Dilemmas and Delineations: How did we get here?! (Part 4)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 37:42

Now I'm aware that these are, or many of these at least, quite unfamiliar ideas for many people—perhaps even many Dharma practitioners and people in the culture more broadly. So I want to say something about that.

It's a lot easier to teach Dharma, or rather, there's no objection, which makes it easier, when we teach Dharma or present something as Dharma in cases where we mix in all kinds of assumptions or frames of reference or conceptual bases or conceptual biases—as long as they're well established in Western modernist culture and assumed to be true by that culture. So when you mix those kinds of ideas and assumptions in and package it all as "Dharma"—for instance, neuroscience or some of the ideas from modern psychotherapy—and you introduce them and they become absorbed or blended into "Dharma," that's a lot easier. Rarely does anyone's eyebrows get raised or anyone have a problem with that.

When one tries to introduce or open up more unfamiliar ideas, ideas that are not popular or populist in the culture, that's more difficult. And more than that, actually, when one adds something, so to speak, foreign or new to what we might call Dharma, when it's foreign and new, that addition is much more conspicuous as an addition than when there are ideas that people are familiar with from their culture. It's still happening. It's still an addition. There is still an addition, even when it's not obvious—when we add ideas about neuroscience or modern psychotherapy ideas or whatever. It's still happening nevertheless. Something is being added. It's just not so obvious.

Add to that this other idea that the ideas we are using are not truth claims—they don't refer to realities—and that is very difficult sometimes for people to get their heads around as well, because we're used to saying, used to hearing, "it's like this" or "it's like that," or thinking that Dharma concepts refer to realities. Certainly when we think about neuroscience or modern psychotherapy ideas, almost always, almost without exception, there's the assumption and the message that these are realities.

So it's quite difficult sometimes to hear something or to try and present something as "these ideas don't have truth claims in the way that we usually operate with truth claims and truth assumptions." So unfamiliar, and I'm aware of that, and certainly aware of the difficulties in trying to present all this.

But still, I insist—absolutely insist—that in our Dharma, in your Dharma, in your practice, and in your life, fantasy and image is already involved. It's already involved in Dharma, in practice, and life. I absolutely insist on that. And I also insist that this is not a bad thing. Not at all a bad thing. It's inevitable. And it's

important, and it may well, I would say, be necessary—certainly necessary to galvanize in relation to practice and Dharma and to be inspired in life and to have meaningfulness. All that's necessary. So it's not a bad thing.

We need to recognize both the general fact that it's operating and also the particular ways that it's operating for us—that fantasy and image operate for us and the kinds and directions in which fantasy and image operate and mix in with our life and impel our life. So we need a double level recognition: general and a more individual, particular way.

And out of that, we need to expand a psychology that can talk about that and include all that, recognize it and be sensitive to it and be wise in relationship to it, instead of just not admitting it, not seeing it, or trying to cut it because it's papañca. So we need to include, then, in this psychology, in this conceptual framework, we need to include ideas such as soul-making or eros that are not yet articulated in what we call Dharma. To me that seems a necessity, something that is called for.

When we look at our life and the movements of our life with a psychology that's too simplistic, it doesn't serve us, doesn't serve the totality of our beings. "Well, that's just vedanā leading. So when you talk about eros or that kind of thing, that's just vedanā leading. You're just chasing the pleasant or running away from the unpleasant. Well, that's just papañca leading." When we talk about the imaginal fantasy, or "that's just"—you know, what motivates us is either this movement governed by vedanā towards pleasant and unpleasant, or trying to... Some people teach that basically we get attached to things like views because we're trying to shore up this self that somehow deep down we know is not real. Therefore, we attach, we cling to this and that to try and shore up my views, my habits, and all that.

But that kind of psychology—this self-shoring up, or the vedanā leading, or "that's what's going on," or "it's just matter"—I've touched on this before. This is, in a way, it's not sophisticated enough. It's a little bit poor as a psychology. I mean, valuable as it is—we've talked about this—we need something richer, deeper, wider: a psychology that can accommodate and delineate between the kinds of things that we're talking about.

So from our perspective, the movement to seek to increase pleasure or decrease unpleasant sensations, when that is the prime intention of a movement of body or mind and when that's the prime driver—to maximize or increase pleasant sensations and decrease unpleasant ones—when that's the prime driver and there isn't this richness of what we call imaginal perception, then that is axiomatically, in the way that we're talking about, that won't be soul-making. That's not creating soulfulness. It will not do that. It's not eros. It's what we might call craving, as I said.

But to think too much that way, or to really regard as if that's the thing that mostly moves us as human beings—it's really, really poor psychology. But it's interesting.

