Eros Unfettered (Part 4)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 37:31

So you can see in so many different ways the possibilities of supporting or blocking the erotic movement, the movement of soul-making, the process and dynamic of soul-making. And this, as I say, we could say this is what the soul wants.

What do we love about being in love? We love the love, certainly. But maybe more, maybe more than that, we love the sense of soul-making when we're in love. To echo something we said the other day, we love the sense of the infinite potential, the infinite creation and discovery, creativity and discovering with respect to the beloved other, in and with respect to them, in and with respect to the self, to the world, to the eros, to divinity.

Eros, if it's allowed to stimulate and open this soul-making dynamic, the Eros Psyche Logos dynamic, the bigger meaning of Eros, Eros opens. It opens things up. And that opening is what is soul-making. And we love that.

Part of that opening is this: it opens up the very sense of existence, the very way we see and sense and conceive of existence. Eros, if you remember from Plato's depiction, was a hermeneutic daemon, meaning he's some kind of demigod that has to do with interpretation, with hermeneutics, interpretation of everything. So whatever Eros comes into contact with, whatever it flows towards, wherever there's erotic connection, there's a fertility and an opening up of the hermeneutics there—the interpretation of this facet, this thread, this aspect of existence, the self, the other, the world there, the eros itself.

So eros, if you like, opens for us the gates into the garden of infinite interpretations—a phrase I used on the re-enchanting retreat: the garden of infinite interpretation. Eros is what takes us in there.

I like to draw on some Kabbalistic teaching. Most Kabbalists, both with respect to sacred scripture and also in relation to the world—so both with scripture and any aspect of existence—held almost axiomatically that it's potentially subject to an infinite variety of perspectives and interpretations. Not just sacred scripture, but the world and others and all that. So it's very similar to what we're saying here.

Some of these teachings about multiple interpretation in Kabbalah I got from this writer that I enjoy, Sanford Drobb. He describes one Kabbalist, Moses Chaim Luzzato, Rabbi Moses Chaim Luzzato, who lived in Padua, Italy in the early 18th century. He's talking about comparing the multiplicity of meanings in and of the Torah, basically the Old Testament, comparing that to the many nuances of the flames from a hot coal. So the flame from a hot coal flickers and has different colors in it at different times. Suddenly it goes green or blue and moves, shapes, and grows, and diminishes. All those multiple flickering nuances are

somewhat similar to the multiplicity of meanings of the basic text. It's not taken one-dimensionally or in a kind of narrow literalistic sense at all.

So this Rabbi Moses Chaim Luzzato said of the Torah, whose words and letters are like coals: whoever is preoccupied and busy with it—in other words, whoever has that erotic connection with it, that arousal of interest that we talked about, that connection there—whoever is preoccupied and busy with it inflames the coals. And from each and every letter, a great flame emerges, replete with many nuances, which are the information encoded in this letter. This is the reason why the Torah as a whole is infinite. Even one of its letters is also infinite. But it is necessary to inflame it, and then it will be inflamed. And so too the intellect of the human being.

So again, we get the image that I was using before—and I think it might even be a classic one—of Eros as a flame. When there's that erotic connection, just as he was describing there without the language of eros, we could say something similar happens to whatever there is this erotic connection with. And eros, as a flame, needs something to burn. It needs the fuel of what? Of the beloved other as psyche and logos. The psyche and the logos are the fuel. And actually then the flame too, if we follow the analogy, it sort of mixes because the psyche and the logos are what is then perceived of the thing. And that becomes the flame that we behold if you translate it back to his image. But again, that really reflects the fact that eros, psyche, logos are not separate.

Again, Luzzato wrote: we enlarge our soul which was previously contracted, in order to be capable of receiving the wisdom of God. We enlarge our soul, which was previously contracted, in order to be capable of receiving the wisdom of God—or if you prefer, the jnana, the gnosis of Buddha nature, the jnana of Buddha nature. This is what soul-making is.

And somehow that floating, cartwheeling movement of the subtle body allowed the whole imaginal object to come alive again. The door became present, luminous with that same numinous quality from the dream. The organ music returned, flooding through from whatever sacred space lay beyond that threshold.

As I dwelt with this image in meditation, something extraordinary began to unfold. The door wasn't just a door anymore. It became a portal, an opening between dimensions. The carved abstract shapes in the wood weren't merely decorative—they were alive with meaning, pregnant with significance I could feel but couldn't fully articulate. Each curve, each line seemed to pulse with divine intelligence.

