Eros Unfettered (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:36:05

Let's begin to explore and unfold this movement of Eros, the movement of soul-making—what I've been calling the soul-making dynamic, or the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic. We'll examine what it involves, what it brings into being and opens up, and also some of the ways that this whole organic movement can be hindered, blocked, impeded, weakened, or stopped.

I'll speak in theoretical terms but hopefully flesh things out with examples. There's really a double intention here over the next few talks: opening up the possibilities of Eros for ourselves—the possible manifestations of Eros in practice, in life, in our existence, in the way we relate to existence and to image—while also looking at what the possibilities of Eros open for us. What comes forth for us, what becomes available to us because of the movement and different manifestations of Eros?

In a way, through this exploration, we're circling around things and ideas and teachings we've already touched on. There's the hermeneutic circle again—we touch on something, then something else, then come back to revisit the first thing, round and round. Much like a seamstress sewing stitches or knitting a scarf will come back over the same area to add another thread, another color, or entwine threads together. A tapestry gets woven by working over the same material back and forth, adding something each time—more intricacy, more density, more complication, more solidity, more color.

It's interesting that some people who work with imaginal practice wonder: "I'm exploring all this imaginal material, I'm on retreat, perhaps devoting a month to these practices, and it occurs to me that there's a lot of Eros here—often very sexual, explicitly sexual imagery. Why all this Eros? Why all this sexuality, both non-sexual and sexual Eros, in imaginal practice? Is that right? Is it okay?"

This is a good and interesting question. To begin a response: one reason is that we love Eros. We love that fire, and we love its juiciness—using a more watery metaphor. Something in us loves that, and the more Eros flowing through us, the more we love it. Eros has this quality of loving itself—it has its own erotic connection with itself.

Another thing is that in imaginal practices, as we've set them up, the teachers and teachings allow it. We allow that Eros. The logos—the conceptual framework we've established, the explanations—sanctifies and legitimizes Eros. The examples we share in teaching also open something up, normalize it, legitimize it, give it place and space within the teachings.

Through examples, we also communicate the range of images—the breadth of possible archetypes and imaginal figures and characters that come, that operate, that demand attention, that make other demands,

that ask for reverence and devotion. This range is deliberately broad, so we're not locked in—and certainly not unconsciously locked in—to just a narrow range of traditional Buddhist images: chastity, equanimity, even temperament, evenness of mind, calmness, sobriety, the fantasy of the hermit. The range of images and archetypes is broad, giving permission for those that don't fit into the more official but often unconscious canon of fantasy communicated in traditional teachings among some streams of Buddhism.

So Eros is sanctioned by the teachings, teachers, and examples. It's legitimized, given place.

Another important reason is that psyche and the imaginal involves beauty. The imaginal involves beauty—perhaps in a very wide range of what that word means. But generally speaking, beauty is a component, an element of the imaginal, of images when they're alive as imaginal images to us. Where there's beauty, there's attraction. And attraction opens the possibility of Eros.

In a way, Eros is intrinsic to the imaginal. So of course it's going to arise. You do imaginal practice—Eros is intrinsic to it.

Of course it's going to come up. Eros is intrinsic to psyche, I would say, to some degree or other. And the more you allow the imaginal, the more you actually allow eros.

If an imaginal figure is felt by us or regarded by us as other—as an otherness to us—it's not being reduced to a faculty of my mind or an aspect of my consciousness or even an aspect of my psyche. It's not being reduced to a result of my personal history. Then that otherness, that personhood, allows eros between me and the image, or even between two different images, even two different intra-psychic images. Eros is allowed because of the otherness there. Eros is an attraction between othernesses, we could say.

When in that otherness we feel or regard images, or when we play with the perspective that images have a claim on us—they have a claim, a deep, far-reaching, profound, soul-resonant claim on the psyche, the way a lover does, the way a lover has a claim on us, or a nuptial claim of a spouse—that claim on us is also erotic. It doesn't necessarily mean it's sexual, but it's erotic, in the way a lover's claim is erotic, and it gives rise to or involves eros.

Always, I think I've said this as well, where there's the imaginal and imaginal figures, it's not always apparent at first, but there's always some kind of love. It might be a very—again, a kind of love, a flavor, an expression of love that doesn't fit into the usual range and the usual picture of what the mind has of what love looks like. It can be, for instance, quite stern or strong or involve seemingly even violent elements, but there is some kind of love there with imaginal figures both ways—we love them and they love us. And there's a desire for contact. In a way, this imaginal figure is an angelus, is an angel, a messenger. It wants to make contact with us, and we want contact. We desire intercourse, if you like, in the broader sense of that word—intercourse. Again, not just sexual. And that desire for contact is, according to this very basic, what I'm calling the small definition, the loose definition of eros—that's the

desire for contact, to open to, to relate with. That is eros.

As we sense more into an image—again, it might not be at first obvious, but we sense more into an image—what makes it an imaginal image is this quality or dimension that we begin to notice with imaginal images: their unfathomability, their inexhaustibility. They are not reducible to this or that explanation. We don't ever figure them out, or if we do, they die. They can have this sense of endlessness, bottomlessness almost to them. Because of that unfathomability and inexhaustibility, there is, so to speak, always more for eros—the erotic movement towards that image or in relation to that image. There's always more for the eros to open to, always more for it to penetrate, always more for the eros to know.

These words—penetrate, open, receive, know—are all words with sexual connotations, as I said before. But there's no limit to the penetration because of the imaginal figure's unfathomability. That imaginal figure might be an actual person—alive, a flesh and blood person in our life, or that we know about, or a historical person. We've been through all this before. Our perception of them is imbued with beautiful imaginal dimensions and fantasy in the good sense of the word, and there's no bottom to that, so they are in a way infinitely penetrable. We can open to them endlessly.

