Eros Unfettered (Part 5 - Otherness and the Art of Disappearing)

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Let's pick up a couple of threads we've already touched on and take them a little further, elaborate them more, and weave them together more regarding this whole soul-making dynamic.

One of the things we said quite early on was that the way we are defining Eros—and really these definitions are not about who's right and who's wrong—is not the way some people have defined it historically and some people still do. Coming from the Neoplatonic tradition, we are not defining it as, or saying that it is, a drive or force toward unification, toward union.

Rather, in contrast to that, we have been saying that eros, in the way we're using that word—eros as we define it—preserves and creates or discovers two-ness. So it's not an inclination, a movement toward oneness, melting, or unification. Rather, if we pay attention to this thing, this aspect of our experience, of our phenomenological movement that we can observe that we're calling eros, we can see that eros preserves and creates or discovers two-ness.

Why? Because Eros is in the service of and is part of the soul-making movement, the soul-making dynamic, the dynamic of Eros-Psyche-Logos. And soul-making, as we've also said and explained, as we can observe in our experience, brings an increase of otherness, an increase of the other. The other swells, it gets extended, expanded in breadth, in depth, in dimensionality, and starts to become more complicated and reveal more facets, more manifold facets. Distinctions are made in the erotic movement or through the erotic soul-making movement. Distinctions are made of perception and of conception, psyche and logos, within the other or of others.

So we can see then how, and understand how, Eros does indeed preserve and create and discover two-ness and otherness. It's the two-ness meaning the two of self and other.

But we might wonder then, well, what about the desire for oneness? What about this desire that we have, or many human beings have, for oneness? So that avenue of oneness, of dissolving, of merging into unions of different kinds, I want to say that's important. And I think for many people interested in meditation, that is an important pull, call in the soul. But at the same time, the avenue of two-ness is important. So both these avenues—of oneness and of two-ness, if we have this erotic avenue preserving the two-ness—they're both important. I want to say we can have both. We can have both. We can know both.

But let's go into this a little more, because if we actually examine personally the desire for oneness, and

sometimes even a longing for oneness, what actually is it? I would say on inspection, it's actually a desire to know oneness of some kind—a oneness of love or of beingness or awareness or whatever it is, or a desire to know the unfabricated, which is another kind of oneness we could say. It's a desire to know. It's not so much a desire to become one with that oneness, or the unfabricated, or to dissolve into a permanent union.

So it's a desire to know something, not to dissolve permanently into some union. This is interesting. In the classic Pali canon texts, as well as other spiritual contemplative traditions from religious traditions from around that time and before and afterward, the kind of ultimate goal of the path could be construed as exactly that—some kind of permanent dissolution or union, ending of the rebirth of a separate existence, and either permanent union with Brahman or whatever, or dissolution into the unfabricated, something like that.

So classically it's there stated as a goal as a permanent—this is the ending of all rebirths, permanently dissolved and unified, or however exactly one would phrase it, something like that. But I would wonder, is that desire there because it's taught to be the goal, or because it's really desired, or because it's actually a movement of aversion, of subtle aversion—something we'll come back to later on the retreat—vibhava-tanha, desire, lust for non-existence, for erasing everything, turning existence and the world and self off, turning it all off, turning experience off.

In actual meditation, actual practice, an actual spiritual practice, what is possible is all kinds of dissolution to relative degrees, all kinds of unions, unifications, all kinds of experiences of melting into oneness, whether it's different levels of jhanas or of the eight jhanas, or different experiences of the brahma-viharas dissolving into love. All kinds are possible, and even what's called an experience of the cessation of perception in an experience of the unfabricated. These are all available as temporary meditative experiences.

One learns how to do that, develops that art or skill at whatever level of jhana or in whatever direction, or to the unfabricated, whatever, and dips into that dissolution temporarily. And then, hopefully—and sometimes it's a gradual process—one then emerges from that and knows a level of essential unity, an essential oneness with whatever it is—infinite love, or infinite consciousness, or something like that, or even somehow the unfabricated. So one moves in a world experiencing two-ness, but actually knowing oneness.

So one can meditatively, with practice, practicing the right way, finding out how, developing that art, one can dissolve in different ways, to different degrees, into different kinds of oneness, and emerge. And emerging, hopefully, in time, and with some reflective insight, we know something. We know an essential oneness, you could say, something like that.

