Dilemmas and Delineations: How Did We Get Here?! (Part 2)

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Why Eros? Why make this delineation?

Because it's part of our life already. This should become more and more evident: Eros is involved in our relationship with the path and with awakening. To different degrees, Eros is involved in our relationship with the path and awakening, and the notion of awakening, and therefore Eros needs to be investigated there. Because it's part of my path, because it's involved in my relationship with it.

It's certainly part of imaginal practice. And as I said, Eros involves and leads to soul-making and widening of the senses of sacredness beyond just the is-ness of things, and even beyond the transcendence that's possible for us, for consciousness—transcendence in oneness or the unfabricated. Opening up sacredness wider than a kind of universal sacredness. We talked about this on other retreats and we'll go into this on this retreat. So there's a kind of universal sacredness and then there's particular sacredness, theophanies, that preserve particularities.

There's also the making of the link between sexuality and sacredness—that sexuality and Eros are not just defilements. We want a path that has more than nothing to say, or very little to say, about sexuality and about romantic love, that recognizes more is involved than certainly just procreation, and also than mere matter.

Before I venture a first definition or delineation of Eros, I want to say a few things generally about this definition but also about making definitions and delineations in general.

Firstly, and it's implicit in what I've been saying already, people use the word "Eros," if they use it at all in psychological or other contexts, in many different ways. Over the millennia, it's been used to mean many different things, so there's a range in how people use it. It's important to be aware of that. We are certainly not saying we have the right definition and everyone else is wrong. That would be absolutely ridiculous. It's really not about right or wrong. It's more, for me, about what does this way of defining Eros lead to?

Different ways of defining Eros unfold in different directions. The way we're defining Eros sits within a certain conceptual framework of other things that I've mentioned and a whole set of teachings. So what does that whole set move towards? How does this notion of Eros sit within that framework? How is it supported by that other set and how does it support that other whole conceptual framework? Really not about right or wrong or arguing with what people say, but it's important to recognize this is just one

among many possible ways.

The way I'm going to define it in a minute is one among many possible ways. The way we're going to define it over this retreat is one among many possible ways. But it's also a delineation that's based on a phenomenological approach, meaning just the observation of experience and what's actually happening in experience. But that observation is already informed and based on certain directions in practice to do with understandings of emptiness and also imaginal practice and notions of soul-making. Phenomenological observation is always informed by a conceptual framework and adds to that. But the definition we're using is based on what is really observed in experience in that territory.

So not about right or wrong—that's the first thing—but what's it serving, and how can we define it in a way that serves our purposes.

The second thing is a more general point about definitions and delineations that has to do with something philosophers call the hermeneutic circle. Hermeneutics is a word that basically means interpretation. It emerged as a word in terms of the study of sacred texts and scriptures: what does it actually mean, this text? How should we interpret when the Buddha said this, or in some tantric text it says that, or actually the Bible or whatever?

It has to do with parts and wholes. If I'm looking at a text or if I have this concept of Eros, it's one part within a much larger whole. This word that I want to interpret in the text, or the text itself, is part of a much larger group. The word is part of a much larger group of words that make up the text, and the text itself is part of a much larger, probably, group of texts, or stream of tradition, or historical context, or whatever. I can't fully understand the part unless I understand the whole.

In this case, we can't actually take Eros on its own and understand it without understanding the other parts of a bigger whole—what we're calling this integrated vision of practice, integrated conceptual framework or architecture of practice that involves imaginal practice and soul-making. I can't really take Eros separate from those and hope to understand it.

But similarly, the conundrum of the hermeneutic circle is I can't understand the whole until I understand the particular parts. I certainly won't understand the whole text unless I understand the individual words within it, and I won't even understand this text unless I have a bigger understanding of tradition and the group of texts that it involves.

This applies actually to everything. It even applies to our understanding of mindfulness. To understand, or to move closer to an understanding of what the Buddha meant by mindfulness, we actually need to understand the whole of the path and the whole of his Dharma, because mindfulness is situated within that Dharma. Its meaning and its directions and what it draws on and the assumptions—all of that has a place, a context. I can't really understand mindfulness until I've understood the whole of the Dharma and what the Buddha was shaped by and opened with that. Similarly, I can't really understand the whole of

the Dharma unless I understand the individual elements of it.

