An Ecology of Love (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 35:35

So again, in terms of this dynamic—this ecology of love—the eros, the erotic component in love, will tend to insist and push and open in a way that creates more, discovers more, or really both, in an object that it allows. In the case of nature, it will impregnate it, so to speak, through its involvement with psyche, giving imaginal levels to the perception of the object of nature, of another. It will fabricate more, give complexity and richness and depth and dimensionality to nature, in this case to the earth or some particular object there.

In that process, Eros is encountering, so to speak, a new object—a bigger object, a more interesting and richer, more juicy, complex, multidimensional object. It encounters a more multidimensional and rich and eventually divine, sacred sense of experience of nature, in this case of its other, and that excites Eros more. So there's this mutual enriching, mutual deepening, mutual expanding, and with that the logos too—the concept—has to expand as well.

Now, there are a couple of things to point out about this, perhaps addressing some objections.

First, the psyche, through Eros, is giving these other dimensions. We could realize that the psyche is giving these other dimensions to nature, to Earth, and it knows it. As I've said in other talks, seeing image as image, or realizing what is, this is poetic seeing, poetic sensibility, and poetic knowing.

That's why I use both words: the psyche and the perception, through Eros and this dynamic, both discover more in the object—other levels in the object—but they also create that. They discover and create. There's some way of understanding that incorporates both discovery and creation. It's both/and.

Somehow sitting on the cusp there, what allows us to sit on the cusp and include both in our sense of what knowledge is and what happens when we know and encounter something—when we experience anything, what happens in perception—is an understanding of emptiness. It's an understanding of emptiness that allows this "discover/create" experience, this incorporation of both.

I'm not talking here about a kind of New Age style of understanding where typically, or so it seems to me, there's just an assumption that what one perceives or conceives in terms of how I look at this plant is some kind of objective, independently existing reality where there isn't an awareness of fabrication, of fabricating in a certain way—the fabrication of perception that's always there. Or there isn't an awareness of choosing to see and to sense in a certain way. So it's not really talking about that New Age way, nor really talking about the modernist way of understanding what knowledge is and what perception is, where there's an assumption of an objective independent reality—just very different versions of what that

is.

In and through everything I'm talking about, there is what I believe and conceive to be a more sophisticated philosophy—a philosophy of knowledge, of epistemology and ontology, what's real, and all that. Something more sophisticated in terms of depth of insight is going on. It's allowed from the Dharma direction through the deep understanding of emptiness.

So what opens here in terms of these other dimensions and the multiplicity of dimensions in our perception of nature, our sense of nature, is a valid way of knowing. We realize the psyche is somehow giving this to its object that it loves, to the sense of nature. But it's still a valid way of knowing. And it's valuable. And it gives value. But there's not a naive realism involved there in any direction. There's something quite sophisticated—a razor's edge between, a razor's edge of emptiness, really. And that allows, although a razor's edge is of course very thin, an enormity of view, an enormity of view.

So that's one thing that needs realizing.

A second thing: someone might be hearing all this, especially if you've been exposed to a lot of traditional Dharma teachings, and might get quite nervous hearing all this. The very word "eros" and its connotations of sexuality and desire and sensuality and all that, and its associations with these things—well, when is this eros business, and especially the more in eros, the pothos in eros, when does that not just become greed? And greed in traditional Dharma conception is just a kilesa. It's a defilement, it's a problem, it causes suffering for self and others.

So this is a really important question: What is it that sometimes constrains or subverts or distorts Eros so that it actually becomes greed, and the more in it—the wanting more, the pothos—just ends up being endless greed?

Well, there's a lot to say about this. One answer is: when the psyche or the imaginal or the logos or the conceptual framework—either one or both—are limited in some way, then this actually constrains and subverts the eros, and it will become greed.

One obvious example is if the logos—if the conceptual framework of nature—is just one of one-dimensional physicalism, that kind of view that's the dominant view of modernism: nothing but meaningless matter, atoms, building blocks, as we talked about before, randomly moving, and through that random movement, like some kind of machine, creates what it creates in terms of the diversities of nature. One-dimensional physicalism, that kind of view, is actually a limited logos.

