Wisdom, Art, Balance (Part 4)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:18:51

So we're talking about the development of the art of practicing with Eros so that it is soul-making and fertile—working with the imaginal and informal practice in our life. The wisdom of that: what does wisdom mean? The art of skillful response: what does balance mean? How do we create the vessels? How do we tend to the fire and modulate the fire?

We've already said that we don't want to just alternate between practices of fire and practices of earth, so to speak—the practice of the fire of Eros and practice of the steadiness of the earth, the equanimity of the earth. We don't just want to move between these and hope that a balance comes out over time. That will help certainly; that's important. Practices that bring steadiness, equanimity, spaciousness, strength, rootedness—these are important when they're done alone and as part of the totality of the path. We've already said this.

But we're also interested—and what I really want to go into—is the question of balance and equanimity, sustainability, fertility, while engaging with the imaginal, while engaging with the erotic imaginal. What I'm talking about here applies to any imaginal perception. We're talking about the imaginal dimension, so it could be something completely intra-psychic, an intra-psychic imaginal figure that doesn't seem to bear any relation to anyone we know. It could be an actual person seen, sensed, imaginally—the imaginal perception of someone in our life, or someone that we know from history, or whatever it is.

For example, someone comes to me and says, "There's this person and I'm really attracted to them. I want to be in relationship with him, with her, with them. And it's painful because they have communicated that they don't want that. They're not interested in that." The natural inclination and the taught path there would be: let go of that. Let go, turn away, find someone else, feel your emotions.

But in fact, another possibility—and in a way a more fruitful possibility, a deeper possibility sometimes—is actually to go in. This person already exists for you as an image. Go into the imaginal dimension. Allow the image of them to be amplified, to enlarge, as it would with the *eros-psyche-logos* dynamic operating. Dwell with that image. Be sensitive to it. Meditate with it. Open to it.

And lo and behold, when a person does this, they often find that what happens when I allow the imaginal is that the imaginal will reveal its dimensionality to me. This person becomes much more than the one-dimensional, concrete, actual person. They become alive. With dimensions. They become, if you like, huge—or bigger at least. Multi-layered. There's a richness, a depth, a beauty, vitality, multifacetedness of the image there. The image, instead of trying to get rid of it or shrink it or contain it or shrink it down to the actual—actually we're allowing it to open, and ourselves to open to it. And the whole thing opens up.

The whole sense of the problem or the situation or this other person, the self in relation to it, opens up.

The problem is flatness. The problem is over-concretized one-dimensionality of perception, reification. And we actually don't see. We think we see, and that the imaginal is not seeing, but we actually do not see. We're not seeing deeply, fully, imaginally, soulfully enough. And therein, in that reification, in that not seeing, in that lack of fullness, is the problem and comes the problem. Flatness, killing, suffocating, strangling, cramping.

And then, if we can open to the image and allow the image to open, we will see very often that it then doesn't feel like it matters much what actually happens in the one-dimensional so-called reality. We've got something else there. Something else opens up and it doesn't actually matter. The image is much bigger than that—much, much bigger.

And we may ask with that: who is this? Who is this in this image? I thought it was this person that I've been trying to tell that I'm interested in them and I would like to pursue a relationship, whatever it is. But who is it? As I go into the sense of them and allow, as I said, all the sensitivity, all the resonance, all the opening, the energy body, the beauty, the soul-making—who is this person? Who is this? The imaginal layer. Can I begin to see and sense in the image of them, in the image, in the way they come imaginatively alive to the psyche? Can I see and sense the angel there, the angel that they are to me, the theophany, the divinity in the image?

So we're really talking about practice here. When that begins to open—that sense of the angel, the theophany, the divinity in the image—then, because I'm actually perceiving that and I'm sensitive, I'm open to it with the whole of my being, the energy body, the mindfulness, the sensitivity, the delicacy, the tuning, it's as if my being, my psyche, is infused, so to speak.

There's an infusion to myself of that angelic nature, of that theophany, of the divinity therein. I don't need this or that to happen. I don't even need this or that to happen in the image. There's an infusion directly. It permeates and penetrates the psyche, and I have something—I have actually much more than I thought I wanted in the first place. Much more.

This could be any kind of relationship, not necessarily romantic or sexual desire. It could be any kind of relationship—with a teacher, whatever it is. Someone might take it to a teacher, take it to a therapist, and they say, "Let go, let go." And of course, that's the standard message, isn't it? Let go. It sounds so simple. It sounds so wise. But not all the time is it wise. Let go—or actually, what does it mean to let go when there are complex situations? Again, it sounds so simplistic. What does it actually mean?

But instead of letting go, there is the possibility: actually, no, go into this image. Claim it, if you like. Let it have a claim on you. Let it have its claim on you. Enter in, open to the image. Let it open. And there will come, in relation to this person that I can't have—maybe they're dying, maybe they might die, maybe whatever the situation is, and whatever the kind of relationship we're talking about, friend, teacher,

student, potential lover or not, whatever it is—the image opens, and with it comes peace, beauty, soul-making. The opposite movement of what we thought, sometimes, for us in certain spiritual traditions or other traditions of psychotherapy. We're indoctrinated without even realizing it, and the indoctrination here is simply: let go. Let go is the answer. Can we explore? Can we question? Can we check where we might be indoctrinated and see what other paths are open to us?

