Doubt and Discernment (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:19:57

Hearing all this talk about eros and the imaginal, engaging these practices and trying out these practices of the erotic imaginal—especially when they're explicitly sexual—it would be very normal, I think, in our culture, but also in the Dharma culture, for doubt to arise. It would be very understandable, very normal. So it's important to address this and to take a little time to look at that from different perspectives, to unpack it.

Some of what I'm going to touch on here we may have mentioned before here and there, but much of it is worth repeating. And I also want to take it a little further into other discernments, more refined discernments regarding eros and craving.

Someone could hear all this or even do a practice, and even when it happens—when they're surprised by what the practice opens for them and how touched they are by the beauty of it—someone can still come with a question: But isn't this escapism? This business with the imaginal, and especially when it's erotic, isn't this escapism? Will it lead to my not engaging with life?

In a way, is it? Is it escapism? Does it reduce your engagement with life, lead to some kind of cutting off from opening to life, meeting it, engaging with it? Does it close down your care with respect to life?

The best way to address the question of doubt is really to turn it into an active question. Find out. Because at the end of the day, only you and your inquiry and your experience will really have the power, the convincing power. Sometimes the teacher or an authority says this or that and people just trust the teacher—me or Catherine or whoever it is in this case. But really, at the end of the day, we can know something for ourselves through our inquiry, through finding out, turning the doubt away from the paralysis of doubt into an active engagement of questioning.

Find out: is this escapism? Does it lead to a closing down of the care and of the engagement? Notice, see what happens. We actually have to experiment to find out for ourselves.

We can give the question back to you—and I think that's very important—but we can also say more about it. Because we've talked about, a little on this retreat and quite a bit on previous retreats, for instance the Path of the Imaginal, about the fact that images often come with a sense of duty. Somehow, this imaginal figure or this image, wrapped up in that, comes with a message. *Angelos* means message bearer. And there's some kind of sense of duty.

Sometimes it's not at all obvious, or it's not obvious how or whether that needs to be concrete—whether I actually need to do something or say something or whatever it is. And exactly what the translation is, or

how the image and the sense of duty in the image translates into my life, how obvious that translation is, in what way, in what form, in what idiom and what domain and what manner of expression—most images, not all, but most images seem to want, seem to demand some kind of translation somehow.

I don't mean translation to a meaning—"it means X, it means I should do this." I mean translation as in moving one thing from one area, dimension, domain to another. Translation. So from the image to the life.

Some images are already wrapped up in life—the imaginal perception we have of our lives, of others, of situations, of our work, of our loves. But somehow the image is asking to be taken into the world somehow. And so there's a discernment: is it asking that? How is it asking that? How does life and image kind of reflect or mirror or echo each other? What's the dance, the back and forth, the dialogue, the theater between those two stages reflecting each other, as if two plays on each stage and they're somehow corresponding and somehow interacting? The players on this stage and the actors on the other stage opposite each other, mixing even.

This is something to point out in terms of: is this escapism? Will it reduce my engagement with life? Will it lead to this kind of non-engagement, withdrawal into this fantasy world of images where one becomes kind of inert and unengaged in one's actual life?

But in relation to that, there's a sense of duty that images often have. So that's one thing.

Another is, you know—and I've pointed this out before, so I'm not going to go into it now—but there is, at least in some spiritual circles, and Theravāda Buddhism could definitely be a case in point, that there is the image of non-engagement, which is actually quite dominant. You understand? The image of the Buddha who kind of looks with affable equanimity at the entanglements of more worldly beings and is not himself engaged so much. So that's the eyes closed, the stillness, the equanimity, and of course the movement to transcendence, which is something we'll come back to.

But there is... It's more like, is there an image of non-engagement that's actually dominant, and oftentimes dominant partly through its unconsciousness, that we don't see it as an image, or we don't have enough range of other possible images, archetypal images, available to us as pictures of awakening direction? So it's not that images lead to non-engagement, and so we better not have images. Sometimes the way Theravāda Buddhism is taught is "don't have images," but there's a kind of not very conscious, implicit fantasy image of where we're headed, and that's towards a kind of non-engagement—politically, environmentally, and so forth. And I've talked about all this before; I'm not going to go into it now.

But engagement is given in part—in part it's demanded by an image, most images, because even an image of non-engagement is a kind of "how am I going to be in life?" I'm going to be not so embroiled, not so involved, not so heated by the fires of passion and involvement and social justice, and so forth. But the nature of the engagement or non-engagement is given by the image.

