The Way of Non-Clinging (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:06:38

In the last part of this talk, we unpacked and outlined a different way of thinking about clinging and this teaching of non-clinging—actually investigating the experience of clinging, that movement of clinging, and times of more clinging, less clinging, even less clinging. Becoming skillful, moving up and down on that spectrum, and opening up through doing that, we first explore what that word clinging means, seeing that it too is a spectrum of clinging from very, very gross to very, very subtle.

We use this as an entry point and a tool, a key for investigation into the fabrication of perception, the fabrication of appearances, the dependent arising of appearances, and the investigation of seeming reality—questioning that reality through the mechanism of playing with ways of looking, of fabrication, centered on the concept of clinging. In this way we open up very deeply, momentously, the actual sense of existence, as opposed to trying to live without clinging, somehow live a life that's free of clinging, craving, and so forth.

Through this we also saw that actually, in a way, it doesn't make sense to live without clinging, to try and live without clinging and craving, because clinging and craving are actually elements, if you like, necessary for the fabrication of perception, for any appearances to appear for us to live in the world, experience a world. So in that sense too, it doesn't quite make sense.

But as I said, there's a second problem with this ideal of living without clinging. The second problem, and in some ways for some people, would be very obvious. Maybe it's hard for them to articulate it, and certainly hard for them to square it and reconcile it with a more usual dharma understanding. But the problem is obvious. For other people, interestingly, the problem and the difficulty here is not obvious at all, and that's interesting. I'll come back to it actually throughout this retreat.

But the second problem is, as I said: would we even want to live a life without clinging, without craving? And what would that look like? Do we actually thought out or explored what that would mean, what it would look like? What would such a goal—living without clinging, craving (I'm just going to use the word clinging for shorthand)—what would such a goal imply and entail for the different domains or areas of our existence, areas and directions of our existence that we really care deeply about?

So what would it entail, that kind of goal, and imply, for instance, for our engagement politically, environmentally? The world is crying out for this, but what if I have this ideal of no attachment, no craving, no clinging, very even keel—what might it imply for areas such as engagement, or even our own personhood and the range of styles of, if you like, persona or expression in the world? What does this rather simplistic and constrained ideal of living without clinging imply for these areas?

What would it imply and entail for art and our relationship with art making? I've talked about all of these in other talks, so I'm not going to dwell very long on this, but for instance: is it even possible to create a large form—say a long piece of music or a novel or a film or a painting that takes a long time—without craving, clinging, attachment, desire? Or the training, the long, dedicated training it takes to develop that kind of mastery and spontaneity, if you like, of the Zen calligraphist or the Zen sword fighter or the jazz artist.

What would this goal of living without attachment, without clinging, without craving mean for the way we love our families, family members, friends, deep friendships, romantic love? What on earth would it mean for the realm of romantic love, for our sexuality, even for food, for the kind of care and attention to detail and loveliness that some people bring when they prepare food, cook food, share it with others, offer it to others?

So, if we have this idea of living without clinging, how then are these areas, these domains and directions of our being and our existence, our life—how are they then related to and viewed? What is implied about them? Certainly if I have too simplistic an idea of just drop clinging, just let go of everything, that kind of thing—what then is implied about all that?

But also if I kind of piece together and fit together a collection of other dharma concepts and differentiate between attachment, clinging, craving, metta and the brahmaviharas, this word hitachanda—this sort of well-wishing but also desire for decreasing suffering, we could say, in ourselves and hopefully in the world. If we differentiate also what the Buddha outlined: clinging to sense pleasures, clinging to views, clinging to customs and habits, clinging to self-view—we bring that collection of concepts to bear on all these themes and areas and directions of our life, engagement, potential engagement, our personhood and the range of styles of personhood, art, family love, friend love, romantic love, sexual love, sexuality, sexual expression, food, all that.

How is it viewed if it's either viewed very simplistically or through this collection of more traditional dharma concepts? How would those areas be viewed? All those domains, our endeavors, our efforts, our clingings and attachments within those areas.