But I'm talking about practice here, not some vague idea. I'm actually talking about entering into practice so that we perceive certain things. There's the imaginal perception. They become very alive, very vital, very meaningful, very tangible, very real for us, these imaginal perceptions.

So in a way, what's happening here is we're allowing the eros. Another way of saying this—because eros and the image go together—is: allow the eros, allow the feeling of the desire, allow that erotic charge, and allow it to increase. Go into the image, allow the eros to increase. They're slightly different angles in on the same thing, really, but allow the eros to increase, and what will happen? The eros-psyche—because the eros is increasing, it stimulates, it ignites—it starts to expand, inseminate, fertilize the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, the soul-making dynamic, the mutual insemination, fertilization, deepening, widening, expanding, complicating, enriching of all that we've been through. It expands. That whole soul-making expands. The psyche expands. The ideation expands. And peace comes with that—and this can be a huge surprise if we're accustomed to the usual indoctrination.

Going into the image, opening to the image, opening to the eros, allowing the eros, not cutting it, not trying to stifle it or erase it or put it away—peace.

Sometimes what happens is one enters into the imaginal other, the erotic object, the beloved other, whatever that is, whether it's a human or an animal or some element of nature or an imaginal figure. And there can be a sexual penetration, or there could be just an entering into the being. Because the imaginal object, with the stimulation of the soul-making dynamic, as we said before—the image gets deeper, wider, more complex, more multi-dimensional, more multifaceted. Sometimes in allowing that to happen, it's as if we enter into the imaginal other, as if they've become to us a territory, a soul landscape. And I might enter into them through a—

imaginal erotic penetration, or whatever, sexual penetration, or I might just enter into their eyes, into their soul, and their soul becomes for me a garden, becomes for me perhaps even a paradise.

So the image opens, gains dimensionality, and becomes available for us, and there's peace with that. I have something there. I have something priceless, in fact.

This is all very interesting. And it comes from going into the image, opening to the image, not stopping it, not putting it down, not turning away from it, and also the eros—allowing, opening, going into.

But there's much that's interesting here. When there is desire for us as human beings, when there is desire, I would say there's always operating, whether we're aware of it or not, conscious or unconscious,

there's always operating a conception and an evaluation of that desire—a conception of the desire itself that's present, and an evaluation of it. So, for example: it's wholesome, it's unwholesome, it's part of the path, it's definitely not part of the path, it's a defilement, it's holy, it's neither this nor that, whatever. There's always some conception, some evaluation. And either that conception and evaluation of the desire allows us or supports our trusting the desire, its energy, its movement, allows us to see its beauty—or it doesn't allow that. It doesn't allow the trust. It doesn't allow the sense of beauty. So that's interesting too, and that's something we'll return to. What's the concept and the evaluation of the desire itself that's operating? We're going to come back to this a lot.

But as well as that, I wonder whether in some way or another, there's always a kind of projected anticipation or relationship with the having of the object of desire. There's always a projected relationship with the having of it. What I mean is this: desire, when we anticipate getting what we desire, or when we anticipate the consummation of a sexual desire or passion—that's quite a different experience, isn't it, than the desire where we project or anticipate not getting it? Or if it's coming from a feeling of lack, and we anticipate not being able to have this object that I desire, this one that I desire, whatever it is—how does that then shape the whole experience, colour, determine, direct the whole experience?

So those are the two obvious possibilities, but actually there are many more in terms of this projected relationship. What's my relationship with the idea or the anticipation of getting or not getting, being able to have or not being able to have? There are actually others which we'll go into—for example, realizing that I already have it in some way. We'll return to that and others.

But if we take that second possibility, the feeling of lack, or imagining, projecting that one can't have, one won't be able to have this object—sometimes one possibility is noticing that's what's happening and feeling the feelings with that, feeling the whole psychic constellation with that. Maybe it's frustration. Maybe it's some kind of feeling of inferiority.

I want to share something from someone's process that they are allowing me to share. It's a complicated scenario; I won't explain all the details. But this person, he writes—he was describing what happened with someone where there is a kind of boundary, and because of the boundary, and there was the desire, he said, "I felt a bit trapped in a mental and emotional space that somehow reminded me of a teenage feeling or sense I had as a teenager—that I couldn't reach her," this one that was desirable for him, his erotic beloved. "I couldn't reach her. She seemed really together and kind of cool and out of my class. She was out of my reach. It was as if a sheet of glass separated us. I could see her, but I was removed. I couldn't touch her." And in this, he said, "I felt inferior somehow."

This was not a very common pattern for him, but he recognized it from when he was a teenager and before. Somehow he felt inferior, not being able to have. She was somehow better than him, out of his class, out of his league. And then he would consolate into what he would do—go, as he put it, on his solitary and lonely way, kind of a tramp or an outcast, leaving alone. So there was pain and frustration.

Encouraging him to feel it, to really be with that and really feel the frustration, he said in his reporting, "Strong in my body—it was really strong in my body." But actually, with the allowing of it, it became strong eros as he was with it and felt it. And it turned very intense and beautiful.