We could add to all this that, rather than taking us away from life, image and fantasy in the ways that I'm

using those words—those imaginal images; I'm not going to say "imaginal images" every time, but almost always that's what I mean—images, imaginal images and fantasies, they actually bring a dimensionality to our perceptions of life and the world, self and other. So that's not a non-engagement; that's a deepening of connection, a filling out. They also bring meaningfulness to the perceptions of self, other, world, through the image, through the fantasy, through becoming conscious of that, feeling our way into it, opening to it, letting it open us.

People say, "Is this not just fleeing reality? Are you not just trying to flee reality?" Fleeing reality—I mean, we've also touched on this in other retreats, but fleeing reality, there's so much wrapped up in that ideation. Something like fleeing reality is a movement of fear and aversion, something I don't want to open to, something I want to run away from, close down from, turn the world off—turn that world off, at least. It's a movement of fear.

Is this what we're talking about, really, a movement of fear? And again, does it close the heart and close the engagement? Fleeing reality out of fear will do exactly that. It will—and it will become quite obvious in time, if not to oneself, to others around one—that there's a closing of the heart happening here. There's a closing of the psyche, and there's a lack of engagement in life. There's a dying of the engagement in life to a certain extent.

Then we could also, again, turn the question around and actually say that this whole notion of fleeing reality into imagination may be missing the fact that it's coming already out of a certain ontology, epistemology, cosmology, which has, over centuries now, belittled the imagination and belittled any kind of sacredness of that, or purpose to it, or soul-making as well. So if we actually open up the conceptual framework, the logos, and actually grant the world of the imaginal a place—a necessary place, an importance, a significance—then we can actually turn that question around and say, "Are we fleeing in our lives? Are we fleeing the reality of the imaginal?" Yes, it's a different kind of reality. And there are all kinds of, for me, very interesting ontological questions for us to work out as human beings. I don't think to find a final answer, but to explore creatively—creative epistemology, creative ontology, creative cosmologies.

But we could easily ask: all this dismissal of the imagination and this kind of fearful clinging on to so-called reality, are we fleeing the reality of the imaginal, fleeing the demands of it, fleeing its implications, the depth, the meaningfulness, the duty that comes from that, the ways that it opens the psyche, the soul, the heart, the vision, the sense of the world, the sense of the self, the sense of other? Actually, for me, there's more cogency and force in questioning that way around. I'm so used to assuming and thinking a certain way.

And on top of that is just the whole question about, related, is: what do you mean by reality? What are you assuming reality is? Atomic billiard balls buzzing around in some kind of scientific materialist flatland? Is that what reality is? Or is reality exposed by so-called bare attention or mindfulness, and therefore, the

imaginal and all that is not reality? Again, I'm not going to go into that. I've talked plenty and written about that in the past, but there's so much kind of unexposed, implicit in terms of assumptions in these kinds of questions. Is it escapism? Is it fleeing reality? Is it wish fulfillment?

It's important to address these questions, but to actually really address them. So, I mean, really make them questions. It's very easy for something to sound like a question, and it's not actually a question. So, you know, "Is it wish fulfillment?"

Is it even my wish? In the erotic imaginal, do I really feel like this is me and my wishes and I'm indulging my wishes? Actually, look into that. Whose wish is this? I'm engaged in this erotic imaginal interaction or I'm watching this erotic imaginal, sensing this erotic imaginal interaction, whatever. Is it really my wish we're talking about? My wish, the ego's wish? Whose wish is it? It's quite subtle.

And am I able to let go? We talked about this before. Am I just dragged without any choice whatsoever, or am I able to practice putting down, letting go, walking away, picking up and putting down?

Someone might ask a variation on this kind of question: isn't all this just indulging greed? All this talk about eros and erotic imagination, isn't that just indulging greed? So yes, important to ask this question. But again, let's go into the question more. What happens to those who indulge what we might call greed or craving over time? Over a year or ten years, you watch a person and when that kind of tendency and habit to indulge greed and craving is given free flow—it's allowed, it's acquiesced to, it gains the upper hand.

