An Ecology of Love (Part 2)

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Let's explore this more deeply.

As I mentioned, love, though undefinable as a concept, needs to include—or rather, does include—both metta and eros. Let's begin with metta.

I've spoken extensively about metta, and of course we discuss it frequently in the Dharma, so I don't want to dwell too much on this aspect. But let me share a few thoughts about the metta dimension of love.

A couple of obvious points first. Metta is not just a feeling—it's an intention. We intend to wish others well, rather than simply feeling a certain feeling toward someone. This is fundamental, though I've discussed this extensively elsewhere, as have many others.

The second obvious point is that metta needs action. Again, it's not merely a feeling. I may sit on my cushion with my heart feeling juicy, moved, and rich because of the feeling of metta and love—very radiant and expansive feelings—but it needs action. It must translate into our lives through acts of kindness, care, and compassion. This too is something those familiar with the Dharma will have heard before: it's not just a feeling, and it needs action. It's not merely a meditative experience.

The third obvious point is that metta tends to spread out, because what's included in the definition of metta is universality and unconditionality. It spreads out to all beings. When we follow the traditional approach to metta practice—moving through the categories of self, benefactor, friend, neutral person, difficult person, all beings—we're essentially spreading the metta out gradually until everyone, perhaps everything, is included. We're simply making it easier to reach that ideal of universality by breaking the practice into stages.

These are some obvious aspects of metta—important, really important—and they naturally tend to spread out and become universal.

Less obvious about metta, and probably not something one realizes unless one has done an extended metta retreat and learned to work quite skillfully with metta, is that metta tends toward a sense of oneness and equality—certainly of self and other, but actually of all things, of all others. Self, other, and world tend toward unity as you go deeper and deeper into metta, with increasing oneness and equality.

What metta is actually doing is fabricating less perception. This isn't obvious unless you've really engaged in extensive metta practice, learned to work with it skillfully, and come to understand something about meditation and the fabrication of perception. Deep metta practice, as it deepens, fabricates less and less. It

tends toward an unfabricating of perception.

As this process unfolds meditatively—for a practitioner doing dedicated metta practice going deeper and deeper—the view or perception of self, other, world, nature, and so forth goes through a range that corresponds with the decreasing fabrication that comes organically from deepening metta practice.

This range is actually predictable, believe it or not. I can have someone on long-term retreat doing metta, learning to work with it well, and guarantee that at certain points in the process, particular perceptions and experiences will open up for them. Kinds of oneness will emerge.

First, the sense of "me" and "this other" begins to become one—the heart essences begin to fuse into one radiant heart. This is very typical. But even more significantly, and what I want to emphasize now, is that a wider perception of metta will open up at some point. This is all quite predictable. Everything is held in a kind of cosmic love and compassion—universal love and compassion. Everything is taking place within that.

And then, as this deepens further, all is love. The fabric of everything is metta, is compassion. These experiences are, as I said, predictable and common for people who engage in truly dedicated metta practice, going deeper and deeper.

Rarer is for someone to move even beyond this with metta practice, because you need to actually understand something and adjust the approach somewhat. But metta can indeed go beyond even this, into still less fabrication and toward the unfabricated. There's a movement here, a clear trajectory.

There's a range. And as it deepens, we could say there are certain typical pit stop areas, if you like, in the way that perception opens up—very beautiful, very touching, and very important to have those openings and mystical openings of perception.

But they're characterized by being universal and also predictable. As I said, there's a limited number of them that are characteristic on that range.

One of the things about all that—in that spectrum of deepening metta practice and the perceptions that arise from it—is that sometimes what I see is a person can go through all that, feel very touched by it all, deeply and profoundly touched, and yet no engagement or activism comes out of it for them. They don't become engaged Buddhists or really seem to engage much with the whole predicament of environmental crises and climate change.

So all this—everything is love, all universe, all the trees and the grass and the sky, it's all love, it's all one, no separation—somehow there's not the kind of care that comes out of that that results in activism and engagement. That's really interesting to me.