He described—staying with the image, allowing the eros with the image, really feeling it in the body but staying with the image—and the image started to transform. He said, "Like a lion, I wanted to devour her, rip her flesh open with my teeth, tear her limbs apart." None of it angry or destructive. Don't make that mistake of assuming this is a kind of angry violence or destructive, or anything to do with rape or anything like that.

None of it angry or destructive, he writes, but deeply animal erotic. Holy, in its very particular, utterly non-ethereal way.

Reflecting on that word "devour" – it's probably not etymologically related to the word "devout," but there's something we can call, following Paul Kugler here, an archetypal psychologist, there's an archetypal resonance between clusters of words. Devour and devout. There's a holiness here. As he writes, holy in its very particular, utterly non-ethereal way.

So again, remember we were talking about the substantiality, the carnality of the image. This is a really carnal image, a substantial image. It's not light and airy, fairy and insubstantial. This one is utterly non-ethereal, he writes. It's immensely animalistic, potent, roaring, beautiful force.

In the image, he writes, "I lick her inside, her organs, her blood, tear her flesh, lick her brain – a lion, dominant, standing over its prey."

And again, prey, P-R-E-Y, and pray, P-R-A-Y. Is there some archetypal constellation in the very words here, in the poetry of the words, some connection in this case?

He continues: "Licking, gouging, feasting on her flesh and her juices and fucking her too deeply." So there's sexual and carnal, all of it. And he writes, "There's a particular kind of loving of her in all this too."

So it's, as I said, not violent. It's not just the anger of frustration. Something happened and it opened. And there's a particular – if for most people, a kind of unusual – kind of loving of her in all this. Very beautiful. It was very moving for him.

And the previous stuck sense of not being able to reach her, feeling inferior and frustrated – all that utterly dissolved and was replaced by an intense sense of connection through participating in the lived energetics of the image. So something, through really sticking with what was quite a difficult experience, constantly bringing the mindfulness, really bringing the skill and the art of practice with some help there, opened up this very kind, but very vital, very beautiful, and deeply holy image.

Now, it wouldn't have to be – the image could open up in any direction or with any kind of quality. We don't know. But there's something here: tracing the emotion, finding the difficulty, energy body, let the

eros constellate, let the image fill out, and see what happens.

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Now, sometimes – and I've touched on another point in relation to all this before, and you'll notice how it applies to that image I just shared – sometimes what happens with the erotic imaginal, or with eros, or with desire in our life, and also sometimes with devotion, is that there's an imbalance. A kind of constriction or block, as we've talked about in different ways, of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic. Or a better word is a block in a certain direction causing the whole thing to be out of balance. I'll explain what I mean.

With an image, with working with the erotic imaginal – again, whether it's sexual erotic or devotional erotic or whatever, that whole range of eros – what it needs to be balanced and to be unblocked, so to speak, in every direction of the expansion of the soul-making dynamic, what it needs is not just to see the beauty only of the beloved other, only of the erotic object, of the image of the other. Not just their beauty, because sometimes that's evident enough. Some people have this pattern where that's really evident, really clear. There's the beauty, there's the divinity, right there.

But also, for the sake of the balance and the sustainability and the opening of the soul-making dynamic, we also need to see the beauty of the self in that constellation. Not just the beauty of the other, the beloved other, the erotic imaginal object, but the beauty of the self, and the beauty of the self's eros, the self's passion. My eros, my passion is beautiful. Am I seeing it? Am I seeing the beauty of myself in this self-other imaginal constellation?

In that way, then, the soul-making dynamic, the eros-psyche-logos, doesn't collapse. It doesn't contract. It doesn't short-circuit or blow out. And some people, unfortunately, have almost a habit or a tendency not to see – just to see the beauty of the other, not to see the beauty of the self in that imaginal constellation, and of the self's eros and the self's passion.

But in order for the soul-making dynamic and the expansion and the eros to be sustainable, to be stable, to be fertile, in order for that to grow in the ways we were describing, and expand and mutually inseminate and deepen and widen – all that requires this kind of balance, balancing the sense of the beauty of the other with the sense of the beauty of the self and the self's eros.

So it's good to notice if there's a tendency or a habit one way or another. I suppose some people might have more sort of self-preoccupation and not see so much the beauty of the other. Someone might say, for instance, "I just see the beauty and the divinity in the other, and I don't see it in myself." And very quickly, those with certain psychological trainings might think, "Ah yes, well, trace it back to the relationship with the father, or relationship with the mother," whatever it is. Careful of the assumptions.

Perhaps that has something to do with it. Is it causal? Maybe, maybe, maybe. Just, let's have this openness of inquiry. Please, please. And then even if that is a part of it or part of the constellation there, or it is even

partly causative, it still leaves open the question: What does it need? What does the soul-making need? What does, so to speak, health need here? And sometimes, again, it's allowing the image to do its thing, allowing it its fullness. So it's from exploring the image, from entering into it, from having it enter into us, from opening to it and having it open to us. Listening to the image.