But knowing implies already some kind of duality or polarity at least of knower and known. Knowing is already implies or is already a state of some degree of two-ness, knower and known. There is the knower

and there's what is known. There's the consciousness that knows and there's that which is known. Some degree—to different ways, different kinds and to different degrees.

So what does the spiritual seeker want in wanting oneness, in longing for oneness? She wants to know that she is one, essentially, with God, with universal love, universal awareness, universal beingness, with the Dharmakaya, whatever, at different levels of understanding and perception, actually, of oneness. But she wants to know that, essentially, she is one. And that's different than a desire to dissolve and have that union as a sort of permanent thing.

And similarly, you know, in tantra—we talked about this on the last retreat, the re-enchanting the cosmos retreat—about becoming the deity, becoming the imaginal figure as a kind of option in imaginal practice and also as a kind of direction or instruction in tantric practice. But that becoming the deity, becoming the imaginal figure, is never, first of all, total. It's never a complete union dissolving all sense of distinction.

And secondly, it's only temporary. Realistically, it's only temporary.

This is important—to actually scrutinize a little bit this desire for oneness and what's actually happening in the spiritual and meditative openings, perceptual openings of experiences of oneness and union, dissolution and merging, whether in meditation or in life with a lover, or in the flow of doing a sport.

We'll return to this desire later in the retreat, this desire for oneness, for transcendence, for the unfabricated. There's quite a lot involved in that, and we'll explore the place of that desire on our path. But for now, let's say that eros will retain and engender, or works to both retain and actually engender two-ness. And it will move towards doing that even at the same time as it knows oneness, or onenesses—because there are many varieties and many levels of oneness.

So the general overall movement of soul-making and the thrust that comes from eros will work essentially to retain and engender two-ness, but also unfold oneness. And eventually those experiences become quite possible—the perception of a sense of two-ness, of erotically charged two-ness and otherness at the same time as one knows and can sense a oneness, or many onenesses at different levels, different varieties.

And again, eventually it's quite possible to modulate the emphasis in the way of looking or in the meditation or in the experience that one's involved with—to actually modulate it towards the melting, towards the unfabricating, as we touched on, or towards retaining the two-ness. What am I drawing out of perception? How am I inclining the unfolding of the experience? This is all very possible with the development of the art of meditation.

But eros keeps an erotic tension in the relationship, whether it's with a person or something in nature or an intrapsychic image or whatever. The erotic tension is maintained. And that erotic tension is not just the wanting to act or "I really want to kiss you" or whatever it is. It's not just wanting sexual consummation either, or the tension of the build-up of, say, sexual energy in the body, or just psychic energy, desire, or—as we talked about—the tension of craving. It's not just the tension of energy accumulating in the

body or the psychic vessel. That's not the only facet of the erotic tension, and that might not even be a big aspect of it at all. And the erotic tension can be subtle.

So it's not just wanting to act. It's not just wanting sexual consummation. It's not just the tension of energy. It's not just the tension of desiring union. Erotic tension that is intrinsic to the soul-making erotic movement is this desire for the other—desire to know and experience, touch the other that we're talking about.

There is always more. There's always more of that desire. So there's a tension because there's always more. It's inherent in the pothos of the eros that goes with the eros. And also because the object is always becoming more through the insemination, impregnation that eros gives to the whole eros-psyche-logos dynamic process, soul-making process. The object always becomes more. There's always more to desire, more to know, more to experience. It doesn't collapse into oneness.

So there's an erotic tension just because there's always this desire for more and there's always the two.

Eros creates otherness, or we could say it creates othernesses because it creates also different aspects or whole ranges of othernesses within one object even. It creates and discovers otherness. We could say eros needs otherness. The erotically charged object is an other for eros.

And wrapped up in that, and in the experience—again, just phenomenologically observing the whole experience of eros, of soul-making—there's a fascination with the other. There's the sense, the perception of the beauty of the other. The other is, as we've been saying, an image, a fantasy, so they need to be imaginally alive. The other is an image and a fantasy, and image and fantasy are needed as part of the eros, as we've been saying—and this kind of space, if you like, of mystery or "not yet," or "unknown yet," the space in which the whole process, the whole thrust and opening of eros can happen to discover or create more of the object.

