Dilemmas and Delineations: How Did We Get Here?! (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:17:20

This is really a retreat, a course exploring the themes of eros and desire and the alchemy of desire. I want to take a little time now for the next few talks to begin to delineate what we mean when we use this word eros.

To begin to do that, as you'll quickly see, the way we're using that word is actually woven in with a whole web, a whole dynamic web of other words that we're using—specifically, quite specifically, related ideas, related notions, related experiences. So we'll have to gradually unfold all this, unpack it, or to reverse the analogy, gradually build a framework, an architecture that will help us, our vehicle.

In the course of elaborating on what we gradually mean by eros and what it involves and what it implies, where it goes, in the course of delineating, the question comes up: why delineate? We touched on that briefly already, but there's actually more to say. Why make this extra delineation of something called eros? Because we have a lot of words—we have desire, craving, clinging, attachment, love—so why make this extra delineation? I want to say a bit more about that, and I also want to weave into all this some reflections on making delineations and definitions in general, some general reflections on that, because actually it is very relevant to the whole project that we're doing and where it can go.

Unless you teach in some way or other, in some subject or art or whatever it is, it may not be obvious to you, but it's obvious to me that teaching is always, always contextual. So in talking about eros now, there is a double context at least. One is the context of how did we get here, what is it that led up to these kinds of delineations and making the delineations and the justifications and the explanations that we're about to go into slowly, gradually. That comes out of a whole trajectory, a whole progression of exploration and insight that, in a way, one thing led to the other, one thing unfolded another. So there's the context of where we're coming from.

In a way, and I'll go into this later, I'm coming from a background in insight meditation, but a certain way of understanding and approaching what insight meditation is and what the Dharma is and how to think of that. But there's also the context of who one is talking to, who one is teaching, and the context in which one teaches.

So teaching about eros and desire and shining a different light on them in a Buddhist context and in an insight meditation context is teaching in a certain context. It's not necessarily the easiest, most straightforward context to raise these issues and hope to bring some fresh illumination or fresh turning of

the earth. There are other contexts—for instance, in psychotherapeutic context or philosophical context—where, in a way, it would be much more straightforward. There would still be distinctions and things to make, but in some ways, the context that we're in makes it more challenging. But also, we're lent certain advantages, I think, by our practice and by our understanding that other disciplines and directions don't have.

About the context, I remember an international meeting of insight meditation teachers in 2009, I think it was. It actually took place at Gaia House. So it happens every three or four years, and it rotates between three, maybe four centers—IMS and Spirit Rock and maybe Beatenberg—around the world. And that year, it was at Gaia House. Maybe eighty Insight Meditation teachers, I can't remember. Very senior ones, all the way down to very new teachers, and from all over the world. Well, actually, mostly Europe and America.

Part of that gathering—we had three or four days together, I think—included different discussion groups that were offered. So periodically we would break and certain themes would be offered. Then the people interested in this theme would go and make a little group and discuss it for a while. And people interested in another theme would go and make their little group and discuss it.

One day, one of the themes that was offered was eros. So there are a couple of things that are interesting to me about what happened. One is that it was by far the biggest discussion group. There was enormous interest in that topic, so much so that the subgroup of the large group that were interested in eros and elected to go into that group had to be divided into three to make the discussions manageable, interesting, and worthwhile. So I was in a group that had at least ten people in it, and there were maybe two others like that. That was the first thing. Look how much interest there was in this topic among Buddhist practitioners, Buddhist teachers, insight meditation teachers, already in 2009. And partly because so little is said about it in our traditions. That was the first thing that was interesting.

The second thing that was interesting to me was this: we gathered in our group of ten teachers, and a few of us said, "Well, hold on, before we get into this, can we actually just say or agree what we mean by eros?" And immediately it became very apparent that there was no common understanding. We had come to this group with quite a large range of what people thought eros meant or what it meant to them. No one was particularly attached to "it means this" or anything like that, but there was really not a clarity or a common shared meaning.

So I remember one teacher just seemed to equate it with desire in general. And if I understood her correctly, she was saying that her approach to this was, again, not very conventional Dharma, but it was more like, let the students have their desires. So if you want that chocolate cake, have the chocolate cake. If you want this or that, have it. And in having it and feeling it and exploring it and going into that experience, over time—this was the theory—their desires would mature.

And so instead of being caught up with superficial and unhelpful desires, there would be this maturation through actually going into the desire, living it, experiencing, tasting, following the thread of desire. And

there would be this maturation until they would get clear and centered on their deepest heart's desires. So starting with the Mars bars and eating them and whatever, eventually there would be this funneling down, a natural maturation process that would help. Now, that's probably not a fair summary of what she was saying—I might have misunderstood—but anyway, she seemed to equate eros and desire.