So one thing is just noticing, in fact. Giving attention within the imaginal practice – so here's this beautiful, desirable, lovely, even divine other that there's so much eros and devotion towards. Can I notice, not taking the attention off the other, but widening the field of attention within the imaginal practice to the larger imaginal constellation? Can I notice and attend to the whole self-other constellation there, and notice what is the image of the self here? Can I watch it actually gain dimensionality as I include it in my awareness? Including it allows the self to take on imaginal dimensions, not be stuck in a certain narrow or concretized image, or the usual one, or whatever.

This is, if you like, the natural, organic desire or tendency of the soul-making dynamic, of the eros-psyche-logos movement. As we said, it wants to expand, deepen, widen, complicate, enrich, become multifaceted – all that. But it wants to expand and deepen and gain dimensions, if you like, in all directions. That means in the direction of the other, certainly, but also in the direction of the self and in the direction of the eros.

I'll read you something else which someone kindly gave me permission to share. This person was on retreat not too long ago. It's fairly long, but it's very instructive and very beautifully shared.

She was on retreat and settling in. Over those opening days, she noticed – I'll speak in the first person – she says, "I noticed my general experience that the citta was entering, it was like entering a deep well of sadness. The personal and global sadness that I had been carrying for some time. Here, on the retreat, it finally had no distractions under which to hide."

As she was out walking – a deep lover of nature, this woman – and she was out in the forest, "I felt some opening, even just to share this grief with the cold air and with the also silent trees." In our culture, this already would be called an imaginal perception of nature – to share this grief with the cold air and with the also silent trees. Can you hear how we consider that in our culture an imaginal perception?

"I stopped to literally hug one," so she actually hugged a tree, "and to linger there. Its depth and solidity pointed to a resource of strength that wouldn't be diminished by any offering to me." Again, the imaginal perception of the tree, the beauty of that, the resource of that.

"Gaining steadiness in movement, it's impossible to describe what a relief it was to go beyond, beyond even the prescribed trails at the property's northern edge. I was finally connecting to something wild, at least relatively so."

She had been working with a teacher on this, with Catherine, in fact. And she continues, "Yet as you" – meaning Catherine – "so helpfully observed in our meeting, the sense of belonging I had with nature was

nonspecific. Loved I was by the forest, but simply as one of Gaia's countless children, all precious and regarded with universal affection."

She continues, "Returning that afternoon, properly worn out," she did some sitting meditation, "and there I was offered by my very personal benefactors all the love that was needed, and then some." So this is now imaginal meditation with certain imaginal figures from her life, some of whom were dead, but they are living in her as imaginal figures.

"In contrast to what I experienced in the forest, the love from these departed benefactors was very specific. My stepfather and my teacher, lover, friend, and my first lover – these three were there, and they each, in turn, heard and affirmed me. In all three cases, my lived experience was that they knew and loved the fullness of me, messy, complicated, wondrous me."

So the love there is very particular, not this general love that she had from the earth before. Very particular, very unique to her. The specificity, the uniqueness of herself is entering into the imaginal relationship, called into the imaginal relationship at that point with these three – what she's calling benefactors, imaginal figures.

She continues, "Over the next several days, as I was vigilant in honoring whatever sadness appeared, allowing it to fully be present and responding to whatever seemed to be needed, at this point the forms of sitting and walking seemed not just doable, but truly helpful." So she was getting more into the practice, helped by all this, by the way she was practicing with these images and being open to the pain.

So the image is not running away from the pain. It's a way of actually opening. The image is a portal to the pain. The pain is a portal to the image, and then to something much more.

The form is truly helpful, she wrote, though my walking path still had to be outdoors. I began to appreciate my heart for its insistence, its unyielding demand for my attention and rejection of the forms that would skip over its pain.

So she was really up for all this. But now, she continues, my extended walks into the forest were growing slowly and quietly in joy. It was on day seven of the retreat, and she reports something. She was getting ready to go outside for a walk, and then she says, so beautifully: "Like childhood friends at the front door, impatiently waiting on my presence to begin after-school play, the forest now seemed to be calling me—specifically me—out for a romp. Come out! Come play! Come back!" This is the forest talking to her. "OK, OK," my heart responded. "I'm lacing these snow boots as fast as I can."

She's already, by going into the image, by allowing the image, the uniqueness of herself has been called into that image that previously was more general and not unique.

And then she continues: "Following a different route but still heading north and beyond the trail boundaries, I came to a gentle micro-valley under a canopy of pines and was brought to the confluence of

two small streams, a place flat and low with bright sun streaming through onto shapes and colours of such beauty. Rock, snow, dark earth, moss, water revealing and water reflecting. I stood on a squared-off stone elevated right at the stream's intersection and listened to their perfect sound, the sound of needs met. And then out of the quiet space of my mind came the sense: this place is happy. This place is happy in part because I'm here with it. We're together, enjoying this moment and one another, as each of us—rocks, waters, mosses, trees, me, creatures, bit of earth and bit of sky—brings our specific selves to this. We're friends, hanging out."

Very beautiful.

"On the way back to the retreat centre, a snowy clearing, brilliant white in the sun, called me over. A traipse through, and having reached the spot, laid out spread eagle. Through sparse branches I gazed up on the blue above..." And she continues, a very beautiful sharing.