Some would say, "Yeah, all that's delusion. All of it's delusion. Deluded to be engaged and get riled up about these things. Personhood is complete delusion." And certainly anything that doesn't look like the picture of calmness, of unruffledness. "Art—waste of time, really, unless it communicates something about the end of suffering. Family, alright, granted it's important biologically and we owe our parents and that sort of thing, but basically it's an attachment, it's delusion. Romantic love—off the scale as a delusion. Sexuality—just defilement. Food too." And some people would basically hold that—they would answer yes, it's delusion.

Some would say in response that with those other dharma concepts I outlined—attachment, metta, clinging, craving, chanda, hitachanda to the end of suffering, etc., the different kinds of clinging that

Buddha outlined—maybe throw in John Bowlby and those kind of people talking about healthy attachment of the infant and mother, the necessity of the evolutionary programming of that kind of healthy attachment—they would say, "Yes, that's adequate. There's nothing missing in that. We can explain our relationships with all these areas if we are engaged, if we have different personalities, if we are engaged in art and family love and all that stuff. It can be explained with all those concepts. And some of it will be delusion and others can be fit into those concepts. It's adequate as a net of concepts."

And others will be screaming.

Something in the being will be screaming, "No, no, it's not adequate. No, something is missing. Something is missing."

I'm going to come back to this and say more about the difference of opinions and views on this—why some people hold the simplistic view as adequate, why some people feel that net of, I don't know, six or seven dharma concepts will be adequate, and for others, no. This is quite interesting to me: why for some people, it's very clear that it's inadequate, and for others, it's clearly adequate. We'll come back to that.

But of those areas that I talked about or named—engagement, personhood, art, love with family, friends, romantic love, sexuality, food, etc.—what of those areas and what of those directions is allowed there? What is allowed to be involved? What is given place, like given genuine place as part of the path, as we're conceiving the path?

And not just in the sense of, "Oh yes, be mindful of everything, so the path includes everything." So if you're doing art, you're just mindful of you doing your art, etc. Mindful of the body, mindful of—I don't know, if you're painting—how does that feel, etc. Mindful of the movements of getting too tight, clinging to desire in that process. But even if you say it's included because mindfulness should touch everything, there's still a constraint on the kinds, directions, and—yes, the kinds and directions of desire.

And also there's a constrainment of the idea of what's allowed in terms of desire, and also a fantasy, an image of what awakening looks like, what kind of desires and involvements an awakened person has, and therefore what we're moving towards. So it's constrained conceptually and by image, by fantasy.

This is a kind of side point right now about fantasy, but as you'll see if you stick the course—and you might have heard me say this before—fantasy is anything but a side issue when it comes to this whole area. So I'm just going to mention this now, and we'll come back to it in a much more integrated way in the rest of the course.

But notice: when such areas as engagement or art are considered part of the Buddhist path or Dharma path—for instance, in some forms of Zen, some arts are part of the whole form, they're part of the practice. Or in some traditions, often Mahayana traditions, engagement is seen and considered as part of the path. For example, in the Thich Nhat Hanh Sangha and other sanghas—when they are considered part of the path, although these areas are often articulated or explained, or try to be articulated and explained,

as having to do with decreasing suffering or freedom or liberation, actually, there is fantasy and mythos and whole sensibility wrapped up in their involvement.

In other words, there's a whole mythos around the Zen arts. There's a whole mythos of the bodhisattva and the engaged bodhisattva who's willing to get riled and get dirty and on the street, on the avenue, etc. There's that fantasy and mythos wrapped up. I think Allen Ginsberg said—was it Chogyam Trungpa? I can't remember—sitting, cross-legged, meditating on the railroad track in front of the approaching train that was carrying a nuclear warhead, I think, to its silo. I don't know, was it Colorado or somewhere back in the days of the Cold War? "This is my practice. This is what a bodhisattva does."

There's wrapped up in that, actually more than one fantasy, but it's somehow connected and made a dharma fantasy, a dharma fantasy of what an awakening person does, what they engage in, what they look like, how they feel, what they do. So we'll talk more about this. Fantasies are actually also involved in the fantasy or the idea of "let go of everything"—that seemingly simple, pithy teaching. Actually, usually there's not just a conceptual structure behind that, but there's also, underpinning it, a whole image and fantasy.

