



In Memory of  
Rob Burbea  
**Dharmachari  
Satyadasa**

Rob Burbea, who died aged 54 earlier this month, was a Dharma teacher loved and valued by many of us in the Triratna community. His clear teachings on emptiness and the imaginal may prove to be of great significance for the development of Dharma traditions in the West.

Rob was steeped in the Insight meditation tradition in the USA and Europe. He was also, among other things, a classical and jazz pianist, a climate activist and a lover of Jewish and Christian mysticism. I met Rob just once on a Buddhafield Yatra in 2003, a year before he took up residence as a teacher at Gaia House. His sensitivity, playfulness and sheer love of the Dharma was evident in the short talks he gave around the campfire after a days walking.

For many though, their first encounter with Rob was in his seminal book *Seeing That Frees*, published in 2014. After a startling chapter laying out the connections between Samadhi and Insight practice, the reader is guided deep into the heart of emptiness and dependent arising. In his inimitable

prose - gentle, precise and inviting of personal exploration - Rob sets out what he had discovered about how to use the wisdom teachings with skill, subtlety and without limiting the profundity of the Buddha's core teaching to any single conception. *Seeing That Frees* joins up the dots and has become a classic manual for practitioners, one to take on a solitary retreat and really soak up.

What people might not know is that Rob struggled with finishing his book and not only because he had a heavy teaching round at Gaia House and many students to meet. By 2012 he had already begun on a new phase in his practice and thought. He said his experience of Dharma practice left various important questions unanswered. After all, one cannot spend all one's time in the realm of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, can one? Rob had turned his attention to the much broader and possibly more vital matter of how we really breathe life or soulfulness into our Dharma practice, in an age

which is dominated by modernist, reductionist and materialist assumptions about reality.

Such questions will be familiar territory for those of us grown up in the Triratna tradition founded by Sangharakshita. He too was unusually insistent in stressing the need for a wide scale re-imagining of the Buddha and a re-animation of our understanding of the human in relation to the wider Cosmos.

Sangharakshita taught that art was a spiritual path, that myth and ritual were necessary to engage the full range of our human potential and that imagination is an integral spiritual faculty. So pronounced was his syncretic approach, drawing on sources from East and West, that it led some people to wonder if he was really a Buddhist.

Rob Burbea went even further in stepping outside classical Buddhist terminology, including notions of soul, divinity, eros and even God in his teaching. He delighted in exploring and exposing what he saw as Buddhist dogmas that have taken root, particularly in the West, or at least pointing out the limitations of

those views, as well as the ways in which they can usefully be taken up. For example, he thought the cultivation of “bare attention” and the cessation of prapañca was certainly a fruitful practice, but naive if conceived of as the goal of Buddhist practice, especially if one also believes that to have bare attention of sensory objects is coterminous with experiencing things “as they really are”.

One of Rob’s favourite pastimes was to unpick and expose the secular worldview fostered by materialistic science, which he saw as founded on beliefs, usually unexplored, and then to show in turn how these beliefs were shaping how many of us conceive of and limit the Dharma. Speaking personally, it has taken me 20 years to really open up to how conditioned I am by my secular education and upbringing and I expect I’ve hardly begun that journey. Scientific materialism has defined truth as objective truth for such a long time now that other ways of knowing - such as imagination, myths, poetry, dreams - are denigrated to a merely

subjective and unreal status. Thus many of us have grown up with an uneasy relationship to all that. In the talks and retreats he gave and which are freely available online, Rob showed how many people come to the Dharma with an atrophied imaginal capacity. He encouraged his students to reclaim the realm of the Imaginal. He reasoned that if the core Dharma teachings of emptiness are sufficiently realised, then one sees that any perception or conception of reality is neither finally real nor unreal. That being so, one is free to take up different conceptions and images and even fantasies, so that one could, in one of his favourite expressions, “entertain the possibility” of angels, for example.

Apparently some people saw Rob’s teaching and even Rob as dangerous. On one level at least, that is surely correct. Rob exposed underlying views. Who among us can say they’ve never found it uncomfortable when our clinging to a teaching or a conception of practice is exposed? The Buddha himself was surely a dangerous man to be around

for the same reason. But maybe Rob was dangerous in another sense also. In the West and in other parts of the world, the Dharma is finding new forms. Any form of practice is always particular, with particular institutions and ways of doing things, as well as a common language and broadly shared understanding of practice flowing from a lineage of teachers. The form is what defines a tradition and we love our traditions and quite rightly hold them precious. How will it be if we all start bringing in angels, unicorns and the Virgin Mary or whatever pops up in our imagination after a morning meditation? Pandaemonium!

Rob was the first to admit that his teachings weren't for everyone or even necessary. So long as there was eros, love, a movement of the soul, it doesn't matter what you call it or whether you even know it's there. He wasn't trying to start a new religion. Yet for many people he voiced a crucial insight: that the profound teachings of emptiness give rise to the possibility of holding different perspectives on reality

for different purposes and cultivating a range of qualities which enrich and deepen the journey of life. I don't know how to reconcile the creative tensions between innovation and tradition. Maybe it's always just a tension. However, I do know I'm grateful to Rob for his teachings and his way of teaching. They have expanded and enriched the way I practice and conceive of practice and I'm sure they have impacted many individuals and communities beyond Gaia House and beyond even the Buddhist Sangha.

Rob died of cancer after several years of treatment. Despite his suffering, or maybe because of it, he poured out teachings during long retreats all this time. His body was buried in the grounds of Sharpham House, in a rolling green meadow leading down to the River Dart. We might think that Rob died too young or that his later teachings needed more time to develop, or another book maybe. But I can hear Rob questioning our views and reminding us that everything depends on the way we look at it.

*Satyadasa, May 30 2020*