Sometimes, again I've explained this before, sometimes wrapped up in images, or an image bears this message, this angelus, this communication of somehow a telos, an end, a point, an end towards which the soul is moving. There is the eros of that magnetic attraction of the soul towards this telos, towards this end, something that the being, the soul is beckoned towards, called towards. What Corbin, Henri Corbin calls "the angel out ahead," or we could say the divine root of something that we're called to.

But that angel out ahead—we never reach it. It's not that we reach it in some kind of union and finish with that. There's an infinite movement towards that. It keeps moving further and further. We move towards it and it takes a step back and beckons us further and further, if you like, on the path of soul making, on the path of deeper, wider divinity. So there's something about who we are becoming, our telos. In some images, they are redolent with that. They communicate that. They shine with that and beckon us in that way. That telos implies or needs eros, that erotic movement.

We could say all this in relation to this question: why all this eros? Why all this sexual imagery even more in the imaginal practice when a person devotes themselves to this kind of practice for a time? Of course someone might say, "No, no, no. You let people daydream and what do you get? You get the defilements running amok, the defilements running away with themselves, increased." That might be someone's knee-jerk assumption.

But as I hope you can really see when you explore these practices in the careful ways that we're talking about, that's absolutely not the case. We'll revisit the doubts that may arise there, but you can see that's not the case.

There are all these answers that we could give, but we can tie all that together. We can weave it together

through this, I think, more elegant explanation of what we've been calling the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic or the soul-making dynamic, if that's too technical sounding for you. The explanation, the exploration of how the fire of eros spreads, how it catches alight and sparks fire wider and wider so that it spreads. How the tree, if you like, of soul grows—the organic movement of the growth of this tree, or the way the web of soul-making is woven.

These are different, maybe more poetic languagings of what we mean by the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic or the soul-making dynamic. I've talked about this in other talks, I think in that set of talks "The Sacred Universe: Insight, Theophany, Cosmopoiesis," and in more detail in the series "An Ecology of Love."

So there's this rich range of what Eros wants with respect to the beloved other.

Now, when we have this Eros arising, when there's this erotic connection, contact, intimacy, touching, penetrating, opening, receiving—when there's this erotic relationship with a beloved other, what happens? What are the conditions that are created?

Well, one of the things that happens is that both self and other, both the lover and the beloved, both become more imaginal. They take on more imaginal dimensions. They become pregnant with more soulfulness, if you like. They become ensouled in deeper ways, or differently ensouled.

So this is part of what we mean when we say—and I think I touched on this in some of the talks already—that the imaginal is not fantasy. Fantasy tends to be quite two-dimensional. The figures in fantasy, including oneself in fantasy, tend to be quite two-dimensional, relatively flat. The imaginal, by contrast, involves this pregnancy, this soulfulness, this multi-dimensionality. There are depths there. There are mysteries there. There are resonances and echoes and connections that reverberate through different levels and dimensions of being.

So in the soul-making dynamic, in the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic, when Eros is operating—when there's this erotic connection with a beloved other—both self and other become more imaginal, more pregnant with soulfulness, more multi-dimensional, more mysterious, more beautiful.

Now, what does Psyche refer to in all this? Psyche, we can say, refers to this very process of ensouling, of becoming more soulful, of taking on these imaginal dimensions. It's the very movement, the very organic process whereby beings—whether it's oneself or the other—take on more depth, more mystery, more beauty, more resonance.

And Logos—what's Logos doing in all this? Well, Logos has several functions. One is that it provides a kind of conceptual framework that makes sense of what's happening, that gives it meaning, that allows us to understand and articulate the process. But Logos is more than just concepts. It's also the very meaningfulness that gets woven into the experience, the significance that permeates it.

When something becomes ensouled, when it takes on these imaginal dimensions through Eros, it becomes

meaningful in deeper ways. It becomes significant. It carries weight and resonance and connection to larger patterns of meaning. So Logos is both the framework that helps us understand the process, and it's also the very meaningfulness that gets created in the process.

And here's the beautiful thing: these three—Eros, Psyche, and Logos—they're not separate. They work together. They support each other. They amplify each other. The more erotic connection there is, the more ensouling happens. The more ensouling happens, the more meaningful it all becomes. And the more meaningful it becomes, the more it feeds the Eros, the more it sustains and deepens the erotic connection.

So if it's possible to hear these words with more of their full range. Eros wants all that, but classically in Greek mythology, Eros is always accompanied by two other gods: Pothos and Himeros. Together they form a trinity, an erotic trinity called the Erotes—a little band of three.

I think it's Plato who explains that Pothos has to do with what is not so much present, but what is absent. It's the yearning, the longing for what is absent—and in our case, particularly for what is not yet here. We'll return to this. Himeros, again according to Plato, derives from the Greek word related to stream and rushing—the way a stream rushes. There's a stream of soul, part of this soul movement.

This Pothos and Himeros accompany Eros. What does this mean? Pothos is always wanting more. It accompanies Eros, so Eros is always accompanied by this wanting more—wanting what's not yet here. It wants something further, wider, beyond what has already been reached or met or encountered or known or achieved. Because of this Pothos that always accompanies Eros, there's an endlessly dynamic quality to Eros. Eros is endlessly dynamic in its thrusting, its penetration, its opening, its embracing movement. With Himeros and Pothos, Eros is movement—endlessly dynamic movement. You always want more.