So that's quite complex. There's a lot in that in terms of the points we're exploring. Let's draw out a few here.

First: love is there with the imaginal. In the imaginal is love. With imaginal perceptions there is love. Can we notice the love? I think I've said this before already on this retreat. It's there. Almost by definition, I would say. Love is part of the imaginal. Sometimes we don't notice it. Sometimes it's not obvious. Sometimes it's a kind of love that we're not used to—it's not a conventional sort of expression of love, so we almost miss it. But can we notice it? Can we feel into it? What is the quality of this love? What kind of love is it? Because it might not be conventional. There is love in the imaginal, with images, with imaginal perceptions. Can we notice it?

We love images. What is an image for us is something we love. And again, even that might not be obvious. But sometimes even less obvious is that the images love us. We love the images, and the images love us.

And this can open out—that's partly what happened in this yogi's story that she shared so beautifully. So how can we allow this? Not by closing down, saying, "Oh, it's not the same. I love them more than they love me," or whatever. Sometimes we can just open it, notice it, and that allows it to open. What we attend to, what we tune into, amplifies, gains life—like a flower unfolding its petals, its beauty, its radiance, through the light of our attention and our attunement and our sensitivity.

Sometimes how the whole love, in both directions, in the imaginal constellation opens out is actually by allowing yourself to feel and speak your love—even voice your love to the imaginal. But feeling your love, feeling your love of the imaginal other, the beloved other, you begin to feel again, if you open up, if you just stay noticing, stay attuned, stay sensitive, that the image loves you back. This is really, really important, really, really helpful.

And then—is it possible to dwell in that love? To open the heart, the being, the energy body, the soul, the psyche to that love? And maybe it comes through the gaze. We'll talk about this in the instructions: the

gaze of the imaginal other, or lover, or figure of love, or whatever.

And there can be so much healing in this—so much healing in being loved, in feeling loved, in recognizing that one is loved. So much healing, so much beauty there, so much resource and nourishment.

And it's not always easy, sometimes, to open to or to be, if you like, under the gaze—even a gaze that's full of love, that is nothing but love, that's intense with love. It's not always easy. It's interesting. It's complex.

Sometimes that's complex for people because there's a shame, and even a fear, or certainly a discomfort at being seen deeply. And this gaze of the imaginal other—whether it's a person in a life that we're perceiving imaginally, or just an intra-psychic image—there's a shame, or fear, or discomfort at being seen. And something in a person wants to flee from that, wants to refuse it, or just can't take it in.

So sometimes there's an ambivalence. One longs to be seen so deeply—is there a longing to be seen, and to be seen deeply? And there's a fear of being seen because of the shame. And what happens with these two opposite, conflicting forces? Sometimes all kinds of contorted and painful and strange manifestations, determining the behavior, because we've got these two conflicting forces—and what we do in terms of public attention and all kinds of things there. It's complex.

Maybe one of the options—I mean this is complex, I'm not going to go so much into it now—but maybe just to say this, because it's in the line of the theme we're exploring: maybe actually one can ask, if that is the case, "Here I'm trying to open to the gaze of the imaginal other, but actually that's quite difficult too—the loving gaze, even that's difficult to open to. So what does the imaginal other do in response to my ambivalence? In response to my fear? In response to my shame? What do they say to us? This image, this imaginal figure—what do they do? What is, if you like, their wisdom and their wise and loving response in response to our ambivalence, our fear, our closing off, our refusal, our fleeing?"

In that story I shared just now from the yogi, there was a kind of inequality in the love, and that was partly what was painful for her. The image loved her, if you like—in this case, the image of the earth or the trees. They loved her, but in this general way. She was just one of countless of Gaia's children, I think is how she put it—just a sort of generic universal love, if you like, emanating from nature. It's still imaginal. But in contrast, she was *in love* with the earth. She was in love with particular trees and their uniqueness. So there was this kind of imbalance of the general versus the uniqueness, and also of simply loving versus being, so to speak, *in love*.

In that respect too, because of that imbalance, we could say, in terms of our theory, that the eros-psyche-logos dynamic was blocked, relatively speaking, in one direction—in the direction from the image to her. The eros, the imaginal, was filling out and flowing out, penetrating deeply, richly, multi-dimensionally in one direction, but it was more stifled, not completely blocked but more stifled, in the direction towards the self.

But as she, using other images and hanging out with the images—not going away from the emotion and

working with it, in this case over some days (it may take longer, may take much shorter, anything's possible here)—working with it, the love of the image for her unique self opened. It was *her* that the forest was impatient for: "Come out and play! You! We want to play with you!"—and her beauty, her uniqueness. So the sense of self there, the uniqueness of the self, was called into the image and given—it becomes an object of very specific love.

There's a quality of balancing of the two loves there. Her love for the trees is now balanced by the trees' love for her. Not just general love both ways, but unique love for uniqueness—love for particularities, particular loves flowing now both ways, not just one way.

And with all that, eventually, the images' love, if you like, becomes eros. So the forest—we could say the forest, in this case the trees—eventually has not just love for her, but erotic love for her. In other words, the self becomes an erotic object. The self can become an erotic object for myself, in the way that I look at myself, or in the way that it feels, I sense, that the image is looking at me. I become alive. Self, this unique self, becomes alive as an erotic object, becomes an erotic beloved other even—either to myself or to the image.