It could be several. Maybe it's the image of "let go of everything," and we hold that as an ideal, but it's also a kind of iconic image for us somewhere. Maybe it's the hermit, simple man, simple woman living close to nature, wandering in the mountains and the breeze of the air. And they're being light and fluid because they're letting go—light and fluid as the breeze, as the mountain stream that they sit beside. There's a beautiful fantasy wrapped up in that whole image, maybe other fantasies.

As I've said plenty of times in other talks, the way I'm using that word "fantasy," fantasies are not a problem. Actually, they are necessary. There is the necessity of fantasy, the inevitability of fantasy when we care deeply, when we love, when we're attracted. The problem is when the fantasy is unconscious or regarded as a problem. So conscious fantasies are very much part of our lives—well, unconscious and conscious, but we can make them conscious and we can recognize, as I said, the necessity of that and the place of that for the psyche. We're going to talk much more about this.

But sometimes the fantasies that we have that come out of our Dharma background and Dharma set of fantasies or ideas are actually inadequate. So the idea and the fantasy of metta, for example, being what is adequate for romantic love. When we care about and are involved in or seek romantic love, as so many practitioners do, of course, who are not monastics, and actually even some who are monastics, when that is present, and if we try and think of it as, "What's happening here? Why is this desire justifiable? Well, it's metta."

Or, well, it's kalyanamitta, it's spiritual friendship. This partnership is basically based in metta and spiritual friendship, and that's what my romantic love relationship, my marriage, is.

I mean, certainly I would hope—we would hope, I think we would all hope—that metta is a basis, or at

least a component of romantic love and spiritual friendship, which is beautiful. But is that all of it? Does that actually suffice? Does that truly, adequately, psychologically represent what's happening? And am I then going to say, oh, it's metta and kalyanamitta, spiritual friendship, and just clinging, basically? Does that suffice as an explanation?

Can I have a conceptual frame? Can I open to a conceptual framework and a fantasy that actually allows romantic love to become part of the path—and not just in those kind of simplistic terms? The concepts, if I try and stretch too small a set of concepts over the range of things that we deeply care about, the whole structure will snap. It is not adequate. It cannot support it. It cannot nourish those areas that we really care about, if we really care about them.

So we can make all kinds of distinctions between desires of different kinds, and all kinds of divisions. For instance, just those that are what the Buddha would call wholesome, kusala—ones that lead either in the moment or eventually to less suffering—or unwholesome ones, which lead to more suffering. That's one distinction. But actually there are all kinds of distinctions: clinging, craving, as we said.

But what if we made another distinction, based on what I want to get at, and actually say there are three directions or levels or distinctions between desires, clingings, cravings, whatever?

So the first we could call the desire for that piece of chocolate cake. I don't need it nutritionally, but I want it. That's one level of desire. Desire for sense pleasures in that context. But actually, what we're talking about is not only desires here and cravings, but levels of craving, and also levels of investigation of craving. So it's important to investigate and have some facility with letting go of that desire for that cookie, that chocolate cake, whatever it is, that cup of tea when I don't really need it. This is important. That's one level and direction of desire, and it's one level and direction of investigation.

But then there's what we outlined in part two of this long preface talk: the whole use of the idea of, and the movement of, whether we call it clinging or craving or whatever it is, desire—that whole movement and exploring the subtlety of that, and how that unravels for us the nature of appearances, the fabrication of perception, and what that tells us about reality. So we're talking about really, really subtle levels of clinging, and a much broader range of what clinging means. As I said, avijja is clinging. It's belief in the reality of something existing independently from the way of looking. It's a clinging. I need to refine my practice until I can actually play with the spectrum, actually move that clinging of delusion up and down on a spectrum and see what happens. So that would be a second level, direction of what we might call clinging, for shorthand, and the investigation.

And then there's a third level or direction, what we might call the movement of eros. For instance, our soul passions—so obvious when it's the bigger ones: falling in love, or my passion for my art, or whatever it is. My passion for expression, my passion for engagement. So they can be huge, but this movement, what I'm going to call the movement of eros—without, unfortunately in this talk, explaining too much what I mean, which makes it a little bit difficult—there are other movements that are not just about sense

pleasure and relief, not just about unpacking this notion of clinging so that it tells me something about the whole nature of seeming reality. The movement of eros and of soul passion can be huge, marked, deep, or really quite subtle.