And another teacher made the distinction, saying, "This is all very well," and he was saying, "Eros, what I'm more interested in is Thanatos." Thanatos, for some of you will know, is another Greek word—Eros is a Greek word—and in Freudian psychoanalytic theory, Eros is sometimes equated with the life instinct, the instinct to want to live, and contrasted with Thanatos, the drive towards death, the death instinct, which Freud introduced later into his psychoanalytic theory.

And this teacher was saying, interestingly, he came to the group to hold the other pole, if you like: "I'm interested in Thanatos, in the death instinct." And I don't think he meant death per se, more as in the unfabricating we were talking about, the movement away towards a kind of dissolution, nibbana in the traditional sense.

Related, but very different to that, another teacher—there were quite a few senior teachers in this group, by the way—said that the Buddha's primary interest, or he was trying to persuade people that the Buddha's primary interest was in addressing Mara, the sort of primordial, if you like, archetypal villain in the Pali canon. Mara actually means death. And so the Buddha was interested in Amara, which is also a word that's in the Pali Canon less commonly, but it's there. Amara, which this teacher was saying, is in contrast to Mara—because it's a negation—is not death, therefore it means life. So what the Buddha is really teaching is life: live, be in your life.

And this elevation of this concept of life—I actually pointed this out to him—becomes a kind of substitute for an idea of God or divine, which this teacher was very much against. But there was this equation of eros with life as opposed to death, and the Buddha was very interested in life and the sort of praise of life, if you like.

And it turned out that the person who even suggested the topic in general at first, when it came to her turn, was actually quite unclear and sort of said she didn't know. But we just tried to elicit from her a little bit, and it turned out that what she really meant was that when she was teaching, she found that she kind of got into a mode where there was very little humor and very little joke-telling, and more than that, there was kind of not the juiciness of humor. So that's what she meant.

There's this huge range, and I don't think we came even to a conclusion about what we were talking about, which is oftentimes the problem with these kinds of groups. But that was another thing that was interesting to me: there was no clarity even about what is meant.

So why am I going into this a little bit? Partly because it's a topic that people are interested in, and maybe especially people who have been practicing a long time. Why? Because they recognize the lacuna there,

the gap, presumably, in the teachings around this subject. And secondly, we can't really go into it until we kind of start to say, what are we talking about here? Or can we decide what we're talking about and see where that leads us?

So eros, as we are using it on this retreat, and as I would want to conceive of it, certainly has a relationship with desire, with the notion of desire. The notion of eros and the notion of desire are clearly related, but let us say—and we can come back to this—that eros is a kind of desire. Specific—it's still very wide what it can mean—but it's a specific kind of desire. So a subset of desires are erotic desires, if you like.

And desire, if it's not already clear to you or clear from the first few talks that we gave, desire is very interesting and not simple. And desire in the Dharma is also not simple. So I don't think we really went into this in the first three talks, but the Buddha lists—in these great lists that he comes up with, the factors of awakening and this and that—there's a list called the four bases of power or success or accomplishment. And desire is one of those.

So it's listed, and the Buddha talks about it a lot. If you want samadhi, if you want to develop the jhanas, if you want to develop the brahmaviharas, if you want awakening, desire is a basis for that. And he lists it and points to it: this is necessary, it's important to develop this, it's important to give some intention to this, it's important to be skillful with one's desire.

He does not say just let go, do not cling, don't drop your desires. Anyone flicking through the Pali Canon—the collection of the original Buddha's teachings—will notice how often words like striving and exertion appear. I've forgotten the exact Pali words, but he uses the language of striving, of ardent desire, really frequently.

If you take the example of his life, the Buddha is a paradigm, a paramount example of someone really dedicated, really desiring, with what most people nowadays in our culture would regard as an extreme passion for realization. He taught the middle way—actually different kinds of middle way—but his middle way in terms of passion for awakening was not really what most people these days would consider a middle way. It was quite extreme in terms of his dedication, his devotion, his passion, his hunger and desire for realization, for awakening.

As I said, all this—what we're talking about on this retreat and the teachings about eros and desire—has a context. There's also the context of themes in the teachings that have interested me very much over the years and that I have tried to share with others as well. I've talked in the past about passion and desire on the path, wise relationship to practice, and wise effort—looking at the micro-movement of effort and desire in samatha practice and jhana practice.

I might try something on this retreat that could be a little annoying, but hopefully is more helpful than annoying: mentioning other places where you can find more about certain strands or elements of teaching that are involved in what we're talking about. I'm going to mention but maybe not fill out

everything, so that if you want more, you have a place to look.

