Wisdom, Art, Balance (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 53:42

Okay, so we're talking about exploring these ideas of mastery, mastering the fire, forging strong vessels that we borrowed from the alchemical maxims, and exploring what that might mean and exploring even the extent to which that's even possible in work with eros and soul-making. But generally looking at what's involved in mastery—what might we mean by that and what might be included and necessary to develop there and practice in all that?

So most of the previous two parts of this talk we were looking really at practice as a whole and the whole of life and what was called collateral development of certain qualities—long-term development of certain qualities that will serve us well and support us well in extending our meditative explorations and widening our practice to include this work with eros and soul-making.

Now what I want to get into is what about in practice, in the moment, in the heat of practice? What might mastery mean there? Mastering the fire—what might be involved in that, what might be called for, and what does it mean to forge strong vessels, adequate vessels, and how might we do that?

So we said already that the balance we're talking about here is fluid balance. We're not talking about something static. And fluid balance, in this case, in practice, means exactly the ability, the skill, the art of navigation—gliding this way and that, responding to what's actually arising and the balance of qualities, energies, directions, and the art of skillful response in the moment, which sometimes is really quite subtle, even in terms of discerning what's happening, and then this very subtle sort of micro-adjustment, very graceful it can be.

So there's, as always, there's a range. We're talking about fluid balance. So in regard to fire, what might that mean? When do we welcome the fire, when do we stoke the fire, when do we guard it, how much, and which fire exactly, or what exactly needs the fire?

But this navigation that we talk about, this moment-to-moment skillful responding, is actually forging the vessel in the moment. Forging the vessel in the moment is not, as I said before, that we arrive with a prefabricated vessel. That's not completely how it is. We're actually always creating, shaping and forging the vessel in the moment by all kinds of things that we're doing—perspectives, emphases, etc.

So as always in practice there are options, and I want to go through, take a little time and go through different options in practice in this regard. And "options" is a key word because it implies that there's flexibility, there's a range here. The art and the wisdom is in the use of the options, is in the flexibility and in that flexibility of response and range of possibility that we can develop for ourselves in practice.

Sometimes, considering all practices, all meditative practices, sometimes I think that there's only one real mistake, if you like, and that would be always to do the same thing. So talking about any practice—always an emotion comes up or something comes up that's difficult: "I'll always be with it and that's all I ever do. If something comes up I have to go be with it." Or the opposite: "I always drop it." Something comes up: "Drop it, come back to my breath. Drop it, come back to my breath."

And doing always even just one of those two is going to really shortchange us in the long run. It's going to really limit our insights, it's going to limit our freedom, it's going to limit our capacity, it's going to limit certainly our fluidity of response, it's going to limit what we're capable of, not just in meditation, but in life.

Or sometimes people are always paying attention in a very kind of microscopic, very narrow, intense way. Great, wonderful. It's the "always" that's the problem, not the approach itself. Always paying attention with a kind of relaxed, open, spacious awareness with a wide sort of panoramic view, if you like. But always doing either one or the other of those two will limit the insight that arises. We get certain insights through a microscopic attention that perhaps are not so easily available through a wide awareness and vice versa.

So this is a general point about the importance of range in practice, flexibility, and not getting locked into one thing, not just doing one thing. And I could give countless examples, but there are two more sort of standard sets of practices.

So as you're listening to all this, you might consider for yourself, well, what's my usual tendency here? Either in regard to an emotion coming up or in regard to desire coming up and feeling that pressure, heat of desire. What's my usual tendency? Am I locked into a habit here that I always respond to in a certain way? Even if I think, "Oh, that's a skillful habit, that's a healthy habit."

So to be aware of what one's tendencies and habits are and to know this can be and probably—well, I am encouraging the opening up of the range of individual possibilities for any individual. So this is all for exploration, for development, so that we can develop this flexibility, this range, and that opens up a greater range of possibilities for us. It's all part of the art, the exploration, the development that develops our art in practice. And a lot of what I'm going to be saying hopefully is repeating or will be repeated in the instructions over this course.

So the question is, when desire is present, when I feel that movement or force of desire—in practice or in a moment when I notice it in life—then what?

So we can say, well, the first possibility—this isn't any order, by the way. So again, just listen to what your tendencies are, what you know how to do, what could be developed, etc. And I want to emphasize a certain subset of what I'm going to say.