So then the question becomes: what is required of each of these directions or levels of investigation? What is the purpose in relation to all three? Each of them has a different purpose. The purpose of my investigation relative to that extra slice of chocolate cake or whatever it is has one purpose, has a range of purpose. It's quite limited where it can take me also, as we've been saying. The purpose of my investigation of that whole concept—from the most gross to the most subtle—of clinging and its relationship with fabrication of perception and apparent reality and world, that has a different purpose. And what is the purpose of my investigation of what we might call the movements of eros, of those things that I'm passionate about? Whether it's engagement or art or expression in life or love, different kinds, whatever it is. What is the purpose? And what is the range of possibility of each, of what can be opened up and revealed and given to us through each investigation?

Because I can look at my desires for chocolate or, when I'm in walking meditation on retreat and the mind says "tea"—and then it says "tea" again—I can feel that pull as a desire, a sense of longing. I don't need that tea. I can look at that until the cows come home. I can spend a lifetime examining that level of desire. But it won't be enough to open up that radical understanding of emptiness I was speaking about in the last part of the talk. Nowhere near. Nowhere near.

Useful? Of course it's useful. Of course it's useful. But it won't open up that emptiness. It won't tell me anything about this deeper movement of passion, the passions that I have. It's simply the wrong kind and level of desire. There's an investigation specific to that. It's important to have some freedom, otherwise I'm just yanked around—just because the mind says tea, I have to go and have a cup of tea. Of course that's important.

But neither that chocolate cake investigation nor tea investigation, nor the deep investigation into dependent origination and emptiness that I explained, will be enough for understanding and opening out and giving nourishment and life and structure and vision and opening doors in the realm and the direction of the soul passions or the subtle movements of eros. And conversely, the investigation of my soul passions and my desire and relation to them—that kind of eros, whether it's really strong or much more subtle—it will actually tell me something about dependent origination and emptiness, something, but not enough for the full depth of that.

So each has its own door, direction, avenue—all important, but not the same. We can't just lump them all together.

Noticing ease when I let go of something the mind is grasping onto or wanting, when I relax craving, is only the start. It's only the start. And as we said before, that letting go and the ease that comes from releasing something the mind is wanting, grasping—that is not liberation. Or rather, that would be a very

limited view of what liberation is, if it's just a state of ease because the mind is not grasping onto the things of the world. And it's not, as we said, a way to live.

We question all this. Is it in fact really ease? Is that all that we really want? Is ease all that we really want? And if we're wanting something else, other than this relief from dukkha, are we just going to say that something else is delusion?

From another angle: is sense pleasure or happiness all we seek from our desires? Is that really what we're after—sense pleasures and happiness? Or some kind of shoring up of the self, because the self is fragile? Or is it ease or metta? Does this suffice to categorize our desires and what we're actually seeking from all our desires?

Certainly sometimes we're seeking sense pleasure. We'll talk about this. Certainly sometimes I'm trying to get happy. Certainly sometimes I want metta. Sometimes I want ease. But what else?

It's relatively easy to see that sense pleasures are not going to fulfill me. There's something missing in the way I'm thinking about all this. We can hear this teaching—let go, let go, just let go—hear it a million times. And then decades later, it's still something. It's still not somehow taken root or worked. Why?

We can say, "Well, it's a deep habit, isn't it? It's a deep habit." And yes, that's true. But is it also because it's not enough in terms of our understanding of desire—of the range of desires, the kinds and directions of desires, and the levels of desire?

The framework is not enough for us. We're trying to put it all in one basket or several very narrowly related baskets, and actually it's insufficient. You ask, "Why am I not able to live without clinging? I've heard this teaching a million times."

So what about the directions, the domains of our life where letting go does not take us to where we deeply want to go? Letting go simply does not take us to where we deeply want to go. And not just within practice—because even within practice, just letting go all the time doesn't necessarily take me where I want to go. Probably it doesn't. We need many approaches in practice, of which letting go is just one. But in the whole of my life...