People start making all kinds of justifications to themselves: "Oh, I work really hard," and this and that. And I'm talking about dharma folk, people who are living a dharma life in some kind of very full way. It's their work, it's their practice—it's really at the center of their life. And yet somehow over the years, what happens when just things like comfort, convenience, pleasure, security—all very normal—when the craving for these things starts to gain more leeway? It's given more permission, it's acquiesced to, it's not questioned so much. It just has its river flowing at the side of whatever else we're doing dharma-wise, and it's regarded as okay.

And what happens to the fire? What happens to the brilliance of being, to the intensity, to the luster of the diamond, of the citta, of the heart, of the soul, the radiance? What happens to that over time? Five years, ten years, twenty years?

And what happens conversely to someone who explores the erotic imaginal and actually discerns between eros and craving and investigates eros and opens to it and lets it take things deeper over time? What kind of citta, what kind of soul emerges or is shaped by indulging one or the other—eros or craving?

So look, look around you. Find out. Don't assume. Don't even assume that this person or that person must be living like this or making this choice or that choice just because I assume that about them or myself.

Doubt is questioning, and that's really good. But make it questioning. Make it real questioning. It means inquiry, investigation. Not just settling for a fog of paralysis or confusion, or just a sort of standard, easy answer: "I just heard this, so it must be true."

And then to investigate, of course, we have to begin to discern between eros and craving in the first place. We've talked some about this and we'll come back to it. Again, the centrality of the energy body—just including the energy body already in the awareness and the fullness of that—already moves it, helps it become eros rather than craving. The sensitivity, the openness to the whole energy body. And eros will be characterized, the erotic imaginal will be characterized by an opening and a harmonizing, perhaps energizing of the energy body, unlike craving.

And then there's the soul-making, which we can notice as well. So we've touched on this and we'll revisit it some more. But we can notice the differences here. And actually we can learn, as we touched on already in earlier talks, we can actually learn to navigate between or from craving to eros. That's quite possible.

Something might feel like I'm caught in craving or craving has caught me. There's the contraction of that, a certain way of seeing, a certain state of the consciousness and the energy body. I can discern this, and then with the development of skill and the art of practicing, I can actually explore whether we might liberate this craving into eros—not just let it go, though we can do that too. I've written about that elsewhere, but we can actually learn to navigate from craving to eros, allowing transformation.

Some eros, as I've said, is very, very subtle—and I'm not just talking about sexuality, I've mentioned this many times. Even there, there's really a range. Some eros and some of that erotic connection, erotic charge and movement is extremely subtle.

But let's not be too naive here. I don't want to be alarmist because that would be completely defeating the purpose and it's not justified. On the other hand, just because of this range of subtlety and also because of the distinctions we're making—what leads to what—I don't want to be too naive either.

We've said that eros is fire. There's something about eros that's like fire, and fire is potentially dangerous. At the same time, fire is also extremely useful, extremely productive, very helpful. But it's something that can be dangerous.

Yes, we can learn to navigate with practice, with time, from craving to eros, transforming craving to eros in the moment. But also, something may start as eros, and if we're not careful, may contract into craving, divert, contort itself, or get shrunk somehow so that it becomes craving. So there's a danger in all this—there are dangers in playing with fire.

If you've been around the Dharma for a while, you know that one of the Buddha's central metaphors was of extinguishment—extinguishing the fires of greed, aversion, and delusion. This imagery of extinguishing fires is very central in Pali Canon Buddhism.

This is partly an aside, but it's quite interesting because a case could be made historically that the Buddha picked that analogy for a couple of reasons. One was contextual—as all teaching must be, as all dialogue must be. The context he was dealing with at that time in India was a Brahminical religion, Vedic traditions, where they kept fires alive. There were people whose job, whose sacrificial duty it was to keep the fires going—I think there were three fires.

So the Buddha was addressing himself somewhat polemically, wanting to turn something upside down. You don't need to keep three fires going; it's three fires that you need to put out: greed, aversion, and delusion. You can see the relativity of that metaphor—it came partly out of context. Had he been in a very different context, would he have used that metaphor? We are now in a different context, especially living in cold England or New England.

There's a second reason the Buddha chose this metaphor, having to do with the physics, the then-current understanding of what fire was and what happened when you put it out. Nowadays, we think you just put it out—it's gone, extinguished, disappeared. In those days, the sense was that the fire was liberated. When you put out a fire—this wood fire or whatever—and you extinguish it, the fire is liberated in the sense that it's not clinging to any object. There's a kind of freedom that is beyond space and time—unbound.

