Wisdom, Art, Balance (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:06:44

There are two maxims or aphorisms from the alchemical traditions that I would like to share, as they are relevant and important for any practice—for all meditative and spiritual practices, for the practice of psychotherapy and the path of healing, and for many other dimensions of practice.

The first is: "The strength of the vessel must be proportionate to the tension in the material." The vessel is the alchemical vessel that holds the material being worked on, and its strength must be proportionate to the energy in the material.

The second maxim is: "She who masters the fire, masters the work"—or "One who masters the fire, masters the work."

These are two gems of wisdom, quite general and broad-ranging in their applicability. If we are going to open and explore this territory of eros, of desire, of soul-making—especially of eros—with integrity, thoroughness, comprehensiveness, depth, and intelligence, then that opening and exploration demands that we take care of many different aspects and dimensions. It demands that we bring wisdom, art, and skill to the whole process.

I want to explore what these two alchemical maxims might mean for us and our explorations.

We have already discussed how the notion of a vessel for the soul-making enterprise is sometimes provided by the boundaries that are in place in certain relationships. These boundaries create what we call a temenos—a sacred space, a vessel that holds and heats the material, the soul material. The eros functions as fire, and there is a vessel created by certain boundaries in many different ways.

Meditation is also a boundary. In meditation, one is not acting out images or other phenomena. We have opened up the possibility that the body moves and reflects or refracts what is happening imaginatively, energetically, and erotically, but sometimes the body is still as well. Generally speaking, there is no acting out, no concretization or implementation in manifest actuality of the image. So meditation—the meditation posture, the meditation session—also functions as a kind of vessel, a temenos.

The whole question of what makes a vessel strong, what contributes to the strength of a vessel, is complex. There are many factors to consider. Even if you think in terms of physical vessels, some are strong yet brittle, or strong up to a certain point before they shatter.

Another kind of strength comes from elasticity. The strength of a vessel—its ability not to burst and thus to contain the material, the work, and the fire—comes in part from its elasticity, its capacity to stretch, to be

fluid, to morph and take on different shapes when needed.

Why is this relevant to our work? Precisely because of the nature of what we have explained regarding the eros-psyche-logos dynamic and its natural inclination toward expansion—expansion of image, of psyche, of eros, widening and deepening. You can see that this will need a vessel that is elastic. Just in terms of this analogy, there is much implied about elasticity. This question of the strength of the vessel is a complex issue.

The word "fire" in the other alchemical aphorism can mean many different things in different practices, as can "vessel." A vessel might be a relationship—a psychotherapeutic relationship or teacher-student relationship—that becomes a vessel. There are many possibilities for what the vessel actually is. The vessel can be the body or the psyche itself.

Fire could refer to many different things. In any practice, fire is connected with effort and intensity—the intentness and intensity that we bring to bear on the work, whether that is meditation practice, traditional insight meditation, noting arising and passing, concentration, metta, or any other practice. These questions of effort and intensity are part of fire.

But of course, as we have said on this retreat, eros is fire. Eros is flame, desire, fire, longing. All this is fire. So this second alchemical maxim comes very much into this work.

But it is not simple. Even the question of mastery is complex. Do we ever really completely master the fire that is given to us and the eros that comes through us? Or is it always going to be eventually bigger than us? Even if it is always going to be bigger than us—because of its divinity, because of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, because it will keep expanding and opening up other dimensions and meanings and resonances and power—does that mean we should abandon any attempts at mastery, at developing our ability and capacity and skill and art?

It is complex.

All this is complex. Fire burns. We've said this before. Fire burns, so it demands care. And yet without fire, as human beings, just evolutionarily and biologically, we're very limited in what we can do without fire. He or she who masters the fire, masters the work.

In relation to the vessels analogy, I've talked in the past on certain retreats about this teaching from Lurianic Kabbalah, from the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria, about the shattering of the vessels. It's not just saying things are impermanent—it's saying that organically woven into psychological development, cosmological development, conceptual development, development of relationship, the vessels that we form at different points in our soul's development or just the movement of the soul might need not just to stretch, but to shatter.