So both the image, replete with its different facets and its beauty and the fascination with that, and also the fascination, the attraction of the space of mystery, the not-as-yet, in which we can discover and create more of the object—all this is part of the experience of eros and soul-making eros.

Some relation to the opening to levels of oneness in meditation and mystical experience: what that means then, what we've just said, is that on the way to, or aspiring to, or practicing towards, in the process of learning to open to or discovering a level of oneness, eros is there. There's fascination. I want to know cosmic consciousness, let's say. I want to open to it and discover it. There's fascination, there's the beauty perhaps of hearing about it or sensing it vaguely but not quite yet.

It exists for us as an image, replete with fantasy, beckoning from this space of mystery—depth we don't quite grasp, unknown potential waiting to unfold. All these aspects are present, making that oneness, whatever level we're contemplating, whatever we might call the unfabricated, into an erotic object for the soul.

But eros requires polarity, and it constellates an erotic tension. Something particularly fascinating emerges in the experience of eros—more easily observed sometimes in sustained relationships with another person where there's beauty and soul-making, though it applies equally to imaginal figures and objects. Even with something as seemingly unified as cosmic oneness, a sense of twoness and otherness can exist within the larger field of eros, within the soul-making dynamic itself.

This twoness and otherness, this erotic tension and polarity, can be experienced alongside—or perhaps within—a third element. There emerges what we might call the "us" or the "we." Consider: there's the self and the other, with eros flowing between them, each alive as image and erotic object. When the soul-making process grows rich enough, it constellates this third—often the very relationship itself.

So there's you and me, and then there's us—almost as if a third soul gets constellated, discovered, or created. What is the soul of this "we"? It's the soul of us that emerges from the eros-psyche-logos dynamic as it expands, enriches, finds, creates, discovers, reveals ever more. This "we," this "us," doesn't represent a merging into union but rather an integrated constellation of the two—a different kind of oneness composed of twoness, if you will.

When souls come together in relationship, I don't lose the sense of me, nor do you disappear. Both remain vibrantly alive as erotic objects—myself included, which we'll explore further. Yet simultaneously, a third seems to be born: we. You and I create a kind of larger soul together, but it's not a collapse into union. It's a birth.

This birth of the soul of us, of we, could indeed be regarded as a literal birth. Or perhaps the actual birth of a child emerges from this eros and soul-making, this child becoming another facet of the dynamic. The third might manifest as a creative project both parties can love and invest in. From the eros between two, some kind of third is born or emerges—whether the third of "us," an actual child, or a collaborative creation. This becomes a new erotic object, a further channel for eros and soul-making.

All these facets coexist simultaneously as different dimensions of the whole soul-making process. They emerge as one recognizes them, as the entire movement deepens, widens, expands, and refines. Because of this comprehensive nature—the soul-making dynamic's tendency to flow in every possible direction, to fill everything out and impregnate all with meaning—eros will also lead to recognizing essential oneness with the other, all kinds of different oneness.

The very erotic movement, when allowed to unfold fully, will eventually lead us to recognize various forms of oneness. It opens mystical experiences. But in the actual lived experience of eros with another person or imaginal figure, this oneness isn't what's predominantly emphasized. In fact, knowledge or sense of oneness isn't necessary to eros at all. Eros, in fertilizing the soul-making dynamic of eros-psyche-logos, will naturally uncover and reveal oneness as part of its unfolding—but this isn't the dominant aspect, nor what's emphasized when eros is in the foreground.

Eros needs the perception of otherness to remain. It doesn't want to dissolve otherness because otherness is what entices. The scope, size, range, depth, complexity, multifacetedness, and multidimensionality of perceiving the other—this is equivalent to the image, the psyche in the eros-psyche-logos dynamic. This otherness must remain and be continually built.

In igniting and stoking the soul fires of eros, psyche, and logos, eros creates or discovers the other and otherness—but otherness it desires to contact, to know, to experience. Eros creates more attractive others that stimulate more eros. This is crucial: rather than creating others from whom we feel alienated or toward whom we feel aversion, eros generates attractive otherness that draws us deeper into relationship and discovery.