But let's just run through some options. One option is, here's desire, here's a movement towards

something, here's an impulse towards something or other. And one possibility is, let it go. Put it down. Am I confident of my ability, my abilities to do that? And certainly with the kind of small, kind of petty stuff in life, that cup of tea while I'm walking in meditation or in between the sitting—walking, do I really need it? Or I mean, I might. It might be that actually I do need that break and that space there and that easing off the sort of gas pedal of the effort. But oftentimes it's these small things or that cookie, you know, whatever.

Learning to put this stuff down, to let it go—this is really a good development, a helpful development as one of our options.

There are many possibilities here, and though I think we've talked about some of this already, I'll just briefly go through them again. Being mindful—let's say, take that cookie—and really being mindful of the arising of pleasure in the seeing, in the anticipation, in the whole sensual experience of it, moment to moment. Really paying attention to the pleasure as it arises and passes, moment to moment.

If there's enough attention, eventually—though sometimes initially giving more attention to the pleasant actually reveals more pleasantness—eventually we start to see in the whole experience: how good is this really? Relatively speaking, in terms of the kind of pleasure that a human being can experience, is it really worth it? How good is this really? But I have to pay attention to really answer that question. I have to pay close attention to the pleasure, or whatever other sensation—because it might be quite neutral—arising moment to moment.

I've talked and written about that elsewhere, and plenty of people have, so we don't really need to go into it. But another possibility there is actually, in this close attention to the arising of pleasure, having what I want, actually then asking: where does the pleasure go? Where did it go?

Oftentimes it's so brief. So we can incline then with all this—where did it go?—inclining towards seeing the impermanence, seeing the endings. Not just seeing, but really sensing, feeling the endings, the impermanence of things. Giving attention to noticing endings, really honing in on impermanence, moment to moment impermanence, the ending of this pleasure. Really feeling that, really sensing that.

So there's an inclination there, an incline towards the practice of anicca, of noticing impermanence. You really start to see this pleasure—where did it go? It dissipates so quickly.

Out of that, a related third option is: what will it give me? Really, what will it give me, this thing that I want, this cookie? If I'm genuinely hungry and that's what I have to eat, then of course it's going to give me nourishment, and it will give me some pleasure—but how much, and for how long?

So these kinds of reflections—we could say all kinds of things, but they're related. I have to pay attention enough to notice, and I have to pay attention, perhaps, to impermanence. This forms a basis for a kind of reflection that allows letting go.

So that's the first general direction or navigation in relation to desire coming up: letting it go, putting it

down. We could fill that out with all kinds of other possibilities, but let's just keep it at that for now.

The second possibility—and actually related, and again, I think I mentioned this already on this retreat, and certainly elsewhere—is when there's either a pleasant sensation, pleasant vedanā that I'm enjoying, or unpleasant vedanā that I'm craving to get away from, to end, to push away. One possibility is actually to really take up a kind of close attention with the mindfulness and the intensity of mindfulness, focusing intently on the actual vedanā, moment to moment—pleasant, unpleasant, whatever it is.

And noticing within that, not just the vedanā, but noticing the sort of craving that is, if you like, coupled with the vedanā. These ebbs and flows or little impulses and waves of craving that arise with or from the vedanā, or in relation to the vedanā. And just noticing how they keep dissolving—this impulse, this craving, this little swell of craving. "I want it," or "I want more of it," or "I'm pushing it away."

It's not so much in the mind, or certainly that's a level, but in the actual energetics. I'm talking about below the level of thought here, something more fundamental than that, more hardwired even than that.

But focusing on the vedanā, noticing these swells and dissipations of craving, the dissolving of craving—doing that is really good training. Because then one finds that in the noticing of the dissolving of craving, one actually is developing the capacity not to get dragged by it. Over time, this grows so that we're less automatically and unconsciously pulled by vedanā into craving away from or towards something or other. It's a really good skill to develop, that very specific meditative focus. You can do it with any sense door.

Very related to that is a kind of slight shift in the focus to really train the mindfulness on—in a bit more spacious way, probably—the feeling of the pressure that goes with craving. With craving, "I really want this or that," and I can feel it build as a pressure. Again, not so much in the mind necessarily as in the energy body, in fact.

This pressure, because it's hard to tolerate, usually we just want to get rid of the pressure. How do I get rid of the pressure? The easiest way seems to be: eat the cookie, take it, have the cup of tea, get it over and done with—light the cigarette, whatever it is.