The vessel that we've taken care to build up, that provides the terminals, the support of the structure,

containment, orientation—it shatters. Sometimes very unexpectedly, sometimes violently, sometimes it just sort of melts. But this is, I would say, an inevitable part of living life deeply as a human being, and also as cultures. That shattering may be more or less sudden or violent, but it's part of what happens if there is eros. You could say it's part of what happens when the eros ignites that whole eros-psyche-logos dynamic. Because then it expands, and at some point we might have to shatter something because the wall won't budge otherwise—it's not elastic, it won't expand.

So yes, there's building, developing the strength of the vessel or vessels and their elasticity, and mastering the fire. But even these concepts are not so simple.

Just a reminder: all practices, there is no such thing as a practice or a path without dangers—dangers that may be more specific to this path or that path. Not necessarily more or less dangerous, just that the dangers are specific to each path. So oftentimes people, especially when they're first hearing about imaginal practice, will say, "Oh, that's dangerous. That sounds dangerous." And it's just what we've been indoctrinated by. Is it really any more dangerous than, let's say, simple mindfulness practice? Or are the dangers just different?

If you've been reading the newspapers in the last year or so, you'll be aware of articles appearing about mindfulness and eight-week courses teaching mindfulness, and how there have been occasions where it seems the mindfulness itself has caused some kind of mental destabilization or emergence of repressed trauma. Taking simple mindfulness practice as an example, in the way that it's taught in a very secular context these days, I've had people say to me, "I've been practicing mindfulness and I got a lot from it, but at the same time I feel neutered." A woman said to me, "I feel neutered." Powerful words. What does it mean to feel neutered? Something has been cut off, amputated from her being. In this case, it has a whole erotic connection, doesn't it, to be neutered?

Another friend, a close friend, said to me that practicing and living in an insight meditation center for some years—this was many years ago—something in her soul was dying, was being killed. She didn't quite know what was going on at the time, couldn't quite articulate it or get clear about it until some years later. So yes, a lot of learning, a lot of development, a lot of lovely things, and something being killed that's not so obvious at the time. The neutering is not so obvious to a lot of people, unlike a kind of freaking out or whatever. And there are much more subtle dangers with mindfulness that have to do with soul-making and with realism—the kind of realism that's entrenched or implicitly communicated as a foundation in mindfulness teachings, mostly.

All paths have their dangers. This is something that's just part of wisdom—to be aware of that fact, and aware of the particular dangers we need to look out for on whichever path we're taking. I think it's foolish and naive to think there's such a thing as a path without danger, or that the path I'm on doesn't have dangers while pointing to other paths and saying they're dangerous.

I want to talk about bringing wisdom, developing balance and the art of balance, and bringing equanimity

to bear on this whole exploration of eros and soul-making. At the same time, I may need to contradict myself or balance that with this: when we're exploring eros and opening that door, we're opening the door potentially to a wider range of what we might call archetypes than we may have been used to, especially if we think of the Dharma in quite a narrow way.

The classical god Dionysus has a lot to do with eros. Eros is an erotic god, as are many others from different traditions. Hermes is an erotic god. Aphrodite, of course, from that tradition.

But also in the Buddhist tradition, if you look at the Tantric deities, many of them are erotic deities in different ways. Listen to this from James Hillman about Dionysus, and bear in mind what this archetypal elaboration of this god says about the path—about how what the path can be is quite different from how we usually conceive it in a more narrow sense, and what it might involve if we really open up this exploration of Eros.

Dionysus in the myths is dismembered into countless pieces—this happens in different ways, either at his birth or at different points—and then he's remembered. So we have dismembering and remembering Dionysus. He's put back together as a kind of resurrection. Hillman says he's a figure of many guises and pursuits. He is called the divided, but also the undivided—or both together: the divided undivided. He's called the loosener, the lord of souls, the lord of wild beasts.

His realm was outside the conventional constraints of the city. His dances took place on hillsides near woodlands. In the city, he ruled the theatre, both comic and tragic. Can you see how this relates to everything we're talking about? Coming apart, being dismembered, implicates a myth quite different from those we usually associate with strength of character. This is not Hercules we're talking about. This is not ego willpower. This is not Artemis, the ruler of animal nature. It's not Hera, the queen of the household and the upholder of family values.