This kind of need to expand and enrich our psychology extends beyond dharma circles into the wider

culture. I had an oncologist until recently who prescribed the standard course of chemotherapy for my condition, though I think he believed it wouldn't work given my disease and its stage. He saw no point in trying more chemotherapy, considering it potentially dangerous—a risk he wasn't prepared to take, believing it might do more harm than good.

In trying to persuade me to give up wanting to experiment with longer and more intensive chemotherapy, he would often say something like, "It's about quality of life. Come off the chemo and enjoy the rest of your life with better quality." I often had the feeling that he and I understood very different things about what constituted a good quality of life.

He would frequently mention going on holiday as part of his package of what quality of life meant—what I could do if I was off chemo. This probably partly reflected that as an NHS oncologist, he was grossly overworked and overstretched, desperately needing a break and craving a holiday himself.

But he never said, "Quality of life—so you can go on pilgrimage." A medieval peasant in Christendom, or a Tibetan Buddhist even nowadays, or a Muslim today—if told they probably had only months to live, one response to the doctor might be, "Then I'll take time off medication so I can make a pilgrimage." A very different mindset.

What's the difference? Typically—and this isn't black and white—one desires or seeks a reduction in stress, an increase in pleasure, perhaps seeking novel or exciting experiences. Whereas pilgrimage, in contrast to holiday, is a movement of soul-making, an actual embodiment of eros, something we do with our bodies that is an erotic movement bringing soul-making.

Different cultures, ancient and contemporary, religious and secular, tend to assume a universality of wants—that people want this or that, that everyone or most people want certain things. In the modern secular West, the choice of what we seek is actually wider, perhaps wider than at any point in human history. This characterizes modernism, secularity particularly, and consumerism. The choice is wider, and individuality has a certain acknowledgment in modern secular Western culture. The individual's choice is respected to some extent in what's important to them. But still, there's usually a presumption that most people will conform to conventional expectations—that you'll want a holiday as opposed to something like a pilgrimage.

With all this talk about eros and exploration of eros, I want to emphasize something you've heard regarding dharma before. Don't believe these teachings. The Buddha said they are *ehipassiko*—to be seen, to come and see. For one to come and see for oneself through practice. Find out—it's not a matter of belief.

For many people, this is the attraction of dharma over other religions. But what often happens for practitioners is we see something a few times—for example, that craving leads to suffering—and something generalizes quite quickly because it's a message we hear repeatedly. We actually stop questioning. We stop the breadth and depth and radicality of our questioning. We stop looking further. In

a way, we program our perception and only see this.

I've sometimes asked an audience, "Are you sure that desire leads to suffering?" People nod, "Yeah, absolutely, I'm sure because I've checked it out." But it doesn't always lead to suffering, as I showed in the Beauty of Desire talks. There can be this belief that we're finding out for ourselves, not believing anything, but actually something gets stuck and we stop the *ehipassiko*. We stop the movement to come find out, to look further, to keep exploring.

What I want to say with all this—I really want to ask for and encourage open-mindedness, exploration, practice, that kind of boldness and experimentation and play and willingness to investigate, to question.

Eros, despite all these definitions and however unfamiliar it might sound, is already in imaginal practice. It already is, I would say, an element mixed in with any imaginal practice. I've said before to people, "Notice the love with the imaginal figures." This is really important. Imaginal figures always involve love. Sometimes it's not obvious at all. Sometimes it can look like the opposite. But there is love there—many different kinds of love, many flavors, characters, expressions of love. This is to be noticed in imaginal practice. And it's both ways. The love flows both ways.

We'll return to this. But wrapped up with the love, related to the love—not the same as, but related—is a kind of eros. It's not the same as sex, and there might be sexuality in the imaginal practice, but there's eros.

When we talk with images and in relation to imaginal figures about opening to them, about feeling that you are somehow in service to this imaginal figure, or that you surrender to this yidam, or deity, or imaginal figure, these words—opening to, service, surrender—they either lead to eros, they deepen the eros, or they already imply that eros is there in the relationship. And actually, I would say eros is inherent in imaginal relationships. A relationship with imaginal figures involves eros.

So I'm talking about something to notice, to see there. And eros is not craving. We've said that. We mean different things by that, and we'll expand on that. But also in relation to more conventional Dharma teachings, it's the case that with a little experimentation, you will discover that eros can lead at times, or it can be steered to lead, definitely, to samadhi, to quite deep states of samadhi.

And a lot of people find this really surprising, because they consider eros, sexuality, that kind of thing, as distraction, as defilement. We've talked about this, but I've lost count of how many examples I could give—and I've talked about it on other retreats—where some kind of often very unexpected or guided erotic interaction with an imaginal figure in the imaginal practice brings about samadhi, and the person is surprised by that consequence. That samadhi comes out of this actually sexual—oftentimes it's very sexual, not even just erotic, it's actually really sexual—and very different kinds of sexuality. Some very soft and loving, and others very sort of darker versions or stronger versions, if you like. It may or may not even be your usual gender or sexual orientation that you're used to identifying with. Many possibilities,

but samadhi can often come out of this. I'll return to these examples, but here's something that's a very standard Dharma concept coming out of something that looks like it doesn't have anything to do with it.