So I've talked about this before—the passion for the path, the passion on the path, the passion for awakening, the desire to unfold certain experiences and insights and how that comes into samadhi practice and metta practice and all that. On this retreat, I want to go into that, but also specifically ask: Why is it that some people have a great passion and choose a path, or a version of Buddhadharma, that allows a great passion for realization, for deep experiences, deep insight, deep openings of consciousness? Why do some people have that passion and choose a version among the different versions on the spiritual supermarket shelf—even within insight meditation—that allows their passion to flourish, and even allows the pain that can come with that passion?

There's a pain the Buddha talked about—I can't remember his word for it, but let's say the pain of the contemplative. In a sutta somewhere in the Pali Canon about equanimity, he speaks of the meditator, the contemplative, who hears about other people awakening, who wants awakening but is not there yet. He doesn't say, "Just relax, let go, don't desire, drop it, too much passion." He doesn't say that. He says, "Yeah, that's how it is. Until you realize, what you need to do is keep going. Until you realize, then your passion will be quenched."

So it's often quite a different message than what we're getting or the interpretation we're putting on the teachings. Why is it that some have this passion and some choose a version that allows that passion even when it's painful, and some don't? Some don't seem either to have that passion or move away, choosing a version where it just bypasses, or tranquilizes, or deflates that passion.

Some choose a path or a version of the Dharma where actually not a lot of passion is needed. The vision, the notion or idea or fantasy of awakening involved is not that remarkable. It's almost something for your spare time. It's not really a big deal. It's quite a small vision of awakening.

Some people don't seem to have an interest or a desire. There's not much libido toward awakening in general. They don't talk about it. They don't listen to talks that mention it. When it's talked about, they'll just lose interest. They'll actually say—I've heard many people say to me—"I'm just not interested in awakening."

So that's interesting to me. Why? What's going on there? What's going on either in relation to those notions, or in relation to the self, or in relation to desire—to the very notion of desire?

Some have, on the contrary, a very high bar for what awakening means. When I place myself in a more traditional interpretation of Dharma, I would say where I set the bar for what awakening means is really quite high in relationship to where others set it—in terms of what stream entry is and all that, if you know those terms.

Some people—and again, I would include myself—at the edge of Dharma would even conceive of an endlessly expanding notion of awakening. Not quite receding, but endlessly expanding. In talks like "In

Praise of Restlessness" and "Questioning Awakening," I've explored this: the desire is always there. The flame of desire never goes out because there's always more.

There's always a greater expansion. There's always more depth and diversity and range to what awakening is and can be. There's always new horizons of awakening opening up.

So why? Why all these differences in people? Is it just differences of personality? Soul differences, if you like? Is it conditioning? Whether that's in terms of personality or education or what people have been exposed to—the kinds of teachings or culture or family environment. Is it early childhood wounding, for example, in how one expressed one's passion and one's love and one's desire? The nakedness that the infant has often comes out quite uninhibited in infancy. Is it that there was a wounding there—something in school or with the family or whatever—that caused one to block and inhibit one's desire, one's libido, one's passion?

All of this we're going to talk about more. To me, these are fascinating questions. There's psychology involved in all of this. Why some people are like that? Why others different? Why people go for this kind of path or that kind of path, or that kind of notion of awakening? So I want to include it over the course of this retreat. We'll return to that periodically.

In the past, a few years ago, I gave a couple of talks called "The Beauty of Desire," parts one and two. In the second part, I introduced something that I discovered in practice where there's a certain way of practicing with desire—even if it's a desire not for awakening, for something else—where it might at first be uncomfortable and bring dukkha, but there's a way of practicing that doesn't dissolve it, that respects it, opens it up more.

Practicing in that way, actually respecting the desire and empowering it without necessarily acting on it—I'm talking about meditation here—practicing this way leads to an experience where the desire does not bring dukkha. Quite the opposite. It brings a kind of fulfillment and opening of the being. So that the whole way we tend to think about desire, even if it's a good thing, inherently brings some degree of suffering because there's tension. Not so simple. Not so simple.

We'll be revisiting and actually elaborating more on that material as part of this retreat, as part of what we call the alchemy of desire. In the first three talks, hopefully it was clear that the whole idea of trying to live a life of non-clinging, trying to live without craving and clinging, just let go of everything—that simplistically understood approach has several problems, which I'm not going to repeat now. That too is part of the context.

And also, what we're talking about on this retreat is very much in the context of the exploration, the elaboration and the expansion of what I've been calling imaginal practice—related to tantric practice, but different. I have talked already a fair amount about eros in the context of imaginal practice, in one set of talks called "An Ecology of Love," in three or four parts. I talked about this dynamic, which we're really

going to elaborate on extensively in this retreat, because it's so central—such a powerful conceptual framework that opens up all kinds of things and gives a basis to all kinds of avenues: what I'm calling the soul-making dynamic, or the eros-psyche-logos dynamic. I will explain more about that on this retreat and bring everything back to that quite a bit. But it's already been explored, so again, that's part of the context through imaginal practice.

