For the Sake of Life on Earth, Part 2

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 42:29

I also would like to announce that I'll be available during the break this mid-afternoon—I'd be happy to sign books. At the end of the afternoon, I have to scoot out of here very fast to go to a birthday party. Good reason, isn't that a good reason?

So, my friends, we are coming around the spiral. We started in the East this morning, being grounded in gratitude. It's our birthright to be alive. Then we move into honoring our pain for the world. That part of it is absolutely essential. It's like the hinge of the work that reconnects.

We have to just know in our bodies that we won't be broken by the fear or grief that we carry for the world, that this is the most natural thing in the world. It's like we are a living cell inside the living body of earth. And if that larger body is being traumatized, it is only healthy and right for us to feel that too. Otherwise we're disconnected. So if you want to reconnect, if you want to make a difference in this world—and that is what your deepest desire is, isn't that so?

Having been honoring—and you could stay there all week, you realize that. My goodness, we have all sorts of ways we can cry and thump and scream and beat our chest, all kinds of things. But the main thing in this honoring our pain for the world is to simply not be afraid of it.

And you can never fully cathart it. You can't purge it out by all kinds of cathartic processes because then the very next minute there's something else that you're seeing, beholding, experiencing in our world. So you're never finished with the pain for the world. You're going to feel more tomorrow. But you won't be afraid of it. And you'll learn how to see what it really is, how it really is the boundless heart of the bodhisattva, how it really is a gift of this extended awareness.

And pretty soon you see that this, whether you're experiencing it as sorrow or as dread or as outrage—that's a big one for me—anger, confusion, doubt, etc., that these are not reducible to the self-interest of the little ego. They are grounded in your connectedness with the world.

So think of it as a two-sided coin: your pain for the world, whatever flavor it's coming in for you—despair or rage or sorrow—is simply one side of the coin, and the other side of the coin is your love for the world. And if you try to anesthetize yourself against one, the other gets numbed out too. Isn't that so?

Just don't try to carry it all by yourself. Because what's going on now is, I like the phrase of a teacher of mine, David Corton, great economist, he calls it the great unraveling. It's the unraveling under the pressure of the industrial growth society, which is constructed—it has to grow. That means it has to keep extracting resources out of the body of earth, turning them into goods, weapons, and waste, and then

dumping them out on the earth.

It's been a good twenty years that we have known that we're taking the resources out of the earth faster than they can be renewed. And maybe we didn't get it in our minds, but we got it in our psyches. We got it in our sense of things. And that we are at the other end—and it's a pretty short little passage because of the built-in obsolescence. So we dump, and we are dumping things into the earth faster than they can be absorbed. And that's becoming clear to us. That both the source and the sink, we've gone far beyond already.

But we continue to treat the earth as a supply house and a sewer. And as long as we do hold that thought in our mind, we can do all the activism and all the organizing and it won't make any difference.

We have to change our view of the larger body of which we are a part. First of all, to see it as our larger body. And that this is not a supply house and a sewer. This is the sacred living earth—mother, father, lover. This is our larger body, and every society and every tradition worth its salt has always steered itself by prayers and thanksgiving and tending and stories that breed that understanding in us.

You're alive now at a wonderful time when you are going to be participating in our culture's getting back to that absolutely life-saving apprehension of what we are.

So guess what? We've come to the part in this spiral, which we call seeing with new eyes, where we enjoy training and experiencing the ways we can embody this understanding. And it takes some deconditioning. It's not enough for any of us to go to a lecture—whether it's Deepak Chopra or Fritjof Capra—and for them to say, "This is a living earth." You have to practice it. You have to know it. And that actually is not onerous. It's a joy, a continual joy. We're coming home.

So we're going to be going outside for a little deconditioning work. First I've got a couple of poems. I'm giving you poems because the song we had planned is waiting for somebody I'm dying to meet to come and sing with Jennifer. But we're cool. We're totally relaxed.