And again, I don't want to dwell too much on the metta aspect of things in this talk. But why is it sometimes not enough? A person's had these wonderful mystical openings, even getting established as

something that's quite regular in their life, and yet somehow something's not coming out of it in relation to the crises that we face in the natural world. Why is that?

Actually, there's probably a lot involved there. But it may be—I just wonder—whether something, because we're talking about a sense of the infinite, this infinite love and the universality of it, it may be that the particular manifestations can be lost from the infinite without any diminishment. One feels then, in that view, in that mystical sense that opens up, that the particular manifestations—whether it's this person or that person, or even myself, or that forest, or whatever—the particular manifestations can be lost from the infinite without diminishing the infinite. That's characteristic of infinity: you can subtract things from infinity and you still get infinity.

Something in the infinity and the universality of the experience means that particular manifestations can be lost from the infinite without diminishing the infinite, so it's okay.

The whole thing, that whole movement, that spectrum of deepening metta, actually moves towards equanimity. Again, people don't always realize this, but deepening metta moves toward deep equanimity. And equanimity is characterized by coolness, by not being perturbed—it uses the word "the imperturbable"—not being disturbed by gain and loss and those kinds of things.

So there's something in this very beautiful mystical movement, this mystical opening of perception, that sometimes can have a cooling effect on activism and engagement. Not to say that that kind of opening of perception isn't beautiful and important for the being and the sense of existence—but sometimes it's not enough to support and stimulate engagement and activism in regards to the natural world.

Okay, so there's metta, and then just touching on that. But what I want to emphasize more in this talk is the eros strand or aspect of love.

So recall this definition that I was starting with, which may have sounded a little strange or unusual, a little un-erotic, actually. Eros is the desire to connect. Let's add one more piece to that definition, because as some ancient Greeks pointed out, always with eros there is pothos. That's another Greek word, p-o-t-h-o-s. And this pothos within the eros—what's characteristic of pothos is it always wants more, more, more. What's beyond? What's next?

So we can expand the definition of eros to the desire to connect more—the wanting, the urge, the intention to connect more.

Now this pothos aspect of eros, this wanting more connection, creates or instigates a dynamic. And this is what I really want to emphasize. It instigates a dynamic of the opening of the perception, of the view, of the erotic object, the other that I love or I'm attracted to—or in this case, nature. It instigates a dynamic of opening up our perception, our view, which again means idea and sense of nature, in a different way.

In other words, it will keep wanting to open up our perception, our sense, our view of nature in different

ways. So it opens up and enriches the sense of the other that I feel this erotic charge with—the other there's this erotic connection with, in this case nature. It opens up and enriches the sense of nature, adds dimensions to it, deepens it, infuses it with image and fantasy.

This is what I want to call giving it a vertical sense. Other dimensions come into our sense, our perception, and our idea of the erotic object, of the other, of nature.

Because of this pothos within the eros, because of what eros involves, it starts involving more of the psyche and the imagination, and that changes the perception.

So when we define eros as—and when we see this is what's happening in an erotic relationship, when there is eros in relation to anything—it's this desire to connect more. Then the eros, we could say, if we flesh out what that means, because it wants to push through and beyond boundaries, manifests in a movement or a desire to penetrate more what it loves, its object. Eros desires, manifests as a movement, a desire to penetrate more—more deeply, more fully.

archetype-laden way, in a way that's more infused with archetypes. So the perception of nature, earth, the natural world begins to get infused with archetypal resonances, archetypal dimensions, archetypal senses.

And this can happen, as I said, at different rates for different people and in different ways. But when there's this erotic involvement with nature, with earth, these archetypal dimensions begin to come alive in the perception. So we might begin to perceive the earth as Mother, capital M, or as the Great Mother. Not just metaphorically - though it includes the metaphorical - but actually sensing, perceiving, feeling into that archetypal dimension of the feminine, of the maternal, of the nourishing, of the holding, of the containing.

Or we might begin to perceive certain places in nature as having what we might call genius loci, the spirit of place. There's something more there than just trees and rocks and soil. There's a presence, there's a being, there's a consciousness that seems to inhabit or be that place. And this isn't just projection in the usual psychological sense, though it involves the psyche. It's actually an opening of perception to dimensions that are there but that we normally don't perceive or conceive.