But it's the same here in relation to Eros. Eros is, as I said, tied in with a whole other web of concepts. To take it out on its own and try to define it is actually not strictly speaking possible. It's still helpful, and that's what I'm going to do as a starting point, but it's woven together with other notions, ideas, concepts, and experiences.

Everything that I've mentioned so far—all these words that I've sometimes thrown out without fully explaining—will be elaborated over the course of the retreat. Because of this hermeneutic circle, because of this contextualization and the place that something like Eros occupies within a larger framework of ideas and experiences, we're going to have to move back and forth between small vision and big vision, tying things together. We're going to elaborate what Eros means over quite a long time, and I ask for your patience with that. This approach is necessary and will give us a much richer, deeper, fuller understanding that's actually much more helpful.

The third consideration about definition in relation to Eros specifically is that Eros classically is a god, a divinity. Divinities are, by their nature, not fully fathomable, not fully capturable in concept. They have some kind of infinitude to them, and so they're not fully definable. That doesn't mean we shouldn't venture certain concepts—and I'll explain much more later why we can't avoid conceptuality, and actually why conceptuality is necessary and part of the erotic movement itself. What's crucial is expanding conceptuality, not limited or fixed or stuck conceptuality. That's where the challenge lies.

It's not that we simply say, "Oh, it's divine, it's infinite, it's undefined," and then shrug and forget about it. Then we don't amplify that quality. It doesn't come alive to us as an area of interest. But we can use concepts while never hoping to completely capture it. In some traditions, actually, Eros is a semi-divinity—a demigod existing between the divine and the not-divine. This may allow us to approach it, or at least part of it, through some conception.

We'll return to all this business about conceptuality. But having acknowledged these caveats and qualifications and complications about definitions, let's start with a really simple definition—just to get us started. Bearing in mind that we can't capture it completely, bearing in mind that it involves many other concepts, and that it's not simply right or wrong, let's begin with a relatively simple definition.

I say that Eros is a desire—a kind of desire, a wanting. But wanting what? It wants more contact. It wants more contact, more connection with what we could call its object, or whatever erotic object we're talking about. We're going to use that language frequently. "Erotic object" means what Eros is in relationship to, or the beloved, if you prefer more poetic language.

So Eros wants more contact and connection with the erotic object. Now, because these words—"contact" and especially "connection"—have become so commonly used that they've almost lost their power, I'm going to elaborate this a little.

It wants more contact and connection. It wants to touch the erotic object more. I'm using these words quite broadly. What does it mean to touch? Does touch just mean skin touching something? Certainly it means that, but it means much more. What does it mean to touch? Consider the fullness of that word and how we can touch things—with what dimensions of our being and our psyche can touch things. It wants to touch more of the erotic object.

It wants to know more. It wants to know the object more. It wants to know the beloved more. And again, that word *know*—think of the fullness of what that word means. "I want to know you." I'm really using these words quite broadly here.

It wants to experience more of the beloved, more of the erotic object. So it seeks intimacy. Eros is a wanting to penetrate the erotic object more, to open more to the beloved, to open to more of the erotic object, to penetrate more of the erotic object, and to be penetrated more. These words—penetrate, open—are also words with sexual connotations, and that's deliberate. But we're not limiting ourselves to that.

Using these words broadly, eros is the wanting of more contact, more connection, more touch, more knowing, more experience of—to experience more of, to have more intimacy, more penetration, more opening to the erotic object or beloved.

Now that erotic object could be anything. Anything. Outer, so-called outer or inner. Anything. The erotic object can be anything.

Notice also in this simple definition the emphasis on that word *more*. I don't know the classical myth well, but Eros always goes along with another god called Pothos. P-O-T-H-O-S is another Greek word, and Pothos is the infinite desire, or the desire for the infinite. It's always the *more*. This is the more. Pothos has something—it always wants to move on to something else. When it's got something, it wants more, more, more.

I'm going to say that pothos is a part of eros. When we talk about eros, it implies and involves and has as an intrinsic element pothos, and that's the more. It wants more touching, more knowing of, more experience of, more penetration, more opening to.

You might be thinking, "That's not a very interesting definition." It's quite a humble definition in a way, really starting quite simple. In some senses, it's quite broad. In others, it's quite narrow. You might think it's a bit disappointing, or maybe not a big deal.