Instead, Dionysus is the lord of souls, the divided god who was pulled to pieces. He's a strange figure—he was even named the Stranger. He's an intoxicating life force who came on the scene, appearing from outside the usual civilization together with a dancing group of satyrs and raving devotees. And he was also declared to be Hades. There's some strange identity of Dionysus, this intoxicating life force, with Hades, the invisible god of the souls in the underworld—the invisible god of the souls in the underworld. All this woven together. Can you hear the resonances and mirrorings of what we've said so far on this retreat?

Hillman goes on in relation to erotic arousal and desire coming into our life and disrupting things, potentially disrupting things in all kinds of ways. He's not just talking about sexual arousal—again, he's talking about that force, that movement of Eros, and its capacity to stretch our vessels through the soul-making dynamic, and sometimes shatter them. He says: "Realize you are not solely to blame for the conflict brought on by arousal. The source lies deeper than human nature. It is archetypal—a conflict among the gods." The call of Dionysus tends to upset the normal course of civilization, whose wise

overseer Athena, another classical goddess, did not permit his goat in her terrain. The goat is this disruptive animal.

Dionysus, lord of women, called to both genders and all ages to join his rituals. This is not something just for men or just for women or just for young people. Women left their household duties to follow him into the hills for release and raving. Two old-timers with grey hair in Euripides' play The Bacchae go off to dance with Dionysus all night and all day.

How do you hear that? How are you hearing that? Is there already for you a certain identity construct? Perhaps you're already quite identified with that archetypal figure of Dionysus and that kind of actualization of behavior. Or perhaps you're identified with the opposite—the picture of calm and cool equanimity and stillness. Where is your tendency of identification, clinging, attachment?

And do you hear this in terms of a necessity of concretization? Oh, I'd better go find the nearest rave and dance all night long. Or if something needs manifestation—we've talked about this before in terms of imaginal practice—is it just a very obvious, very narrow interpretation? Oh, it means actually dancing. Is that what this means? Does raving and dancing in the hills with raving devotees mean actually dancing? It might. It might be concretized that way. But not necessarily. The question is: does it? And how?

How does it move? And what does it call for?

We've explored this territory before on previous retreats. But is my interpretation of this mythological figure, this archetypal figure and divinity—am I putting it into too narrow a box in my interpretation, my translation? What's my tendency here anyway, in relation to all this?

So I'm interested—we're interested—in opening up this territory, opening up a myth. A myth should open, and these teachings should open, rather than just justify what we already kind of believe and are entrenched in. Partly these teachings are to kind of legitimize and realize a place for something we might have been judging in ourselves—we'll actually see that in a different light. But not only to justify—to open as well.

So let's go into this a little bit. What might be involved in creating good vessels—right vessels, if we can use that word—and supporting, let's call it mastery? But that really means the ability with all this: a facility, an art, the capacity and skill of navigation and discernment with all this. What might be involved in creating and forging right vessels and developing mastery?

Those two are not actually separate—just to make that clear from the start. The navigation, the capacity and skill in responding to what's actually happening in one's practice, in one's life, with Eros, with the imaginal, with soul-making, in real time, in the moment—our abilities to bring different factors to bear and all that—this navigation, this richness and complexity of responding and the skill and art and ability in all kinds of different ways, that actually creates the vessel in the moment. So it's not like you have a pre-packaged vessel and then you add a bit of mastery. That actually is making a vessel in real time, in the

moment, as things are moving and developing. So they're not really separate.

But let's think about all this. Let's go into this, unfold it a little bit, unpack it. Right vessel. So what might that mean?

You may be aware of this, but in Vajrayana teachings, in tantric practice—at least in Buddhism, in Tibetan Buddhism and other Buddhist traditions—they are almost always only presented after certain preliminary practices which are regarded as necessary. So there's a whole range of preliminaries, and I wonder if we can think about that too: What might be a preliminary for me? What needs to be in place? What do I need to take care of and establish if I'm going to do this kind of practice, exploring Eros?

So in the Vajrayana, the preliminaries would include ethics. Actually, I don't know that tradition from the inside, so to speak, so I'm just getting this from the outside, so I'm hoping and assuming this is the case. It includes ethics—a grounding, an establishment in ethics, as something we'll come back to.