But with practice, actually begin to notice this pressure, and what I need to do is notice it with a more spacious mindfulness—allow it, give it space. What pressure needs often is space. That's kind of physics: you squeeze something, there's more pressure. So you want to give it space, and it's like giving a gas more space—it just takes the pressure off. It lowers the pressure.

We just allow that pressure. And again, there'll be a kind of swell, perhaps over quite a bit of time—over some minutes even—a kind of swell of pressure, maybe micro-movements within that, micro-swells within that, this swelling of pressure.

But if I can just be mindful of it in this very allowing way, giving it space, I can see that I can actually

tolerate it more easily. And I learn, I develop my capacity to tolerate the pressure of craving or the heat of desire or whatever it is. That learning to tolerate gives me confidence in the long run.

And you find that this pressure and the craving just begins to ebb away. And then I'm free. And the next time it comes back, it will probably be a little less strong. Eventually an addiction can be—some addictions can be—healed just by doing that. A really good skill to have.

So either focusing on the vedanā, noticing the craving, or focusing on feeling the pressure and allowing, giving that space, tolerating it—two versions of a second possibility there.

The third possibility has more to do with holding—these are all related and they can overlap, certainly they do overlap—but holding with a kind mindfulness, or mindfulness imbued with kindness, the emotions that are wrapped up in or underneath the desire and the craving.

For example, a feeling, an emotion of a sense of lack, or even the fear of lacking, the fear of missing out, the fear of losing that's impelling me, compelling me, pushing me to cling on to something or to crave something or to fill up in a certain way with food or whatever it is. It could be actually any kind of fear—fear of boredom. Sometimes this is quite subtle and not obvious. We actually have to notice it, discern what's going on there, and then kind of hone in very delicately on this emotion and hold it, care for it.

What does that mean? Sometimes it can be an agitation. It can be all kinds of things. There's an emotion wrapped up in or underneath that's sort of firing this craving or whatever it is. And sometimes it can be very subtle, sometimes not so subtle, but that's what needs the attention, that's what needs the care.

And what does it mean to hold caringly the complex that's involved there? So one part of this is holding and caring for the self, for me, that who is feeling this complex of emotions—whatever it is, feeling of lack, feeling of emptiness in the non-dharmic sense, a feeling of fear, whatever it is, boredom, uneasiness, stress.

Holding and caring for the self there. Sometimes with mindfulness, we kind of too quickly, or at the wrong times, we skip over or through the self. It's almost like we laser beam the attention down to the sensations of the emotion, which I'm going to come to in a second, because that's actually quite important or valuable as an option. But sometimes also at the level of the self.

So this self that is feeling this difficult emotion, that's put the emotion pushing me into craving—maybe I even know it's not going to be helpful and all of that. Can I hold and care for myself there? Can I give mettā to myself or just hold myself in this kind of kind awareness? So it's the level of the self, of the being.

But a second level is, as I just alluded to, giving a kind of honing of the attention on the emotion rather than the self. So here's this emotion. And one way of doing it is kind of like a laser beam with a lot of intensity. These sensations are arising in my throat, in my chest. It may or may not be that that kind of

laser beam intensity or bearing down on it is what's needed. It may be, but sometimes with some emotion, some situation, it's not what's needed. We need something much more delicate, much more caring with that.

And so what is it, again, to hold kindly, almost to cup in the hands like you would hold a little fragile bird or something like that, to hold kindly with mindfulness—bring the mindfulness, but the mindfulness has a lot of holding and kindness in it—to hold with mindfulness that emotion as it plays out in the energy body. But the emotion of it is what's—the actual emotion, the experience of the emotion, the phenomenon of the emotion is what's being held and cared for.

So again, these shade into each other. There are really blurry boundaries here, but we're talking about subtle shifts of emphasis which can make all the difference in practice. I'm not talking about theory here, not talking about neat, clever distinctions that package together very nicely. We're talking about really subtle leanings and emphasis in the moment, in the heat of practice, meeting the difficulty, meeting the beauty, whatever it is.

And these subtle distinctions—this is where when we talk about mastery, when we talk about artistry, when we talk about the beauties of practice, this is really part of it. In this kind of subtlety and the micro-leanings of attention. Think of an eagle or one of those beautiful birds of prey as they glide and ride the air waves, or a surfer riding the waves. It's really the joy, the art is in the micro-adjustments. And it just sometimes can be really effortless, really subtle, almost barely noticeable to anyone else. And you're riding the currents. What's most helpful here? What's available?