And what happens then in relationship to nature? What happens is that the eros that's part of the psyche, that is an indispensable aspect of the psyche, becomes greed. Then you get the growth economy gone mad without realizing or wanting to acknowledge the finiteness of the Earth's resources, the finiteness of the biosphere, the finiteness of what we live in.

Back in the early 70s, I think in '72, there was a seminal paper by the Club of Rome called "Limits to Growth." It was actually just pointing out: hey, we live on a finite planet materially. There's a limit to what our atmosphere can handle. There's a limit to material resources that we can dig up out of the earth.

Really, really important to recognize that and to voice that. And when greed's gone mad, it doesn't want to see that. There's this insistence that the economy must grow—that there's only one way of thinking about economics, and that the economy needs to grow. Well, there are limits to growth. So that's really, really important.

But in a way, part of the problem with that, or a whole other level of the problem, is that because of the one-dimensionality of view and perception of what nature, earth, planet, we, and others are, there's nowhere for the eros and the psyche and the logos to expand. There's nowhere to get more, this wanting more. There's nowhere to get more other than at the horizontal level, because the horizontal level is all that exists. There is just the material.

So whether it's an individual wanting more—more cars, more houses, more this, more that, more plasma TVs, whatever it is—individual materialism in that sense of lifestyle, or social materialism, this expansion to get more, it can only go horizontal. It must expand because of the more in the eros. And it can only expand horizontally, with devastating consequences.

But if this whole dynamic of eros, psyche, logos is allowed—each aspect of that dynamic, the eros, the psyche, the logos, the erotic, the imaginal, and the conceptual—if those dimensions of our being in relation to nature, or in relation to anything, are allowed to grow, are not impeded, not hindered or constrained or locked down through some kind of clinging or fixedness of image or fixedness of view, then there can be a kind of infinite growth, an infinite growth getting more, discovering more, having more of what eros wants—an infinite growth in that sense, without the greed on the material level.

So there are limits on the material level, of course there are. But if the soul's way of knowing—if the facets of this dynamism of eros, psyche, logos, of the erotic, the imaginal, and the conceptual aspects of the soul—if the facets of the dynamism of the soul, facets of that dynamism of perception, of the soul's way of knowing, facets of that ecology of love, if they are allowed to expand unhindered, unimpeded by a kind of fixation in terms of view or image or idea, then eros can expand as it wants to, and thrust deeper as it wants to, and open more as it wants to, without demanding more, without its more being a demand on the material level, because it's able to get other kinds of more—more at other dimensions and levels of perception, and other levels of fulfillment, of beauty, of nourishment.

You understand?

Actually, maybe another example would help to make it clearer—this connection between limitations on view, idea, logos, sense, and also on psyche or image. The way limitations on view distort or deflect eros into greed.

Another example I'm thinking may be more helpful, probably because it's more tangible in one's own life, visible in one's own personal life, at least to some extent—maybe more fundamental. I'm not sure anyway. Another example is the way we can see this working: I'm thinking of the tendency we can get into as human beings sometimes, that can actually dominate our relationship to existence. The tendency to be driven to accumulate experiences, to collect experiences. People talk quite commonly about having a "bucket list"—a bucket list of things to do or experience before I die. That's quite a common notion that people have in their life, even from quite a young age.

Or more specifically with regard to earth and nature, and not necessarily in relation to dying, we can see sometimes people get into this tendency to want to fly all over the world. Every year or several times a year, flying here or there, going on holiday or calling it traveling, to see and experience this place or that place all around the world.

So what's going on with the eros there? Notice a few things here. Because, let's take that example of going on holiday to this place and that. The eros there actually includes, actually even emphasizes the sensual, what we might call the sensual. So typically a person wants to travel to this place, experience the cuisine there—exotic cuisine, despite the fact that you can get most of this stuff in Tesco these days, or your local corner store, if you still have a corner store. But there's this sensual element through the cuisine, through experiencing certain sights or colors of a sunset in this place, or the vistas—to experience this beach or swim in this place or that place, whatever. The dimension of the sensual is definitely included and even emphasized.