The implications of what we're exploring here are vast and far-reaching.

And we'll return to these threads. We'll pick them up later, as I mentioned.

But what it implies is that what some people call the art of disappearing—Ajahn Brahm, I think, has a book called *The Art of Disappearing*—the art of disappearing into jhana, or getting rid of the self, or erasing the self, or experiences of "no self," or emptiness, or that kind of thing, or other kinds of art of disappearing—valuable as they are and important as they are as experiences, temporary experiences on the path in the unfolding of insight and beauty and mystical awarenesses and opening of perception—the art of disappearing is not Eros. Eros is not the art of disappearing. They're different, if you like. You can't reduce one to the other. Eros is not the movement of disappearing. It's certainly not disappearing finally.

All these aspects that we've been talking about, all these pieces—the recognition of the oneness, the knowing of the oneness, the sense of the twoness being retained, the sense even of a third, of something being born from the erotic connection of the two, even the mutual emptiness of self and other object, imaginal object—all of that is actually implicit in the concept of participation. Participation. This is something I've touched on very briefly before, but to me it's a very powerful idea in all kinds of ways. But more even than an idea or a concept, it's actually a sense that is opened for us if the Eros is allowed to do its thing and stimulate the soul-making.

There isn't a hindering, a blocking, a cramping, a constriction, a refusal, a dismissal from any side of the Eros-Psyche-Logos tripod. So we begin to have a sense of participation—participating in the we, participating eventually in the universe, but at much more than just a material level. I participate in the universe by breathing in and out, or I participate by eating and urinating and defecating, whatever. I participate culturally to whatever extent I do. I participate in the community that I'm in, the communities that I'm in. I participate in society by voting, by writing letters, politically, socially, etc. All that's important participation. There's a way that one can see the beauty of all that.

But there are depths of profundity and comprehensiveness to this concept and sense of participation that Eros will unfold. It's not just an idea. We could start with the idea of it, but Eros will unfold, for instance,

what eventually we feel like we are participating—my mind, which means my thoughts, my creativity, my insights, my playing with certain ideas. My mind is participating in the mind of God, if you like, or the mind of the Buddha nature. My individual mind, all the micro-movements of my mind, participating in the soul, if you like, of the divine nature, the Eros of the divine, or in the soul of the other, or in the world soul.

As I said, as the Eros is allowed to expand and fertilize the perception, fertilize the psyche, fertilize the ideation, we get a sense of other dimensions to the different aspects of our being and a sense that we are participating in those other dimensions. They're not separate from us. It's not that we're just one. It's not that it's just two either. And there's a sense of a third. This participation is creating a third. Something is being born of my participation in the divine. Something is being born by the divine, if you like, using me and my particular personhood, my particular—all my particularities.

So as I asked, I think it was in the last talk or the one before: whose Eros is this? Whose psyche is this? Whose imaginal perception is this? Whose idea is this? Whose conceptual framework? These begin to be questions that come to the fore. They emerge out of the very soul-making process. And so we can have a sense, a deepening sense of mystical participation.

As I said, participation—it's a big word. And I think anyone with a little reflection would, as I say, it becomes obvious that we participate in all kinds of ways, but there's depth to that and levels of what that can mean to us and the beauty of what it can mean, the beauty of the sense of it. Because in participation, the idea or the sense of participation, as I said, it's got a kind of oneness in it, implicit in it, but it also retains the twoness and it keeps the threeness, or the birth of the third, if you like.

And in it, my particulars, your particulars, the particular of whatever erotic object I am connected to, opening to, engaged with, the particulars are sacralized in that participation, and as particulars, they are sacralized. In other words, my particular bones or this thought or whatever—it's not just sacralized because its essence is said to be equal with the essence of everything else and being universal, whatever, play of awareness or universal love or something.

Particulars—my particulars, your particulars, the particulars of the erotic beloved—are sacralized as particulars in this sense of participation. You understand? Because the participation needs the particulars. Part-icipation. The part is... it's not just all the same. It cannot be replaced. My uniqueness, your uniqueness. And that uniqueness is itself unfolding. And that's part of the participation.

Can you get a sense? It's a different kind of mysticism, if you like. It doesn't replace the oneness and the knowing of universal essence, but it's a different sense and a different concept.