Similarly, the Brahmaviharas—and hopefully there'll be time on this retreat to talk about the link and the relationship between eros and the Brahmaviharas. I think I gave at least one example in that series of talks on Ecology of Love, where actually quite a dark, lusty, and quite strange—or by most people's standards, strange—kind of sexual image actually deepened and opened the flow of compassion, the second Brahmavihara, very, very potently. So maybe we'll return to that later, the relationship between eros and the Brahmaviharas.

Continuing our delineations here with standard dharma—eros, we've already said, is much more than sexuality and sexual energy and attraction. We're not equating them. But it may be the case that exploring eros and the imaginal in practice, in meditation, may bring with it or lead to an opening up of a level and a breadth of questioning regarding sexuality in general—one's own sexuality and one's attitudes. It may well just open up that whole field and also the experience of sexual energies too. We will return to that later.

So just making a few more little delineations. I think I've said this before: I'm not equating eros with love. Love is one of those poor words nowadays. It's come to have to mean so much, this poor word, to do so much work, to span so much territory. We still use it—it's a lovely word—but oftentimes there are problems with just how much it has come to mean or include. There's too much for one word.

So oftentimes two people are using that same word in relation to each other and saying it to each other, and they actually mean quite different things. What they're referring to entails different experiences for them, different perceptions of the other, different feelings, different sense of obligations that come out of it. "I love you. Therefore I'm obliged..." What guarantees are different. The commitments are different.

But if we say, for now, if we use the word love to just mean something like care—care for someone's well-being on every level—then it's clear, if we just look at some distinctions now between different terms, it's clear, of course, that we can have sex, even pleasurable sex, enjoyable sex, without love and without eros. So hopefully there's some respect at least. But sex is possible and for a lot of people maybe it's common without love or without eros.

It's also possible that you can have sex with love, with care, but without eros. In other words, there's sexual arousal, sexual pleasure, etc., and care for this person, maybe sometimes even a lifetime of care in partnership.

But actually, this person—maybe never was, or is no longer—there's no longer soul-making in the sex. There's no longer the aliveness of the erotic and the imaginal in bed. So then there's sex with love, but without eros.

And of course, you can have love, care, without sex or eros. You can care deeply for someone with metta,

wish them well, care deeply about their well-being, but this other to whom I give my metta is not alive for me as a soul-making image. They don't constitute that for my psyche.

And if it's not clear by now, hopefully it is: we can have eros and an erotic connection with someone with or without sex or sexual contact.

So all those permutations. But I would say it's not possible to have eros without love. This is quite interesting. It's not possible to have eros without love, because eros leads, brings, stimulates, opens a perception of—more and more so, in fact, as it goes on—a perception of the beauty and the divinity of the object, of the erotic object. This grows. Eros opens a perception of beauty and divinity, and we can't help but love what appears to us deeply beautiful and divine. So I would say it's actually not possible to have eros in the way that we're talking about it without love.

Implicit in all that we've just said is that eros is actually always involved with and involves the imaginal and psyche in the way I used that word before. Where there's eros, the imaginal is instigated, invoked, inflamed, deepened, widened, brought alive. Psyche is expanded, enriched, deepened, complicated.

And vice versa: where there is the imaginal, where that's operating, where something is an image, eros is already inherently wrapped up in that, in the relationship with that image. And also logos. There's an ideation, some kind of idea that's wrapped up with an erotic perception of someone or something. Conceptuality, logos, supports—to whatever extent it can—that eros.

I mentioned this eros-psyche-logos dynamic as one of the things on our list. I'm going to talk much more about this, but what it means is that the eros wanting more deepens and creates, discovers more to the image, gives more imaginal dimensions, imaginal complexity, imaginal facets and faces to this beloved other. And in that, the idea, the logos also of this other expands.

And that eros-psyche-logos, that soul-making dynamic then comes back because the object then is more beautiful, more deep, more rich, more juicy, more enticing, more complex. It offers me more, it offers more for the psyche to move into, to expand, but also for the eros to find attractive and to want more of. So there's this way that it potentially infinitely just expands.

There's this mutual insemination, mutual fertilization, growth, expansion, deepening, widening, complexifying, complicating, enriching of eros, psyche, logos. They all help each other. They're all involved with and involve each other. And that's the eros-psyche-logos dynamic.

The fact of that as a fact of our soul, of the way the soul works, implies several things. One is that eros is liberating in different ways. Let's unpack that just a little bit now.