It includes other practices. So, for example, the development of samadhi is probably a preliminary or prerequisite to doing Vajrayana practices, tantric practices. It should be—this I know is actually not always the case, unfortunately—but tantric practice, Vajrayana practice is predicated, is based on an understanding of emptiness and some facility with emptiness practice. We'll return to this. I've said it before. We'll return to this. And I would state all this for our path as well.

Tantric practice also, if you talk to someone, if you read, you get the sense that it's very much based on faith. There's some kind of faith operating here, which may not be a so-called naive, realist faith, as sometimes it gets portrayed or dismissed or labeled. There's an understanding of emptiness. Tara is empty. Whoever it is, this tantric deity is empty. Oftentimes people don't understand this and they're still practicing Tantra, or they think they understand it. But technically, somehow the faith that's involved is also imbued with an understanding of emptiness. But faith is another of the preliminaries.

And also devotion, tied in with faith, obviously. But that devotion needs to be embodied. So you see again in the Vajrayana practice how either mantra recitation or the prostrations—think of people doing hundreds of thousands of prostrations. How much work and time and commitment and effort is involved in that? There's an embodiment of devotion there. Yes, literally an embodiment of devotion.

So all these form the preliminaries, as does a conceptual framework. Some conceptual framework is provided for understanding...

imaginal practice, and tantric practice. And also—sometimes it's not so obvious from the outside—but sangha is implied as well. There's the support of other people who are exploring this together, teachers and co-adventurers, that one can talk to, one can feel nourished by, one can be in the presence of. That kind of support functions there as well.

So all these—ethics, other practices, samadhi, emptiness, faith, devotion that's embodied, conceptual

framework, sangha—this is all part of the preliminaries that are deemed necessary in Tantra and Vajrayana practice. We'd do well, I think you would do well, to reflect on some of this: what does it mean for you? What does it mean for us, exploring this, opening up the range of what practice is and the directions and dimensions of what practice can be and can involve? What might each of these mean—sangha and devotion and emptiness, understanding and ethics and all that?

But preliminaries—it's a question. I'll come back to it. Because part of that question, inherent in the very concept of preliminaries, is this: pre, prerequisite, preliminary—does that imply a certain ordering of my development in practice? An ordering of the development of what? An ordering of what practices I'm developing?

In other words, do I need to—as I mentioned in a previous talk—develop my capacity to really say no to that cookie or that second slice of dessert when I don't really need it, and really feel secure in that, before I attempt any of this stuff? Do I need to feel that I'm not just pulled around by the vedanā or by the promise that someone might love me or make me feel okay about myself, before I open up this exploration of Eros?

Some people do that first, and then get interested in this other stuff. Some people do that and never get interested in this other stuff. Some people need to do that first—need to feel that kind of establishment and security and development before they can open this. And others, as I said in a previous talk on this retreat, others can't wait. There's something in the depth and aliveness of the eros that moves through them in this life—they can't wait, or things are happening, and the investigations and the development into more traditional kinds of letting go, and this exploration of eros, need to go on somehow in parallel. We touched on this before.

But I would say both letting go—both in a sort of more superficial sense of the cookie and the chocolate cake and all that, and in the deeper sense that we talked about in terms of really letting go of subtle clinging, really opening up this whole range of insights into dependent arising and emptiness—both all that and a sort of conscious and mindful exploration and development of art with regard to Eros, both of these I would regard, for me more and more, as elements or parts of what I would conceive to be a full path, a full practice.

If we're just going to say, "Eros, you're talking about desire, or that's just clinging, and that just leads to suffering. Just put it down. Don't engage with Eros. It's fire. Don't go near it"—well, most of us listening to this are probably lay people. We're not celibate renunciates, for a start. Actually, if you've lived for a while in monasteries, there's still a question of how renunciate are a lot of monastics. They may not be having sex, but there are a lot of other opportunities for sense pleasures and indulgences.