But my contention, and what I hope you'll at some point be convinced by, is actually the beauty of this way of defining it. You will begin to see slowly, hopefully more and more, the power of it as a way of thinking about eros. It has all kinds of implications and consequences that emerge from it, that are wrapped up—not so obviously, but intrinsically—and create the beauty and the fullness, the richness, and the multi-directionality of what eros actually is and what it does.

Again, notice that eros is not the same as sexuality or sexual attraction or sexual energy. It includes that in our definition. That's certainly part of it. Sexuality is one dimension of that, one manifestation of it at a certain level and in a certain direction.

We're also not equating it with Freud's pleasure principle—the seeking of pleasure and pleasant sensations, which would be akin to one of the Buddha's lists of what craving or clinging involves. Pleasure is certainly involved, and I'm going to come back to this in eros. But that's not actually what eros is after.

Nor are we equating it with what Freud would call the life instinct versus the death instinct, or even the life force—just the sort of life energy. Nor love.

The way we're using the word eros, we're not equating it with all of these. There is a relationship between the way we're using the word eros and each of those, but they're not equal. In some instances, eros is the bigger concept—for instance, in relation to sexuality.

In other instances of these other definitions, eros would be the smaller concept.

I would say eros is a part, or an element of life force—or better, a certain direction or manifestation of life force. We as beings have a certain amount of life force at any time, or just in our existence, and eros would be one directionality and one manifestation of the way that life force expresses itself.

Eros, as I said, is one kind of desire. Craving would be another kind of desire. Craving for sense pleasures would be yet another kind of desire.

But notice something else. In some traditions and ancient traditions that continue to this very day—I think it came either from the Platonic teachings or from the Neoplatonic tradition—there was a mystic and sage and philosopher with the wonderful name of Dionysus the Areopagite. Actually, this person I'm talking about had the even more wonderful name of Pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite, because it seems, for very complex reasons, he was pretending to be the other person, Dionysus the Areopagite, who had lived a few hundred years before.

Anyway, this Dionysus the Areopagite, among other teachers, defines eros as really that force that moves towards unification, towards union, towards melting in oneness. We are not defining it that way. This is important. This is quite common in some psychologies and some spiritual teachings, but we're not defining it that way.

There is a relationship between this movement towards unification, though it's actually more complex. Go back to our definition: eros is this desire, this wanting for more contact, more connection, more touch, more touching, more knowing, more experiencing, more intimacy, more penetrating and opening to the beloved or the erotic object.

So there's a relationship with the movement towards unifying, but—and we're going to elaborate this, both of us will elaborate this much more—eros will always want more. It will always want more, which

means more of this connecting, touching, opening to, which means that either it will resurrect a twoness, it will resurrect the beloved object after an experience of oneness or union, or it creates or discovers more of the other, other othernesses, other things to reach towards in the object. It complexifies this. We're going to explain this much more.

Or it simply does not go towards union. It does not move towards dissolution, towards union, towards melting, towards a collapsing of the twoness into oneness. So either it does, but then it will re-instigate, re-create or discover—this is something we'll come back to—create or discover other othernesses, or recreate a kind of more of the beloved other to move towards. Or it will simply resist somehow that collapse to oneness. It will preserve the twoness—the self, if you like, and the erotic other, the erotic object, the beloved other. Much more about that later, but this is a really important point.

So how do we recognize eros? How do we recognize the presence of eros in our experience, in our life, in our meditations, in our relationships?

I remember teaching many years ago and giving some instructions on mind states, emphasizing the awareness of developing sensitivity to how the mind state was reflected in and affected the body and the experiences in the body, and also just the general texture of the mind space. My two co-teachers commented afterwards and said that they thought some people just would never be able to do that, or couldn't do that, and that a much better way of going about it was to say that you recognize the mind state through the thoughts—the kind of thoughts you have tell you what mind state you're in. So if you have angry thoughts, you know that you're angry.

All I can say for now, and actually for the way that I would conceive of this whole set of teachings and the Dharma in general, is that we need, as practitioners, to develop our sensitivity and the subtlety of our awareness to be able to notice mind states—if we're calling eros a mind state or a state of being—to develop the sensitivity to that without relying on the clues and cues of thoughts. Seeing how the energy body is affected, developing the sensitivity to that, to the textures of mind and the space of mind, the subtle mental movements that are there even when there is no thought, or that exist underneath or alongside thought.