As I've said, Eros is a kind of desire—actually a whole group of desires that are erotic. But it's a particular kind of desire that always relates to or involves the imaginal. Eros is a desire to know, to experience the other, the object, the image, more deeply, more widely, more sensitively, more finely and subtly, as well as more grossly—the more obvious kinds of intimacy and knowing, as well as developing increasing subtlety in that knowing, meeting, touching, connecting, penetrating, opening to, receiving of the image, of the object, whatever it is. And to know it and experience it more completely and more fully.

There is this movement to keep thrusting, to keep opening. In this movement—a movement into the imaginal—Eros penetrates the imaginal and inseminates it, or opens to it and is inseminated itself by the imaginal, by Psyche. It fertilizes the imaginal, the soil of the imaginal territory. There's an increase in what we're calling Psyche, or an increase in the image. There's a swelling, a tumescence, a growing of something. Not like daydreaming where images get carried away, one thing leading to another, but an increase in the sense of richness of the imaginal object.

It gains in imaginal richness, in complexity—the way a piece of paper or fold of cloth gains dimensionality when you crunch it up with all these folds. There's an increase of dimensionality, of aspects or folds, the

faces of the beloved other, the particularities. We discover more particularities, more richness, more complexity, a widening of who they are, what this thing is—the beloved object or other, the imaginal object. They become wider and deeper. They contain more dimensions.

With that, the logos is also pushed forward. If I'm regarding a person in my life in whatever relationship we have, and they become alive for me in this erotic, imaginal way...

The beloved becomes a theophany, a divine manifestation. Through the very particulars of their being, their expression, their actions, I witness how they embody a face of God—not separate from God, intimately connected to the manifestation of Buddha nature and divinity in exquisitely particular ways. This goes far beyond the general recognition that "everything is love" or "everything is awareness, therefore Buddha nature." Rather, through their unique particularities, through their irreducible personhood, through this exact way they appear to me anew, the divine reveals itself.

Because I perceive and sense all this, the psyche undergoes transformation. My conception expands—not merely of who this person is, but of what any human being fundamentally is. The logos of human existence stretches to encompass the understanding that a person is not simply a biological mechanism, however complex and marvelous that may be, but simultaneously and intricately a theophany. The very ideas of what constitutes theophany, the relationship between divine and human and soul—all this expands as well.

Through this thrusting and opening of Eros, both image and psyche expand, and the logos grows in relation to this beloved and potentially to others as well. As they become more sumptuous, more complex, more rich with facets—more refractions of light from the different surfaces of the jewel they reveal themselves to be—this very richness entices and elicits an increase in Eros itself.

Thus the whole dynamic unfolds: Eros inseminates psyche and logos, while the larger, fuller, more complex and beautiful psyche and logos inflame Eros further. You witness this inflating, self-fertilizing, mutually fertilizing movement—not a snowball effect, for that strikes me as an inadequate metaphor—but rather this feeding of each element by the others, the whole becoming increasingly fecund, expanding, widening, deepening.

We could say I discover more in my beloved—more dimensions, more faces, more theophanies. Simultaneously, we must acknowledge that I am creating this. The psyche creates it. This process of creating and discovering reveals more of the beloved other, and this expanding, mutually fertilizing dynamic of widening, deepening, enriching, and complicating does not happen instantaneously.

It unfolds over time, inevitably in stages, not smoothly in the sense of continuous flow. Something opens, we become captivated by that opening, we explore and expand at that level, we dwell with that beauty, and then potentially the movement grows again. There are natural stages to this unfolding.

The movement can also be unsmooth in that it may be blocked or diverted—something we will return to

later. But when unimpeded, notice this crucial point: there is never any complete knowing, complete penetrating, complete opening to the beloved. We never fully know, penetrate, or open to receive the beloved other—whether person, inanimate object, aspect of nature, or intrapsychic image. No finality is possible to our knowing.

This creating and discovering is potentially infinite, driven by pothos—always more, always more, always more—or by himeros, the flowing, the onward flowing.

But it is not only the object that becomes amplified, extended, widened, deepened, complicated, made sacred, discovered, created. Because subject and object are always mutually dependent horizons—they always go together—not only the object but the subject, the self as well, is subject to this same process. Caught up in the same web, involved together, turning with the same movement.

Not only does the object receive dimensionality or have its dimensionality revealed, not only are its beauties and complexities given or discovered—we ourselves undergo the same transformation. The imaginal sense of self expands in precisely the same way. Everything I have described in relation to the object applies equally to the sense of self, the imaginal sense of self in those moments of unfolding.

This is not always obvious to people and sometimes gets missed, with significant consequences. But again, subject and object always go together.

And another aspect that weaves together with all of this is the world—the larger perception that encompasses not just the object and the self, not just self and other, but the entire cosmos of our experience. All of this unfolds naturally through the dependent arising of perception. Self, other, and world are always co-fabricated together.

Depending on the eros present—its nature and quality—and how it fabricates imaginally, a particular self-other-world constellation emerges. They become co-constellated, inseparable. We could say self-other-world-in-eros, all arising together as one dynamic whole.

We will return to this understanding, but what's crucial to recognize is that all of these dimensions—psyche, logos, and eros—are expanded, deepened, widened, and enriched together. Self, other, world, and eros itself all undergo this simultaneous transformation. Through this process, unfolding in stages, they too eventually are felt and seen to have more dimensions, eventually revealing their divinity.

This is where our understanding of cosmopoiesis emerges. You work with an image and it spills out into the perception of the world. Why does this happen? Because the object and the eros with the object naturally draw in self and world, weaving them into that imaginal co-constellation. This is inevitable because they form part of that four-fold co-constellation we've been exploring.