But anyway, both lay people and celibate renunciates—whether they're monastic or lay celibate renunciates—eros is there already. That's partly what I'm trying to say on this retreat. It's already there as an element of our being, as an element of our soul, as a force in our lives and in our practice. Even just eros with regard to the path—which we'll come back to talking about what that means—even just with

regard to a narrow range of images and fantasies that are alive for us. Maybe they're just the Buddhist ones, the sort of classical Buddhist ones, but there's eros in relation to them and to the path. Even if it's just that range, and those kinds of directions of eros that are allowed, eros is there already. It's alive in our lives, and it needs addressing, it needs understanding, it needs exploring.

But if we, as lay people, are just going to believe something incredibly simplistic and dismissive—that Eros is basically craving and it brings suffering—then really what we're believing, what we're buying into, is this: if we buy into that, we're also buying into the idea that, okay, we're deciding to live as lay people, so we're effectively deliberately engaging in what leads to suffering. Which somehow indirectly implies that we're either a bit stupid, or our practice is essentially a waste of time. We may get a little benefit, but really what we're doing is opting for some version of the path that is not a full version. It's not the real deal.

Now, of course, some people believe exactly that, and either decide to be monastics or just hope that in a future life they'll be born able to be a monastic. Some people actually believe that. But really, is it true? Is that true?

Is it just true that Eros inevitably leads to suffering? Is it that simple? Therefore we should just leave it—put it down, turn away, or settle for some kind of half-hearted attempt at the path? Is that really true? Are we just settling for second best?

Or do we need—as forms the whole basis of this retreat—other concepts and conceptual frameworks here, so that we can really include Eros and include the exploration of it, as well as other ways of working with the parallel factor of letting go? Both at the more superficial everyday level and at the level of really deep exploration—do we need other ideas and practices that can actually allow us to include and explore both?

There's this whole question about ordering and priorities. But I would say an exploration of eros in the wide sense—and again, I've said this before, but just to reiterate—if we return to those first two alchemical maxims and say that Eros is fire and the vessel needs to be strong so it can contain this fire without bursting or melting, it can sound like we're dealing with something really intense and dangerous.

But don't get carried away with those particular images of fire or alchemical vessels heating up and perhaps cracking. Yes, there's that possibility that we're sometimes dealing with something really strong—something that's really stretching our being emotionally, energetically, conceptually, psychically. But also, a lot of eros, many of the experiences, are really quite subtle.

As I said before, practice needs to be able to span that whole range. Yes, the intense. Yes, the stretching. And yes, sometimes even the breaking. But also the subtle and the easily overlooked and the not particularly remarkable and the not very intense. It's not the case that one is the real deal and the other isn't. Not at all.

So don't get too taken in by some of the imagery from alchemy or other traditions. The exploration of eros

in the broad sense—not just sexual, not just intense, but all of that: the intense and the not intense, the sexual and the non-sexual—requires several things.

One thing it needs, touching on what we've already mentioned, is what I would call a heartfelt, integrated, embodied rootedness and commitment to ethics. I'm choosing these words very deliberately: heartfelt, integrated, embodied, rootedness in and commitment to ethics.

Why I'm saying all that is because some people's commitment to ethics is actually coming out of fear, or it's just coming from authority—because some teacher or tradition said so, and one has never questioned it. I'm talking about something that's really heartfelt, coming from deep in the being. There's an engagement, a commitment that's integrated into one's life and embodied in one's life. There's both commitment and rootedness there.

But that involves an engagement, a living questioning. Sometimes what happens is people just follow ethics—whether Buddhist ethics or the ethics of Western societies as they stand in whatever era one lives in—simply because they're afraid of the consequences or they're told to by some authority. They've never really questioned it.

Sometimes that's okay—a person hasn't developed that capacity yet. But sometimes it actually creates a situation where the ethics are not full enough. I've spoken about this in relation to Buddhist ethics: sometimes, because they were formulated at a time before globalization, before climate change, and from the perspective more of simplifying one's consciousness and life, or ensuring a good rebirth, rather than other considerations present in other religious traditions—because of all that, Buddhist ethics sometimes needs more questioning and expanding.

Questioning ethics doesn't necessarily mean giving up this or that constraint. You might decide that something you used to hold as an ethical constraint is no longer something you believe in, no longer feels like the appropriate or right thing to do. But questioning might also operate the other way. Really engaging in a questioning of ethics—lived, beautiful, embodied, heartfelt—might cause you to actually extend your ethical commitments beyond, say, the five precepts as they're usually understood. I've spoken about all that before in other talks.