So all this applies to everything—everything we're talking about in practice generally, certainly everything on this retreat, but particularly what I'm exploring in this series of talks.

There's also the possibility of holding and caring for the emotional complex through what I call directing metta toward phenomena—metta to the phenomenon of the emotion itself. Not so much metta to myself, but actual metta with phrases directed toward the emotion. I've taught this technique elsewhere, so I won't go into the details now, but you can find it in other teachings.

What you'll discover, if you genuinely don't try to get rid of the emotion this way, is that oftentimes it fades. But this only works if you're not trying to get rid of it—which would usually be another form of aversion. Instead, you're actually loving this emotion, which means it's welcome, truly welcome. Not as some theoretical idea, but as a real embodied opening, a softening of the relationship to it—welcoming, allowing, and actually directing metta to the emotion in various ways.

Because of dependent origination, because this represents a reduction of clinging, the emotion often fades. But you can't aim for that outcome, because then it's usually just aversion trying to get rid of the emotion. Depending on which emphasis you take, sometimes the emotion fades, but other things might happen instead. An image might arise. Something might shift in the energy body. All kinds of possibilities—some

kind of healing with the emotion, some change in the relationship even while the emotion remains.

So we have a third general possibility: the first is letting go, putting it down. The second is focusing on the vedanā or the pressure of craving, allowing it, giving it space, tolerating it. The third is what we could call meeting and holding—tuning in, noticing, meeting and holding, and caring for in different ways, whether for the self, the emotion, or through giving metta to the emotion.

And there's a fourth general possibility in our navigation of practice when desire or craving arises: making a conscious choice to navigate away from it. The Buddha describes this kind of skillful avoidance many times. We're not talking about fear—being afraid of the eros or intensity, some knee-jerk reaction. We're talking about a conscious, skillful response that simply leans or inclines consciousness somewhere else.

Sometimes we recognize that the craving or desire arising right now is actually arising partly or even predominantly because we're not feeling nourished—spiritually nourished, nourished in our being, in our heart, or in our energy. What would serve us better is actually concentrating on giving ourselves some nourishment, opening to nourishment.

Or perhaps we're feeling restless, and the restlessness is impelling this craving. Craving and restlessness, or aversion and restlessness, go intimately together. These hindrances are intimately connected. Or perhaps there's generally not enough space in consciousness—it's getting cramped, often because there's already some craving present. But that crampedness itself fuels the craving in unhelpful ways. There's a kind of intensification, a snowballing effect because there's insufficient space in consciousness.

Or sometimes there's simply not enough energy. We're depleted somehow, irritable, and there's craving or aversion—toward or away from something, whatever our particular pattern of vulnerability when we're tired and depleted.

So we can deliberately recognize this and incline toward some kind of nourishment. This doesn't necessarily mean getting up from the cushion and going for a walk, or taking in nature, or talking to a friend—though of course all that is possible. But within the practice itself, still sitting or walking or whatever the form, we can move into a samādhi practice, for instance, or into metta. If I'm feeling undernourished, I don't necessarily need to give myself metta—I could, but sometimes I might just as well give metta to other people and still get nourished from that. I certainly will.

Or if it's space that I need—opening out the consciousness—maybe taking the meditation outside to help with the outdoors, the sky. But sometimes just opening to listening, 360-degree listening from all distances near and far, will open the spaciousness of consciousness quite organically.

Or generally, some kind of practice that inclines toward fabricating less perception. There's a whole host of these possibilities.

I'm not going to describe them all, but, for instance, an attar practice, if you know it, or actually any kind of emptiness practice—actually the samatha, the metta, and the spaciousness are also practices of less fabrication. So there's a navigation away from the fabrication that's wrapped up in and with the desire, and instead a navigation towards practices which are less fabricating. Samatha, metta, spaciousness, emptiness practices of different kinds—these can be really, really skillful at times. To know that one has that option, to develop these options so that they are available and accessible, and to experiment with gliding between these different practices, really feeling the resource and knowing and being nourished by these different things at different times.

So that would be a fourth option.