On this retreat, in a way, it's similar material to what I've explored before in imaginal practice, but now I want to expand that piece about eros, elaborate more regarding eros and its place and its potential, both in what we've been calling imaginal practice and also in the path and for the path as a whole—what that might mean for the path and what kind of paths that opens up.

So that's a little bit of the context, but there's more, because we could say: why bother? Why introduce this other word, eros, when we have lots of words, as we elaborated in part one of the first talk? Why bother? That's a really good question. Do we really need another concept here?

Let me read you something. Someone I didn't know sent me an email sometime in 2015, a little while before I got ill. This arrived at my inbox from Gaia House out of the blue, from a man who lives in the Yukon in Canada—in the Arctic Circle, I think. I'll read you the entire email because there's so much insight here, and he captures so many of the themes that we're going to touch on. He highlights the necessity and in a way answers this question of why bother. So listen quite carefully, because it's very well articulated, very beautifully written, with tremendous insight packed into what he's saying in all kinds of ways.

"Dear Rob, my name is..."

You don't need to know his name. And we've never met. By the way, I asked his permission to use this email in teaching, and he was really fine with that. I'll say this now, and I hope you can remember this because I won't say it every time: when I use examples from other people in the past, if you have heard me do that, or in this retreat or in the future, generally speaking, almost without exception, I've asked the person involved if I could, and they have said yes.

So: "My name is X, and we've never met. I have recently been reading your book and listening to some of your talks, as recommended by my current teacher, Y. Interesting stuff. I found myself being challenged and derailed by some of your approaches to the Dharma, often in a quite uncomfortable manner. This made me realize how easily I tend to align my whole perspective with certain specific sets of ideas and points of view without daring to shake it up. But you woke up the rebel in me, the iconoclast, and I'm grateful for this."

But here's really what I want to focus on. He continues:

"I'm quite new to the Buddhist path, having only been formally practicing for about three years now, but I dive straight into it. I've spent most of the last year as a monk, both in Myanmar and France, before

disrobing with the idea of closing my worldly life and ordaining again this upcoming fall. I was quite committed to the idea until I fell in love with a girl who came out of nowhere and disheveled my whole world. Classic story, apparently.

"Now, obviously, from the monk's perspective, this is the worst thing I could have done, but somehow I can't really buy into that. Not just because romance is so sweet and compelling, but mostly because of my intuition that there is something deeper running underneath lust and love, something wider than her and me, something so beautifully alive that maybe it shouldn't be renounced so quickly.

"It's that same intuition that flared up every time I have fallen in love – the feeling that I'm playing a game that is beyond us, that the torrent in my chest is just running through me, unaffected by matter or time, untamed by anybody, that I'm just here as a temporary vehicle for a desire that has never begun nor ceased stretching out towards the Beloved. So my specific love stories become just some personified renditions of a myth, essentially unspoken and inexhaustible."

There's so much beauty in what he writes, and so relevant to the themes that we're going to be unraveling, unpacking, elaborating on. But he continues, and this is why I wanted to write you:

"Because I have never heard anyone else attempting to reconcile romantic love with the Dharma, and I would like to explore this possibility in order to avoid fragmenting my life into discrete arenas. I can't honestly bring myself to set up desire and freedom against each other as mutually exclusive principles, however much this seems to be insisted upon in the Dharma, and this has been a huge difficulty in my recent attempts to engage fully with practice.

"I would like to start imagining an experience of desire or lust that would exceed the lack and the compulsion to fill it in, that would be unconditioned by pain without having to impose an artificial stance of dispassion and sacrifice a dynamic force of the human heart for a peace maybe too sterile."

And he continues:

"Unfortunately, I feel ill-equipped for such an undertaking. My heart just dramatically bouncing from an inclination towards disenchantment tranquility to one of stormy passion and unreasonable attachments, constantly throwing myself off balance, completely invested into one configuration or the other. I don't really know where to start. As of now, I have recently let myself be overwhelmed by a crazy and beautiful romance" – I find this really moving, all of it – "overwhelmed by crazy and beautiful romance to the point of neediness and jealousy. And I want to open this up, to let it breathe, to bring some freedom within the tension of desire itself.

"So I'd like to ask you if you would have any advice, any lead into how I could directly practice with this explosive heart of mine... Thank you kindly and please accept my best regards."

So, beautiful, beautiful email. And I was struck by this, of course, and moved. A bit busy as I was at the

time, I was moved to write back and suggest we arrange a time to speak. And we spoke just for about an hour. That was actually all we had the chance to do before I got ill, quite out of the blue as well, and I had to cut down on most of my teaching.