I remember the day in the 1950s when I was standing on a snowy day in a bookstore near the university. I saw this little cloth-bound book, *Das Stundenbuch*, the book of hours by Rainer Maria Rilke, and I opened it and saw the second poem.

Ich lebe mein Leben in wachsenden Ringen, die sich über die Dingen ziehen. Vielleicht werde ich letzten nicht vollbringen, aber versuchen werde ich ihn. Ich kreise um Gott, um den uralten Turm, und ich kreise Jahrtausende lang. Und ich weiß noch nicht, bin ich ein Falke? Ein Sturmer? Oder ein großer Gesang.

I live my life in widening circles that reach out across the world. I may not complete this last one, but I give myself to it. I've been circling around God, around the great mystery, the primordial tower for thousands of years. And I still don't know: Am I a falcon, a storm, or a great song?

Well, that just took the top right off my head. And all of a sudden I saw that I was not a spiritual failure.

That the many connections I'd felt, the many voices I'd heard, the many teachings I'd received, the many times I'd flown with the birds—all of that was really important for this little Protestant girl.

It is our opportunity now in this hyper-individualized society—this hyper-individualism that serves late capitalism very well—to recognize that we consider ourselves to be separate, and that all we can be sure about is "this is me inside this bag of skin and I better take care of number one." I've got to make sure she's got enough of what she needs. I've got to push away what threatens. Maybe I better improve her, make her look pretty, and so on.

It is this concern with defending or improving or enhancing the separate self that is really a strong driving engine in the capitalist economy. It breeds dissatisfaction because you're never enough.

you can never satisfy that self. Because, as the Buddha pointed out, you can't satisfy something that doesn't really exist.

So we come then in this part of the spiral to the second weapon or tool of the Shambhala warrior—that insight into the radical interdependence of all things. This was the core teaching of Gautama the Buddha. And they say it was the core teaching of all the Buddhas because when people, as centuries passed, found that the Buddha's teachings and practices were so wonderful and so useful and so helpful, that they must have been part of the fabric of reality even before Gautama Siddhartha. And so they imagined that there were other Buddhas that appeared at other times. Why not? And this was something—this was the key teaching of all of them.

That we are not separate. That we are made of relationships. That we change from moment to moment because of that. That we grow strong through our regard and connections with others and with the web of life. Learning to see the world as exquisitely precious, like one's only child, like one's dearest partner and lover, like one's mother—like one's larger self.

And every spiritual tradition has wrestled with this question of what do you do with this first person singular? What do you do with this I? Always talking, always wanting, always insisting. What do you do? You can mortify it. You can punish it. You can work to improve it. You can sacrifice it. So in all the different spiritual currents and streams and rivers of spirituality there were these different ways of imagining how you could tame or get on top of or kill this sense of the separate ego, this self-interest and this pride.

But what's distinctive—what just blew me away about the Buddha's teaching—is he didn't say mortify it, sacrifice it, improve it, make it noble, make it gorgeous. He just said, see through it. It's just a convention. It doesn't really exist as a self-existent permanent being. So see through it, and then see what you're really, really a part of. And that you don't have to knock yourself out or make applications or submit your curriculum vitae: "I want to belong to Earth. Let's see, what do I deserve to do that? Well, let's see, I was a Girl Scout," or whatever. But that belonging comes with you—it is most deeply what you are.

Well, that saves us a lot of worry.

Let me read you a teaching by an Australian Aboriginal, because as Jennifer said, the Native peoples are so wise in indigenous people's wisdom on our relationship to our world. And I'll read you some lines by Big Bill Neji. He has recently died. He was an Aboriginal from the Kakadu area in northern Australia. And you may think it's written in his speech—I'm not making it up.

"Well, I'll tell you about this story, about a story where you feel laying down. Tree, grass, star. Because star and tree working with you. We got blood pressure, but same thing. You're working with you. Even nice windy blow, having a sleep because that spirit is with you.