When we say things like that—and in fact wrapped up in everything, literally, but also wrapped up in all imaginal practice, and all this talk about eros and re-enchantment—indeed wrapped up in anything that we might want to take as a subject in our existence is the question of epistemology: How do we know

what's true or what's real? How do we know anything? What can we rely on? Epistemology is the philosophy of knowing, of knowledge, if you like.

Actually, forgive me—I'm using that word epistemology right now in a way that includes the implicit questions of ontology wrapped up in it. So really, one word to embrace all that. Ontology is the branch of philosophy that deals with questions of reality, of what is real, of the reality status of things. How real is this or that, if we could say, or what kind of reality does this or that have? So as I said, just for shorthand, I'm using that word epistemology to embrace all that—that whole nexus and flow of questioning, all that investigation into ways of knowing and their validity and their domains and the whole question of reality.

This is wrapped up, as I said, in what we've just been talking about—the sense of sacredness and the whole notion of the viability, the validity of imaginal perception when we're talking about eros. It's wrapped up in insight into anything—into emptiness, even into impermanence. It's wrapped up in just our existence, even if we don't think and we're not philosophers at all. So this is important.

We're saying these things about sacredness, and what are we saying about that in terms of its philosophical ground, the epistemology?

Well, first of all, as practitioners, I'm interested in opening up the field of our explorations—I don't know why else you would be here. But as practitioners interested in opening up the field of explorations, interested in opening up regions of soul and of soul-making, we recognize and we admit openly that we grant an image its sacredness, its divine dimensions, its autonomy. Remember I was talking about how an imaginal image has a certain autonomy.

But we acknowledge that this is something that we grant the image. We grant it through the way of looking, through the concept operating in the moment, the logos operating in the moment. Through the way of looking, we grant it sacredness, divine dimensions, autonomy. Without that, it cannot have these things for us.

And it's the same with eros. If you like, we can decide to see it as divine, as autonomous in the way that we're talking about—that it's not my eros, it's eros coming through me, pushing through me from the divine, from a divine figure or divine level. It's autonomous in that sense. So we can decide to adopt that way of looking, that conceptual framework as part of our way of looking, and see what happens when we do that. I mentioned this much earlier on the retreat. See what happens when we adopt a certain ideation, a certain logos, and have that actually be in the way of looking.

But it's also true—and if you're experimenting with this stuff in practice, you will get this sense—it's also that we discover sacredness. We discover the divine dimensions, the dimensionality, the autonomy of images and of eros, when we don't contract around or cling to some conceptual framework or way of looking that simply refuses to admit sacredness, divinity, autonomy.

So if, in other words, if we're open and we're not clinging to a certain rigid idea, then we will actually have

the experience of getting a sense of noticing sacredness, autonomy, divinity, dimensionality actually revealed in the experience.

So what is it then? Is it that we give it that? We grant it that? That it's just coming from us? Or is it that we discover it? Are both true? Do we create and discover? Is there some kind of amalgam, I think I used the word at one point?

Now, this question in regard to sacredness of the imaginal and of eros—the epistemology there is a very similar question to the epistemology in relation to anything. So this is related to much broader epistemological questions regarding all experience.

All experience.

I would say that in the field of imaginal practice and the exploration of eros—and I mean the wider field of imaginal practice, not just the way that comes into our awareness intra-psychically, but the way it comes into our perception of the world, of self, of other—we can and we should see it both ways.

Both that we acknowledge the dependent arising, if you like. We grant an image, a sense of sacredness, a sense of divinity, a sense of autonomy—a characteristic of autonomy. But we also discover it. Can I move between those two perceptions, those two ways of looking, these ideas? Can I even somehow adopt both at the same time? Yes, I can.

If we can do that, have that kind of flexibility, this will be the most useful for practice. I think it's much more mature than plumping for one or the other. It will be useful in the sense that it will liberate our perception. It will liberate perceptions, experiences. For us, it will open and fertilize that whole soul-making dynamic, the eros-psyche-logos. It will galvanize the soul, galvanize soul-making, if we can hold this epistemological question quite skillfully.