He said, while we were talking, that before falling in love this time, he thought he'd left all that behind him and was now travelling a different path. And what was the image of that path? He mentioned the hermit in solitude in the peace of the woods or the mountains. And I asked him, "Is it peace you're after?" And he said, "Freedom from ruts and from the fear of engaging."

There's a lot here. We talked about imaginal sensibility, imaginal practice, what this meant about self-view, the possible plurality within self-view, the possibility of regarding desire as not just restlessness, as we touched on in the first talks. We really touched on the possibilities of imaginal practice and also on working with the energy of desire, as I was talking about in some of the Beauty of Desire talks. But we only could speak for an hour, and it's such a huge subject that all I could do was kind of give a few pointers, really, and suggest that we have some more contact at some point.

There was another piece to this man's situation. The woman he was involved with—and this was part of the problem that initially instigated his reaching out—was wanting the relationship to be an open one. She wanted them both to be able to have intimate connections with other people, and while she was clear about this desire, he felt very unsure and deeply ambivalent.

I pointed out to him that although this question of an open relationship was certainly worth exploring and pondering, whether it ended up being open or not, and even whether the relationship continued or ended, wasn't actually the most deeply relevant thing. The more fundamental, universal questions he was grappling with—these wouldn't disappear regardless of what form the relationship took or whether it continued at all.

So when we ask, "Why bother? Why bother with all this?" that email articulates really well one of the reasons. The contact we had wasn't enough to truly allow those kinds of questions and the wrestling he described to be opened up and supported. Hence this retreat, hence these teachings, and hence the attempt we're making here.

In the Theravada tradition he was coming from, sexual images and energies that arise in meditation are usually regarded essentially as kilesa—defilement or distraction. There's sometimes a slightly more charitable and open, softer view that says notice them, allow them, but certainly don't encourage them. So there's this spirit of openness—notice, allow—but not encouragement. Sexual and erotic images and energies are not regarded as having any real positive place on the path, except in the very general context that anything has a place insofar as we're attempting, within a certain framing of what dharma is, to be open to all things.

Still, underneath that openness lies a subtext: it's better if these things don't arise. It's easier. Basically, just

let go of them. There might be a kind of view of equality—they're just like anything else to be open to, to be let go of—but essentially they're treated like everything else: don't cling, don't get involved, don't create anything there.

Insight meditation has many strengths, including how much emphasis it places on the feet. How many times have you heard this on retreat? Walking meditation, feet on the ground, standing meditation, groundedness. "Can you feel your sitting bones on the cushion?" Really important. And insight meditation also emphasizes—and this is one of its beauties—the heart: openness of heart, the capacities of heart, the cultivation and centrality of heart.

More and more in insight meditation circles, there's an emphasis on what we could call the head—slowly, a few strands within insight meditation are really emphasizing study of texts and intellectual understanding.

So we have feet, heart, and head. But other bits might be missing. Can it involve our hips? Feet, heart, head, hips. Again, there's a kind of lacuna there, certainly around sexuality and erotics.

I really want to emphasize that when we use the word eros, it includes sexuality in the way we're meaning it. We include sexual attraction, sexual energy, and so forth. But it's actually much, much more than that. We're talking about something much more fundamental, something that can be both very intense and very subtle. Sexual energy and attraction can be subtle too, but we're pointing to something even more basic and often more refined than that.

But again, not to over-labor the point: why introduce this concept of eros? Why distinguish something called eros from craving or greed or desire in general? Well, it's there already. Eros, as we're meaning that term, is already functioning every day in our lives. It's already part of our experience, as we'll explore.

Making this distinction draws out something that otherwise might not be so clear to us—and that lack of clarity might shut doors if we don't distinguish it. Making any kind of distinction amplifies something. By distinguishing this from that, A from B, both A and B get amplified, or one of them gets magnified. It's like putting something under a magnifying glass—it becomes clearer.

Setting something apart allows us to investigate it, to take it as a theme of investigation. If I don't delineate it in the first place, I can't take it as a theme of investigation.

The delineation is the beginning of opening something up—like a tear in fabric that reveals what lies beneath, or getting your foot in the door so you can begin to pry it open. Setting it apart allows us to investigate, to become interested in it. And then we can see how it works. What is this thing? How does it work? And where does it lead—this thing that we're going to call eros?

Because, and this is one of our central contentions, eros will lead to different experiences, to different ends than craving leads to. It leads to ends and experiences other than the ones craving leads to. It opens

up, if you like, regions of soul, to use a certain language.

Eros is very connected with soulfulness, with what we're going to call soul-making, which I'll explain more what we mean by that. But for now, let's just say the widening and deepening of a sense of sacredness—the widening and deepening and diversification of our sense of sacredness. But this word "soul-making" has much to do with meaningfulness and resonance and depth and dimensionality and beauty and all kinds of things. Eros is connected with a sense of divinity and with what we've been calling in past retreats cosmopoiesis—the very sense we have, the vision, the perception of the world, the cosmos we live in, the cosmos about us, our very sense of existence.