A fifth option I'll just mention here—and we'll introduce it in the instructions—I am referring to what I actually introduced a few years ago in the talk "Beauty of Desire Part 2," I'm guessing 2011, I could be wrong. Very briefly: just here's this desire. Actually, here's some difficulty that I'm experiencing—some pain, some confusion, some anger, whatever it is, some sadness. And sometimes what can happen there is actually, I say that there's probably some desire wrapped up in this difficulty that I'm feeling. Or it might actually be that I'm conscious of a desire that it seems like I can't have, or I shouldn't let myself have, or something or other. But it might just be some other difficult emotion.

So there's probably a desire here. Can I just give myself enough of a platform of deciding to entertain some trust, deciding that maybe there's a treasure in that desire? Maybe that desire is a kind of treasure. So I'm just opening the view away from what I might have been taught or what I might believe already. Maybe there's a treasure in this desire. First step.

Second step: what am I really wanting here? So it seems to be I want this person, it seems to be, I want this to happen—but what am I really desiring? What's the deeper desire, if you like, the more, in a way, more general or abstract desire here? To find out what that is, just gently with the inquiry.

And then really, third step: open to that. Open to the current, the force of that desire in the energy body. I mean really open—really opening the sense of the body to that, what can sometimes feel like a torrent or a stream. Really, really opening to it and allowing it to flow.

So three steps there, and something quite remarkable can happen in terms of the whole state of consciousness and the freedom in relationship to the desire. It's not coming from putting the desire down. It's not coming from navigating away from it. It's not coming from just being mindful of it in the usual sense. There's a different order of something that's available here in terms of—and it really turns upside down the beliefs that we've probably become a little bit entrenched in regarding desire, perhaps over the years of practice.

But here, there's more an emphasis on the energy of the desire itself rather than the image. And also, as I said, the more generalized desire or more abstracted desire, the kind of deeper level, if you like. So it's

away from the image towards more of this generality of what I'm desiring deeply, what I really want, and more towards the energy and that kind of general level rather than the image.

So there's five options. But actually this talk, and maybe the next one—we'll see how we do for time—what I mostly want to go into is staying within imaginal practice with the desire that's arising in that imaginal, with the eros, with the erotic imaginal, with the beloved other. Staying within with the image, not navigating away, not going just to the energy of the desire as I just described, not putting it down, not all of that, not just finding the emotions underneath and being mindful of them and caring for them, but actually staying within, if you like, the remit and the direction of imaginal practice, keeping the image alive and working with the eros there.

But remember, all those options I've just been through—navigating away from the desire or from the image, any of the previous ones that we've just been through—are available, as is stopping the meditation, pausing, opening your eyes. It's pretty rare that that's going to be necessary. So maybe some of you are thinking, "God, this is going to be really intense, this eros business and desire and wow and fire and all that." Yeah, maybe sometimes, but it's pretty—I would say pretty—rare that someone actually finds it's just way too much and they need to stop and open their eyes. I mean, it might be, but generally speaking, again, there's a real range here.

So all of those options that we've just been through are possible. Or what I want to really explore shortly is subtle shifts and inclinations, shifts of emphasis and adjustments of emphasis in the imaginal practice that allow us to—yes, part of the mastery—allow us to find our way, allow it to find its way, to open the paths, to open in the imaginal, in the erotic imaginal, allow the vessel to be strong in the moment, and elastic if it needs to be, or whatever. So that's really what I want to go into.

Before I do, a couple of things. One is sometimes it's valuable to be clear—in fact most of the time probably it's valuable to be clear—what I'm actually responding to. So if we're talking about the art of skillful response and subtle responses to subtle or not so subtle things or energies or qualities that are arising in the practice, it's good to be clear: what am I actually responding to?

If or when the eros that's present in an image, in an imaginal practice, feels hard to bear—if or when eros feels hard to bear sometimes—why right now does it feel hard to bear? In other words, what exactly is hard to bear about it? This can be an interesting question at times, and actually quite a helpful inquiry at times. Not that you have to always go into this inquiry, but sometimes.

Sometimes, for example, in what's happening in an erotic image in the practice, there's a sense of merging, perhaps with the beloved, or dissolving into them or together, and there can be fear in relation to that.

Fear of that merging, fear of dissolving, and that makes the whole thing hard to bear. Or it could be that actually there's a lot of bliss arising, a lot of pleasure, and if one isn't used to it or doesn't know how to work with it, that can feel hard to bear. Or, kind of related but a little bit different, just the erotic charge,

the energetic charge, can feel hard to bear.