Now, we could speak of eros, psyche, and logos as separate things, and we could define eros in that

smaller sense we discussed earlier. Yet as I've mentioned before, eros truly implies and involves the whole eros-psyche-logos dynamic—the entire soul-making process. While we can speak of eros, psyche, and logos as distinct, there's another way to understand their relationship: eros, image, and concept—or idea—are actually aspects of psyche. They are aspects of soul-making, not truly separate phenomena.

We will revisit this understanding, but it's important to recognize that image and idea are not really separate. Image actually always involves ideas—plural. They interpenetrate completely.

This brings us to a fascinating question: what does eros desire? What does it want to touch, to know, to penetrate and open to exactly? What is the nature of this other, whether it's a purely intrapsychic image, an actual person, an object in nature, an animal, or anything else that draws our erotic attention?

The object that eros desires is, in fact, image and idea. It is psyche and logos. Eros wants psyche and logos. This offers another way of understanding what's actually occurring in these moments of soul-making.

The object is constituted by—its very nature is—psyche and logos. It is image and idea. Even when I'm speaking of a flesh-and-blood person, when I'm in a certain relationship to them that allows and gives permission for this way of seeing, the object—my beloved other—is image and idea wrapped up with flesh-and-blood reality.

Someone might protest: "But what about the real object as it is? What about the object as it really exists?" And at this point, you know what the response must be. The response to that question—"What about the real object, the object as it really is?"—is laughter.

Always there is concept, there is logos involved in any perception. I have emphasized this countless times. If there truly were no conception involved in perception, there would be no perception at all—there would be fading. Why? Because concept is part of avijjā, part of the very mechanism that allows perception to arise.

So this notion of "the object as it is" reveals the fundamental problem with realism. I won't elaborate this entire teaching again, but it relates directly to our understanding of emptiness and the absence of inherent existence in all phenomena.

Another way of expressing all of this might be to say that what eros ultimately wants is more psyche. Eros desires psyche, endlessly longing for psyche. There is the beautiful myth that some of you will know—the myth of the love between Eros and Psyche, their eternal dance of desire and soul.

Eventually they get incorporated into the pantheon of gods. But we could say in all this, from a theoretical perspective, what is Eros wanting? We could phrase it a few different ways, and one way of saying it is this: because the object is psyche and logos, and because logos—idea—is wrapped up with image anyway, and the object is image and idea, that's really psyche. Eros wants soul. It wants image. It wants cosmopoiesis. It wants the ideas and concepts and images that are fecund and beautiful. Eros wants

psyche—it wants more and more psyche.

Another way of saying all this is that the soul loves soul-making. The soul has an erotic desire for soul-making. The soul desires soul-making. So there are different ways of explaining all this, but in a way, they're just different ways of saying the same thing.

Let's look at that dynamic with a few examples and talk a bit more about it. We'll explore it both in imaginal practice and in life, with different kinds of erotic objects, beloved others.

Starting with purely intra-psychic imaginal practice, we can see that eros is sometimes explicitly sexual—obviously sexual—and sometimes not. Let's begin with sexual eros, partly because what I want to do in these talks is to open up the sexual, open up that doorway of the sexual and legitimize it, sanction it.

Again, we've said before that the sexual is not equivalent with the erotic. It's one face of the erotic. When we say erotic, we don't mean sexual, as has become common parlance. Sexual images and sexual action in life are just one way of knowing, experiencing, contacting, connecting, opening, penetrating. It's just one way—one strand or thread of the erotic movement.

But at the same time, while we've established this distinction, it's not interchangeable with another way. In other words, we cannot simply replace sexual knowing with another kind of knowing. You can do that if you want, but don't assume they're interchangeable strands of eros.

Let's linger with this for a while. Sex and sexual images cannot be reduced—we cannot assume that they are, for instance, just expressing love, or that this particular sexual image is just expressing a voice wanting union, melting together into oneness, or certainly that it's just a desire for pleasant sensations. Sex and sexual images can involve these things as primary elements, but what drives sexuality and generates sexual images is much more involved than that.

I'd be cautious of narrowing it down this way. In spiritual circles, these kinds of ideas about sexuality are very common: it's an expression of love, or it's wanting oneness and union, or it's just seeking pleasure. But remember something from previous courses about the specificity of images. Images are very, very specific. When we reduce them, they lose their specificity. This image, with all its particular nuances and details and the very particular ways it was felt and sensed, cannot be replaced just by an idea like "it was wanting union" or "it's a movement towards oneness."

The specificity of images is something really important. So yes, the sexual is one way of knowing, but it's also that the image wants this way. The image shows this particular way—this specific way of penetrating, of opening, of intercourse in the larger sense. This expression of eros is being shown in the image. This is what the image wants.

There's a principle here that I've touched on in previous retreats about trusting the intelligence of the soul, the intelligence of the dynamism of the soul. Sometimes that's hard to generate, but just playing with a

little bit of trust nourishes the process. It's very specific.

The images are specific. They're not just reducible, interchangeable, or equivalent to one kind of eros with another. If we extend that point, you also see that implied in this idea is the exact specificity of the sexual image—because we're talking about sexual images, starting with that.

What you'll notice, I think, inevitably, if you really do these practices and you're truly open to this, exploring them in the ways we're discussing—with mindfulness, with sensitivity, with awareness of the energy body, with noticing the soul resonances, and all that we've described in what we consider imaginal practice—you will find that often, maybe not all the time, but often the erotic images that might arise, whatever they are, and become what you're meditating with, are what I like to say sufficient unto themselves.

