant the bare root of a tree into the Hunter's Point hole, she looked up and there was a young boy about seven holding a gun. Could have been a toy, but it was a gun. And she looked up, and she'd grown up in that part of town, so she knew that it was unlikely she would make her way out of that garden. All of the men who had also grown up in that part of town with the muscles and the tattoos had gone back over the fence, because they knew what it meant to look into the barrel of a gun as well. She turned around, and there was no one there.

And then suddenly one of the ex-cons looked at that boy and he realized that he knew that boy's aunt. And he said, "Your aunt, her name's Maria." And the boy looked up. And another ex-con came back over the

fence and he said, "Yeah, I know where you live." And the boy looked up. And suddenly all of the men came back and gathered round and named the streets and the neighborhood and knew which trees grew on which block and knew the colors of the houses and knew the boy's aunt and sister.

Catherine looked at the boy and she said, "Do you want to plant the tree?"

And he put down his gun and he knelt on the earth, holding the bare roots in his bare hand. And he laid the tree into the hole. And she said, "Now you have to fill in the earth and tamp it down." He tamped it down with bare feet. And then they poured water on it. And she saw as the water fell this little moment of recognition in his eyes. That the water was like rain, that rain came from clouds and clouds moved through the sky by wind that was caused by movement of ocean. And that the trees would reach to the sun and the sun had a movement in the sky that defined the movement of the stars and that his own hand, in his own hand, in our own hands, we recognize stardust.

Pressure cookers, shrapnel, nails, childhood of violence. The violence comes at us and we can't help ourselves. We extend it back out. And the way we change is to start to understand I am not me. I never have been.

And "we" isn't a big enough word. Stars, wind, guns, roots. He started to see just for a moment—because she saw the recognition in his eyes—that he was connected to everyone. And he put down the gun.

Imagine driving home, making that right turn at the end of the Spirit Rock driveway, even though I want to turn left. Driving down the road where the green hills are just starting to go brown, and there's that moment where I want them not to turn brown—that color in California we call gold. It's gold. Reframe it.

I'm going to go home and take a hike with my dogs and look really carefully at the lupine that is just starting to burst with its purple flower. And look at the leaf which has five fingers and is shaped just like a hand. And I'm going to see stars.

This is what it means to practice. To slowly, patiently train ourselves to see the interconnection that was always there. To recognize that our own hands hold stardust, that our breath moves with the same wind that carries the clouds. When we truly see this—not just intellectually, but with our whole being—something fundamental shifts. The boundaries that seemed so solid begin to dissolve. The separation that breeds fear and violence reveals itself as illusion.

Each moment of recognition, no matter how brief, plants a seed. Each time we choose to see connection rather than division, we water that seed. This is how transformation happens—not all at once, but through countless small moments of awakening, until one day we look at a lupine leaf shaped like a hand and know, with complete certainty, that we are not separate from anything at all.

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