Or sometimes what's happening in the imaginal practice with the erotic object, the erotic beloved, is that there's an opening of one's being, and that opening of the heart and the whole being feels vulnerable, and that feels hard to bear. We feel unsure about that. Or perhaps it's actually gone into craving, and the craving is bringing a certain constriction, and that feels uncomfortable, hard to bear.

Or it might be a matter of trust. You know, here I feel like, "Oh, I'm not sure," and we're feeling uneasy because there isn't enough trust in place—in this practice, in the eros itself, in the kind of image that's coming up. It feels, you know, to the mind, it feels, "Oh, this is weird," or "It's too this or that," or whatever, or "Not enough this or that," or something.

Or it could be, you know, sometimes what happens is there's a really deep longing that arises in relation to certain images and fantasies. And it has this kind of bittersweet, but kind of a little bit hard to bear, or very hard to bear, quality to it.

So all these are... you know, there are multiple options with all of these. But I remember just not too long ago working with someone and she was working with an image. We were working with it together. And she said, "Oh, the eros is a little bit hard to bear right now." And I asked her, you know, "What exactly is hard to bear?" And I went through some of these possibilities.

And she was sort of checking in and looking. And she said, "No, what's hard to bear is the giving image." This was... okay, well, "What do you mean, the giving?" And so it was part of the image that was already unfolding for her, that she was, if you like, in.

And this was an image that was very... it was more bodily than visual. It was coming through her body and she was moving her body in a sort of expression of the image and sensing the image through her body. So we've talked about that with the different senses.

But what was needed was actually a little bit more entering into the image, inquiring into the image, and then this sense of, "Oh, it's the giving that's a problem." Okay, well, giving, and "Tell me about the giving. What is being given?" And then going into that whole image of the giving, and she felt herself to be a divine womb.

So the whole thing just went to another level, in the image, into the image, and it opens up. She was a divine womb, a sort of generatrix, and her body was turning out sacred text. So she was making this gesture with her body, kind of rolling her arms. It was puzzling to her. She was following her body, and the image was of this divine womb turning out sacred texts on her arms and with her body and these texts sort of emanated, radiated and then became the cosmos.

So there's some kind of divine goddess birthing the cosmos in hierophantic time here and birthing also the beloved other. It's quite a beautiful and profound image, but it took actually going into the question of

"What's hard to bear there?"—an imaginal, it was an aspect of the image—and opening that up.

So in other words, exploring the image more can sometimes make the whole thing easier and give rise to more space. So this is the emphasis, this last one that I've just been through that I want to explore shortly.

But as I said, please remember there are options with all of these. So for instance, if there's a lot of bliss or a lot of pleasure arising with an image... oftentimes the secret here is to open the energy body, give it more space, give that bliss space to flow, to move, allow it. The emphasis is really on opening and allowing and enjoying.

If you really open, really allow and kind of surrender to it—like you surrender to a really powerful shower or waterfall—even you just really open the body to it and let yourself enjoy it, you'll find almost always that that actually takes the unpleasant edge off and the intensity off the pleasure makes it much more tolerable.

Now you could do that almost like again this kind of gently veering away from the image to just a meditation on the energy body and you're just working... you let the image go and you're just working with the bliss and the pleasure in the energy body really opening, really allowing and letting yourself enjoy, surrendering, abandoning yourself to that pleasure and you'll find that it becomes a meditation in itself on the energy body, on the pleasure, etc. It can go to samadhi and different things.

Or you might do exactly that, but keeping the image present. So you're just kind of, again, it's all about shades of emphasis. So there the image is present. I'm not letting the image go and keeping that, but I'm at the same time working with opening the energy body and allowing and enjoying and surrendering and all those things while I'm still engaged with, in relationship to the image. Lots of possibilities.

Similarly with the erotic and energy charge that we talked about before, but they're, you know, in other words, really opening the energy body, etc. But there are other options with the image.

You know, in terms of what we... just the list we went through of what might feel hard to bear just then, you know, if the opening of the being is what feels vulnerable... then again, you can go back to kind of meeting that vulnerability, feeling in with mindfulness. What does that feel like?

Caring for it with mindfulness, perhaps with some metta—maybe just the caring kind of holding with mindfulness. Maybe again, stopping, pausing. You don't need to push yourself through something that feels too much of an edge for you, that you're not ready for. If it's too vulnerable, stop, pause. It's okay. It's really okay.

But again, there are other options: keeping the image around, playing with that edge, working with the energy in relationship to the image—or rather, primarily with the image, even more than the energy or the emotion. The energy and the emotion shift from this different relationship with the image. This is what I want to explore.