This, to me, is a really interesting area. Historically—and I think I've mentioned this on other retreats—probably within religious traditions and perhaps most philosophical traditions until maybe very recently within the history of humanity, there have been streams which have wanted to give a kind of independent reality to the world of the imaginal or to what we might call sacred knowledge.

You get that in Sufism, you get it in many of the Buddhist traditions. In a way, you even get it in the Buddha of the Pali Canon. There was a group in England called the Cambridge Platonists, active in the seventeenth century—Thomas More and John Smith, among others—who resurrected Platonism with variations, wanting to give, or in fact giving, a place for the possibility of knowing in a way similar to how we know things through the senses. The possibility of knowing immediately—not by rational deduction—having sacred knowledge, knowing the mundus imaginalis, which is Latin for the world of the imaginal.

They were actually creating a third kind of knowing. There's rationality and abstract knowledge, and

there's what was regarded as concrete knowledge—knowledge that's sensual through the senses of external things. But there was a third category that the Cambridge Platonists called spiritual sensation. It wasn't to do with thought and rational deduction. It wasn't to do with the kind of sensation where I touch this chair or this table—concrete and externally conceived. It was another dimension which had its own kind of immediate sensation, spiritual sensation.

So they gave, if you like, independent reality to the mundus imaginalis, or to certain things we can know as sacred. And there's a way of knowing that—just a third way of knowing. We say that it's true if I deduce something logically from rational deduction, and if my logic is correct, then I conclude something is true. It's true if I can touch it and see it and everyone agrees with me. And there's a third kind: it's true if I open and use my faculty of spiritual sensation. But all these things exist independently—they just need the right tools to uncover them, discover them.

A lot of these traditions, for instance the Sufi tradition, speak of this way of knowing, this spiritual sensation, this knowing directly of the mundus imaginalis, as available to one who has purified their heart. That word "heart" in Sufism, in mystical Islam, refers to the organ of imaginal knowing—not so much the seat of emotion, but the organ of imaginal knowing. One who has purified their heart knows what's independently existing as a reality in that way.

This still goes on—people asserting this is real, this kind of knowledge, sacred knowledge, or this knowing of what appears in the imaginal. It's an alternative to Cartesian dualism of just mind or matter, and to philosophical positivism, where if you can't measure it or see it with your senses, it doesn't exist. So that's one option. It's been very popular, and it still is popular with different people and different traditions.

But there's an alternative. The alternative is to recognize that reality, so-called, or perception is participatory. Our sense of reality or reality itself is participatory. Our experience is participatory. In other words, we fabricate experience. We are involved in the fabrication of experience, the fabrication of the sense of reality and the fabrication of what we then deem real.

This is not going to the extreme of a slightly New Age "it's all just mind-made, you create your own reality" sort of version. But neither is it the other extreme of just assuming that things we perceive exist as they seem to, independent of our way of looking.

That notion of independent, objective reality has been thoroughly dismantled, if you like, by modern Western philosophy, whether of the continental variety or the analytical Anglo-American tradition. From multiple directions—philosophy of science and countless other approaches—this basic assumption has been systematically deconstructed. The fundamental notion that we're generally taught and feel as intuition—that things exist objectively independent of our way of looking—is simply no longer viable. This was also a core axiom and goal of the scientific method: the idea that we can know how things exist objectively, independent of mind, independent of our biases and perspectives.

Both in philosophy of science and in broader Western philosophy, the naivety of that kind of objective realism has been left in tatters. It's not really sustainable anymore.

And yet, even among those who've encountered these ideas, there remains an often tacit attempt to build Dharma—the whole conceptual structure of Dharma—on some kind of realist foundation. Whether through religious realism, as I alluded to earlier, or secular modernist realism based on materialist assumptions, or an existentialist version that simply accepts "this is reality as it seems, and this is what we must deal with." Sometimes a third option emerges, quite popular among Buddhists who aspire not to argue or enter conflict, simply declaring that anything goes—people believe different things and it's all fine, let's just not argue.

But in all of this, I see a kind of naivety, an inadequacy of philosophical engagement with epistemological issues.

What's more compelling to me is recognizing that perception, experience, so-called reality is participatory. It's always participatory. We've explored this in other talks through quantum physics and developments in modern philosophy, postmodernism, and various other fields.