There might be a particular activity, sexual activity, interaction or communication or relationship going on. This is true for all images, whether they're sexual or not. But it's sufficient unto itself. There's some particular activity embodied, manifested in the image itself that is, if you like, intrinsic to the image. That means it doesn't follow the usual way that images—like one thing leads to the next, as they say, for life, and also with images—progress. One thing happens, then one thing leads to the next, and so on. There's a kind of sufficiency unto itself that's part of what the image wants. It's intelligent.

So it's not that you're working in meditation and something erotic arises, something sexual, and then there's this kind of progression or escalation to, say, genital intercourse or orgasm or whatever. It doesn't have that kind of escalation necessarily at all. In fact, quite rarely. There's something about just lingering. It just wants to be just that, whatever that is. Of course, that might be genital intercourse, but it doesn't have this escalatory sort of propulsion to it.

Nor certainly does it imply at all or propel one to concretize that action in any way in the world. We've been through all this in regard to imaginal practice, but remember that in relation to sexual images as well.

So yes, the pothos and the himeros, the always wanting more and the stream, the onward rushing stream, will give rise to, as I said, impregnating the imaginal, impregnating psyche and fertilizing the images. But that fertilization is a deepening, an enriching, a giving dimension to and a discovering dimension in the image. It's not in the same way that unmindful daydreaming just leads one thing onto another, or fantasy in the way it's usually meant—being lost in sexual fantasy or whatever in the poor meaning of the term. It's not that kind of wanting more and rushing on.

So we go back to things from other retreats that you've listened to. There are narrative images where the whole thing seems to progress in time in this narrative way. This happened at this time. There's either an aimlessness to it or a kind of purposive narrative. This thing happens and then it's great because this next thing was able to happen and this next thing—whoopee! That's usually, not always, but that's usually a

telltale sign that the ego has gotten involved and it's spinning a narrative thread, usually towards some kind of triumphant thing or towards collecting something or something like that, or towards doom.

This is in contrast—narrative images are in contrast to what we call the imaginal or iconic images, where there's a quality that we can notice of eternality or timelessness to them. They're more characterized by that. Same with the sexual imaginal, the erotic imaginal. They don't move in time towards some great whoopee necessarily.

Again, it's something to do with the integrity, if you like, and the intelligence of the image, that they don't actually escalate necessarily, and often they don't escalate in that more common way.

They also, again, with this idea of the integrity and intelligence specificity of an image, you'll notice as you play with these kinds of practices more and more, and with the energy body, that images have their own specific register or wavelength of appearance or energy. I can't remember if I've said this on other retreats. I think I have. I'm almost certain I have.

In other words, one could have a sexual image or eros that one's working with in meditation, and it could be very, very ethereal. The forms, the bodies involved are just sort of light bodies, maybe of different colors, or it's all very insubstantial. The resonances with the energy body and the visual, or rather the tangible perception of the image, is towards the insubstantial end of energy bodies. Or it can be very substantial—just feels and looks really solid and earthy and fleshy and very substantial.

That whole range is available. You'll notice, again, that you can play with it because you can actually learn to modulate the register of an image. But it seems to me that, again, images have a certain kind of integrity and intelligence in their specificity. So if it wants to be really fleshy and solid, that's what it somehow wants to be.

And to not immediately want to make it ethereal, or the other way around. This is not always simple as a subject - it depends on the person. But we're saying something about trusting the specificity of images.

Related to this, there's also a huge range in the sexual imaginal, the erotic imaginal - in the sexual dimension of intensity and carnality, of lust and wildness. There's no better or worse with these ranges. Something that seems really lusty and carnal, really intense in its sexuality, really wild, is not better or worse or less spiritual than something that's very gentle and ethereal, where what it expresses of sexuality is quite subtle. No better or worse - it's really about discerning the intelligence of this image. Can I play with the idea of trusting that, assuming there is an intelligence there and going with it, seeing that in the specificity the image offers?

Just to give you a sense of the range here: I had an image some years ago of a couple - I didn't quite know who they were. They were simply on a path in a forest, and all that was happening was they were holding hands. It was a relatively brief image, but there was something in the holding hands. There was Eros there in the hands. The bodies weren't particularly insubstantial - they were just fleshy bodies - but there was

something very subtle in what was passing between them, in the erotic movement through the hand-holding. Very subtle, certainly not X-rated, but this was an erotic imaginal image. There was something about tenderness that was actually really palpable - the love, the softness, the tenderness that passed between them through the hand-holding. One could almost neglect it as an image, but I want to give you a sense of the range and this sense of really trusting the intelligence and specificity of the image.

Notice that in this case, it wasn't even that I was involved. I was witnessing another couple.

Another erotic image that came to me was like a celestial wedding. Again, there was a couple there, and again I was witnessing something. This couple was dancing with each other in an almost formulaic ritual way. There were columns with garlands around them, and they were dancing in and out of the columns, touching hands and holding hands. The whole thing had this very light quality - something really delicate and beautiful and celebratory. I was witnessing this union, almost at another level, a celestial union. The whole thing felt very light, very luminous, though it wasn't particularly insubstantial. They were flesh and blood bodies, this bridal couple, not bodies of light.

Actually, something similar I remember - maybe I'll tell this one in more detail, partly because of what these examples might offer for your practice.

I sat down to meditate one day a couple of years ago, and there was actually a lot of distraction - distracting images. I'd seen a movie the night before, and I was noticing how when you see a movie, the images stay in the mind and dominate for a while, for a day or two even, especially if you don't see many movies. So it was taking time to start, to filter it out. Does this have an imaginal sense to it, or has the mind just been impressed upon by something?

Now, it could be that an image from a movie becomes imaginal for me. Certainly that happens many times, or an image from a character in a book becomes imaginal. So it's not that a priori an image from a movie is not to be followed. But there was a sense of feeling the waters, fishing around - what's genuinely imaginal here, has that quality that I might tune into?