We're going to go into these terms—divinity, cosmopoiesis, soul-making—later in much more detail, because they're very woven into this whole theme of eros.

So that's one reason. Eros is in our life already. We already experience it. We just need to draw it out and investigate it and see where it leads, because it does lead somewhere other than where what we might call craving leads to.

A second reason why I make this delineation is to hopefully establish, or at least highlight, the potential of opening to a recognition of the sacredness of eros itself. The sacredness of eros itself. Again, this is something we're going to come back to a lot. We can see that. And it's very different to see that eros is sacred rather than as a defilement. And that includes also the sacredness, or at least the potential sacredness, of sexuality.

Sacredness never resides in this or that object or thing. We sacralize. We make something sacred through our relationship with it. So there's the possibility of sacralizing sexuality, rather than just viewing eros or sexuality as a defilement, or as leading inevitably to defilement.

And all this, as I said, is not really so adequately addressed in the Dharma at present, for the most part. We talk about sexuality and desire, but we talk a lot about desire in a negative way, mostly. And we talk about sexuality, but very little, except in terms of ethical prohibitions—for example, the precepts. Or we admit it's an aspect of life, predominantly lay life, but still there for monastics. But there isn't really this exploration, this inquiry. It's not really opened up as part of the path.

As we mentioned already at least once, most people have a desire for romantic love, or most people are involved in relationships or in marriages perhaps, and a finer discrimination is needed there. This is not metta. I cannot reduce a romantic love relationship or a marriage to metta. There's something more involved, or that needs to be involved, and part of that more is what we're going to call eros.

And if I'm interested in that—if I'm really interested in really bringing a fullness of investigation, and if I'm really interested in romantic love and romantic partnerships being really integrally part of the practice—then this brings all kinds of inquiries. For example, in a long-term relationship, what keeps the eros alive? What stifles it, what kills it, what erodes it, what just allows it to fritter away, and what keeps

the eros alive in a long-term relationship?

So there's that second reason: the re-sacralizing of sexuality and love, but also of eros, and making it more part of the path—integrally, fully, richly.

But really with all this, a third reason why I make this discrimination of something called eros is related to what I said before. I'm interested in creating or opening an area or a direction of investigation. I certainly don't want to just assert something like the sacredness of eros—to tell you eros is sacred and then leave it at that.

Some people will agree, some people will disagree. It's pointless. What I'm much more interested in is a domain and a dimension for really a much freer, more open and penetrating inquiry—dharma inquiry.

Always in dharma inquiry, always there's something really fundamental to see. There's a principle that how we view something—always we see that how we view something affects the perception of that something. The ideas that I have, the preconceptions, the conceptions, the relationship with the something that I'm investigating, the area of inquiry, affects my perception of that something. And affects the experiences, the related experiences that unfold, that can unfold, or that will unfold.

So all that's just to do with dependent arising. The view, the way of looking, affects, it shapes the perception. Fabrication. We've talked about that as part of what we talked about before. Now part of that, so we really have to see this dependent arising. How I view something affects my perception of that thing. So that must be part of the way that I'm inquiring.

And a part of that, a part of the investigation, is perhaps this question: well, what happens? How does it affect this whole thing called eros if I view it as sacred, even if I just try and view it, even just a little, just entertain the idea that it might be sacred? So that's a subset of a subset of the investigation. What happens if? We're not asserting anything here. It's all really in the spirit of investigation.

And I'll say it one more time. We mean by eros something including, but much more than sexuality, much more than sexual attraction or energy or sexual interactions between people. You can have—there exists, there arises for us an erotic connection or erotic connections, plural, with the earth, with a tree or a piece of land, with the stars, with the cosmos, erotic connection with the divine, erotic connection, relationship with the senses, an erotic sensibility, an erotic connection with materiality. Certainly with another human being, but not only humans, with other living beings. Certainly also not just with others, but we can have, and hopefully we do have, and we're going to elaborate on this, an erotic connection with oneself—an erotic connection with oneself, erotic connections, plural, with oneself and aspects of oneself, faces of oneself, or the self's faces, or self-faces, whatever.

There can and hopefully is an erotic view, an erotic connection with the path and with the idea or the vision, the fantasy, the notion, the concept of awakening. Certainly, always there's an erotic connection with imaginal figures, even when it seems like there isn't. And there's even the possibility of erotic

connection with ideas and concepts.