Modern philosophy often expresses this insight to a certain level, but frequently doesn't develop it further. Those who have read about it and say "yes, yes, I understand" face the crucial question: what do you actually do with this insight into emptiness, into the emptiness of the inherent existence of things? How do you work with the recognition that our way of looking contributes to so-called reality, that reality is participatory in this profound sense?

Modern philosophers seem remarkably ill-equipped to engage this insight because they lack meditative training. Their actual ways of looking remain extremely limited in scope. They don't possess the range to experientially engage different ways of looking and actually open up different cosmoses. Or they glimpse that emptiness, recognize how reality is constructed, acknowledge it intellectually, but then revert to the same kind of realism that modernism indoctrinates us with—there's a real world, it's material, objective knowledge is the way we know things. Nothing fundamentally shifts or gets challenged. There's a reversion.

This pattern fascinates me. Often it's unstated, of course, because intellectually one knows that's not the correct position. But practically speaking, implicitly and conceptually, when weaving new versions of Dharma, it's still operating there.

I find this reversion compelling—why it happens, why there's this backing down or inability to follow through on that level of insight and open things up. I think there are practical reasons related to meditative skill, and perhaps psychological reasons connected to soul-making that I'll return to later in the retreat.

I believe it was physicist John Archibald Wheeler who coined the term "participatory universe"—a great

twentieth-century physicist who worked with Niels Bohr and taught Richard Feynman and Roger Penrose, among others. A wonderful thinker who recognized that knowing is participatory, knowledge is participatory, reality is participatory. There is not this independent existence separate from our way of looking.

We participate also in the concepts we create. Conceptual frameworks themselves are participatory. One philosophical approach to this insight into emptiness is through this notion of participation.

But as I mentioned, this is also something that eros, if we allow it—if we allow it to unfold, to stimulate soul-making—will reveal to us. At some point we develop this sense, this deepening sense of participation in all its mystical levels, openings, and dimensions. We'll experience both the felt sense of it and the logos of it. The concept will emerge as an important logos, a viable one that we can engage as a flexible option.

And what does all that bring then? This sense of participation, this idea of deep, profound participation - what does that itself bring when we open it up as an idea, when we participate in the idea of participation, when we actually have that sense?

Well, one of the things that's implicit in it comes again from Plato's depiction of Eros as a hermeneutical daemon - a demigod, an imaginal figure, if you like, whose realm is the realm of hermeneutics, of interpretation, of ways of seeing, ways of knowing, ways of understanding, ways of perceiving. And this is in regard to everything - the whole sense and every aspect of existence. How are we seeing it? How are we sensing it? What is it to us? What it becomes depends on our hermeneutics, and our hermeneutics is stimulated by eros. So again, it's participation. The idea of participation opens up the hermeneutics, and the hermeneutics - the recognition of hermeneutics - opens up the participation, the recognition of participation in the creation/discovery of reality.

What might all this mean with regard to the Dharma? If eros is regarded with respect, if we don't just pigeonhole it as a fetter or defilement, eros will open things up, as we've been explaining. And in relation to the Dharma, as something we love, as a domain we love, eros will open it up. As the soul-making dynamic infuses the Dharma, relates to the Dharma, eros opens it up. You can see this personally, I think, and you can also see it historically.

In the Pali Canon, the Buddha said: "Seeing impermanence, one becomes disenchanted. Disenchanted, one becomes dispassionate. Dispassionate, one is liberated." You can see the wisdom there, the process he's alluding to of renouncing clinging and letting clinging go, and then the liberation that comes from that.

But with this exploration - this further exploration sometimes based on insight and deeper insight into emptiness rather than just impermanence, and also this exploration that opens up through eros and the soul-making dynamic - one could also say now, modeling on his statement and phraseology, something almost opposite regarding disenchantment and dispassion. One could say, or one could see the validity of saying, or the possibility of saying and recognizing: "Seeing the emptiness and eternality of images" -

seeing the imaginal, in other words, seeing that image is image but it has this timelessness - "seeing the emptiness and eternality of images, the world is re-enchanted. The world and the self, enchanted and empty, one is free to become impassioned. Impassioned, infinite things open infinitely."