Listen carefully to this because you can hear me. I'm telling you, Earth, just like mother or father or brother of you, that tree, same thing. Your body, my body, I suppose, I'm same as you, anyone, tree working while you're sleeping and dream.

This story, he can listen carefully. He can listen slow. If you're in city, well, I suppose lots of houses, you can't hardly look this star. But maybe be one night you look. Have a look, star, because that's the feeling. String, blood, through your body. That star, he working there, see?"

He's working there. I can see him. Some of them are so small you can hardly see them. Always at night, if you lie down and look carefully, he's working, you see? When you sleep, your blood is pumping. I love this tree because he loves me too. He's watching me, same as you. Tree, he's working with your body, my body. He's working with us. While you sleep, he's working. In daylight, when you're walking around, he's working too.

That tree, that grass—they're all like our father. This dirt, this earth—I sleep with this earth. Grass is just like your brother. In my blood, in my arm, this grass, this dirt exists for us because we'll be dead. We'll be going to this earth. This is the story now. This is the story now. This is the story now and always.

We are not separate from our world. We are birthed from our world. As that young man at Rocky Flats said—we are utterly... Oh, that was the line I couldn't remember. He said, "My brothers, we go forth to flourish or perish because we are utterly of this world and the world is utterly of us."

So we're going to go out and listen to our world. We're going to go out in pairs. Listen and feel and look, smell. You're going to go out two by two. Outside, you can put on your shoes or go barefoot, but we're going to be outside the whole time. Put on your shoes—I don't want you to be worried about what rattlesnakes you're going to step on.

The shorter one will close their eyes first. Once you're outside, you will have a period of ten minutes when you will be the guide or the guided one. The guided one keeps their eyes closed, and this is done in silence. Then we walk.

When you close the dominant sense, you know what happens. The sound, the smell, the texture, the air on

your face—everything else kicks in. You feel like you're a virgin to this world, that you're just going out and feeling it as if for the first time. As the guide, I'll be sure that you're safe and guide you to a place where you can maybe touch something. I might put your hand there—oh, that's a living object. Or the trunk of a tree. Or the grass on the ground.

I might pick up something—there might be a dead leaf there and I might have you hear it crinkle. I might have you smell it. So it becomes a feast of the senses where you're experiencing your adherence in the living body of earth.

Every once in a while, maybe five or six times in your span of ten minutes of guiding, you will place your guided one in front of something that you'd like them to see and then say, "Open your eyes and look in the mirror, and you see yourself." That's what all the poets and mystics say—that you can learn to move in the world as if it were yourself, your larger body, as it is indeed. You're always home.

So once you get out there, I'll ring the bell. You can start right away, obviously, but I'll ring the bell after ten minutes or so, and what you do then is change roles.

We come now to the last station on the spiral of the work that reconnects. Having grounded and centered and opened ourselves in gratitude for life, for the chance to be alive in this amazing world—with being breathed by life, with senses that can apprehend and receive messages, able to listen, to see, to hear, to communicate, to touch, to plot and plan, to be alive—praise be. Hallelujah.

And then with that fullness inside us, we know that we're not just some living abstraction, but we're in a flesh and blood world where things are being torn and bruised and unraveled, where great things are being invented and created—art and music and new perceptions and new thoughts—and great unraveling at the same time. This is the world that we have chosen, or that has chosen us. We're here.

And so we are not going to be afraid of the suffering that comes along with that. We practice that too. We saw that the suffering reminds us—it's proof positive, each time we remember to think it, remember to see it that way—that we are connected. We are bodhisattvas. We are Shambhala warriors. Threads in a tapestry of life.

And life calls to us, always surprising. A year ago, Jennifer didn't know that she'd fall in love with the Yukon River and the Yukon River would love her back and give her this song. New stuff arising all the time.

So we see with new eyes. We throw open the windows and doors of our being. And there's so much to feed that in this time—the ancient currents of indigenous teachings, the science of our time. Systems theory has been particularly powerful for me. And oh, the Buddha Dharma.