So eros pervades very broadly. We mean much more than sexuality here. Eros can also be, or can seem to be, primarily erotic. At different times, it can seem to be something primarily energetic, or primarily physical, embodied, if you like, or primarily imaginal, or primarily intellectual. Can at different times be or seem to be primarily all those things? Actually, I would say it always involves all of these aspects. Eros always involves energy, what we're going to call the energy body and the energetics. It involves some kind of embodiment, some kind of embodiment, or relationship with body and views of the body and sense of the body. It always involves the imaginal and it always involves ideation, intellect, concept, what we're going to call logos—always involves all that.

So it's already something multidimensional, and we're going to go into this more. And as I said, whenever there is a sense of soulfulness, that kind of richness, resonance, depth, dimensionality, beauty, meaningfulness, in our existence, in the being, whenever there is soul-making, sacredness in our existence, eros is involved. Eros is involved whenever there's soul-making.

Now, I think it's fair to say, I think it's obvious, maybe important to say as well, that different people at different times will find these investigations that we're going into around eros and soul-making more or less interesting. So this, to me, is interesting in itself. It seems to me, it does seem to me, that people differ in the flavours or the characters, if you like, of the ways eros or libido, if we say life force, expresses in their lives. They differ in the flavours, the characters, the ways eros expresses in their lives.

The fire, if you like, if eros is a kind of fire. The fire of eros looks and burns differently. People's soul fire burns and looks differently, one to another. There's quite a range there. The flaming passion, and also at different times, the flaming passion, the very steady, quiet, small, but unquenchable flame, or the raging fire, whatever, you know, leaping from one thing to another, the flames. It looks and burns differently.

But people also differ, it seems to me, in the amount, strength, and depth of Eros—of the libido or life force that flows through them in their lives. Some people are characterized by one quality, others by another. There's a range here. And it's also true, as we've touched on before, that for all kinds of interesting reasons, Eros and libido can be and often are blocked in our lives in different ways. They may be inhibited at certain times or in certain situations, along certain lines of expression while remaining free in others. Sometimes there's a more chronic and pervasive blocking or inhibition of Eros and libido. It's not necessarily that a person's character or style is simply fixed—something may be blocked, inhibited, crushed, or otherwise constrained.

Despite all these varying differences between different people at different times, I would say that Eros is a necessary and integral aspect of what we're going to be calling soul-making. Therefore, an inquiry into Eros is important for anyone interested in or devoted to soul-making. It's simply part of what one needs to consider and explore—to open up, go into, allow, understand, support, and nourish.

So on this retreat, the intention of these teachings is really to open doors. I've mentioned that it's possible certain doors are actually shut or even locked in the way we're conceiving not just of Dharma, but of life, existence, who we are, what the world is, what existence is. The aim of these teachings is to open doors and to sketch—at least begin to sketch—a path for those who would move through these doors into new territory, for those who would like to travel in certain directions.

We're offering a map, at least the beginnings of a map, a frame of reference, and lighting certain beacons for navigation for those who already find themselves in uncharted territory around Eros and desire. They're already there and need some kind of orientation—ways of thinking and practicing, practical tools, the practical subtleties of practical differentiations, navigation, and steering that all practices need.

Some people, as we mentioned, already see that the more usual or narrow interpretations of Dharma may not be enough to open up this territory. Some already sense, as in that beautiful email I read earlier, a holiness in desire—the holiness of desire in life or in certain areas of desire, and also in imaginal practices. This is very common. But they sense that holiness while recognizing it's tricky, complex, and rich. Help is needed—a conceptual framework, tools, distinctions, practice instructions both on the cushion and in life, in relationships.

Again, returning to context: these teachings sit within a larger framework of wanting to open a path that integrates many elements we've explored over recent years—imaginal practice, soul-making, cosmopoiesis, the re-enchantment of the cosmos, the poetry of perception, experiences and senses of sacredness and divinity, Eros. We've touched on all this before, and I'm probably going to attempt a brief glossary of these terms in the next talk, which will hopefully be helpful.

This retreat takes a slightly different angle, approaching from Eros and expanding more on what that means. But all of this, as you can hopefully see, integrates with and sits alongside our usual, more typical Dharma teachings about craving, letting go of craving, and how craving leads to dukkha. It complements those teachings and also the much more radical teachings about investigating clinging—the whole spectrum of what that word means, with all the subtleties and beauties of working with that in practice.

This includes letting go of clinging, moving up and down the spectrum of clinging, seeing what it does to the fabrication of perception of self, other, world, time, and so forth. It involves going deeply in practice and understanding into the realization and insight of dependent origination at a very deep level—not the more common level—and unfolding the experience of the unfabricated and the emptiness of all things.

This opens existence and provides radical freedom, a radical opening of the sense of existence. That understanding of emptiness provides what we could call a non-realist basis for all these other explorations we're engaging in. To the degree that we've taken to heart and understood the teaching of emptiness—how deeply it's penetrated heart and understanding—to that degree we can practice a flexibility of ways of looking and of conceptual frameworks.