Or we might begin to sense nature as sacred in ways that go beyond just appreciation or environmental concern. Sacred meaning imbued with divinity, imbued with something holy, something that demands reverence not just because of its beauty or its ecological importance, but because of its intrinsic sacred nature, its inherent holiness.

The land itself, the rivers, the mountains, the forests begin to take on this quality of the sacred. They become ensouled, if you like. They become temples. They become manifestations of the divine. And this happens through this erotic engagement, this erotic opening, this allowing of eros to do its work of connecting more deeply, penetrating more fully, opening more completely.

Sometimes this archetypal infusion happens in more specific ways. A particular tree becomes the World Tree, the axis mundi connecting earth and heaven. A particular body of water becomes the cosmic waters, the primordial source. A cave becomes the womb of the earth, the place of death and rebirth. These aren't just poetic metaphors - though they include poetry - they're actual shifts in perception, actual openings of dimensionality.

And sometimes the archetypal opening happens in more personal ways too. The landscape begins to mirror and speak to the inner landscape of the soul. The seasons become not just climatic changes but profound teachings about the cycles of life and death, growth and decay, the eternal return. The weather becomes the moods and movements of some vast being of which we are a part.

All of this - and I'm just giving a few examples - all of this is what I mean by the vertical dimension opening up through eros. It's the infusion of the perception with dimensions that transcend what we normally think of as the purely physical, the purely material, the purely sensual, though it includes all of that.

a way that's more retaining of particulars, doesn't tend to dissolve particulars in a universal sense.

There's really a range, there's a spectrum of how much things dissolve in the universal and how much the particularity is retained in this opening up and adding of other dimensions to the perception.

So that's one range. Another range is just how obvious or subtle is the manifestation of this. Because some manifestations of this deepening and enriching and sort of complicating of what we love through the eros, some manifestations are so subtle that we may not recognize them. You may not recognize them in your own experience, or it kind of may get lost from what I'm saying. Sometimes it's so subtle. There's a range there from very obvious to very, very subtle.

Let's go into it a little bit. Maybe there's just a vague perception or intuition or sense. Now really that's a key word, sense. The word embodies or encapsulates a lot. So I'm not talking here about just ideas—ideas that are kind of just intellectual, divorced from experience. I'm talking about things opening up that are sensed, perceptions, palpable, and opening up as sense perceptions, in a way that affect us, that have an effect on our heart and on our life.

But maybe the kind of opening that happens is just kind of vague, a vague perception, sense, intuition, that nature or materiality is somehow more than just material in the modernist sense—little bits of atoms, meaningless and moving randomly, and just sort of solid little billiard balls, and that's all there is that's real. So maybe it's just a vague sense that natural materiality is more than just material in the modernist sense.

Maybe, as I described in relation to metta, there's a kind of universal sense of universal oneness of love or in love. Everything is in or is love. It can open up, as I've described. That can also happen in relation to awareness. Everything is in awareness or is awareness. These are very, very common openings for people

who are dedicated to meditation.

Often with those kind of openings, with a person who, as I've described on the metta retreat, a person who has this cosmic love holding everything, often at that point, a person who has never, ever used languages or a theistic language of the divine or God will start using it. It just seems the most natural thing in the world and most obvious thing and it's almost like this is what we're talking about. So very, very common, even for a person who says never use that, shied away or not even liked much that kind of language or been suspicious of it. Very common at that point in the opening of the meditative perception experience—at that point that people often start talking theistically.

But it may be that nature and things, all things are imbued with—there's a sense of them being imbued with or reflecting or expressing the divine in other ways, not just this universal love or emptiness, in all kinds of other ways. So maybe, I mean again, an example, maybe even, for instance, for some perhaps theoretical physicists, the mathematical physical laws that govern matter, and particularly the elegance of these laws, the beauty, the mathematical beauty, their economy, their symmetry, this somehow—well, it actually is another level than the matter itself. The laws are not the matter, the laws are another level. That is another level, another dimension of the matter, if you like. And that, for some theoreticals, that is somehow, somehow an expression for them of the divine, of divinity.

