For The Sake of Life on Earth, part 1

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 41:47

One of the amazing teachings of gratitude is that it does not depend—your experiencing it does not depend—on external circumstances. I used to think that I had to approve of the way things were set up if I was to feel thankful. That it was like counting the blessings. But what we experienced then in that singing was something deeper than that, wasn't it? It had something to do with belonging.

Belonging. It has something to do with the mystery that has called us into being that is still there at the heart of everything—that we will never, ever be separated from. So in whatever the situation, when you're faced with a seemingly overwhelming task, when you're faced with needing to repair something that's broken, gratitude can well up then too. The capacity for that is in us. It comes with life.

Last month I had an amazing week at a dismantled nuclear bomb factory. It's outside Boulder, Colorado. It's called Rocky Flats. It's where the plutonium pits were made. In every warhead in the U.S. arsenal, there's that plutonium pit or trigger that was made at Rocky Flats. There are 20,000 nuclear bombs now, many of them still targeted.

We did this work with a group of people of all ages who want to stop the Department of Energy from turning this area, which is laced with plutonium from 37 years of making the triggers with very sloppy management by Rockwell International—illegal burnings and the whole mess. You know that developing nuclear weapons and nuclear power doesn't make you the neatest person in the world.

What grew up in the work was—it's still staggering to me—the sense of gratitude of this little band of a couple dozen nuclear guardians. A huge job, because they want to stop the Department of Energy from turning it into a recreational area where children will play. And that's planned, actually, for all the weapon sites—Hanford, Savannah River—when they're dismantled, because that will show the world that it's been an okay operation.

At any rate, a huge job. And what came through that was almost intoxicating to me: the sense of, "Oh, good, we have something really big to work on." And there was a sense of summoning up of the blood and an electricity in the air, a kind of "Oh, my life has tremendous meaning. How good it is—I'm so glad I was born to be here, faced with this, with all my senses and my brain and my good friends." And that sense of linking arms and being glad for each other—it just made your heart sing.

So things don't have to be just perfect for you to feel gratitude. And I felt that when I received this week a message from one of them, a young man named Seth. He was writing to the others and said, "Dear friends, dear brother, sister guardians..." He was announcing the next meeting, and there are several strands of

what they're doing. But then, in a postscript, he said, "And in parting, let me say, rest and be kind to yourselves. Feel within you the great winds of time. Feel how deeply rooted you are in the earth. Feel the immensities of the seas that are within you and outside you."

And he said, "Whether we go forth to perish or to flourish, we are inextricably intertwined in the living body of earth."

That just blew me away. And it wasn't saying, "Oh, woe is us, faced with this terrible... we're the worst people who ever lived, we humans, and oh, this is so terrible." Instead, he turned, being able to see fully the danger, and said, "Ah, this is our work. And we are part of this world and it's in us. Whether we perish or flourish, we go forth inextricably intertwined."

So I think of that as we move into this next station of the spiral of the Work That Reconnects, which is: feeling grounded now—grounded and gladdened with our gratitude for the gift of life—we use our capacity. We use our attention. We use our breathing lungs and beating heart. We use the rhythm of life within us. We use all that we are to see what is happening to and in our world and to our brother-sister beings.

Because our world cannot heal unless we see it. This world cannot repair itself and cannot self-heal if we pull down the shutters and close the curtains and say, "I won't think about that, it's too depressing." But strengthened by the gratitude, we even feel gratitude that we're here now. Isn't that so?

So with them, as with you, I shared the Shambhala warrior prophecy. And I'm going to share it now. Many of you have heard it from me because it's kind of my marching orders.

And it comes from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. I heard it from people who are very close to me, and my life has been greatly shaped and influenced by being part of a Tibetan refugee community in northwest India. I've been linked with it since the mid-1960s when my family and I were there in India with the American Peace Corps. I got to know them then. They had recently come into exile from Tibet, fleeing the Chinese occupation.

But it wasn't until over fifteen years later, when I was back on a visit in the early 80s, that I was visiting the community. They're partly lay people—about three hundred lay people, one hundred monks and lamas. So they were talking about this prophecy. They said, "You know, it seems to be coming true in our time, in our generation, even though it's so very ancient."