We can entertain different ideas and conceptual frameworks without having to believe in the reality of any of it—without needing to think that any of these ways of looking reveal how the world actually is, how I actually am, what the nature of things actually is, or that this idea or conceptual framework represents the truth of things. There's a real facility and flexibility in moving between ways of looking—a really broad range—and all kinds of conceptual frameworks.

So these teachings are woven into and integrate with the usual Dharma teachings about craving and letting go, releasing dukkha, and the much deeper teachings about dependent arising and emptiness. This forms a non-realist basis that partly allows us to open up teachings of imaginal practice and, if you like, tantric teachings—though I make a distinction there. Tantra is based on that understanding of emptiness, absolutely, or at least it's supposed to be, as I've mentioned before.

All of this is integrated together. As I've mentioned, there are other possibilities through imaginal practice and through understanding Eros of having what I call fuller, more adequate concepts and perceptions of self, other, world, and existence—ways of relating, seeing, and experiencing that are more soulful, more conducive to soul-making, that widen and diversify our sense of sacredness and open our senses of beauty, sacredness, and divinity.

I hope you can see in all of this—if not right now, then at some point—that this isn't really eclecticism. I'm not interested in simply drawing different things together and tossing them in a pot for the sake of being interesting or out of restlessness in some superficial way. I hope you can see at some point how integrated all these teachings are.

And if you like, how necessary, how inevitable many of these teachings are, because as I said, one way of understanding the Dharma unfolds a certain depth and a certain possibility, and that just keeps unfolding in a very necessary way. So necessary to what's gone before, but also necessary to our existence and to our practice for the future.

More typical Dharma psychology might focus on teachings like the links of dependent origination, which we've touched upon. One of the immense strengths of the Buddha's teaching is that he gives us a set of concepts, and in a way they become ways of looking. That's what these concepts are—they become ways of looking. But they serve to simplify. Dharma concepts serve to simplify because they fabricate less. When I use a certain set of concepts, there's less papañca, less of this complexifying and nonsense-making entanglement.

At a deeper level too, they simplify in the sense that Dharma concepts become ways of looking that move towards less and less fabrication, and less fabrication is a state of simplicity. So the teaching says: don't think about this, don't think about that, think in this way, look in this way, adopt these ways of looking. There's a disentangling, a certain amount of simplifying—both of the ways of looking by constraining them to certain concepts, but also then in what is seen. There's a simplifying in the perception of things, and that simplifying just goes deeper and deeper.

Not just the simplicity of the is-ness, the so-called suchness of things and the vividness of that, but the simplicity of our life, and then the simplicity of perception beyond the thing-ness of things as we go deeper and deeper into unfabricating, and eventually into something that is in effect so simple that even "is" or "is not" doesn't apply to it—the unfabricated.

Again, if I use the language of the soul, the psyche wants and needs, obviously, a kind of disentangling. And it certainly wants that journey into perceiving less fabrication. But there are, so to speak, other dimensions or strata of the soul—we could use that language—of the psyche, that want something else. Rather than just simplicity, simplicity, simplicity—unfabricating, unfabricating, unfabricating to the unfabricated—rather than just the simplifying of that direction, powerful though Dharma practice and Dharma concepts are, other distinctions and delineations become necessary.

What is the difference between papañca and fantasy or image in the way we're using it? The difference between daydreaming and fantasy and image? What's the difference between soul-making and the kind of simplicity of freedom that I've just talked about? What's the difference between eros and craving, or desire and eros? What's the difference between eros and love, or the brahmaviharas?

Something—and I'm going to make this contention, something I'm really going to come back to a lot on this retreat—something in us, something in the soul wants to know, wants to experience not just oneness, not just transcendence or the unfabricated, the transcendence of the unfabricated, nor just "life as it is," as if there really even is a life as it is, as if such a thing exists, as if such a thing is possible to behold. We don't just want oneness, transcendence, or that freshness of bare attention. Certainly we want more even than all that—certainly more than bare attention, I hope—but also more than a dissolution in oneness, and also more than the transcendence of the unfabricated.

We need a kind of more elaborate, you could say, or slightly more sophisticated psychology. We need a Dharma psychology that both recognizes that which is already present, but which needs to be, as I said, drawn out, amplified a little more, made recognized. So the fact, for example, that eros is more than metta. It's not the same as craving. It's not even just wholesome desire or chanda or desire that leads to less suffering. We need to recognize something that's already present in our life that hasn't been drawn attention to yet, highlighted, drawn out, investigated.

And we need a slightly more elaborate Dharma psychology because of the different kinds of sacredness and the different realms of experience which a slightly more involved psychology that involves concepts like eros can open up for us—without which either these realms don't open up, these directions don't open up, or they just get dismissed.

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