But I would say exploration of eros needs that heartfelt, integrated, embodied rootedness and commitment to ethics—including the ongoing questioning of our ethics.

A second thing it needs is skill and confidence in emotional awareness, with emotional energetics and energetics in general. This is why we put so much emphasis on the emotional energy body and stated that as a prerequisite for this course.

This means skill and confidence to notice what's going on emotionally and energetically in the body, including subtle—really subtle—manifestations of emotion and energies. Not just the obvious ones, but really subtle movements and manifestations. It means being able to notice and discern and handle

energies, especially the stronger ones.

So really having some skill with the energy body—being able to open when energies are strong so there's not pressure building up, being able to allow energies to flow in different ways, and when they feel blocked, having the capacity to tolerate energies that are intense and creating a feeling of pressure.

So this, I would say, is a second demand, if you like, or necessity for the exploration of eros in practice.

And the third is some degree of what we could call trust or faith or even wisdom, actually—a little trust. As I mentioned before, this might even come as a kind of experiment. In other words, we're just experimenting with an attitude of trust temporarily in regard to eros, in regard to this sexual image or whatever it is.

What gives us even the trust to be able to experiment temporarily? Well, hopefully that's an attitude in our practice anyway, as I would teach it. That's very much a key ingredient: experimentation, playfulness with mindfulness, discerning what happens when I do this, what happens when I conceive this way, what happens when I look this way.

But knowing—developing a first-hand knowledge that the conception, the conceptual framework that I entertain at any moment and the way of looking shapes and conditions the experiences that then unfold. Simple, deep understanding of dependent arising. It can be taken deeper and deeper, as we said. But knowing that allows me to experiment even with just a little bit of trusting—trusting, for example, this idea that eros or desire at root is a treasure. There's something to be treasured there. Despite its obvious connection with suffering and dukkha, something wrapped up in eros and desire is a treasure, that it may express a deeper intelligence of soul.

So it's like searching for jewels or searching for gold. You have to clean off the dross and mine a little bit and find something—find the gem there, right in the middle of the eros or the desire. Brush off the other stuff. Again, a limited analogy.

But again, trusting perhaps a little bit that there's some kind of telos operating here, that something through desire, through eros, is pulling us towards an end that is, if you like, constellated by the soul's intelligence or wisdom, or the wisdom of the Buddha nature or whatever. That trust, a little bit of trust, experimenting with that eros may itself be holy or divine in origin, though it's easily distorted in different ways.

So those kinds of trust, which for some may sound really far out already, but they may well emerge just from what we're calling the phenomenological approach with an open-minded inquiry into our experience, into questions, imaginal practice and into soul-making and into eros.

But these things—just what we've mentioned so far: the rootedness in ethics in an integrated way, the skill and confidence in emotional awareness and energetics, and the certain amount of trust and wisdom in

regard to eros—we could call this a kind of skill set. I'm going to mention more. But we could call that a skill set, and that skill set, or that language of skill set, implies that these are developable things. That relationship with ethics is developable. That skill with the emotions and the energies is developable. Even that trust is developable. So I use the language of skill set to imply, partly, that these are developable things, factors, elements.

If we talk a bit about equanimity, which is obviously a key word in Buddha Dharma—and so how does that come into all this business of when you talk about desire and passion and eros and all that? Equanimity. We may wonder, well, what about the equanimity? Or I have a lot of eros and I keep falling over or getting floored by my desire or whatever. So equanimity, what does that mean? How does it come in in relation to this path?

So equanimity implies several things. We could say it implies balance. So that means not toppling over, either forward towards this object that we're enamored with or that there's an erotic connection with, or kind of backwards in recoil, in fear—different kinds of fear that can come up in relationships when there's a lot of eros.

So equanimity implies balance. What does this whole word "balance" then mean in relationship to eros? Steadiness is implied in the sense of—maybe that's the wrong word, but not short-circuiting. Yeah, steadiness in the sense that it can last, that the eros can last, a flame that can burn steadily—that's what I mean.