When there is craving or clinging or greed or aversion, we can see in our phenomenological approach that when there's clinging towards something or pushing away or grasping, aversion, it tends to solidify the perception of that object that we're clinging to. There's a solidification of that object, and also a kind of

stagnation—a stagnation of the perception. We only see it this one way, or rather the perception gets more solid, more one-way, often in a negative way, or a particular flatly enticing way.

We know all that from dependent origination and the study of that in practice through ways of looking. And the reverse is also true: when a certain perception is solidified, it tends to stimulate the clinging. These two go together—solidification, stagnation of perception, and clinging.

Even when we see something as impermanent or flowing, there can still be a kind of stagnation of the perception, a kind of one-dimensionality and a certain unidirectionality of the perception. The perception stagnates in a certain way.

The solidification and stagnation of perception are the exact opposites of what happens with this eros-psyche-logos dynamic, or they're an arresting of that dynamic—of the way that opens out the perception, the imaginal perception, the sense of, the knowing of, the intimacy with, and the idea of the object, the erotic object.

There's an infinite potential for this mutual insemination, fertilization, expansion, enriching, deepening, to create, discover more of the beauty, more of the dimensionality, more faces of, more dimensions of this beloved, this erotic object. It's the opposite of stagnating or solidifying the perceptions.

There's much more to say about that kind of infinite potential—infinitely increasing or expanding or complexifying or complicating or enriching the object. It certainly doesn't happen as a smooth process. It happens in stages, and often with hiccups and obstacles that need to be addressed or negotiated or made aware of.

But what this means is that eros, in its capacity to open perception and see image as image, is very different than grasping, aversion, clinging, craving. It has the opposite effect. It doesn't solidify, it doesn't stagnate. Actually, it liberates the object. Its effect is to liberate the perception in a certain sense.

Last thing for now. So you've... I can't remember now if I've said it, but it may be dawning on you that—I did say it, didn't I?—that there's a small definition of eros, as we said. Eros is this wanting more contact, connection, intimacy, experience, knowing, penetration, opening to the erotic other, to the imaginal erotic object, to something. And that's what we call the small definition.

There's also, because of the way that psyche and logos and image and the imaginal and soul-making and that whole soul-making dynamic—the eros, psyche, logos dynamic—are actually implicated or naturally tend to evolve, eros will start to evolve and expand unless it's inhibited. We can also talk about eros and imply all that, really imply that whole dynamic, that whole constellation. So that in the small definition, we're really talking about eros as one element of that eros-psyche-logos, that soul-making dynamic.

Or sometimes when I use the word eros, I'll actually be using it in a way that implies that whole erotic imaginal constellation, implying that whole dynamic, that whole expansion of that dynamic, everything

that's involved in the erotic, imaginal aliveness, activation, that process, the way it constellates self, other, world, et cetera, which we'll come back to.

So this is just one of those things—again, I probably apologize in advance—I predict that I'll be going back and forth between these two meanings, a more small meaning, and saying something like, when eros gets blocked, it becomes craving, or something like that. Or when the logos doesn't expand enough, then there are problems. But it should probably be pretty clear in context.

Another implication there is that eros in itself, so to speak, the small definition, is neither inherently, intrinsically positive or negative, good or bad. It's just this wanting more contact, more opening, more penetration, more intimacy, more experience, more knowing of all that with the erotic object. So in itself, it's neither here nor there.

Of course, there is no "in itself." We can't extricate it as something that doesn't stimulate this whole movement of eros-psyche-logos, this whole dynamic, interwoven dynamic, or as something that is trying to stimulate that dynamic but is blocked in different ways. So there really is no "in itself."

Whether eros is for the soul, is soul-making, is enriching, is beautiful, is opening and opening up the sense of existence or not—and therefore desirable or not—is really dependent on what happens in relationship to that whole dynamic or how that whole dynamic is able to unfold. We'll talk a lot about this. So "in itself," if there isn't "in itself," eros is neither actually good or bad, positive or negative. It's just this thing. But oftentimes we'll be talking in a bigger definition, bigger implication.

When realism comes in and I really don't see this image as an image, I really take it as literal or a truth or this idea that's wrapped up in the imaginal and the erotic object, and I take that logos as really being true, then problems come in and eros becomes craving. And there's realism. Eros leads to craving, related to what I said before about solidification, et cetera. We'll come back to this.

But there are other kinds of problems that can come in. There can be a cramping or a blocking or a limiting in different ways, either of the eros, of the libido, if you like, or of the psyche, of the imaginal function, or of the logos. So when any of these elements is cramped, blocked, limited, then it gives rise to problems in the relationship with the other, with the erotic object. And we're going to look at this in much more detail as we go on.

Okay. Thank you for listening.

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