And I said, "Well, what's it about?"

And they said, "It's about a very dark time, very great danger."

Well, you see, I'm kind of apocalyptic by nature. And I said, "Oh." The Cold War had begun in earnest by then.

So I heard three different versions of it. And the one that locked in, the one that I'm going to share with you, is from my friend Dugu Chögyel Rinpoche.

Wait—just a minute. You will hear reference to the Shambhala warrior. And you will know, you will recognize, that this is a metaphor for the bodhisattva, the hero in the Buddhist tradition. The one with the boundless heart.

All right, so these are pretty much his words:

"There comes a time—and we are living in this time—when great powers have arisen, barbaric powers. And although they waste their wealth in preparations to annihilate each other, they have much in common. Among the things they have in common are weapons of unfathomable devastation and death, and technologies that lay waste the world. And it is just at this moment, when all life hangs by the frailest of threads, that the kingdom of Shambhala emerges.

"Now you can't go there because it's not a place. It exists in the hearts and minds of the Shambhala warriors. And actually, you can't tell a Shambhala warrior by looking at her or him because they don't wear any uniforms, no insignia. They have no banners that they wave to identify whose side they're on. They have no barricades on which to climb to threaten the enemy, or behind which they can rest and regroup. Always they have only the terrain of the barbaric powers to move across.

"Now is the time," Chögyel Rinpoche said, "when great courage is required of the Shambhala warriors—moral courage and physical courage—because they are going to go into the centers of power of the barbaric powers to dismantle their weapons."

They're going to dismantle weapons in every sense of the word. They're going to go where the armaments are manufactured and deployed. They're going to go into the halls of power where the decisions are made.

And then he said, "Joanna, mark this. The Shambhala warriors know that these weapons can be dismantled. Why? Because they are mano-maya. That means mind-made. They are made by the human mind, so they can be unmade by the human mind."

Because the dangers that are facing us now are not brought upon us by some satanic extraterrestrial force, or some evil deity, or even some inexorable, inalterable, predestined fate. They arise from our choices. They arise from our relationships. They arise from our habits of mind and body and action. They are made by the human mind—they can be unmade by the human mind.

So he said, "Now is the time when the Shambhala warriors go into training."

You can imagine. How do they train? And he held up his hands...

the lamas in his community hold their ritual objects in the great lama dances of his people. And he said, "They train in the use of two weapons." That's actually the word he used—two weapons. And then I said,

"What are they?" And he held up his hands. "One is compassion and the other is insight into the radical interdependence of all phenomena. And you need both," he said. "One is not enough."

You need the compassion because that provides the fuel, the motive force to get you out where you need to go to do what you need to do. And what it boils down to is this: to not be afraid of the suffering of your world. And when you're not afraid of the suffering of the world, then nothing can stop you. You can go where you need to go to do what you need to do.

He said, "By itself, it gets very hot. It can burn you out. So you need the other weapon, the other tool." And with that insight, understanding, wisdom into the inter-existence of all things, the radical, inextricable—just as Seth said in his little email this week—inextricably intertwined nature of all things, then you know that this is not a battle between the good guys and the bad guys. It's not about that. Because the line between good and evil goes through the landscape of every human heart.

And when you have that tool, that insight, you know that we are so interwoven in the web of life that even the smallest act with clear intention has repercussions through that web that you can barely begin to see, let alone measure. It makes all the difference. But he said, "By itself, that's a little abstract, a little cool. So you need the heat of compassion." And as he said that, I was thinking, oh, that's what I've been seeing. The monks with their flowing gesture, hand gestures, the mudras, as they chant. There, likely, is the dancing interplay between compassion and insight.

Well, that was it. That was the prophecy. I was so excited. I went racing down to the edge of the community where my family happened to be visiting at that time too. And it was the end of the afternoon and I burst in and I said, "Oh, you will never—you can't guess what I just heard from Juja Rinpoche." And I proceeded to tell my family the prophecy. And my son Jack was with us. And he listened and he said, "Well, didn't he tell you how it's going to turn out?"