So sometimes the eros, it's like a flame that just—you know, a lot of charge goes through the electrical circuit and it just blows the circuit, or it short circuits, or the whole thing just collapses, it kind of caves in on itself. So all this is very common with eros. There's a lot of eros, and there's this imbalance falling over one way, either towards or away from, or kind of blowing out or collapsing inwards or something.

But equanimity implies balance. It implies this kind of steadiness. It also implies spaciousness, meaning non-contraction. So again, what does this mean in relationship to eros? That it doesn't, for instance, contract in craving.

That it doesn't contract in realism as well. That there's no contraction emotionally or energetically—no shrinking or freezing, no contraction of view. All this is implied in equanimity.

But what does this mean, equanimity in our life and practice, in relation to eros? This is actually more interesting than what we often hear about or might first think when we consider equanimity as a word in Buddha Dharma.

Some of you will know from meditation that really deep equanimity—experiences of deep equanimity—involves letting go of pushing away experience we don't like in some way, that which is unpleasant, and letting go also of pulling toward ourselves or trying to pull ourselves toward pleasant or attractive experience. When there's really that developed in meditation, it goes deeper and deeper. It takes

you into deeper and deeper non-fabrication—lessening fabrication, and eventually into the unfabricated.

So experiences of deep equanimity are experiences of much less fabrication on a spectrum of fabrication of perception. The experience of spaciousness is also connected with that. Deep equanimity often is an experience of deep spaciousness, deep unfabricating, sometimes blackness. These are all characteristic of meditative states of deep equanimity—blackness and equanimity, spaciousness. We touched on this in the last retreat.

Generally speaking, over time—not just when those states are experienced once or twice, but through repeated descent or immersion in those states, opening to them in meditation—they bring in one's life a kind of steadiness and spaciousness with respect to the things of the world. We taste something; we taste a whole different perspective and sense of things in those states, a whole different sense of existence. That brings, generally speaking, over time, with repeated immersion—in, out, in, out—this steadiness and spaciousness with respect to the things of the world, and in a way, less craving with regard to the things of the world.

The shadow side of all that is that maybe those kinds of experiences, those perspectives, can also bring disengagement. So that's interesting. Why does it sometimes bring a kind of disengagement, even sometimes a kind of anemia—more like a political or environmental disengagement, non-engagement? What does it depend on, whether it brings disengagement or whether there can be all the fruits of that deep equanimity and still an engagement, passionate engagement?

Partly—I've talked about this before, so I'm not going to labor it now—but partly it depends on the fantasies and on the conceptual frameworks that are operating there in relationship to what the path involves and what awakening looks like. Fantasies are always there; concepts are always there. Dependent on what they are shapes the ethics, if we tie into what we said before, and shapes the engagement as well—the degree of engagement and the fullness and what it looks like.

But shadow aside, potentially those experiences—again, sometimes just one-off will do something radical in one's life, but more generally it's dipping in and out, getting really used to those perspectives and those openings—potentially then, because of the spaciousness and the steadiness, it's almost like something in the being has the spaciousness and the steadiness, and then a kind of confidence that it can allow desire, eros, in regard to certain things in life, because that steadiness, that spaciousness, that perspective is absorbed.

Catherine held up this beautiful picture in the last retreat, or was it a cloth—I can't remember—with the pitch black background, and then within that, a flame in the middle of it. The flame of eros is supported, is contextualized, is allowed, and given strength by the blackness, the deep equanimity, the space around it that we can open to. And so that deep blackness characteristic of states of deep unfabrication.

Actually, a slight aside, but there's an important point and we'll come back to it. The desire for the

unfabricated, the desire for the absolute as some people call it, the desire for the transcendent, even the desire for onenesses—knowing different onenesses at different stages of less fabrication in meditation—the desire for all that, I would say, is a soul desire. It's a deep desire.

The desire for equanimity in life, for balance, I would actually say is not a soul desire. It's not something we don't really have eros about equanimity. We can really want it, but we would be hard-pressed to imagine that it could function as a soul-making object for us—equanimity in itself.

But the desire for the unfabricated, or this deep black, or the states of less fabrication, the oneness and the space of all that, and the mystical knowing of that can be a deep soul desire. The desire for equanimity that comes out of here—I have a hard time conceiving that could really be a soul desire, an erotic object, a soul-making object. It's more a kind of, if you like, a medical aspiration in the sense that it's really helpful in our life to have equanimity, to have some coolness, to have some perspective. It's soothing, it's freeing, it's healing in certain ways.