Maybe, and often it's the case, that the divine, the sacred divinity, is there as a sense, as a perception, as an idea. It's very vague in the sense of not really even knowing what that means. There isn't a formed conceptual framework or definition for divinity or sacredness. Somehow there's a sense of the sacredness of earth, of nature, in this case. There's somehow the sense it's not just a kind of one-dimensional reality or existence. There's more dimensions to the sense and the perception. Somehow there's the sense that the kind of meaningless mechanisms of biology and chemistry aren't all there is to nature and to matter. They are not all that we can know and feel and sense. There's something—vague as it is and undefined as it is, a sense of divinity or sacredness—that's gone beyond the typical view of modernism in how it views matter and nature and the cosmos.

So what's characteristic here to all of this is these dimensions of existence, really dimensions of perception that open up. As I said, there's various, there's all kinds of possibilities, infinite really. Metta has the characteristic of opening up a certain series, kind of as a predictable and, in a way, limited number of a series, of a range of openings up of these dimensions of perception, of sacredness, of divinity.

But characteristic of a deepening erotic relationship with any other, whether it's a lover or a wife or nature or whatever it is, characteristic of a deepening erotic relationship is that it involves image and fantasy in the perception more and more. Eros and Psyche, if you like, and by Psyche I'm really emphasizing the imaginal dimension of our beings, the capacity to perceive imaginally. Eros and Psyche start to involve—again that word—to turn with, to turn around and mix with, start to involve and fertilize and impregnate and stretch and expand and nourish and enrich each other.

So the eros, this dynamic of eros, kind of starts to complicate the object that it loves. It's unlike metta, which tends to simplify. I erase all perception of differences between people like and dislike, and everything goes towards universality and simplicity and oneness. Metta tends to simplify and dissolve particularities, it tends to unfabricate, moves towards the unfabrication, the unfabricated towards unfabricating.

Eros, on the other hand, complicates and fabricates what it's connected to, its object. It tends to complicate and fabricate more in the perception of nature, and involved in that is more and more image and fantasy in the perceptions.

Now still, with the eros, it may still be vague. There may be a vague imaginal sense that can still be part of the eros as well, or what the eros opens up in the perception. Or it may be, to some degree or another, more specific.

This body, the body of myself or the body of another, is the Buddha. One may perceive that, one may train in that perception. Or sense, or train in the sense, the perception that all, everything—all the world, all of nature, the cosmos—is Buddha nature. It is Buddha nature. It's the expression, if you like, of the mandala of the dharmakaya, the primordial Buddha nature. So these are very classic tantric ways that the perception opens up and can be trained.

Or it may be that this body or the body of another is perceived, is sensed as angelic, as angel. As well as, or rather in and through the human. The angel comes through in and through the human. The angelic comes through in and through the personal, the human, the material. And using angel and angelic not just as a metaphor—"he's such an angel." I don't just mean a sort of stand-in word for something else. "Such a nice guy." More than metaphor. Something deep and profound and moving and other. Another dimension is infusing the perception, the sense, the idea, the knowing of this thing. And it's retaining the particulars of the human and the material and the manifestation, rather than dissolving them.

But it may be, or again, it may be similar to that, that this person or this thing, or even the whole of nature, or a specific tree or a river, is a specific theophany, a specific expression of God, a face of God, a showing or an appearance of the divine. That's what that word theophany means. There are all kinds of possibilities here.

Maybe, as I alluded to earlier, it's through a skillful use in meditation of the imaginal sexual erotic, through practicing that skillfully, that the divinity of another is sensed more and more deeply and richly and beautifully. And that divinity of the other that is perceived, that starts to spread. Spread to the environment, and to the cosmos, in fact, in a very specific way, as characteristic of what was infusing the sense of the divinity and characteristic of that other with which there was the erotic, imaginal, sexual meditative practice. And then there's perhaps a very specific, and to use a certain language, a very specific perception of the world soul pervading nature, pervading matter. All kinds of possibilities here. We could just go on endlessly, almost.