What about those directions, those domains where letting go is not what takes me to what I most deeply want? I'm not talking here about the kinds of things we do which we can acknowledge and accept as basically driven by craving. Having that extra slice of chocolate cake, overeating just a little because someone put something really tasty in front of me, or flying to France or Switzerland every winter—or in the States, Colorado—to go skiing. If I'm honest, I don't really need that. I can see that I sort of justify it to myself because I work hard, so I deserve a rest. But basically, if I'm truly honest, I can see craving has trumped ethics in terms of carbon output and contribution to global warming and others' suffering in the world. If I'm really honest, I can see it's just a movement of craving.

I'm not really talking about all that. I'm talking about our deeper loves, our deep passions, our longings, the movement of our passion there—as well as more subtle movements of eros, though I'll have to explain this in other talks.

In these areas, is it ease that we're seeking? Is that what we want—just ease or sense pleasure? It might be ease I'm seeking, especially if I'm really struggling. When there's a lot of dukkha, a lot of struggle, it can seem like that's basically it. But to varying degrees—and this is something we'll return to—human beings want more than ease and peace. We want more than ease and peace, certainly more than the kind of ease and peace that's merely stress reduction or coping with painful sensations. Even we want more than the ease and peace of the most profound and comprehensive kind.

Look, see, even within the Dharma—isn't it more than ease you want? Isn't it more than that you're looking for? Yes, there's ease. There's the cessation of suffering that we're after. And what? And what? If you love the Dharma, it's not just that. It's not just that.

And then if it's something outside the Dharma, how do I integrate these two aspects and directions that I care passionately about? There's Dharma, and there's whatever else it is—art or something. How do I integrate that? Or romantic love, or this person I'm in love with, or sexuality.

If what the Dharma means to me is just stress reduction and some techniques for stress reduction, then this whole question is not an issue. I thank you very much—you give me some techniques from the Dharma that I use to calm down and let go of this and that and have a bit more ease. Then the rest of my life I just... I can have plenty of passions and whatnot.

But if we really love the Dharma... How do we reconcile this? How do we reconcile "just let go of everything, drop desires, don't cling, achieve the end of craving" with the other movements of what we could call soul, our other loves and passions? How do we reconcile it? How does it fit together?

In the world of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, and spilling over from there into the Dharma, some people speak of discrepancy-based processing. This essentially means when the mind operates in a mode where it notices the difference between where it wants to be and where it actually is—between what it desires and how reality presents itself.

For example, there's a sensation of thirst, creating a discrepancy. I don't want this sensation of thirst; it would be good to drink. There's a gap between the idea of quenching thirst and the reality that, at this moment, there is no water. Therefore I go to the tap or the well. This discrepancy-based processing, this perception of differences, directs the organism to meet its need by noticing differences and trying to minimize that gap.

This discrepancy-based processing stands in contrast to what they call "mindfulness"—in this particular way of teaching about it, mindfulness means simply being with things as they are, accepting, paying attention to, opening to, without wanting to change, without being so interested in that discrepancy

between how I would like things to be and what is.

These two operate like different gears: the gear of discrepancy-based processing and the gear of mindfulness. What seems missing is the recognition that you can be mindful of a discrepancy itself, of the desire, of the movement. But let's leave that aside.

There's this idea of mindfulness as something opposite to, or complementary to, discrepancy-based processing. And it's acknowledged that discrepancy-based processing is okay at times—why? Because it's useful, functional, instrumental. If I need a toilet built, I must first recognize there's a discrepancy between what is and what should be for hygiene purposes. Or there's hunger, and we notice the discrepancy between that and feeling satiated and nourished, which leads us to cook. Framing it biologically in evolutionary terms, as many would do: recognizing there's no food, therefore we need to forage or hunt.

So it's useful, this discrepancy-based processing—regarded as okay at times, as long as we don't get too tight, too excited, too agitated. But otherwise, this "mode of mind"—a concept somewhat related to what I'm calling ways of looking, though probably nowhere near as broad in range, diversity, depth, or subtlety—should revert to a more mindful stance, a kind of neutral gear that avoids the suffering inherent in discrepancy-based processing.