So it's important. It's definitely important. Heavens, it's really important. And it's important in relation to eros because it can, over time, enable this kind of balance with eros. But in itself, it's not really an erotic object or a soul-making object, unlike the desire for the unfabricated and the unfabricated itself, or knowing different kinds of oneness.

But while we're on this subject—so this is still a side note, but actually it's quite important to everything that we're saying.

Eros implies, or rather is implicated and woven into, the very fabric of psyche and image. It implies the imaginal. And the imaginal—psyche and image—implies this notion of what we've called daemons, these imaginal figures, and a duty to the imaginal figure that can sometimes be felt. Eros kind of implies all that, whatever that imaginal figure is or whatever it imbues. And as I've mentioned, there can be eros in relationship to the imaginal figure itself.

What, though, is the relationship between freedom and duty? There's this whole movement in the path towards freedom. And for me, that's a very big word with many dimensions, many directions that may be far more than we initially conceive of or hear about. But what's the relationship between freedom and the movement towards freedom and duty?

Duty can sometimes be a lessening of freedom, a constraint of freedom. I'm not totally free because I have this duty that I need to carry out. So duty often goes with imaginal practice, as I've mentioned on another retreat. But what's the relationship between duty and freedom? Doesn't duty sometimes also mean a kind of constraint of freedom?

This is really interesting to be aware of and explore. But one thing I will say is that an imaginal duty and a kind of devotion to that—or those, plural—doesn't just curtail freedom or certain freedoms, but also brings certain freedoms at certain levels. And oftentimes it brings freedom in relation to the really big

things.

For example, in relation to death, or the possibility of dying, or the possibility of an early death. Because one feels that one is devoted to, in line with, following one's calling, plugged into one's duty, carrying out one's duty as best one can in the time and circumstances allotted to one—because one feels that alignment—then there is a certain freedom in relationship to death, a certain deep okayness in relation to death and to the big things in life, the big losses, the big ups and downs.

It keeps your bearings and gives you a sense of what's important. There's that popular phrase book, "Don't Sweat the Small Stuff," with the subtitle "And It's All Small Stuff." But this imaginal dimension and the duty there is saying, don't sweat the small stuff, but it's not all small stuff. If I say it's all small stuff, I lose the soul dimension because soulmaking has everything to do with meaningfulness and importance.

Don't sweat the small stuff, but it's not all small stuff. It matters—matters deeply to our being, to our life, to what unfolds for us, to our souls, to the cosmos, to God, to the Buddha nature, to the tradition. It matters that we follow our duties, that we sense that, that we give that a certain amount of reverence and devotion.

And what does that look like? That's not a simple question either. We mentioned earlier the importance, the delicacy of the question of what an image may or may not be asking for, what needs to manifest from an image, and the kind of open-mindedness and sensitivity in the inquiry with regard to images and imaginal figures and the sense of duty. This is not necessarily at all a simple translation or concretization of the image.

Real care needs to be taken in a middle way between that kind of oversimplistic translation, concretization, and a dismissal of what the image might be asking for. So there's a middle way there, with no simple answers necessarily, no formulaic answers either.

There's that kind of middle way in regard to all this sense of duty and manifestation and importance and meaningfulness. And there's also the middle way between what matters and what is empty at the same time as mattering—seeing image as image, understanding it and relating to it in a way that allows it its potency and power for the soul, at the same time as not reifying and identifying.

In some ways it's asking a lot; in other ways it's just natural to imaginal practice, and it may not require a lot of training to do that. People just understand it, intuit it directly in the context of imaginal practice.

In relation to all this, there is clearly a complex relationship between duty and freedom. In some respects, the duty that we feel towards an image or from an image constrains freedom, maybe constrains the equanimity in some regards. But as we've just explained, on the other hand, it also brings a kind of deep freedom at certain levels, and also equanimity in relation to the big things of life and death.

Let's pause there and pick up this list in the next part in terms of the qualities, the factors that are

important and necessary in mastering the fire and shaping the vessel for these practices.

Thank you for listening.

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