There's an etymology there of *nibbāna* with that unbinding of fire—*nibbāna* as unbinding.

But it wasn't just a disappearance and non-existence. It was actually almost more potent, but not clinging to anything. So it was this kind of abstract fire that was liberated.

The point is that if we're used to hearing a certain directionality in regard to the metaphor, the imagery of fire, and then we're using the opposite analogies here about mastery of the fire and stoking it and tending flames, that can cause something in the being to shake a little with doubt.

When we talk about the imagery of Dionysus, which I did in one talk recently, we're speaking of how unsettling, how disruptive, how fragmenting, violent and erotic, and intoxicated this archetype is. Dionysus was the god of wine - intoxicated and wild, raving. This disrupts the sort of serene, controlled, placid, sometimes sterile course of what is regarded as civilized. That's all in the territory when we play with fire, when we're with eros.

And then there's that mythology of the breaking of the vessels from the Kabbalah, *Shevirat ha-Kelim*. All this - we understand what we're saying. This is in the territory of what we're opening to. This comes with the whole landscape that we're entering. It would be very understandable that doubt and trepidation arose. And again, it doesn't fit the imagery that we have or that we've absorbed.

There isn't a kind of Dionysus equivalent in Theravadan Buddhism. That iconography, that mythology just doesn't exist except as something to get rid of. In the Vajrayana icons and deities of Tantric Buddhism - I'm not sure, I don't know nearly enough about the history of how icons get mixed - but many of those gods are full of wildness, those yidams and deities, full of wildness, wrathful deities and phallic deities and the

eros and the sexuality that's visible there.

But in Theravada Buddhism, in Pali Buddhism, we're really not used to that kind of mythology. It just is not given a place except as something to renounce, move beyond, get rid of, towards another archetype - the renunciate, celibate, equanimous, uninvolved, calm archetype.

So yes, playing with fire brings danger, and upset, and shatterings, and disruptions. All that goes with the territory of soul-making, and opening to eros, and fire. I don't want to be alarmist because we're also talking about really subtle movements and there's the wisdom of the navigation, but there is that possibility.

But even then, we can ask - and again, it's really important to ask - is there a path without risk? Is there some kind of practice that has no risk? Anyone who really loves a path or a set of practices, anyone for whom it's really important in their life, will be willing to put up with and open themselves to some kind of risk, some kind of sacrifice, some kind of discomfort or confusion at times. Suffering is regarded as okay and acceptable and even necessary on the path.

So ask this of yourselves. Look back at your path or paths you've taken and see at different times how ready and willing you were - and also the nobility of this, the beauty of this - to open to and enter into and go through all kinds of periods or moments, transitions of risk when you didn't quite know, or sacrificing something, confusion, discomfort, suffering basically.

The question is: what kind of risk, sacrifice, confusion, discomfort, suffering are okay on the path? What kind?

It's less dominant now, but the whole Mahasi tradition as it was taught by Mahasi Sayadaw and Pandita and some teachers was very, very intense and strict. The retreats there were full of suffering. Ask anyone who sat through some of those long retreats with Pandita. Someone from the outside might say, "Why do you put yourself through all this suffering? I thought you were interested in getting rid of suffering." But there's a whole logos there and there's a whole image that gives nobility to that suffering, and there's a whole purpose regarded. There are all kinds of sacrifice, all kinds of risk, all kinds of confusion, discomfort - or rather certain kinds. There's a range there in just that paradigm of strict Pandita style.

The question is: what kind? What kind is okay on your path, and how does it fit? What kind of discomfort, confusion, sacrifice, risk, suffering?

Or consider Ajahn Chah - there's a passage somewhere, maybe in *A Still Forest Pool* - where he talks about just meditating in the jungle when he was practicing as a *tudong*, just crying, this deep well of tears. He wasn't even sure why he was crying - maybe there was loneliness and such, but it was beyond that. Many of us know this: just practicing in this upwelling of profound sobbing.

And yet there's the whole image and logos that supports that. This is good. Yes, it's difficult, but this is

good. This is heartful. This is healing. This is releasing, whatever it is. And of course, you get that in psychotherapeutic paradigms as well. I've been through all of this - sitting through lots of pain, huge upsurges of emotions, not even knowing what they were about.