The music grew more magnificent, not louder but deeper, as if the very foundations of existence were singing. And in that imaginal space, I began to understand something about thresholds, about the places where the sacred breaks through into ordinary reality. This wasn't just a beautiful door—it was the Door, the eternal opening between the visible and invisible worlds.

What had begun as a simple dream image was now revealing layers upon layers of meaning. The mockery

of the young men in the dream began to make sense too—they represented that part of consciousness that dismisses the imaginal, that reduces mystery to mere fantasy. But here, in the actual engagement with the image, the door was teaching me about the nature of sacred space, about how the divine presents itself at liminal moments, at thresholds.

This is what I mean about the vertical dimension opening up. I didn't need to travel anywhere to find more beauty, more depth, more meaning. Right here, in this imaginal door, was an inexhaustible source of wonder. Each time I returned to it in meditation, new aspects revealed themselves. The grain of the wood spoke of time and growth. The stone arch whispered of permanence and strength. The music carried me into realms of feeling I had no words for.

And then something even more remarkable happened. Having been touched by this imaginal door, when I walked outside and looked at actual doors—the front door of the retreat center, an old garden gate, even just the doorway between rooms—they too began to shimmer with that same quality. The imaginal dimension had opened up my perception so that ordinary doors became thresholds to the sacred.

This is the cosmopoiesis I spoke of—how engaging with images in the imaginal realm actually transforms our perception of the physical world. The eros that had been awakened by that dream door, that longing for the sacred, for beauty, for depth, didn't get satisfied and then fade away. Instead, it kept revealing more and more dimensions, both in the inner realm of imagination and in the outer world of form.

The door became a teacher, showing me how the divine hides in plain sight, how every threshold we cross might be an opening to mystery if we have eyes to see. And this seeing, this enlarged perception, was exactly what that earlier quote was pointing to—enlarging our soul, which was previously contracted, in order to be capable of receiving the wisdom of God.

And then that helped, that numinosity and beauty and connection with this image of the door and the sense of sacredness and praise. It helped it all to arise, became really almost just as vital and just as beautiful, just as moving. And really not separate from me. There was something very beautifully connected there.

Then I floated—you know, there was still this energy body sense—so I floated in the image. And I, rather than make the door open, I sort of let it open. And inside was a kind of rainforest, a bright orb of light like the sun. But there didn't seem to be any walls there or borders. It was just this forest and bright light and such a sense of beauty and reverence. And looking up, somehow at the same time looking up, there were stars there, and more music. I could—I was aware in the image—I could sort of travel into this landscape and go on a bit of a journey, but I decided not to, for that reason I pointed out about the difference between narrative images moving through a lot of space, a sort of shamanic journey, versus a kind of image that's sufficient to itself, so the depth there remains a little bit pregnant, not yet fully explored.

I'm mentioning this partly because at one level it sounds like, well, nothing much happened, or it's

certainly not sexually erotic. So in one level it sounds like not that big a deal, as a dream and as an image. But it was, first, tremendously touching for me, and second, there is Eros there, right? There's this sense of attraction, beauty, dimensionality, divinity. And in that attraction, in the way that it stirs the soul, there are all the elements of soul-making there.

The reason I'm mentioning it now as well is because as I moved through the day—and I think I was even working that day—I periodically just recalled the vision, the image, during the day at different times and noticed the cosmopoiesis that came from it. So it was a vision of nature in this case, not of some sexual thing, but a vision of nature and a whole relationship with nature, with this rainforest and the beauty there and the door opening into something that actually spilled over into a real sacredness of cosmopoiesis in relation to whatever was around me that was redolent of that image, characteristic of that image.

So again, coming out of the eros and the imaginal—in this case originating not even with actual physical nature—there's a sense of the relationship with nature being opened, transformed, deepened, so that there isn't a need to necessarily go here or there, see this or that place necessarily. Because the more the eros can go, it can get infinitely satisfied in the infinite depth that can open up there. It doesn't need—let's say it's not constrained to the horizontal. It's right here. I don't need to go elsewhere on this same flat horizontal level. It's infinite right here—infinite in depth, infinite in possibility.