So it can seem, if we don't really probe deeply this whole question of eros and what it is and what it does, it can seem like that whole movement to want to do all that includes the erotic and is indicative of someone who has a kind of fuller eros in their life—not just sexual, but in terms of their relationship with sensuality.

But the eros, psyche, logos dynamic is often limited when there's that kind of propulsion, pull, drive to collect experiences. Particularly, the logos can be limited. As I said, oftentimes it's a one-dimensional view of earth, of nature, of materiality—also self, and we'll get to that. But the logos is limited. Often it's through a one-dimensional view. And so the more in the eros, the pothos in the eros, this wanting more, will just go out and out and out and turn into greed. I want more and more, and more and more can only go one place. Next year we'll go there. In the spring we'll go there.

You can see this pattern not just in relation to holidaying and traveling, but with food, consumption—truly with anything. This reveals something crucial about the nature of eros itself.

Notice something important here regarding eros, particularly in how psyche interacts with it. The usual assumption is that fantasy combined with eros spells trouble—a disastrous recipe leading inevitably to pornography and other distortions. We quickly conclude that eros is problematic, fantasy is problematic, and their combination even more so.

But in these examples we're exploring, what we're actually encountering is either an absence or, more precisely, a poverty of the imaginal—a psychic impoverishment in relationship to eros. When psyche encounters eros in this depleted state, there's no opening, no revealing, no discovery of other dimensions. The vertical dimension simply doesn't open. Things remain resolutely one-dimensional in our perception, our belief, our very sense of reality.

The sense of things fails to open through the imaginal, through psyche. Consequently, the pathos within eros continues wanting more, but it has only one direction available—horizontal accumulation. This impoverished relationship, this poverty of psyche in relation to eros, becomes deeply problematic. The issue isn't that imagination works with eros, but rather the quality of that relationship.

The real problem emerges when fantasy or image becomes locked onto and believed as literal—when we don't know image as image, don't see image as image. Related to this is our wholesale acceptance of the modernist ideal of non-fantasy in perception. We embrace a kind of realism that remains stubbornly one-dimensional. This dismissal of fantasy through rigid logos impoverishes the imaginal, cutting off the psychic influx and interaction with eros.

In all these ways, we see limitations, constrictions, and rigidities in logos, and corresponding restrictions in psyche. When both are constrained, eros inevitably gets deflected and distorted into what we might call greed—something ultimately unhelpful.

Let me draw out a third, quite subtle point about how eros operates here. Often when people speak today about reclaiming or rediscovering a sense of the sacred—particularly in relation to nature—there's an implicit assumption that perceiving nature as sacred naturally leads to respect, which then inhibits certain exploitative or commodifying behaviors. This inhibitive function of sacred perception is genuinely important, and I want to include it in understanding how eros works.

But there's something subtly different happening when we recognize that eros, allowed to flow freely through unrestricted psyche and logos, opens a natural dynamic for the soul. Rather than operating through inhibition born of respect, eros becomes naturally channeled to receive what it seeks in ways that are neither exploitative nor commodifying. The natural dynamic arising through the interplay of eros, psyche, and logos opens the sense of sacredness so that behavior transforms organically—not through any kind of inhibition, but because eros is allowed full expression while receiving what it desires through the very sense of sacredness itself.

When other levels of perception beyond the one-dimensional open through this co-feeding, co-constellating, co-deepening of eros, psyche, and logos, we discover dimensions that can have their own kind of infinitude. This opening moves through stages or ranges, then opens again and again because none of the three—eros, psyche, or logos—is being limited, constricted, fixed, or rigidified. When this endless movement of expansion is permitted, eros receives the "more" it seeks without exploiting earth, nature, or other in any of the ways I've described, without reducing them to commodities.

This principle applies to relationships with others, with earth and nature, with any sense of otherness. Eros finds its fulfillment in other ways, receiving other kinds of "more" than mere accumulation of experience at the horizontal level. Other dimensions of "more" become not just available but natural. We relate differently because we see differently.