But is something missing here? Are we missing something if we conceive this way? Is this kind of psychology adequate? How do you feel when you hear this? Apart from the illusion of non-doing and the realism hidden there, as I touched on in earlier talks, can you hear that the language is straight out of artificial intelligence systems—the language of machines, robots, humans as very complex robots?

How much soulfulness does this kind of conceiving have? How much soulfulness does it support, nourish, allow? Where's the poetry? Does it have any poetry? And do we really want a psychology without poetry? What are the consequences of seeing ourselves this way? What are the consequences of a psychology without poetry?

Because if I regard desires merely as discrepancy-based processing—it's funny—"I want to kiss you" becomes "my discrepancy-based processing." It has nothing enriching to say about my wanting to kiss you. It doesn't open that up, doesn't nourish it, doesn't bring water to it, doesn't fan the fire, doesn't bring out the beauty or reveal the dimensions there.

What does it say about this music that wells up in me, wanting expression? So much that I'm willing to sit through all the toil and frustration, the revising, to write a symphony? What does it say about the gaze of Eros, the gaze filled with and imbued with Eros? Nothing. Nothing to address. It addresses nothing of real beauty or value or poetry or the dimensions of our existence.

Sometimes we can be oversimplistic as human beings, especially regarding spirituality. What can happen is that a person can, for decades, abide in and with an overly simplistic view in relation to craving and

desire.

And okay, they might acknowledge, as I said, that some desires are wholesome because they bring a reduction, or they lead to even eventually a reduction of suffering for self and other. But other desires or movements just have no place. How could I possibly justify an abstract art painting? It has nothing to do with releasing suffering.

And then what can sometimes happen if a person actually clings, indirectly—that seems like not clinging, but clings—to an overly simplistic view of living without clinging, and a simplistic view and concept in relationship to clinging and desire, is that we get to a place after some years of Dharma practice where we're, you know, with craving and desire, we accept that it's there, and we kind of laugh at it. And we practice letting go sometimes, and sometimes on retreat we let go of a lot, etc. But basically we kind of fall back into a sort of, ah, well, the self or the mind is pretty wily, isn't it, in terms of getting its desires and what it wants, and it's a deeply ingrained habit.

Well, there's a kind of cognitive dissonance that doesn't quite add up, it doesn't quite fit together—this teaching of letting go of craving and then our passions and what we really care about, my love for this man, this woman or whatever it is, doesn't quite add up in relation to the eros in our lives.

So there's, with all of this, there can come a kind of a status quo that just stays, a sort of stagnation of exploration in relationship to desire. What's happened there? Why? Why?

Again, so is it that whether it's the concept of discrepancy-based processing, that kind of language and that kind of way of thinking or framing things or delineating things or other ways, what do they serve and is there something they don't serve that's necessary for us? And language I've been using recently, does it serve soul-making? Does this idea of discrepancy-based processing serve soul-making? Does it satisfy the psyche, the soul, the depths in me? And again, sorry, I'm not going to explain that term now. It's coming, or it will. In past talks it's been explained, but just to say this.

We use these words, eros. Do we need another term? And I'll explain more fully in the next few talks what I mean by that, what we mean by eros. I don't just mean sexuality, although it includes sexuality. I don't just mean it in the way that Freud, I certainly don't mean it in the way that Freud was meaning it as just a seeking of sense pleasure. I don't simply equate eros and love, and I don't simply equate eros with life force, it's just life force.

So very briefly, and this will beg more explanation if you haven't listened to other talks and teachings. But I hope to unfold it in the course of this retreat. Eros—a desire, a movement of the psyche, of the being, that opens, deepens, leads to soulfulness, sacredness, soul-making, sense of sacredness, opens that out. A desire, a movement of the psyche of the being that opens out, deepens, enriches, complicates also our sense of sacredness. A desire, a movement of the psyche that opens the being, unlike craving.

Eros always has something to do with depth and with expansion and with perceiving of dimensionality

and also with beauty. Eros always has something to do with beauty. And I don't mean by beauty just pleasing, what is pleasing to the senses in terms of its sensual arrangement. We'll talk more about this later. The eros always has something to do, is wrapped up, wrapped up in the movement of eros, in these desires, these movements that bring, that open and deepen and expand the sense of soulfulness and sacredness. There's depth, dimensionality, beauty, meaningfulness.