What kind of risk, discomfort, confusion, sacrifice, suffering are okay on your path? When you think about an artist—someone who really, truly gives themselves, dedicates themselves completely—how much are they willing to put up with? There's risk in that dedication, confusion, sacrifice. This is not an easy choice. It's so similar to spiritual practice. This is part of the territory. When we love something deeply, when we're really engaged, these challenges arise naturally.

The question with all that is: what does it serve? If there's going to be disruption, confusion, some kind of risk and suffering or burning, what is it serving? All this goes together with an understanding, with a sense of where I'm going, with a logos, with a conceptual framework as we talked about. Any practice brings risk—absolutely. What kind? Multiple kinds. And what's it serving? How are we seeing it? What's okay for us?

If I trace my own process with imaginal practice—not just imaginal generally, but specifically with the more obviously erotic imaginal—I'm certain it took me quite a while. It was really a gradual process to move towards truly trusting images, or working with images of, say, attractive females. I was somewhat cautious.

It's funny now, some years later, after having experimented with all this for several years—I actually can't quite remember why I was so tentative and unsure about exploring the more erotic images. This is interesting in itself: something that had quite a subtle but powerful grip on my consciousness and my choices in practice. I was trying to remember while preparing this talk, but I can't fully recall.

I think it had something to do with a suspicion that anything like that would just be a distraction—would distract and dilute me from my central purpose of what practice was about. There was something in that kind of engagement with eros, sexuality, and the feminine that would confuse me. But this is partly a guess, and it's interesting to me that I can't actually remember. In other words, it's just past. Strangely, I was trying to find it in old notes, but I seem to have lost a notebook.

Carl Jung, in a way, developed his psychology partly from a predisposition that was similarly distrustful of the feminine and the attractive sexual—as if there's some kind of luring siren there. James Hillman and others have made this critique, wondering what kind of psychology would have emerged from Jung had he been more trusting, more willing to listen to what he called the anima voice, which he was so wary of in developing his psychology and his personal process.

Looking back, I see sometimes there was a tendency at first to choose a non-sexual image to work with in meditation. For example, if I'd had two dreams the night before that made an impact and I remembered both—one more obviously sexual, the other perhaps more obviously spiritual—I would choose the more

spiritual one. There was that tendency to lean away from the sexual into what seemed more obviously spiritual.

Or if I was working with an image in meditation where there were multiple figures, I would tend to go to not the attractive female one, for instance. I noticed that tendency looking back. I also noticed I was quite tentative at first—tentative because, well, this is spiritual. So even when there was beginning to be more willingness to explore the erotic imaginal, even the sexual, it was tentative at first. Perhaps I wouldn't go into the more carnal and voracious sexual image, or maybe just hold back a little from letting it unfold naturally. No, this is meditation time, so it's spiritual.

I made a note a while ago about being able to trace a kind of gradual letting myself explore more and more this strand of erotic imagination and the specifically sexual in meditation practice, but I can't find that note. Still, I was aware of this evolution.

Then a few years ago, I had a dream. Somehow in the dream, I was trying to resist the seductive advances of a beautiful woman. I wasn't quite sure after the dream—why am I resisting this? I don't know if she was a yogi or something, if there was some kind of boundary issue. It was something like that. But I felt very ambivalent—very drawn towards her and attracted.

So I felt like only half successful in my attempts to resist her. By that time I was deeply interested in imaginal practice, so I took this dream into meditation. I allowed her to come again, and then I entered her deliberately—not sexually, but entered her being and became her, identified with her, which is one of the options in imaginal work.

I became her in the meditation practice and looked out through her eyes, out of her being, at me, at Rob. I was aware of how much kindness was there. She really cared for me—there was love there. But she was also somehow communicating: you're being a bit idiotic, Rob, and you're missing the point here. This was fascinating—someone very kindly pointing out a sort of stupidity, a rigidity.

As I experimented with different ways of working with images, I asked her what she wanted. Her response—I can't remember if it was verbal or not—but the sense I got was that she had a very simple sexual desire, a simple erotic, sensual longing. In the very simplicity of it was a kind of purity. It's like, look how simple and pure this is. And you're being a little idiotic, Rob.

This was intriguing, so I let myself experiment in meditation with the eros, with erotic imagery, with the sexual. But as I worked with it, confusion arose. What's the point of this? Where is it going? Where would this kind of exploration lead? I'm mindful of the sexual imagery and entering into that, but is it actually going to achieve anything? Does it lead to the end of suffering?