After some time for the mind to settle, an image appeared that I'd had before, quite common for me: a young man, relatively young, alone in a prison cell.

And there's a sort of spiraling stone staircase descending into a dark cellar, and that's his prison cell. I can see that I'm traveling down that staircase to where he is in his prison cell, and there's a tiger that appears beside me, and beside that young man. So I'm somehow moving in and out of identifying with him. At this point, I'm just finding my way into the image.

The tiger, too, was a very common image for me at that time. This tiger has a very powerful, very calm and silent energy—an immense power. So I descend into the cellar, and I notice that actually the top of the stairs admits light. This is interesting. I look up, and I think it's actually open. So this is doubly interesting—the prison is somehow actually optional.

As I go into the cellar, I see that it's peopled. There are various characters there. It's not just this young man. There's a sort of wizard character there—again, a character that I'd encountered before with certain characteristics we don't need to go into here. And there's also a beautiful lady in white, again a character with other characteristics we don't need to go into here.

Interestingly—and again, I'm still describing how I'm getting into the image—I'm still not sure what to focus on here. I focus on her for a while, and her appearance keeps changing as I focus on her, mixing with images from the films that I saw. Then doubt arises. I'm not sure—is this right? What's happening?

I'm describing all this just to paint a picture of what actually happens, as we're going to talk about practice, of course, and doubt and all that. What I did at that point was go a little deeper into the sense of samādhi in the energy body. Remember, all this is connected with that. The mind can't really settle here on what to connect with as an image. Let's just go deeper into the samādhi sense and feel the subtle body, the energy body.

In doing that, sometimes what can happen with the energy body—maybe it happens with some people more than others—is that the energy body sort of begins to float free of the physical body. This is not anything at all to do with being disconnected from the body. There's still this real sense of being really intimate with the feeling in the body. But it's as if the subtle body floats free and sort of flies free of the body. You can feel it flying, and oftentimes for me it wants to turn cartwheels or somersaults. There's a kind of exuberant joy in it.

I can really feel that very palpably in the energy field of the body, and I also see it—it's kind of blue and a kind of white-yellow light. It feels really good and joy arises with that. So sometimes for some people it's related to a possibility that arises with a certain amount of samādhi. This feels good and joy arises with it.

Then it's almost like I'm seeing this subtle-bodied angel, if you like, but I'm no longer really identifying so much. There's definitely not 100 percent identification with this subtle-bodied angel. And this subtle-bodied angel and the beautiful woman who was there—she now also has a more subtle body of light—so what happened, as I went into the energy body with more samādhi and followed this energy body movement, it started to change the image. There's that dependent arising, mutual dependent arising of energy body, mind state, and image, and we're acknowledging all that.

But this subtle-bodied angel and the beautiful woman with the body of light, they start to dance. Dance is really the best I can do as a word for what they're doing. They're somehow floating and interacting with each other in such a movement of delight. There's so much delight and mutual sympathy and resonance in the way their movements reflect and respond to each other and work together. It's very hard to describe in words, but they were full of delight and the whole scene was full of delight and it delighted me and there was a lot of joy in this.

Also I want to mention that as this was happening, there was a lot of—the thinking mind started flashing

lots of insights very, very quickly and intuitively. It wasn't like pondering something, just lots of very quick flashes of intuitive insight around cosmopoiesis and other stuff.

This is quite a few years ago, and I still remember developing this material as insights were occurring to me. Notice also that the thinking mind can be drawn into this process in a really creative way, becoming part of the whole experience.

Now I'm witnessing this erotic interaction, this intercourse in the widest possible sense. But it's really not raunchy or sexual at all—it's very ethereal for a start. What they're really doing is just moving in this way together, dancing if you call it that, in these bodies of light. It truly feels like a vision of another realm where these two, this couple, are somehow eternally in this erotic dance together. Somehow I'm given a vision or an opening into this other realm, and that's exactly what it feels like.

When this had been going on for quite a while in the meditation, I felt like I was losing touch with that world—it was fading a bit. So I went back to this subtle body sense of feeling like the subtle body was flying, the actual feeling of that, turning cartwheels and floating, really feeling how that feels. And again, that feeling in the energy body was very powerful, very lovely and enjoyable, and helped me to access that kind of realm or world again, the vision of that.

So yes, imagining the subtle body floating and flying through the air of the room—because then I could also transport it from that cellar to the room I was actually in, the room at Gaia House. Imagining the subtle body while feeling it, so image and energy body interacting there, allowed that whole sense to come back, that whole image to open up again of the couple.

Just tracing that again as an example—very insubstantial, if we go back to this range of what's possible. Sexual, yes, but in a very gentle way, and certainly not obviously genital or anything like that.

Many times, sitting in meditation, it's as if a deva or a dakini or an angel comes and kisses me on the heart. This has a really healing, soothing effect—very beautiful, very delicate, very loving, but so specific in the qualities of this angel and the way the kiss is given and the effect, its ripple through the energy body. Some of them are characterized by tenderness or by humor or by mischievous playfulness and a sort of seductive quality. But so many possibilities in the specificity—the range is huge.

Or you might get an image of what you know from the Tibetan word yab-yum: the icons of Buddhas in erotic union and sexual union with their consort. Different Buddhas with their specific consorts in erotic union, right at the center of a mandala or a thangka. This would be quite a common image to arise in meditation.

Again, who is it? Who is it who's involved? What are the characteristics of that yab-yum, of that penetration, of that opening? It may well involve melting. There is bliss in that melting. It may be characterized by tremendous tenderness that goes with the melting, and tenderness melts together. It may be that it starts substantial, becomes insubstantial, just melts into light. What started as two figures just

becomes a melting into some color of light, and the figures and their independence and their forms are dissolved in that light.