But what's characteristic here is the penetrating beyond a one-dimensional, the opening up beyond a one-dimensionality of perception, opening up of a multiplicity of dimensions, sensed or intuited, perceived, discovered or created in the perception of the other, the erotic other, or in this case, nature.

So on the one hand, with all of this, and what I'm talking about, these kind of openings, there's the opening up beyond one dimensionality, the opening up of other dimensions in the perception. On the other hand, those dimensions are not separate. So there is not, in this kind of opening, a separation of divinity and matter. Or there is not a denigration of matter in relation to something transcendent and divine. Because that would be another extreme. Either it's one-dimensional or there's this kind of divide between what's divine and what's just matter.

So characteristic of the kind of openings that I'm talking about and the kind of deepenings I'm talking about in the direction of the sacred sense through both matter, but particularly eros now, is this not one-dimensional opening up dimensions and not the separating of those dimensions. So in and through and with, infused.

In the Western alchemical tradition, they talk about the alchemical task being the spiritualization of matter and the materialization of spirit—the spiritualization of matter and the materialization of spirit. Now, of course, that was interpreted and explored and practiced in different ways. But what I want to say here is that spiritualization of matter and materialization of spirit is possible through perception, through opening our perception. And that's something we can practice. That is, in fact, what I would say practice is. Spiritualization of matter, materialization of spirit, that alchemical task is possible through perception, in and through perception, as a practice, as a training of perception.

And like I said earlier, some of the manifestations, this kind of opening of these dimensions in the perception and sense of nature are very, very subtle. So, for example, Rupert the garden coordinator was telling me a little while ago he needed to get some harvesting done very quickly for some reason in the garden at Gaia House. And so he put up a note and asked anyone who wanted to help for an afternoon. And it so happened that mostly who came were women. And he showed them what to do, and they were in silence because they were on retreat, and kneeling together and harvesting. I don't remember what they were harvesting.

And he was there with them, also harvesting, and then just looking around him and seeing these women kneeling on the earth and harvesting the fruits of the earth. And it's just so beautiful, something, in that sense, and how traditional—it's the tradition of actually women kneeling on the earth and harvesting, hands touching, knees touching the earth together and the community of that, the connection of that with the earth, the tradition through history into prehistory even of that.

So there's something very subtle here—there's actually an imaginal and fantasy dimension that was infusing his perception at that moment, giving it beauty. In this case, the beauty arose from the nature of humans and also from tradition. A sense of tradition is often part of the imaginal, as a side point. The

imaginal infusion of perception often amplifies time. It can give a sense of eternality—it often does give a sense of eternality—but it also amplifies something about time and tradition and the place of the self now in time as part of a trajectory of tradition.

That's quite a subtle example of this kind of enriching, complicating, fabricating and adding of other dimensions to perception.

Another example: a friend told me—I had asked her the questions I asked you at the beginning, and she hummed and hawed, as I expect anyone would—then she related something she'd heard George Monbiot say in a talk. Something to do with the fact that elephants used to roam in this part of the world and then were made extinct and driven south. But elephants used to roam and be part of the dynamics and mechanisms of evolution of many things, particularly of certain trees and the way they were able to grow in certain ways in response to the evolutionary pressure of these elephants moving around, trampling around and eating what they like to eat. There was something he was explaining about what we see now in our environment—certain trees able to grow in certain ways that actually, surprisingly, is a result of elephants being around millennia ago.

Now, that explanation or anecdote or fact could be heard in a couple of ways. One could hear and appreciate—going back to the very beginning—the intricacies and complexities of the dynamics of evolution over vast timescales. Just like, wow, all that working together, all these different forces. But one can hear it and have a sense, an idea of that as something purely material. There's a kind of very complex machine of different evolutionary forces, biological forces going on—this complex machine where different parts impact different other parts, and out of that you get the evolution of this or that, the dying away of this or that, survival of the fittest and all that, and more complex ideas of evolution. But basically it's a mechanistic understanding—incredibly intricate and complicated, involving vast timescales and encompassing a lot, including the totality of ecosystems.