This confusion was very alive for me. A little later, I realized: I actually don't know. And more than that, I am deliberately in a period of exploration here. This is the domain of my exploration—I must always be in a period of exploration, but this is the particular domain. I don't know the answers to these questions: Is

there a point? Where will it go? Will it achieve anything? What's it got to do with the end of suffering?

I remembered a time many years before when the domain of my exploration was the relationship between awareness and emptiness. I found all these conflicting teachings, unclear and contradictory, with people dogmatically saying this and that. It was such a searing investigation for me—so much heart and emotion and passion involved. I remember sitting outside at Gaia House, crying tears with so much longing to understand, wanting to penetrate with insight and just not having someone I could ask or fully rely on for an answer.

There was all that confusion in the investigation, the passion of exploration, but eventually insights came in relation to awareness and emptiness. Answers came, ways forward emerged. I found things, discovered things, worked certain things out, found ways to practice.

Remembering that, I told myself: you've been through something like this before—confusion and uncertainty about how to proceed, what's worth trusting. I reflected that in regard to the imaginal, there may be no definite final answer or truth. It's a different kind of investigation. At that moment, I was aware of this and actually okay with it.

So I was partly okay, and there was still this concern and trepidation, this real ambivalence about the possibility of a long but ultimately fruitless exploration. I might spend years, hours and hours of practice time, and eventually conclude that it was a waste of time, or actually not helpful, and find myself stuck with various problems. This felt like the risk—the risk of the research scientist. Listen to a theoretical physicist: "I spend my days working out equations on paper, trying theories on a blackboard, and at the end of the day, none of them have worked, and I just erase them all."

And then I do the same thing the next day. How many dead ends, how much unknown territory there is in the passion and the willingness to explore. Similarly, in a different way, the same holds true if you're an artist—sometimes there's something parallel there.

But I kept telling myself, well, that's the lot. If you're exploring, if you're actually finding out when there doesn't appear to be any teachings on this that I was aware of, then that's the lot. You don't know. There's a risk there. You're moving into the unknown and you don't know where it's going to lead.

In relation to that image that came out of the dream, what did emerge was a sense of a particular kind of holiness, a kind of feminine divinity that permeated nature. Now I would call that cosmopoiesis. Back then I didn't really—I hadn't made that connection yet. But I noticed that, oh, that's interesting. I worked with that and then outside there was this real sense of feminine divinity in and through nature.

A little later, going for a walk, something felt like I was in a different relationship, a different sensual relationship with nature. Something in the sensuality opened with regard to the nature around me, beneath my feet. It wasn't—rather, it wasn't just mindfulness of sensations, which I had been practicing for years, nor was it only just enjoying the pleasantness of the hot day or whatever it was and the warmth

on my skin and all that. Something else, another kind of level came into my relationship with nature that was sensual. Something opened in the sensuality.

And yet it still could not be reduced to it. I wasn't going to put it in the box. It did not feel appropriate or right to say, oh, she, this figure from the dream and the imaginal practice, she represents my sensuality or something like that. No, there was a sense of there's something bigger here. I can't quite, again, get my mind around or fathom completely. It's as if she manifests or embodies this figure, some kind of, at present, unfamiliar kind of wisdom, an unfamiliar kind of depth.

So something was opening, but bigger than I could really figure out, if you like, or the mind could figure out.

A lot of this happens in small movements, and that's partly what I want to communicate about this kind of process, working with soul work and certainly exploring. A lot of it's in small movements.

I'll share another image, and I'll actually give more detail. This is, again, transition over time, some maybe a year later or a little less than a year, I don't know, half a year, a bit more. Again, why I choose certain images to share—sometimes I'll choose an image because it's really intense and really could be regarded as kind of crazy, and it's almost to normalize that there's that range too. Sometimes I choose an image because it's really the opposite. It's really not a big deal. It's not that colorful. It's not that unusual or dramatic. So to really give a sense of the range, like all that is there.

And sometimes I want to share or want to include what goes on in working with the images, including all the false starts and wrong turns in the practice. So you get a sense of actually creative working and responding and navigating, that it's not all just immediately obvious and clear. There's some dancing a little bit with the thing.

So, sitting in meditation and opening myself to see what came, I see a visual image. In this case, I see a young woman sitting by the side of the road and she's sad for some reason. I'm unsure whether to go with the image at first, but then I decided to go with it.