So now we come to the going forth, and we allow some glee and appetite to arise in us. Wait till we get out there. Oh, what we're going to do.

We've got to remember certain things. Some of the good remembering comes in a poem I love—a good going forth poem, of course, from the Book of Hours. The poet imagines that God is talking, which is interesting because Rilke was not much of a theist. He was kind of turned off on Christianity. But the fact that he didn't like the theology to which he was subjected as a child—he didn't let that in any way close him off to the mystery and the beauty at the heart of life.

You must nourish that surprise you feel every morning as you wake up and look at the world as if you're looking into your lover's face.

Here's the poem. God speaks to each of us as he makes us, then walks with us silently out of the night. These are the words we dimly hear:

"You, sent out beyond your recall, go to the limits of your longing. Embody me.

"Flare up like flame and make big shadows I can move in. Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final.

"Don't let yourself lose me. Nearby is the country they call life. You will know it by its seriousness.

"Give me your hand."

Let me share that again. "You, sent out beyond your recall." It's too late now. You're already on stage. You can't go back. You're here, here, here. You are of this world utterly. Too late to check out.

"You, sent out beyond your recall, go to the limits of your longing. Embody me. Flare up like flame and make big shadows I can move in. Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final. Don't let yourself lose me. Nearby is the country they call life. You will know it by its seriousness. Give me your hand."

So remember that. Just keep going. You don't need to approve of everything that's happening. Just don't stop.

This was sent to me yesterday—a newspaper from a farmer's market co-op in Santa Barbara. An interviewer once suggested to César Chávez that he might be a fanatic. "I am," he responded. "Those are the only ones who get anything done."

The writer, who appears to be a teacher at UC Santa Barbara, continues: "I often recall this exchange when I hear talk of walking the middle road or the middle way for the sake of our suffering planet. It's as if the bold and tenacious approach is by nature too radical, misguidedly fanatic."

"Now it seems to me that we preach the middle way to let ourselves off the hook. We don't care to do the work of disenthralling ourselves from assumptions, of examining the worthiness of our jobs, of going with a lot less, of changing our day-to-day habits, of cheerfully tolerating a little discomfort. No, we don't want to do that. So we glibly invoke the middle path, good and proud of our own reasonableness. And we

continue to live more or less like we always have and sleep at night, relatively untroubled. Meanwhile, the world of nature literally dissolves—dissolving, as they say, offstage, out of sight, almost as a rumor."

But whoever told us that the changes that are needed are supposed to be middling? If that sounds like an echo of the Buddha's middle way, it should be remembered that the Buddha's middle is modernity's extreme. After all, here was a man, and God bless him for it, who exhorted followers to cease travel during rainy season to avoid stepping on surfacing worms.

As many reading these words already know—and he probably would be amazed to know that I am reading it to such a distinguished collection of people—changing for the sake of our world is often difficult. It is anathema to the wallet and to the status quo. But as the many who are struggling to make these changes will surely attest, there is satisfaction in such sea changing and pleasure too: the satisfaction of entering through the narrow gate, the pleasure that can abound in the single gourd life.

"Angels began shining," Rumi sings, "when they achieved discipline." Get a load of that! You rarely hear the words angel and discipline in the same sentence, but let's put them there. Each one of us could use some discipline. That's how open systems self-organize—through constraints. Angels began shining when they achieved discipline.

"Life was hard," a Navajo elder once said, "but we lived it gloriously." Sacrifice, Gandhi teaches, is making sacred.

The aim of this is to summon up the blood and make you ready for extreme actions—to be ready to take your desires for the self-healing of our world seriously. Be ready to take your dreams for a just, sustainable society seriously. We can do it. Why do we want to settle for anything less? Do we dare to take our dreams and wishes seriously? It's hard to do without others, hard to do alone without linking arms with some others in your neighborhood, in your town, in your life.

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