Problems arise only when the co-involvement and co-fertilization of eros, psyche, and logos is blocked or restricted from any direction. When I spoke of the void in our understanding of sacredness and love, the consequences are absolutely devastating.

When any one or more of the erotic, imaginal, or conceptual facets of our being are constrained, limited, fixed, or locked down in relation to anything—whether a partner, spouse, nature, or any object of our attention—when they're not allowed their natural movement and growth and mutual fertilization and impregnation, what happens to our love?

In a relationship or marriage that endures over time, what happens to the love? What happens to our view, sense, and experience of that person or partner? This applies equally to our relationship with ourselves, for eros, psyche, and logos can become locked down or hindered in relation to our self-view. The same is true whether we're relating to the world, to nature, or even to the Dharma itself. What happens when these faculties get stuck, fixed, or hindered in relation to our view and sense of what the Dharma is, or what eros is, or what the soul and psyche are, or what conceptuality and its possibilities might be?

What happens to the love, to the very sense, experience, and view of whatever it is we actually care about? There can still be tremendous care—just as in a relationship where I care deeply about this person. Yet something has shifted over time. The eros has dissipated. Something has locked it down, stagnated it, or drained its life. Something in that fertile dynamic, that mutual involvement of eros, psyche, and logos and their capacity to impregnate each other and grow together—something has become stuck. This affects how I see my partner, how I see nature, how I see myself, how I see the Dharma. The care remains, but something has become limited. A level of vitality, enrichment, and growth has vanished from that relationship, from that perception, from that love.

If we dare speak of something as bold as the fullness of love—which is probably not even a possibility but rather a direction we move toward—we can point to several essential qualities. As I mentioned before, it needs not just feeling but action. The fullness of love must manifest in our behavior: what comes from our mouth, what the body does, our gestures, our acts of kindness.

The fullness of love needs not just metta but also eros. Both metta and eros—among other aspects of love we could explore—have a natural tendency toward horizontal spreading, toward fullness across the breadth of experience. Metta spreads by virtue of its very aspiration; its ideal image is universal, unconditional extension to everything and everyone. Eros also spreads through that mutual impregnation and growth of eros, psyche, and logos. There's a natural spilling over, an expansion into what I call

cosmopoiesis. The enriched sense and view of whatever we love—a person, for instance—begins spreading outward organically. The psyche and imaginal faculty expand this view, the logos and conceptual framework broaden, the eros grows within that expansion, and this perception naturally spreads horizontally to our environment, to the world, to nature, to the cosmos itself.

The fullness of love, if we allow ourselves to dwell with that possibility, that direction—whether toward a person or toward nature—must involve the heart, of course. But it must also involve soul. By soul, I mean what I'm using interchangeably with psyche: the imaginal faculty and the logos, the conceptual framework, the conceiving of what it is that we love.

Fullness of love involves not just heart but soul as well—psyche, imagination, logos, the imaginal dimension, and the conception of what we love. Through the involvement of soul, the vertical dimension opens, along with the multiplicity of other dimensions of perception. This involvement of soul is part of the fullness of love, a necessary aspect alongside heart.

Metta and eros accomplish this opening in slightly different ways, moving in different directions. Metta opens the vertical dimensions in a more universal way. The divinity there is more universal, with a simplification of objects leading toward unity and oneness.

Whereas eros retains the particulars in its sense of the divine. It complicates, it fabricates, and it retains the particularities.

And again, if we stay with that fullness of love—the fullness of love related to what we just said and this whole dynamic or ecology of love—fullness of love needs a sense of mystery. The object, the thing, the person that I love, whether it's nature or whatever, it needs to retain a level of the mysterious, a level of unfathomability, of undefinability.

It's almost like that mystery, unfathomability, undefined quality is then space for eros to move into in this expansion—space for eros psyche-logos to move into. It has to be space, like a womb. It has to be space where something can grow, something can get fertilized. And that's also attractive. It gives the pothos in the eros something: "Oh, there's more here. I can probe deeper. I can penetrate deeper. I can open up to more."

Because eros needs to be able to penetrate and to open to more.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.