So I sat down next to her and her arms were attractive. There was something like I wanted to comfort her and I stroked her arms, sort of mixture with sexual attraction, but also because she was sad. I noticed that I wanted her to talk, but I also noticed at the same time that there was a pressure to make her talk because of some book that I was reading that basically said you need to get some verbal message or something from the image.

So I backed off a little bit from the pressure of wanting it to be verbal and just opened the sensitivity to, if you like, receiving communication—which, as I've said somewhere before, the communication can be just the image. It's not like there's the image and then it communicates something verbally or some kind of signal. Sometimes the image is the communication.

But this question: what does she want? Backing off the whole pressure to be verbal. And the sense was, she wants to be loved by me. There's some kind of communication in that.

Now, it was actually hard to stay focused. Again, I'm mentioning this because that's all part of it. It's like, oh, this image, my concentration flits in and out of it.

I lose it. It comes back. But I just think, okay, fine. That's just the nature of this image, or it's just one of those days. No problem.

And there's some kind of loving of her. So I'm working with this—okay, it's not so focused, but I'm in and out of that. And there's some kind of... I'm really loving her. But the loving, it's not that it's explicitly sexual. It's not really sexual. It's more just kind of sharing and being with her. Somehow there's love being communicated.

And she keeps changing. And somehow in that, I see that actually—or I kind of reflect—she's empty. She's changing. She's not inherently this way or that. And that makes me realize... I can only love—because I'm sort of trying to open myself to loving her. I say trying, it's a very delicate trying, supporting that movement of the heart and that opening of the heart and that flow. But I realize I can only love who is in front of me right now.

So she keeps changing—how she is, her appearance. And really, I can only love who is in front of me right now and commit to at least showing up for how they appear next. So here's what she is now. And just however she'll be in the next moment or minute or whatever, it's like, okay, well, I'm just going to keep showing up. And whoever it is in front of me, however she seems, I'm going to keep loving that.

So there's a sense of mystery in that, in her emptiness. And then I also realized with a thought, oh, this applies to real beings as well, because they change too, don't they? And it tells me something about love. But okay, so there's a thought, but I said, okay, fine, there's a little insight there about metta and stuff like that, with implications for actual life, so-called. But okay, just noting that, and I don't make a big deal of it, or I don't focus on it.

But again, the whole thing comes in and out of focus. And I have to remind myself to see it all as an experiment. I really have to make a conscious... again, there's this kind of unsureness. What am I doing here? Is it leading anywhere? But I just remind myself of this attitude of experimentation. And that helps.

And so there's this kind of sharing and meeting and she sort of opens up to me. Her being opens and it's like I enter her and then all kind of kaleidoscopic geometrical forms appear which feel quite mystical and significant and wondrous somehow, quite subtle. But again, doubt arises and I don't particularly... so I'm not necessarily picking up on these kaleidoscopic geometrical forms, even though they feel very wondrous.

But then after all this, I feel the subtle after-effects of that whole interaction, of that whole imaginal

interaction. So you can hear, as I'm saying this, how kind of undramatic the whole thing is, how much unsureness there is, and how the whole thing is just really these micro-movements that at the time can really seem like... I'm not sure, is this significant? Should I stay with this? Is anything happening? All that.

The word for psyche is a Greek word and I'm pretty sure it's either related to or even some very similar word is the same word for butterfly. I can't remember if I've shared this in a talk before. So psyche and butterfly are related. Now butterfly—I'm taking this from James Hillman—butterfly makes little flitting movements from side to side. It's not this direct supersonic jet flight or crow's flight or bird of prey sort of thing, falcon soaring through space at great speed. It makes these little flitting non-direct movements from side to side, not very fast. That's the characteristic movement, the characteristic flight of the psyche.

And so there's a lot, as I said, in this soul work, soul-making work and imaginal work—a lot of it feels like little micro-movements, little this side and then that side, not this sense of great strides in a direct line that can characterize other movements or other dimensions of soul movement, the movement of other dimensions of soul, spirit.

Now, what's also interesting, again, in the sort of seeming lack of power at first of this whole experience was... so I get up and it was soup time or whatever, and the thought just goes through my head of something I'd read not too long ago. I actually read it again...

about the cosmos being erotic, something to do with Kabbalah that I had encountered. And it's like that thought—just vaguely remembering it, that seed planted from what I had read—somehow came into alchemical reaction with this image that also didn't seem particularly fruitful or dramatic at first, that I was ambivalent about and uncertain of.