And so in that, because eros and image go together, the self comes alive as an image. And because dimensionality is part of image, as we keep stressing, and dimensionality starts to shade into the divine dimensions, the self comes alive as image—

and it gains dimensionality and it gains divinity eventually—maybe suddenly, maybe just gradually, there's a gradual transition. And this is coming in the image, in the imaginal practice, or even from the image.

So there are two aspects to that story I shared. There's the aspect of love and the opening of love and the opening *to* love. And also the inclusion of the self and the opening of that self in its imaginal dimensions. The inclusion of the self and the opening of the self. The opening to love and the opening of love. Different aspects, all mixed into one there. I could give countless examples of this kind of thing.

Again, what it means for our practice and for this question of balance and artistry and sustainability and fertility, for tending the fire and mastery of the fire and the vessel—it means that the object, and the self, and the world (and that's where the cosmopoiesis comes in, in terms of the imaginal perception of the world), all these three—object, self, and world—actually, and eros too, because we said that before, the four: object, self, world, and eros, need to be included. Included in the soul-making dynamic, included. They're part of the imaginal constellation, and we need to let the imaginal constellation open to really, really spill over and involve them and include those dimensions—the world and the self, as well as the other—in our attention, in our attunement, in our sensitivity and opening. So opening to the other, the self, and the world as images. That brings balance.

If you can imagine a soul-making dynamic, this expansion of eros, psyche, and logos, if it expands in one

direction and not in the other direction, it's lopsided, it's out of balance. It wants to organically expand in all directions, if you like, equally. Again, talking about in imaginal practice, but also in relationship, because deep relationships are imaginally infused. They have imaginal dimensions. If they don't, they become problematic for us.

Now, when I say opening to the other, self, world, eros as images, it means, as always, as a reminder now: not reified and not identified with. Seeing image as image.

Sometimes I encounter someone where there is a sense—a very strong, beautiful, palpable sense—of the divinity of the other and also the self. So there's a balance there, but unfortunately, oftentimes the images, the divinity in the image, is not seen as image. Image is not seen as image. Rather, it's reified. And then, in the case of someone I'm particularly thinking of, what happens is she moves between a kind of self-elevation and a self-hatred—the two reified poles of this dynamic. Moving into the sense of divinity of the self. Okay, great, the self is included. It's not just the other. There's not just divinity outside of me. But there's a kind of elevation there. She's buying into it, or she's reifying it. And then that swings to a kind of self-hatred and shame. The images are literalized. There's a kind of bipolarism, you could say, operating there because of the reification, because image is not understood as image. It's not understood to be empty.

Sometimes a person says something like, "I'm really into emptiness practice. I'm really attracted to it, and it goes really well for me. But then I begin to see everything as empty, and this whole insubstantiality of everything—I feel like I'm flying. I feel like I'm invincible." And that goes into something that psychologists might diagnose as almost a kind of mania, a unipolar manic episode. And then people will say, "Oh, I need to go out and do some gardening and dig some earth and stomp around in my wellingtons and kick around in the soil. Definitely practice emptiness less, or practice less in general, because it's all getting out of hand. Too much emptiness."

Is that the only option? Is that what really needs to happen? Is that even the correct diagnosis of the problem—too much emptiness? Is it actually that when a person says "I see everything as empty," actually you've seen everything empty except one thing? That invincible self is the thing left out of the emptiness. The whole world is empty and everyone else is empty, and this invincible self, unfortunately, is reified, is believed in and identified with, is taken to be real, not seen as image, not seen as empty.

Actually, you could say it needs *more* emptiness. The emptiness, the sense of image as image, needs to be pervading equally the self as well as the world. This kind of imbalance or lack of pervasion is very, very common. And what a person might have, for example, is a whole fantasy or elevation of a fantasy or an image of, say,

Passion, or a passionate person, or being a passionate person. Another might have a similar fantasy around being a more equanimous person – a standard, common image of what a good Buddhist looks like, or what an awakening person looks like. Sort of really equanimous. And sometimes there's not the seeing

of image as image.

The image itself has gotten stuck, become a little bit rigid. Not only is there attachment to it, but it's actually stuck. It's prevented from expanding and having its multidimensionality in life. So often it's in allowing the image its multidimensionality that it actually loses its reification. It's in allowing the image its fullness that it loses its reification, because we see its multidimensionality and allow it to have that. Oftentimes it's precisely this that allows us to let go of the reification, the identification.

Sometimes we are shrinking, rigidifying an image, or shrinking ourselves to try and fit into some rigid image. It could be passion, it could be equanimity, like I said, but an image is bigger than an emotion. So again, it's letting the image fill out, making sure image is image, and not something rigid, concretized, literalized.

We can ask in imaginal practice – whether purely intrapsychic or in relation to someone in our life who is involved in this imaginal constellation – who is it? Who is this beloved other? Because I can reduce the image to a flat, one-dimensional person, but who is the self as well? One thing you can do is say: there's Eros, there's this imaginal thing going on, and who, actually, just gently – who am I right now? Who is the self in this image? Who is the one participating in this imaginal constellation with an other, and who is the other?