In a way, I stand by that in the sense that I can't really see how the kinds of things we're talking about and the capacity to work with them in practice would even be remotely possible without those kinds of sensitivities. We're talking about developing practice in a way that demands quite a lot, and one of the basic things it demands is a sensitivity to the energy body and a more subtle sensitivity in general to the mind.

But this ties into a point I've said before and repeat again: when we talk about eros, like everything, we're talking about a spectrum. It can be incredibly intense and in a way quite gross and obvious, or really, really quite subtle. And somehow we want—if we're going to explore it and investigate it and include it as part of our reach of what the Dharma means and our practice means and our path means—then we're

going to have to be sensitive and recognize its presence and be able to work with it across that whole realm of subtlety and intensity.

That means we can handle and work with and not get bowled over by really intense eros. We'll come back to that whole question about balance. And also that we can recognize and work with it when it's really very subtle, and that it's still recognizable, sensible and fruitful.

Also, you'll notice, kind of implicit in the definition and part of recognizing eros, is that eros involves attraction.

There is attraction in eros. Once more, more X, Y, Z, as we said. So attraction is implicitly part of the force of attraction that one can recognize in oneself and feel and actually explore. It's attracted to what, as I said.

But included in that, or because of that, or with that attraction, eros has this felt tension in it. So eros usually involves some degree of tension, often because of the more, you see, because of the more. It always wants more, or because, and as well, because as I mentioned, the attraction towards the erotic object is not dissolved. Or if it's dissolved, it's only temporarily dissolved in union.

There's an element in eros, if you like, that preserves the otherness and therefore the tension of the two and the tension of the attraction. The attraction doesn't lead to oneness as a final resting - certainly either at all or as a final resting place in which that oneness, there's no more tension of the desire. So always, to say it again, there's the preservation of otherness or the creation of more otherness, so to speak - more of this object, more dimensions of this object and therefore more otherness, or the discovery, if you like, of more to the object and more otherness, more to move into with this attraction, with the directionality of the desire.

So you can already see it's simple, but it's already quite complex. And we're going to go into this thing about two-ness and one-ness and preserving otherness and all that. We're going to go into that more, as I said.

But recognizing eros - again, eros often has a certain, what we might call, juiciness to it. Now, that's quite interesting, too. The word libido, which some people use interchangeably with eros... The word libido is related to the word lips and the moisture of lips, the drippings of pleasure. I'm taking this etymology both from James Hillman and also from Onions, who wrote a book about the history of Western thought and certain concepts and traces them through history.

Libido is related to the meaning of drippings of pleasure, juices, libation - our word libation - drink, the excitations of lust, the pouring of liquid, as in libation, as I said, to... deliquarius, to make liquid, to make something a liquid or to melt. It's also related to the Latin word litus, which is moistness or fatness or fruitfulness. That's very key to our definition of eros - fruitfulness and gladness.

And also related to the German lieben, which is love, as well as to the word liber in Latin, which means free. And the god... Liber was a fertility god, a procreative figure. It's also related to something you may have heard me say in other talks about the necessity to make all things liquid. Alchemical maxims - don't proceed until all things have been made liquid. In other words, not reified.

So eros, in its connection with the word libido, all this is wrapped up. Actually, we will be using the word libido when we even use it as meaning more something like psychic energy in general, the energy of the psyche. But anyway, it's related. And juiciness seems to be a part of the erotic experience, a part of the experience of eros.

Part of the reason for juiciness is that, and this is something we're going to have to explain in more detail later, is that eros always invokes, stimulates or involves or is involved with the imaginal and soul-making. Eros always invokes, is involved with or involves and stimulates the imaginal and the soul-making. I'll explain more about this later. And that process of soul-making is in itself rich. And so eros brings more richness. This whole process of soul-making is a rich process and a juicy process.

So attraction, tension, juiciness, the imaginal - I'll come back to that - or image is part of eros or involved with eros as part of how we recognize it.

All this implies a kind of dynamism. So there's the dynamism of the attraction towards the object. That's also recognizable as a feature of eros. There's this dynamism of attraction towards the erotic beloved. But there's also the dynamism of what I just referred to, and I'll elaborate much more as the retreat goes on - this dynamism of the stimulation of the soul-making process, which is a dynamic process. It involves movement, expansion, complication, enrichment, widening, deepening of image, of what we might call psyche, and also of conceptuality. So there's a dynamism involved in eros that has to do with that dynamic. It's not always obvious at first. It's the dynamism of the attraction to the object that's more obvious. But actually what it turns out is the object that we're attracted to is more the complex of image, idea, eros itself. That becomes the object - much more about this later.