And again, I'm not just talking about necessarily like huge passions, although I'm including that, but also very subtle. It's a subtle movement of eros. Subtle movements of eros.

So we're talking here about relationships with desire, craving, clinging, eros, whatever words you want to use, understanding, understanding and relating to this whole aspect, area, these forces in our lives. I'm certainly not saying that every erotic desire, a desire of eros, the movement of eros, needs to be physically acted upon, needs to be made materially manifest. So you know that if you've listened to some other talks.

But the question is, what does this movement of psyche need? What does it need? Where does it lead? Or rather, are there ways of conceiving, conceptual frameworks, relationships and investigations that open otherwise closed doors for us? And doors that are deeply important to us, that it's deeply important to us to move through because of what they open to, because of where they take us. This is really what we want to go into.

How can we think about the whole domain and the different kinds of desire, craving, clinging? How can we conceive of all that? What relationships and what kinds of investigations can we bring to bear that open this up for us and don't actually keep certain doors shut that are deeply important to us?

Because, and I've said this in other talks earlier, in the last few years some conceptual understanding of dharma, some ways we're thinking about dharma—even if we don't think we're intellectual: be kind, be present and be with what is, let go because everything's impermanent, everything's in flow, relax and try to live without clinging and this will bring ease, this will decrease or even end your suffering if you can do that—a view like that, for a lot of people it's actually fairly common, a view like that, a conceptual framework like that, whether it's articulated intellectually, verbally or not, it will, as helpful as it will be to limited extents, it will also constrain our vision and our experience. Constrain our vision and our experience of self, other, world.

of desire and eros itself, of the whole cosmos, inner and outer, will also constrain the kinds of freedom, the kinds of creativity, the kinds of beauty that are available to us.

I said elsewhere, I think, we can have conceptual frameworks that actually end up constraining our sense of existence, our hermeneutics—the way we're actually interpreting our life, our being, this world, what comes to us in the senses. And when our conceptual framework is limited, when it isn't questioned, when it isn't open, when it isn't adequate enough or rich enough, there's the constriction in the view, the constriction in the interpretation of what we call the hermeneutics of existence. And therefore, out of that,

because of dependent arising, our experiences will also be constrained.

And not just constrained because certain sufferings won't happen—constrained in all kinds of ways. We limit our experience through the ideas that we're hanging on to, even when we think we're not intellectual and we don't have to think about all this stuff.

So what I'm asking is: can we question the conceptual frameworks that we have? Can we perhaps add to the conceptual framework that is operating for us? Can we find out what it is for a start? Question it. Add to it. Extend it. Deepen and widen it. Refine it, perhaps.

Then it becomes interesting: what should the order of practice, of the development of practice, be regarding the more traditional teachings about craving and letting go? And if we're going to open up this concept of eros, which I will do very fully in this retreat, what order? Should I do one first and then the other, or how does it work? How should it work?

Some people will need more practice, do need more practice with just the simple idea of letting go of craving. We talked about it in part one—gross craving, slightly more subtle craving in their life—so that they are less chained to pleasant and unpleasant, no longer being led or dragged around by the craving that comes towards or away from pleasant or unpleasant vedanā sensation.

And some people listening, you've already done a lot of that, and yet you feel no particular need, no calling, no stirring in the soul to explore, open up to other kinds of desire, or dimensions of desire, or this thing called eros. And that's fine. Or rather, maybe it's fine.

And some of you listening have already done a lot of what we could call the most prevalent or even classical teachings about taṇhā, craving, and vedanā, etc., and clinging. And yet, you now feel, you're now at a place where you feel there is more. And there's a calling—the soul is called, if you like. There is a deep calling to explore desire more fully, more richly, more carefully, more subtly and sensitively. Not just in the direction of emptiness, but in the direction of what we're calling eros.

And yet others—there's another group—people who feel called, something hears this and says, "Yes, yes." But there is not yet much discernment, much proficiency, much freedom in relation to the classical teachings of pleasant sensation and desire and hanging on to views and opinions and all of that. And yet, they can't postpone the soul calling to include an exploration of eros fully, richly, deeply on the path. I can't postpone it. I've not yet got all that more straightforward stuff figured out, but I can't postpone it either.