In asking that, we allow self to become image, or we notice what the image of self is, who is participating in this image. It may be the usual sense of self that we have – it's me, it's Rob, it's whoever – but it gains imaginal dimensions through being included in the imaginal practice. Or it may be that it bears very little similarity to the usual self. But who? We can ask *who* as a gentle way of including the self. Or just look.

With all this we're talking about, we're talking about navigation. Navigating, balancing, responding, climbing, gliding. One possibility, if we speak generally now, is that in practice, working with an image in our life or in our practice on the cushion, we can tune in with sensitivity and notice and follow what is autonomously emerging or given in and with the image. In other words, we're not doing anything. We're just tuning, noticing, and following – trusting, if you like, the soul intelligence of the image, or in the image.

At other times, or to a certain extent, we can do something slightly different, have a different kind of tack, a different relationship with the imaginal practice, where we're deliberately leaning or inclining or gently, subtly guiding the practice in all kinds of different directions if we want. So, for example, with an erotic beloved other in the imaginal, guiding it toward a kind of melting union with that other, with the beloved other, with the erotic object – dissolving perhaps in light or love or whatever it is. Essentially, it's towards less fabrication through the erotic connection, but actually allowing it to go towards this melting union.

That's one option. You can lean that way, or let it go that way if it wants to. But you can also modulate that movement, temper that movement with practice, with skill, so that it goes only a little bit of the way

towards that union and towards less fabrication – only to a relative degree of insubstantiality of the perception of materiality. There's a little bit of fading, but actually the forms are retained. The particularities and the uniqueness and the shape or character of self and other, of the two beings of the image, is retained. But they become lighter and more insubstantial. You can play with this spectrum with practice – modulating that, choosing where you'll hang out on that spectrum.

You can experiment with colors – adding, or seeing what color the other wants to be, or your own body, or the interaction, or the breath. We played with that a little bit on the Poetry of Perception retreat. You can deliberately tune into giving and receiving healing, different kinds of healing, or different kinds of the brahmavihāras – mettā, or compassion, or muditā, different kinds of love. You can emphasize the sensitivity and exploration of the energy body, or the particular sense of sacredness, or the particular sense of divinity, or the particular cosmopoiesis that's spilling over, or the particular kind of love.

And something we'll come back to in the instructions as well: sometimes with an image, with the Eros there, there is a sense of duty. A duty that either one of the imaginal characters has, or the self has, and it translates in some way or another to my life – or it doesn't. There's some kind of sense of duty. And again, that could be what you incline towards and draw out through your attention, through delicately focusing on that. It's the duty.

So it's not without the energy body—the energy body is always there. It's not without an awareness of the emotions; that's always there. There's a certain fundamental inclusion of these aspects. But we're talking about the relative balancing of where you put the attention, what you draw out through the attention, what you dwell on, what you focus on.

And so with the sense of duty: Whose duty? Who is the character here, the imaginal character who feels this duty, who carries out this duty? What is the duty? And it doesn't mean necessarily figuring out what it means, like the practical steps I need to take in my life. Just staying with the more imaginal, the pregnant, the depth and the beauty of the feeling of duty. Maybe it constellates an image, or the image changes. Maybe it constellates a sense of devotion. And that's a feeling, that feeling of devotion.

Often, if we notice it, allowing the sense of devotion brings an alignment in the energy body. We're aligned with that devotion to that duty. There's a great beauty here, great depth, great power and strength without any hardness. But that alignment of the energy body is itself a state of balance—and we're talking all about balance here. It's also a state of rootedness. I'm rooted in what I'm devoted to. I'm rooted in my duty because the energy body is aligned there with it. And you can actually feel the energy body rooted in something deep. It becomes almost unshakable. Again, there's a kind of equanimity emerging from the imaginal, from the erotic-imaginal.

So all these deliberate inclinations, plus all the ones we mentioned before toward samādhi or mettā, all of that's possible—anything like that we've mentioned before is possible. You can get this sense of how great a range, and a subtly differentiated range, there is of where you can incline. Like a ship on the open water,

or a boat on the open water, or a bird in the sky gliding on the air currents. There's potentially, at least, dependent on the skill, an almost infinite degree of precise directionality available—360 degrees—and also depth, up and down, and all that.

Let's point out a few more directions, dimensions, that are available here with imaginal practice—if we're allowing the image and allowing the eros. I'm going to mention four right now.

If we allow the image and enter into it, open to it, let it open, and the eros, then it's possible that we either start to discover certain dimensions of the imaginal, or, again, we can almost look for them, or incline toward deliberately resurrecting them from the experience before, or whatever.

So the first of these four I'd like to enumerate now is that we see and feel the desire—and whatever the specificity of that desire is, it might be the desire for sex or certain sexual interaction or something, a kiss or this or that, or something non-sexual, whatever. We see and feel the specific desire as what William Blake called a "divine influx." He used that word somewhere or other—a kind of idea of the emotions that we feel as divine influxes.