So one can hear it that way, purely material and mechanistic. Or one can hear it as imbued with image and fantasy. When I asked my friend about this, she answered that something in that relation about the elephants and the evolution of certain trees, when she heard it, invoked in her—made present in the here and now perception—an imaginal sense of nature. In her very sense and perception of nature here and now, as she was looking at the trees around her, it made present, invoked those elephants and their movement somehow. It was almost like they were very subtly at the back of the perception. They were infusing the perception. And particularly, as she said, a sense of wildness and majesty. Both wildness and majesty are imaginal words, fantasy words.

There's something in this where the biological had gotten amplified and enriched and extended itself into the imaginal and fantastical. The imaginal fantasy had infused this. So the whole thing, the scene as she looked around her, the trees around her in that moment, was alive in a different way than in a purely mechanistic way. It had a kind of multi-dimensionality rather than just a mechanistically biological way. It

was subtle, very subtle. Subtle infusion, but strong nevertheless. Subtle, but strong.

Actually, that was the second time I asked her those difficult questions I posed to you at the beginning and probed a little into that with her. The first time, she gave a different answer. She said that what she had heard gave her a sense of the trees fighting back against the elephants—like they have characters, she said, and like they are warriors fighting back, and I too am a warrior fighting back. And so that sense of things was infusing her sense of nature and her whole relationship with nature: I am a warrior fighting for nature. This person is very engaged in environmental activism and dharma.

That's much less subtle than the first example. It's much more obvious that that is infused with image and fantasy. So it can be very subtle, relatively unsubtle, or very, very obvious.

One yogi who often looks after the plants at Guy House was saying to the garden coordinator, "Listen to this plant, listen to this plant." And he was touched and struck by her language and the way she was relating to the plant. It opened, again for him, this sense of another dimension of perception, another dimension of beauty. And this all has something to do with dimensions of beauty that are perceivable to us. But for him, her sharing with him that way of relating opened up this sense of the beauty of other dimensions of perception, other levels and dimensions other than purely a modernist idea of materiality.

So again, that's a more obvious example or instance of the kind of thing I'm talking about.

Eros involves or ignites image and fantasy in the perception, in the sense of the other that it loves, of its object—in this case, of nature. We could say it activates image fantasy, it activates the archetypal. And because of what we said—it always wants more, the pothos in the eros—when it attains a certain degree or level or kind of connection, it will enjoy that for a while, and then it will want more, more. And in this way it opens both the psyche and the sense of the object, and those two are not really separable.

So in this wanting more, eros opens both psyche and object more deeply. This is what eros does—it's simply its nature, or at least this is my understanding of how it operates. Eros functions this way if it is not hindered, either by clinging to a certain image or by attachment to a particular logos, a certain conceptual framework that prevents its natural expansion and penetration.

This is what eros does in relation to anything, including a lover, including the Dharma. If the Dharma is something we love, if we have an erotic relationship with the Dharma, it will do the same thing to our understanding, our conception, our image of what the Dharma is—it will keep opening it, expanding it.

Eros operates this way in relation to anything it has an erotic relationship with. It will even transform our very sense of what connection is and means. What does it mean to connect? Obviously we can connect sexually, physically, but through eros the dimensions of connection themselves are being opened. The meaning of the very word "connection" expands. What's involved in the very desire of eros starts to open up through its own dynamic.

Even the idea of eros itself gets opened up through the dynamic of eros, through this pothos within it. Any definition, even a definition of eros, is a boundary. A definition forms a limit. And because eros pushes through and expands, it will push through even that definition of itself, that boundary, that limit. It will expand or transcend that definition, reaching toward other levels of meaning, other possibilities. Hence eros is undefinable, because it is divine, or infinite in this sense. There is no end because of the pothos within it.

Eros, psyche, and logos mutually inform and influence each other. They grow together, they fertilize and inseminate and impregnate each other, if you like—ad infinitum, endlessly, or rather, with endless potential.

Where there is eros, it wants to connect more. In that wanting to connect more, it discovers or creates more of the object by fertilizing the psyche and the imaginal, and sense perception itself. Then I connect with and experience a larger, expanded object—an expanded other that I love, an expanded sense of earth and nature.