That is so good that you laugh. And I did too, and I said, "Oh, if he had tried to tell me how it's going to turn out, I wouldn't have believed anything." So don't you believe people who tell you how it's going to turn out. It's the fact that we don't know—that is our awakening in this time. We can't wake up if we have it handed to us. No, it's too late, it's over, don't bother. Or it's a sure thing. No, no, it's that not knowing that calls us to be and understand what we need to be and understand at this time.

So I tell that now because as we address our pain for the world, as we address the woundedness we see around us, as we address the dishonored ocean—as the poet Denise Levertov talks about it, and boy is it dishonored now—as we look at the clear cuts, as we look at the homeless in the streets, as we hear of the fantastic hungers in the Horn of Africa, as we look at the hungers and statistics in our own country, as we look at the layer of smog over our cities, as we hear about the spasms of extinction of species, as we look at more and more foreclosures of homes and people falling through the safety net in a greed-devoured society, as we watch a climate system spiraling out in ever more fearsome oscillations of heat and flood...

As we allow ourselves to remember every minute of every day of these days, the war-making, the trillions that we're spending destroying the lands and the people in Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan with our drones. Oh, it's enough to break your heart. And your heart is breaking.

But then the heart that breaks open can hold the whole universe. It's beautiful. We discover the mystery and the wonder of our being able to suffer with our world, with our friends who are sick, with our friends who are jobless, with our own experiences of failure and fear. Oh, this is a dark time. And this is the time you have. In a way, perhaps you even chose it. Perhaps we asked for it.

But would you want this to happen to Earth and you not be on hand? Would you?

My grandfather did that once in a while. He'd yell. He was a preacher, and he would thump on the pulpit. But the thing is, he thumped not to tell people they were bad, but to tell people how much God loved them. "God loved you so much!" I certainly hope some of you are going to raise your voice. There's quite a bit to raise our voice about.

My sweet sister here and I were getting pretty hot under the collar about some of the devastation happening, and we couldn't think of anything worse than what was happening in Canada in the tar sands. So something possessed us to just decide to go up there and see it with our own eyes. We set up some gigs, took the money from our performance, and hired a plane. I kid you not. A little plane with five seats. Joanna was in the front with the pilot. And the stink. I was a little airsick—I didn't throw up, but that was my other great preoccupation: how horrible this was and whether I could keep my breakfast down.

"Well, you know, Joanna had come up to me when we were working up at Holy Names University a couple of years ago and said, 'I want to go to the tar sands.' And I knew immediately what that was because I'm from Alberta. How many of you have heard of the tar sands?"

The response showed many raised hands.

"It's really Canada's dirty secret. Being Canadian, we're very proud of the way we've managed the natural world—big extensive parklands. This really doesn't fit with the Canadian persona, this idea that one of probably the worst environmental disasters on the planet is happening in the northlands of Alberta and now moving east to Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

"Essentially, they're trying to get the last bits of oil from the earth. It's not like there's oil being drilled for. They have to use massive amounts of chemicals and remove entire ancient, pristine forests—hundreds and hundreds of acres completely demolished and removed from the surface of the land so they can go underneath and, through chemicals, leach out this tarry substance and then process it into something that gets shipped to the United States and turned into oil. It costs an enormous amount of water and energy to get the tar out of the ground.

"The land alone—when Joanna and I went up in that plane, I had some ideas. I'd seen pictures in National

Geographic. We both had. But we flew for an hour in one direction and did not come to the end of it. It is simply—you look down and all you see is pools of toxic waste. They're called tailing ponds. And it's right adjacent to the great Athabasca River, so the river is being completely destroyed. There are all these native communities living downstream, and they're suffering hugely from the repercussions. There's a lot of denial about it in Canada and Alberta and around the world.

"To go with Joanna—when she asked me, I thought there's no person I'd rather go with to do something like that. It was absolutely profound and distressing to see. I've created a song about it and really sing it everywhere I go because it seems like such an important thing to be talking about."