Is that just the pull of delusion? The impatience of delusion? Not necessarily. Some who actually don't do things in the order that a neat way of framing things might prefer—so be it. And if that's you, then somehow you'll have to figure it out on the way. You'll have to learn how to discern and differentiate between these different movements and kinds of desire and letting go and dropping something. And that might be more messy. You're doing that at the same time as you're investigating and allowing eros and

fire and passion. And it might not look so neat. And sometimes things are not so neat.

It's the same with imaginal practice and papañca. Some need to explore the teachings about letting go of papañca and complication and fantasy and simplify, simplify the mind, simplify the attention. And this teaching, illusory as it is, but of bare attention, because it would be helpful. It's helpful for them. They need that. And some are drawn before they can explore what we mean by, in a way, good fantasy or imaginal practice. And some have explored all that, and they feel ready for something new, this other dimension of imaginal practice.

And, again, there's some who can't wait.

They need to include and learn as they go along through different ways of looking, different practices, trial and error, with the help of teachers, to discern between these different movements. What's papañca? What's imaginal practice? It's absolutely possible to make these distinctions, but parallel tracks are running concurrently.

Just to conclude this long preface: Yes, it's important to learn to let go of cravings, of desires, of clingings in life. That's really important. But so much more is possible than that.

It's possible to take up this notion of clinging and actually explore the whole range of subtlety of what that means—to play with it, learn to modulate it, and see what happens to the dependent fabrication of perception of self, other, world, time. Through this exploration, dependent arising reveals itself—deep insight into how self, other, and world arise dependently. This isn't just about the cigarette craving or asking for someone's phone number. We're talking about something much deeper: the whole fabrication of our very sense of any reality at all, any experience at all.

This leads to deep understanding of emptiness, a beautiful opening of being into states of less and less fabrication, eventually reaching the unfabricated. What this gives us is a radical and extraordinary understanding of the emptiness of all things.

So there's that possibility, as we've outlined, and there's also this possibility of something we'll be calling eros—a movement that brings soul-making. We're going to unpack these terms if you're not familiar with them. This is something important for the soul, something we don't completely let go of. It's already operating. We want to understand it, explore it, develop conceptual frameworks and dharmic understanding that allow us to open to it, to give it its place and receive the richness it brings.

As I said, eros is already there. I'm not just meaning chanda—this intentionality or desire for reducing suffering, for what is wholesome. That might be one manifestation of eros, but I'm not just talking about that. The psyche needs to bring attention to bear so that it recognizes this movement, recognizes eros, delineates it, and perhaps develops ways of conceiving and thinking that actually support the eros. This becomes supportive to the totality, the integrated totality of what we conceive as practice.

Because this investigation and movement of eros also—just like the deep exploration of fabrication through playing with the spectrum of clinging—opens up our sense of the world radically, widely, beautifully. It opens up the whole sense of existence. But in a different way than the fabrication exploration.

But you decide what you want. You decide. Some people, for various reasons, don't want much depth or much soul-making, much soulfulness. We'll actually explore these different reasons as part of the retreat, because what's happening there is quite interesting. Some people—and this needs to be respected—that's not what they want. They want techniques of what we could call self-help, really. They want some ease, some reduction in dukkha, and that's great. That's important.

Others, though, are drawn to this opening of the sense of existence—these radical and remarkable openings that are possible in one's whole sense of existence, not just of self, but of the entirety of one's sense of existence. The deep understanding of emptiness. The deep and wide and eventually all-pervasive movement of eros and soul-making. These, for others, are the most important things—what they care most deeply and most passionately about.

But it's not for me to tell another person what to want. I don't think it's for anyone to do that. So as I said, you decide what you want. But still, we can investigate this whole question of desire and eros, make delineations and distinctions, and see where that leads. Then decide whether we want to go where it leads or not. We can still investigate. It's always up to us where we want to go.

This is what we want to explore on this retreat—a little bit of an introduction to what we want to really fill out and expand in the course.

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