So we can see this in all kinds of ways. Also, again, non-sexual, with respect to someone who's not a lover, but an actual person or a thing in our life or something. For example, the fantasy of a teacher. And again, I'm using fantasy in a good sense, in a creative, soul-making sense. There is fantasy and image. When the teacher-student relationship—even when they don't know each other, they've never met in person—when that is potent and deep and fertile, when there is eros there, and there's a fantasy of the teacher, or fantasies and images of that teacher, in the best sense, in the imaginal sense.

But then what can happen is, again, if we're talking about how this process gets blocked or limited—either, for example, my soul-making process of the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic, in its expansion, reaches, if you like, the limit of what the teacher is presenting. So the image—the way they are, or the way they behave, or act, or comport themselves, or dress or speak or whatever it is—can no longer meet the expansion that's happening in my soul-making process of the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic. And we need more. We need a larger, wider... someone that can give us that or hold that, if you like, in their being. Or a deeper, wider logos than this teacher is presenting and communicating or teaching. You understand? Something in your soul-making, my soul-making logos, soul-making movement, in relation to this fantasy of this teacher—it reaches the limit of what they can hold, or what their presentation of themselves can hold, and of their teachings can hold. And the soul needs something more.

And then the eros goes out of that relationship, and oftentimes the power of the teaching goes out of that relationship. The soul-making goes out of that relationship. Or what can happen is my fantasy or image of

them, or of what awakening is, changes. So I'm talking about spiritual teachers now. For some reason my fantasy just changes of them, my image of them, or my whole fantasy image or logos of what awakening is. And again, it shifts. The eros can no longer flow there for what the soul-making needs. So there's a diminishing of the eros, or the eros means that I move elsewhere for something that can support that psyche and logos.

I can't remember—I think I've shared in other talks in the past, I don't remember—but I lived as a musician for quite some years in the US, and twice during those years at different times, there were periods where the whole soul-making relationship with music and with making music and writing music and playing music just kind of collapsed. It collapsed to a kind of one-dimensionality, so everything that music was—so full, so expressive, so resonant of other dimensions of existence and meaningfulness—at different times, once for a very short period, once for a little longer, it just kind of collapsed to just like, "Yeah, why all this fuss about sounds in certain relationships?"

Continue beautifying this talk (part 4/5). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

It lost its magic, if you like. It lost its image. Those words—magic and image—I'm not sure, but they may well be related. It lost all its imaginal dimensions, its meaningfulness, its soul resonances. And the erotic relationship with making music, with improvising or writing music, was just gone.

It came back. There were certain things that actually helped break that collapse, and certain things that allowed a new level of fantasy to return.

Actually, if we go back to the whole fantasy of a teacher thing, in some traditions—for instance, some of the Tibetan lineages—the instruction is to regard your lama as the Buddha. It's hard to say how many people actually take that literally, like they really are the Buddha. There's something there that they are the reincarnation of a Buddha, or something very close to a Buddha. It might be taken very literally, or not. I don't know, and there's probably a real variety in how literally people take this "your lama, your guru, is the Buddha" teaching.

For me, it's exactly this kind of literalism or realism—whether it's religious in the narrow sense or whether it's secular—it's the realism that's a little silly. So what we're trying to open up here is something, a kind of middle way, that's not a realism, not a shrinking literalism and kind of concretization that would strike me as really a bit silly. But it's also not a kind of dismissal and a refusal to admit other dimensions—something about the nature of perception and ways of looking and soul-making and eros that dismisses all that and just goes to a kind of realism of another level, shrinking to that one dimension.

Something, if you like, in between, which isn't some sort of happy compromise. It's something that's at a different level of understanding, of concept, of engagement, of wisdom, I would say.

So there's the difference between an idol and actually believing this thing or this person is really divine in a kind of very concretized, limited and reified way, and then it somehow encapsulates the totality or it is

the totality of what divinity is. There's a difference between an idol and an icon. And here I'm borrowing from Henri Corbin and also Jean-Luc Marion, a postmodern French philosophic theologian.

An icon admits of this open-endedness, admits of dimensions of unfathomability, dimensions of divinity that will always exceed whatever is in front of us, always bigger than the actual perception. But somehow this thing, or this beloved other, or this object, or whatever it is, functions as a kind of portal to that infinity of infinities, to that dimensionality and divinity. But it's without naive realism, and it's without limitation as well.

So you can get icons and idols in relation to images, of course, but you can also get them in relation to ideas. So an idea can become, or a conceptual framework or a logos can become an idol. It becomes, again, limited, and we say, "This is the truth, this is real, this is true." Or it can become something that's held in a different way—not reified, not taken with a truth claim, and not limited. It becomes more potentially open, expansive, expanding. We'll return to this in relation to ideation.