One thing that amazed us was our constant state of complete distress and hysterical laughter because the situation was so absurd. It was like we were in a bardo of the absurd. In Fort McMurray—known locally as "Fort McMoney" because of all the wealth being generated from this destruction—corporations like Suncor from the United States and Europe have erected massive billboards proclaiming messages like "Suncor: Leaving the Land Better Than We Found It." They promote this fantasy that they'll plant trees and rebuild the landscape, while you're standing there looking at the devastation thinking, "What parallel universe are we in?"

I remember driving along those enormous lakes filled with toxic effluent—the lethal chemicals pumped from the extraction process that they simply don't know where else to put. Sometimes these waste ponds are contained by nothing more than earthen dams. This area sits directly on the flyway of ducks, geese, and other migratory birds. If they touch down on these poisonous waters, they can't get up again. The companies have tried various solutions—cannons to scare away the birds—but nothing works effectively.

The complexity of the situation became clear when we held events in Edmonton and Calgary and met people who actually worked in the tar sands. There are many jobs to be had. I remember during one event, a worker raised his hand to share his story. Many workers there are heavily drugged—crack is a massive problem because working in what can only be described as a hell zone, going in for days at a time, is unbearable without chemical escape.

The social infrastructure of the entire region has been destroyed. This isn't simply a matter of environmentalism versus a pristine economy—it's the complete unraveling of community life. There's no affordable housing because prices have skyrocketed. People who have lived there for generations can no longer afford to stay. Meanwhile, young men with suddenly massive incomes have no culture, nothing meaningful to do with their time or money. Prostitution, drug addiction, and crime rates have exploded through the roof.

This is the whole complex of interdependence made devastatingly clear.

The last thing I'll share before singing is a moment of profound recognition. We had rented a car to drive around, and I remember stopping to fill up with gas after our flyover. Standing at that pump, having just

witnessed the source of that fuel, I felt the complete interconnection of cause and effect with piercing clarity. It was the most poignant moment of my life in terms of understanding how we're all part of this system and how the solution must come through all of us.

The area is so vast it can be seen from outer space. Most of this extracted tar is destined for the United States. So breathe with this. Breathe it through your heart.

Thank you, and thank each other.

I want to call your attention to something I feel strongly about, so I'm going to stand up. Please observe and notice how far the concerns you've just shared extend beyond your personal ego. Notice how what you've been experiencing and expressing reaches far beyond your individual needs and wants. Just notice this, because it reveals something vital about who and what you are.

It shows that you are capable of suffering with your world. To suffer with—this is the literal meaning of compassion. You are compassionate beings.

This recognition is crucial in modern American culture, which tends to reduce people's distress over social and ecological conditions to personal pathology. Again and again, this suffering is interpreted through the lens of individual biography—some hypersensitivity, childhood trauma, hormonal fluctuations, or other personal failing. As James Hillman pointed out in "100 Years of Psychotherapy and the World's Getting Worse," this reductionism serves to silence people.

While I owe a personal debt to psychotherapy, it's essential not to fall into this cultural trap. This is precisely how people get silenced. So recognize this truth: it takes courage to suffer with our world.

It takes courage not to be afraid of the suffering of the world. You're evincing a strength. And you are actually—that's the definition, is it not, of the bodhisattva, the one of the boundless heart. Hi, bodhisattvas.

So I would like to close this morning with a poem, and then we'll have some announcements from Sean before we go to lunch. This is a poem that has meant a great deal to me. It honors the great pain that we're in and the darkness that we're in, and also how it can transform us and take us into our true nature and our identity as life on earth.

So it's from Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*—it's the last one:

Quiet friend who has come so far, feel how your breathing makes more space around you. Let this darkness be a bell tower and you the bell. And as you ring, what batters you becomes your strength.

Move back and forth into the change. What's it like, this intensity of pain? If the drink is bitter, turn yourself to wine.

In this uncontainable night, be the mystery at the crossroads of your senses, the meaning discovered there. And if the world has ceased to hear you, say to the silent earth: I flow. To the rushing water speak: I am.

Thank you for listening.

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