The first thing I mentioned from our list of what might feel hard to bear was this fear of merging, or the imminent dissolution that might feel like a tendency toward dissolution. What's helpful here is more of this collateral investment from other practices—if you have experience with the lessening of fabrication, because that's what dissolution is: the lessening of fabrication of self and the perception of other, perception of anything.

If you're familiar with this from practices of samadhi or metta or emptiness, then that familiarity allows you to realize over time that you can really trust this dissolution. If it does go to dissolution, or if it wants to, or if you want to go to dissolution, there's really no danger there. There's no danger. Things can dissolve, merge into oneness—all kinds of different oneness and luminosity and experiences. No danger at all. You're not going to get stuck there. You're not going to lose anything permanently—at least nothing that's worth keeping.

Really, generally, one goes into these experiences and comes out. With familiarity, with time dipping in and out through other practices or even this kind of practice, you realize there's no danger. It might help you, if this is really very new to you, hearing from a teacher—me or Catherine or whoever—saying there's no danger. You can dip into that just a little bit, a little bit more, maybe a little bit more sometimes, and it becomes a beautiful option, completely trustworthy.

Sometimes what happens is there's a sense of the fear of dissolution or the fear of melting. What you can do is just know that there's fear there. At the same time, just notice it's also very nice. It's pretty delicious at that point. You can just not push away the fear, but notice the deliciousness that's around in the body, in the mind perhaps—that's there as well as the fear. Just very gently incline the mind or the attention toward the deliciousness without ignoring or pushing anything away or trying to get rid of fear. Just enjoying that pleasure—that can really, really help.

With all this, it's important to be aware that, as I've said before, often in eros there is a tension—what we're calling an erotic tension. This comes partly because of the pothos, partly because there's always this "more" there, and partly because there's a tension between this attraction toward the beloved other, the erotic object, while at the same time retaining twoness. There's like a pull in opposite directions: a pull toward the object and a pull away to retain, to keep the twoness. All of this creates what we're calling erotic tension.

Sometimes this tension is quite noticeable, and other times it's barely noticeable at all. But just know that this can be part of eros. Yes, there are all kinds of different experiences of peace that we can have in and with eros—quite particular ones, senses of peace that we'll hopefully encounter in this retreat, and kinds of equanimity or balance in and with eros.

But strictly speaking, equanimity is really about the drastic lessening, if not momentary erasure, of any pulling of the object toward oneself or pushing it away—any movement of desire that way. Because it's that lessening of the push-pull toward something, it actually moves toward a fading. I mentioned this in

the last part of this talk. Equanimity and fading go together. Deep equanimity involves deep fading. A state of deep equanimity is a state of deep fading.

That's not really what's happening in a state of eros for the most part. It might go toward this melting in union, dissolving in light with the beloved other. But generally speaking, as I said, eros will stay engaged with an other, will retain the other. Whereas deep equanimity will dissolve the other, dissolve the thingness, and actually not be in engagement.

Here's something interesting I'll throw out—some of you will find it intriguing, some won't. The Pali for equanimity is upekkha, the Sanskrit is upeksha. This comes from upa and iksha. Iksha means seeing or to regard or to consider or to watch over. Upa usually means toward or near or together with. So you get this sense of watching closely something. We say equanimity and tend to think with mindfulness it's a watching closely of something.

But the word upa also actually has the implication of extinction, of killing, of diffusing something.

So, at a stretch—I mean, if we just play with words now—at a stretch, *upekkhā* or *upekṣā* could mean something like the extinction of looking. In other words, the fading of perception.

Now, I'm not claiming that is the etymology. I mean, it might actually be involved in it. Personally, I find arguments over etymology and picking over the etymology to try and find the authentic, real, one meaning that the Buddha had for these things—I find that a bit silly, to be honest. I would rather use words to open doors, to give us pathways, a kind of more suggestive hermeneutics there.

But anyway, eros is different, really, than equanimity. We can talk about kinds of equanimity and kinds of peace that can be mixed with the eros or part of the whole opening of the erotic imaginal, but actually there is a kind of tension, an erotic tension, that remains for the most part and to differing degrees when we're working with eros.

Let's look in more detail in the next part. Let's move into what I said I really wanted to talk about, which is the working with, staying with the images and working with the subtle shifts of emphasis and inclination that can happen in imaginal practice in the moment.

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