But in a nutshell, it's not inflation that's the problem—if you know this word from Jungian psychology. This expansion of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, this expansion of the imaginal and the ideation—that's not what Jung actually meant by inflation. It's not the expansion per se that's the problem; it's the reification and the identification that's the problem. Reification and identification are the problems, not this expansion, not the inflation. Because where there's reification and identification, there is not the imaginal. It's not image as we're using it.

Now, last thing. Sometimes, and in some relationships—most of the time, perhaps all the time—it's not acting on the eros that actually stimulates. It's the containment of the eros, preventing it from spilling out in certain ways into actuality, that actually allows the increase of the psyche, the growth, the expansion of soul-making, of image, of logos. It's the not acting.

So what happens by creating a space that is free of manifest action is we create a kind of alchemical vessel, a crucible. The heat of eros accumulates in that space where there isn't the possibility to act on the eros in the most immediate or obvious or one-dimensional way. And this crucible and the vessel and the heat—the fire of eros heating that vessel—heats and stimulates and galvanizes, catalyzes the soul-making process. There's alchemy here.

We cannot, or we refuse to get our more—the more that eros wants—on the horizontal material level in this relationship with whoever it is. And therefore the more is, if you like, forced or funneled to other dimensions, to open other dimensions, to discover, to create other dimensions. Because it can't, it's kept out of this area, of this dimension. So it must find the pressure to create, to find more and find it at other levels and create those and discover and open those other imaginal dimensions.

So for example, non-consummation sexually in a relationship, or on the physical plane of manifesting—being friends and hanging out or whatever it is.

Rather than seeing these boundaries—the kinds that often exist and are sometimes stringently reinforced between psychotherapists and clients, or teachers and students—through the conventional psychological lens that views them as opportunities to re-experience the Oedipal triangle and the frustration of not being able to possess the mother (as projected onto the therapist or teacher), we might consider a different understanding. The typical interpretation suggests that by reliving that Oedipal trauma or pain, we can find healthier ways to navigate, confront, and accommodate these dynamics. But this remains largely a psychological reductionist view of what's actually happening.

What if instead we understand these boundaries and their necessity as creating a kind of alchemical vessel? They forge the conditions where an alchemy of soul-making becomes possible through the very containment of eros—through this sacred space, this *temenos*, as the Greeks called it.

Through non-acting at that level, sometimes in certain relationships, a *temenos* is created for soul-making. This isn't about letting go and diminishing our desires, releasing craving from our lives, renouncing eros, or trying to abandon sexual desire. That's not the purpose in our understanding, in this way we're exploring now. It's for the sake of soul-making itself. This space, this boundary, this *temenos*, exists for soul-making.

The erotic tension is preserved, the fire contained, so it heats up more rather than dispersing. The erotic tension remains alive because the two doesn't collapse into a one through union. This boundary, this containment—I'm not referring here to the preservation of sexual energy found in certain ancient and modern sexual yogas, where the man doesn't ejaculate so that energy is contained and rechanneled to open bliss or activate energy centers, allowing consciousness to melt into oneness. That's all valid and beneficial, but it's not what I mean by this kind of *temenos*.

This containment serves a different purpose: the fertilization of the imaginal, the increase and support of soul-making, the very vessel of soul-making. The imaginal is involved here in a unique way.

Let me conclude with a quote from William James, the psychologist and philosopher. I'm uncertain of its exact source or the full scope of his intended meaning, but perhaps you can hear it now through the lens of everything we've explored. He wrote about "the fantastic and unnecessary character of a man's wants"—keeping his gendered language for the moment. He observed:

"Even when the gratification of the wants seems farthest off, the uneasiness they occasion is still the best guide of his life and will lead him to issues entirely beyond his present powers of reckoning. Prune down his extravagance, sober him, and you undo him."

Prune down his extravagance, sober him, and you undo him.

There's something profound in what he calls "the fantastic and unnecessary character" of eros. It does give rise to a kind of uneasiness, an unsettledness. Why? Because it's inherently dynamic, because it grows things. When we allow it to expand in the way it naturally, organically wants to, it becomes the best guide

of our lives, leading us to issues entirely beyond our present powers of reckoning. It opens insights, expands our sense of existence—all of this unfolds naturally.

Prune down his extravagance, sober him, and you undo him.

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