So all kinds of possibilities here. There may be images and imaginal senses involving different kinds of penetration—sexual penetration, actually all kinds of erotic penetration, because it can even be penetration through the gaze, and this is something we'll come back to. What is it to feel penetrated by the gaze of an imaginal figure? What is it to feel their gaze penetrating you in erotic union that's through the gaze?

But there can be all kinds of penetration, all different ways, and they don't at all need to correspond to or be constrained by any kind of anatomical, biological accuracy. You or an imaginal figure might, for instance, have five penises—there's a statue of Hermes that I saw somewhere that indeed had five penises. You can penetrate or feel penetrated in more than one place at the same time, something that's obviously not biologically possible: maybe in the middle of your head, or in the middle of the imaginal figure's head, or through the front of the throat. It can feel or seem in different ways that the whole body is being penetrated. Again, it doesn't make biological anatomical sense.

There can certainly be gender reversal. So I'm used to thinking of myself as a man or a woman, or I define myself in some way, but there's no constraint or stasis necessarily in terms of gender identities in the imaginal realm. Even with gender, there's not necessarily a clear visual sense that corresponds to gender. There might be, or there might not be.

Penetration, as I said, might have to do more with energy penetrating. It might be very carnal, very physical and conforming to human anatomy. It might certainly be homoerotic. The range is enormous, and it could be a penetration of being, of beingness itself—what's that?

The imaginal is not, as I said, constrained to any kind of gender identity that we're used to. It could be hermaphroditic. Sexual orientations that we're usually identified with, if we are identified with them, hold no sway in the imaginal realm. There's some other intelligence operating that just breaks that open, doesn't feel limited, is not limited by that.

So there are all these possibilities. Let me describe another one. Some of these images, actually this one in particular, has a slightly different context, so there are bits I'll leave out and bits that have connotations that won't be clear from what I'm saying. But I think for our purposes right now, it serves.

In meditation, I see myself or feel myself on a large raft. There's a whole cast of other characters on this raft with me—a large wooden flat raft that's on the sea, drifting. Some of the characters are familiar from other images I'd worked with in the past, that had come and visited me, and some completely new, unrecognized from before. Some of them are very clear, and some are just vague presences. I couldn't even quite get a sense of them or a picture of them.

Not only that, but at first the number of figures—there are clearly quite a few of them, but exactly how

many seemed to be changeable. It seemed more or less, and not even necessarily a finite number, potentially. The individuals themselves could change. They hadn't settled down completely.

Then it seemed like suddenly the raft was like a theatre stage. It was being lit up, so it was on the ocean, this big flat wooden raft, being lit up—this theatre that now felt like a theatre stage—being lit up by intense flashes of lightning, very dramatic lightning coming from the heavens, as if from God or something. So this stage, this theatre stage, was illuminated by the lightning, this periodic lightning, whereas the water around it was not. The water around it was black, dark.

Suddenly with all that, tremendous energy shoots through the image, and it begins. On this raft, on this theatre stage at sea, illuminated by the lightning, a rite begins. There's a woman there. She's mostly naked, a dark woman, mostly naked, but her body is daubed in splashes and strokes of black paint or tar or something. She has amulets around her upper arms, and she's full of vital energy and force. She's exuding this vital energy and force.

A rite begins between her and me, watched by the other characters, as if they form a circle watching this rite. What happens in the rite, unlike some rites, is not formulaic. It's more improvised. It's part dance and part sex, basically, and part different acts of union. There's a lot of energy involved. The energy is quite, if you like, dark and powerful, but I don't mean by "dark" evil. We've been through this in the re-enchanting retreat and other events, possibly other retreats. Dark, in my language, is not evil at all, as most people tend to think in terms of certain archetypes.

She's a dark goddess. It's very, very beautiful. But she's not someone like Kali, who's a sort of overwhelming, primordial, destructive force of nature. She's very powerful, and she's a dark goddess, but it's not that kind of completely, just decimatingly destructive force that I think goes with the goddess Kali, although I'm not quite sure of that iconography.

Now, in this rite, part of what we do, this dark goddess and I—I don't know if you ever did this, maybe it's a weird thing. When I was a kid, my brother and I had two friends who lived just up the street. We must have been seven, I'm guessing. I don't know where we got the idea from—maybe it was from a TV show or something—but we cut our arms just a little bit so that they bled a little bit, and then we pressed the two bleeding arms together, me and my friend, so that we would be blood brothers. I don't know if you've heard of this. I honestly can't remember where we got it from; it must have been some TV thing or something. What that was, really, for us back then when we were kids, was symbolic of our friendship and our commitment. I really loved these guys, and we were buddies and we were always out on the street playing or riding to the park. It was symbolic of our deep commitment to each other as friends.

So that's part of what happens in this rite with this dark goddess on the raft—we cut our arms and we press the bleeding parts together to become blood friends, if you like, or related. It's a symbol of our deep commitment to each other and commitment to something. I'm not even quite sure in the image what.

This image was something I returned to a few times. I was experimenting at the time with the whole notion of pacing with images—when to return, when to deliberately return to a certain element of it, when to just move on to another image. I think I hope I talked about that in past retreats. When I return to it at some stage later, even the next day or later that day, I can't remember, we do this rite again, and her blood is actually black. She has black blood. And I receive this black blood of hers into my veins.

Then I went out for some walking meditation. I was on retreat at the time.