And what happens when we decide to see something, or we start perceiving something, as a divine influx? In this case, desire. This very specific desire. What happens if I sense it, see it, feel it, in all its specificity, as divine influx? In other words, it's not, as we would usually assume, that this desire I'm feeling is *mine*—not that usual perspective. But actually, that the desire, this very specific desire, is coming from or given by God, if we use that word, divinity, whatever word you want to use. It's flowing through me, or flowing through us, if it's mutual with someone else.

Again, we're talking about a conception here, but one that needs to be translated to a perception. Conceptions on their own, disembodied, abstract—not much help at all. This conception: this desire that I'm feeling right now, I'm in touch with my energy body, I'm in touch with desire, I'm in touch with the image, all of that—can I perceive it? Either I notice or I discover that it is, or I deliberately see it as a divine influx. It's coming from the divine, from a God, flowing through me. And then what happens? Again, there's an opening, because you're opening up another dimension of the imaginal.

And because there's an opening of the psyche and the logos there, there's space to tolerate. There can even be an increase of the eros with that, but there's space there, and peace.

So that's one possibility: seeing and feeling the desire as a divine influx. A second, which I alluded to briefly before, is this: can I notice that which is desired—whatever it is, this kiss, this wanting to dance with you, whatever it might be, even some very intense sexual desire, sexual or not—can I notice that which is desired may be perceivable as already happening? It's already happening. Not on the actual physical level, so to speak, but it's already happening on the imaginal level, eternally, in what Henri Corbin calls hierophantic time. Hierophantic means the appearance of the sacred. So in sacred time, we could say, which isn't a time that flows past, present, future—it's almost like images exist as icons,

eternally. There's just this discrete icon and that discrete icon. They may have connections, but they're not temporal connections of cause and effect, this coming before that.

One can get a sense, when one feels deeply into an image and opens deeply to an image, that this thing, this desire—you're also an imager connected—that which I desire, the image of that which I desire, is perceivable as already happening on the imaginal level, eternally, timelessly, in hierophantic time. Again, we're talking about a conception, not something abstract, but a conception that is a seed in the perception and becomes a way of looking. Conception needs to be translated to perception. I actually perceive this as already happening, this image of this desire that I would like fulfilled.

And again the question as well: who? Who is it who is kissing this image, who is dancing, who is making love in hierophantic time? Who is it that's eternally making love in that way? And again, seeing in this way, that level of imaginal perception opens up and the problem goes out of the whole thing—the problem of desire. It may have felt quite problematic, quite intense, quite hard to tolerate, and it goes out of it. A whole other dimension is added with that, all the beauty and fullness, all the richness, all the divinity.

A third possibility, a kind of subtle variation of those two, is that the desire that I'm feeling and the self, the image of the self, and the image of the other are all theophanies. The desire, the self, and the other are all theophanies. They are all faces of the divine, or if you like, parts of one larger theophany. So it's not, as in the first one, that the desire is the deity's desire or the Buddha's desire for his consort. It's not that desire is this God's desire, but that the desire itself is divine, or is an aspect of divinity. It's a very subtle difference, but you can play with this. And again, if I can see that way, sense that way, perceive that way imaginatively, then there's space, there's beauty, and all the peace that comes with that.

The fourth, for right now, is that the whole constellation—in other words, the object desired, the image of the self desiring, and the desire itself, the whole imaginal constellation of the eros—is seen, felt, perceived as God making love to herself or himself. The whole constellation: object desired, image of the self desiring (who is this one that desires?), and the desire—all of it is God making love to her or himself.

Recall the image of those Buddha figures on thangkas or mandalas: this or that Buddha, whoever it is, or the different Buddhas in yab-yum, in erotic union, making love with their consort. The Buddha there is regarded as not just this Buddha and his consort—the Buddha is the totality of the male and the female figure. The consort and the Buddha together are the Buddha. So the whole thing, the whole constellation, is God making love to herself or himself, this or that Buddha making love to her or himself. Can I find that way in, see that way, sense that way, perceive that way?

For some of you, this is going to sound like you could never do that. Actually, this is all available with practice, maybe a lot easier than you suppose. But then the self is not as it usually is regarded—the self as the basic actor, the basic desirer. Basically it's me desiring. And the other is not, in this imaginal perception, this dimension, what it seems to conventional perception. But be careful with this, because it's not that the self and the other are just empty. It's not only that they're empty, or that they're divine in

some kind of universal way, or that they're partaking of, or essentially are, universal love or universal awareness or beingness or whatever version of universal oneness. It's not that they're only empty, and it's not that they're just universally divine. Nor is it that the desire is only anattā, not-self.

If desire comes up for me and I regard it as anattā, and I keep that practice—just not me, not mine—focusing on the desire and regarding it as not me, not mine, what actually happens is the desire fades.

One has not erased the eros. One has kept it, actually taken it deeper. Nor the image, nor the other, nor the self. These things are given other dimensions.

So, looking in this way, learning to look in these ways—I'm just offering a few possibilities in practice, again—but with all of this, craving, contraction, dukkha dissolve. Soul-making, and the sense of beauty and sacredness and all that, increases. Because the eros-psyche-logos dynamic is allowed to expand and to open up new dimensions in that expansion. Beauty, soul-making, sense of divinity, sacredness—all of that.

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