Because of that expanded sense, I might say, "Perhaps it has this divine quality." I sense intuitively this divine level. And then my logos must expand with that. If I simply dismiss it—"Oh, divine is silly, that's foolish. We know now because we're modernists that there's no such thing as the divine"—then my logos has no room for that expansion, and it hinders the whole movement.

But if there is either enough force in the eros, or if I'm not too rigid—either in the image or the logos—if I'm not clinging too tightly to a certain image or logos of nature, then the logos must expand as well.

In meeting this different object, encountering and discovering these richer dimensions of what I love—in this case earth, nature—in meeting that, there is more eros. There is more to be enthralled by, more to fall in love with and connect with. More desire of the eros is present.

And this increased desire pushes again, expands, penetrates further. Other dimensions open up—both breadth and vertical depth. The logos must expand again.

So there is this infinite possibility of mutual informing, influencing, enriching, complicating—of insemination, fertilization, impregnation, growing together, expansion. Nourishment. Enrichment is a good word. Richness and beauty, different kinds of beauty, are expanded.

There is a multidimensionality that comes into the sense of the other, in this case of nature—not just material in the modernist sense.

Buddhists often talk about interconnectedness.

There's a lot of talk and emphasis in engaged Buddhism about interconnectedness. But often the idea and sense of interconnectedness is actually not vertical - it's horizontal interconnectedness that's being talked about or put forward as a really important value. And it is important, obviously.

What's really being talked about with interconnectedness is a kind of material interflow of porousness - the air that moves in and out of my body, the food, the sense of porousness and non-separation, interconnectedness at a material level, and horizontal at one level.

We talk a lot, both in ecology and in Dharma, about origins and causes. But those origins and causes of nature - this tree or this ecosystem - are regarded horizontally. They're on the same level as they exist now. In other words, material entities in the past are thought to be the origins and causes of nature now, of this thing now, this ecosystem now. Origins and causes are always thought about in the past, typically, on the same level, on the horizontal level.

So this interconnectedness is both temporal over time, from the past to the present, and also spatial. I'm connected through air and food - trees breathe and all that. This temporal and spatial interconnectedness is horizontal. There's an absence of the vertical dimension from the conversation, at least, if not from the sense.

Consider something like Joanna Macy's beautiful teachings about deep time. Sometimes you just look at your hand and see how that's evolved from - I remember doing it, but I don't remember the specifics - was it fish fins or pterodactyl wings? The important point is that the connection through time and deep time, what she calls deep time, in other words very, very long time, or what could potentially be interpreted as very long time in a mechanism of evolution - that this hand is somehow connected with all those other material instantiations of biology.

That's one way of relating to and hearing that kind of teaching. But compare that with a sense of this material thing - whether it's my hand or a tree or nature or environment - as something that echoes. Rather than horizontally, what about saying it echoes or is an image of the divine? I see and perceive and sense echoes and images of the divine, or what I love, in this object, in nature. Nature as echo or image, expression of the divine.

That has a more vertical sense to it. The material reflects, as I said, or expresses divine dimensions. Some people might use the language of the source or the root. Being in divinity or in divinities or archetypes or divine images, the source of this nature, so to speak, is in the divine or in some divine image.

Now that use of the word "source" is not, absolutely not, A) an explanation, and B) temporal. When I say this tree or nature has its source in the divine, its roots in the divine, its feet in the divine, as some people say in some traditions, that's not an explanation. It's not something like we used to think - God created the earth at time zero. It's not temporal and it's not explanation.

Rather, it's a way of seeing. It's a poetic sense, a poetic sensibility. The more the eros is allowed to do its work and to have its dynamic, that way of sensing things, that way of looking at things, that poetic sensibility will open up. It will come from the eros and bring with it more and more soulfulness, infusing the psyche and infusing the sense of the object, the world, nature.

So infinite possibilities here - infinite possibilities of discovery and creation, both. It's open.

Sometimes the sense of horizontal interconnectedness, as much as Buddhists, and particularly engaged Buddhists, tend to emphasize it - sometimes people talk about that, have a sense of it a lot, and sometimes it's not enough. Either not enough for the psyche and the fullness and richness of what the psyche really wants, or not enough to support and stimulate or catalyze engagement.

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