I went out for some walking meditation, and this infusion of her black blood into my body filled my whole being with tremendous energy. But more than that—as I was walking, it felt like that same energy, that same black blood essence was suffusing into my body from nature itself during the walking meditation. She was somehow a nature goddess, and I could actually feel this surge of energy, this black blood current from nature, permeating my whole body, my whole energy body.

Engaging with this image in my walking meditation very mindfully—walking up and down, stopping and standing, being present with this unfoldment—that infusion into the energy body actually transformed my imaginal sense of my body and the earth as well. My energy body became a dancing god, like a very thick-set, heavy, muscular form, quite different from the body I have in this life. And this god in my energy body was dancing a really energetic, powerful dance, something like the haka—you know, the dance the All Blacks rugby team performs to intimidate their opposing team. Something like that was moving through my energy body and imagination while the physical body remained still in walking meditation. We've talked about these kinds of possibilities in imaginal practice before.

At other times, returning to this thread of blood mixing, the image took on much gentler qualities in terms of what it opened up. The mixing of blood became this merging of beings in profound, beautiful love and a kind of softly ecstatic union. So the very same thread of the image felt completely different at different times, giving rise to different trajectories within the larger imaginal constellation.

But also at other times—this is all within the same constellation of images on the raft in this rite—the erotic rite between the dark goddess and myself involved dismembering each other. Ripping or chopping each other's limbs, all the limbs, severing them from the other. She would do that to me, I would do that to her. Anatomically, physically, it doesn't make sense, but chopping all the limbs of the other, cutting their body into pieces, laying these out on the raft—these limbs and body pieces—and then smearing one's own body with the parts and dismembered limbs of the other. So that one's own body becomes daubed in the blood, and then feasting, devouring the limbs and flesh of the other.

Why am I sharing all this? To give you a sense of the range. Clearly, that image wasn't insubstantial at all—it was very substantial, very carnal, very intense. For many people, this just sounds weird or pathological or whatever. But actually, there was tremendous meaning that emerged from that image—a tremendous amount, in fact—infused with holiness, infused with beauty. Is it the standard picture of holiness and beauty? No, it's not. Am I ever going to dismember anyone? Of course not. But what I want to

convey through these examples is to open up the sense of the possible manifestations of sexually erotic imaginal imagery.

So we return to this question: What does the image want? Can I trust the integrity and intelligence of images? Or if I can even grant them a little bit of trust—trusting their integrity and intelligence—what does that open up? What does that allow? What does that allow to unfold? What does that set in motion through my trust?

When I grant that trust, and the image has this iconic, timeless or eternal aspect and quality to it, that trust allows the soul-making. This is part of what enables the soul-making. We're interested here in opening and allowing the eros so that the eros can open and allow the soul-making and cosmopoiesis and eros-psyche-logos dynamic—everything we're exploring.

Notice that this granting of trust, this idea of the integrity and intelligence of the image, is a view. It's a way of looking. It's a concept. It's a logos. It's a conceptual framework. We're completely acknowledging that. It's part of the dependent arising, part of our intelligence that we bring to bear, that we play with, knowing it's just an idea and that it will have an effect. Sometimes this is quite a subtle point and difficult for people to grasp.

But what happens in contrast is this: if I reduce an image—if I dismiss it as merely arising because I was clearly traumatized in my past, or as just an expression of my personal history, or if I dismiss it as uninteresting, or explain it away as loneliness when I see a couple holding hands—if I reduce the image in these ways...

If I reduce or dismiss the image, what happens? Then I have a certain way of looking, a certain view, a certain concept—logos operating. What happens to the whole process? It just folds, usually. So again, there's dependent arising here. We're going to come back to this.

What happens if I feel guilty—some kind of guilt from my upbringing or from other kinds of teachings I've received in different cultures—and I feel guilty about having a sexual image arise? That's actually interesting, the effect of guilt. Again, the guilt becomes a view, a lens, a way of looking, a part of the way of looking, and there's a concept built into that: this is something I should be guilty of, that I should feel guilty of, that is bad. There's a conceptual framework informing it, shaping a way of looking in the view, and that affects what happens.

Well, guilt's an interesting one, because it could inhibit the movement, the soul-making movement, certainly inhibit the image, so we just shut it off or bring the mind back to the tip of the nose or whatever it is that we're doing, or different so-called spiritual practices, or bring it back to so-called reality or whatever. Or the guilt can—and I think I've talked about this before—guilt can, shame and guilt can also propel something more. They have their place in the mechanism of what propels addiction. Often it's the shame and the seeing of something as bad that somehow creates an energy that's intolerable that propels

the whole process. And I just repeat the addiction because of the shame, because the intolerability of something is part of the whole cycle.

I've talked about that before, so I'm not going to dwell on it here, but the question is: if I feel guilty, it's the opposite of trusting the intelligence of the image. What effect does that have on what can or does unfold?

And then there's the whole question too—and we'll come back to this as well—of if there's a lot of energy, a lot of sexual energy or arousal, or sometimes just a lot of agitation anyway, or stress, and then sometimes sexual fantasy or actual orgasm is something the being is just seeking out as a way of seeking to discharge energy. So we'll come back to that, but if that's what's propelling the whole movement, then it will go down a certain line and escalate—one thing leads to another in that way.

So there are many different things that can come into how we're viewing the image at any time, in terms of ideas, subtle ideas—sometimes we're not even conscious of them—or intentions or whatever views, ways of looking. And this all has an impact.

So that's enough for now, but I want to really start to go into this Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic, when we can relate to the image in certain ways that allow that, and how it spills over, as I've mentioned, into the self-image, the images of self that are operating, as well as images of other and world, in cosmopoiesis, and other aspects of this organic movement of soul-making.

Thank you for listening.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.