But there, as I said, if we're recognizing eros, there's attraction, juiciness, tension, dynamism, arousal. Arousal is also a part of the erotic experience. Now, we don't necessarily mean sexual arousal, although of course that's a part of it, can be, or perhaps even measurable or observable psychophysical arousal that a person might measure with electrodes or something or other.

But this arousal involved with Eros is truly an arousal of interest. We speak of the spark as well—there's an arousal of Eros, of interest. We become deeply interested in this beloved, where something engages us, compelling in the best sense of the word. It's captivating, again, in the best sense of the word. The interest is aroused.

And also the energy body is aroused, by which I mean the energy body is energized. It will feel energized, it will feel open, and it will probably feel aligned. I've talked about this in past retreats when discussing

how the energy body works in imaginal practice. But it's also a feature of when there is Eros—the energy body is also aroused.

This arousal can be very intense, very, very intense, or really quite subtle, and it may be relatively unagitated. There's often quite a peaceful feeling with it. Not always, but often.

There's also an aspect—which I think I will leave until later when we more fully explain what I mean by this soul-making dynamic, Eros psyche logos—but I'll just mention it now: autoeroticism. What becomes for us an erotic object also involves ourselves and involves our Eros. So the Eros itself becomes erotically beautiful to us, our own Eros, and ourselves also. This we call autoeroticism. I'll return to that hopefully in the next talk.

Now, let's introduce another slight delineation here in relation to some of what we just said. I'm going to make a distinction between two words: delight and bliss. Again, no claim whatsoever that this is a correct dictionary definition or the right definition. But let's use the term delight and say that Eros usually is accompanied by or involves delight.

Delight is involved with erotic experience, by which I mean a sense of fullness, of richness, of aliveness, of interest, as we just said. The delight of soul-making—of this enriching process, this expanding process that soul-making is. We can say, axiomatically, the soul loves soul-making. It's almost a circular definition of the soul. What's the soul? The soul is what loves soul-making. It loves this dynamic, this process of soul-making, of Eros, psyche, logos, and the mutual fertilization, expansion, deepening, enriching, widening.

So soul-making, I wonder, is intrinsically delightful. And Eros, because it goes with all that, almost always has a sense of delight with it. You could say that's part of juiciness, but let's say that's specific to the soul-making quality.

Now, Eros may involve bliss, and again, I'm just creating a definition here for our purposes, defining bliss as an experience of the energy body—of great pleasantness in the energy body, of rapture or joy in the energy body, and that kind of openness. Sometimes, again, very intense, sometimes much more subtle.

But that energy body experience of bliss, I would say, accompanies any lightening or unfabricating, to whatever degree, of the self sense—up to a certain point at least. When you get really deep unfabricating, I'm not sure you can really use the word bliss at all, when you get into the deeper jhānas.

So you can have bliss without Eros, or without delight, or without soul-making. For example—and I'll come back to this too—the bliss of the first jhāna or the third jhāna may or may not be soul-making. In itself, in some ways, it's not, for reasons I'll explain. It's just bliss without Eros and without soul-making delight, the delight of soul-making. And of course, sometimes you can have delight in soul-making without bliss quite often, without that sort of strong feeling in the energy body.

But basically, Eros usually involves delight or is accompanied by delight, and it may involve bliss.

So recognizing Eros—let me run through these again. There's a big spectrum of intensity and subtlety. It involves attraction, that's implicit in it. It includes some kind of felt tension, juiciness certainly, richness of experience, dynamism of different kinds, arousal of interest and of the energy body, autoeroticism which I'll return to, delight usually accompanies it, and it may involve bliss—this pleasantness, these rapturous or joyful, peaceful, beautiful feelings in the experience of the energy body.

These are some of the elements for recognizing Eros in a very simple way, with some caveats. We're going to see what that does and expand and enrich the very definition or delineation of Eros, really filling it out over the retreat. We'll put it in relationship to other concepts. But these are some of the elements of recognizing the experience.

Already you see in some of what we're talking about, it's hard to go too far without bringing in other elements or parts of this web or architecture of ideas and experiences and delineations that we're going to try to unfold as part of this wider, integrated, more far-reaching conceptual framework or path. So that's what we're going to begin to do—start to draw it together and draw in some of these ideas and involve them in each other.

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