In other words, if we allow the passion, the eros, if we allow the soul-making of the imaginal, the world is re-enchanted. And in that, infinite things open infinitely - this soul-making movement, the way that this opens things up, everything, infinite things, and opens them infinitely, potentially infinitely.

You can also turn this phrase around so that the passion, the eros, leads to enchantment and the sense of timelessness that comes with images, the eternality. All these aspects - enchantment, eternality, eros - they are mutually dependent.

Some of you will be familiar with some Vajrayana teachings, and you can see the connection there or recognize in what I just said something akin to a Vajrayana opening of tantric perspectives, tantric understandings, tantric project if you like.

Something then happens in the whole sense of what we're seeing the Dharma is, where it leads, what the possibilities are. Dharma becomes bigger and becomes endless in a certain way. Eros will extend, will widen, deepen the image, the psyche, and the idea - the logos - of dharma, just like it will with anything it comes into contact with. And the pothos in the eros will create this endlessness to it.

So something, if we allow soul-making really fully, maybe something in us eventually recognizes that we, the soul, need an endless Dharma, a Dharma that is endless. And what does that mean? If awakening - if we're not chained to the mooring of regarding awakening, final awakening as an ending of rebirth - what does an endless Dharma mean beyond just the reduction of my personal suffering or stress or neurosis in a rather narrow modernist version of dharma?

This reduction of personal suffering or stress, this narrowing of dharma to merely addressing neurosis in a rather modernist framework—that's what awakening becomes. But that's not endless. It's not big enough, perhaps.

How might the dharma be endless? We'll return to this question, but four possibilities occur to me.

The first is through a much deeper understanding of emptiness. Now that in itself is not endless—one perhaps reaches the point where everything is understood to be empty, absolutely everything, at a very thorough, deep level. This is certainly much further than merely aspiring to reduce personal suffering, stress, or neurosis psychologically. Yet still not endless.

However, if one sees fabrication—returning to some of the original insights we explored—and then sees further that fabrication itself is empty too, then the whole duality between fabricated and unfabricated collapses. The entire ground of everything is taken away. The whole distinction between fabricated and unfabricated, sacred and profane—all of that opens up as magical.

What opens up are ways of looking. As I said, we end up with nothing but ways of looking. The range of ways of looking expands infinitely. The validity of different ways of looking and their practical possibility opens. Everything becomes magical—all part of the magical, sacred fabrication in which we can participate. There's an endlessness of exploring different ways of looking, an endlessness in the beauty of that exploration.

This might be one way that dharma could be endless.

Another way lies in the Mahayana vision of what a Buddha is—what an awakened, enlightened being truly embodies. If you know some of these texts, what it involves to be enlightened in the Mahayana sense, progressing through the ten or eleven bhumis to full Buddhahood, represents something so far beyond anything realistically possible. As a Sanskrit teacher I once had, Peter Gang, said: "The Mahayana Buddha makes the God of the Old Testament look like a schoolboy in short trousers." It's so grand and far-reaching, it's effectively infinite—that level of potential we're discussing.

There's a kind of fantasy of rebirth through eons upon eons of time, a vast cosmology. This entire fantasy—and I use that term in a positive sense—contains a kind of endlessness because realistically, no one will declare, "I am a Buddha now." One remains always within that larger cosmological, imaginal fantasy and the beauty of that direction. There's an endlessness there.

There's also endlessness in the more popular understanding of the bodhisattva—one who devotes life and energy to serving others, to easing suffering. In socially or environmentally engaged Buddhism, there's a kind of endlessness. There will never be an end to social problems, environmental problems to address. Endlessness exists in that dedication.

This represents a third possibility of endlessness.

The fourth relates to soul-making. If soul-making is recognized as a fundamental dimension of what practice is and what dharma can be, then that too creates an endless dharma, because soul-making is endless. Why? Because of exactly what we've been exploring—the eros-psyche-logos dynamic and the way pothos pushes it to create more and more, discover more and more, open more and more, potentially infinitely. There's an endlessness in the integration, the incorporation of soul-making organically into the scope of what dharma is.

These four possibilities are not necessarily separate at all. You can see their interconnection. We'll revisit this question again.

But if the eros is strong, deep, then I wonder whether this recognition needs to happen at some point—a sense of a path or territory that is endless, one that can accommodate soul-making.

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