But then somehow they came into interaction, and that opened up the whole sense of the eros of the cosmos on multiple levels. It's quite subtle, but really quite a subtle yet powerful transformation of the perception of the world, related to or imbued with this sense of that imaginal young woman and the feminine divinity pervading her. This feminine divinity pervading consciousness, seeping out into what I now call cosmopoiesis—some kind of alchemical transubstantiation of the world there. And then a lot of happiness came with that.

So I made a note: don't judge the value of imaginal practice while you're actually doing it, because it may not feel like much or seem very significant, and the effects can come later sometimes. Again, we're back to this discernment between intensity and efficaciousness. An image or something planted from what we've read or heard in a teaching—these things are like seeds and they can do their work underground and blossom later, just like metta practice.

And then even later, I went for a bike ride and found myself walking, just walking my bike for a while. There was a sense of being in this alive universe—personified, impersonal for sure, but also having this divine personification of what is sometimes called anima mundi, the soul of the world. Related to this

image, related to the idea that I had read a little while ago, but such joy and freedom and some kind of sense of relief there, and a really touching sort of mystical beauty in that particular perception. It almost made me laugh with the joy of it.

I'm sharing this partly for the details and the sense of playing with something, staying with it, altering things—picking this up but not that, picking that up but not this. That's a little bit of my process in terms of the movement in relationship to doubt with respect to all this eros and the imaginal.

But basically, as I said at the beginning of this talk, you need to know for yourself. I've had my process with this—it's still going on in other areas related to this—but you need to know for yourself. For that, we all need to keep questioning, keep exploring with respect to desire and craving and eros.

It's that spirit that the Buddha was pointing to when he said the Dhamma is ehipassika: come and see for yourself. Ehi—come. Passeti—to see. Come and see. That spirit of finding out for yourself—you have to keep exploring. We have to keep exploring. Keep that questioning alive.

It's very easy to think we're doing that and to believe we're doing it because we did it in the past, when actually it's dried up a little bit and we're just running on kind of an old range of insights, not extending that questioning.

For example, it's very easy to see sometimes how desire arises from some kind of sense of lack. And then we make a conclusion, and that conclusion is reinforced when we hear teachings that say exactly that: "Yes, desire comes out of lack—existential lack"—people put it different ways. It could be a Dharma teacher saying that, it could be some kinds of modern psychoanalysis.

But the question is: is that always true? Is it always the case that desire always comes from a sense of lack? If we don't revisit this later, I want to say now: no, find out. Because sometimes there's joy and celebration that give rise to desire. Joy or celebration where there is a sense of the libido overflowing—it's not lack, it's the opposite. It's a kind of superabundance. Something is overflowing.

Libido, remember, is etymologically related to libation and has to do with the pouring of liquid—it's one of its etymological connections. And the libido is overflowing. It's anything but lack. Other times it can have a sense that this desire is already flowing—from me to you, from me to this thing—eternally somehow.

It's already present—not a lack I'm trying to fill. There is desire, an erotic connection, and it's already happening. It's not lack-driven. It's flowing from me to you, pouring from me to you, rather than me grasping at something out of emptiness.

But investigation, knowing for yourself, keeping the questioning alive, and not resting on just a limited range and the assumptions that become entrenched from that narrow scope. Any investigation, any exploration needs sensitivity. And this investigation in particular—into Eros, into the imaginal, into soul-making—requires tremendous sensitivity. This exploration demands what I've talked about before:

the poetry of perception. It needs sensitivity and subtlety. We must develop the subtlety of our attention, the subtlety of our discernment.

When we speak of imaginal practice and mindfulness of images, of bringing mindfulness to bear on the whole realm of the imaginal-erotic, we definitely include the energy body, emotional awareness, sensitivity to the whole soul-making process. But there's another dimension we need to make clear—we must also be aware of, make ourselves subtly attentive to, the subtleties of relating.

The erotic imaginal implies relationship, erotic connection, and all the subtleties of that relating, of the kinds of eros, the kinds of love with respect to each imaginal figure. Again, back to particularities and uniqueness. Each imaginal figure is unique. With each imaginal erotic interaction, what kind of eros is present here? What are the subtleties of the relating? What kinds of love inhabit this interaction?

Perhaps with an imaginal figure I've had a long-standing relationship with, worked with in meditation many times—but right now, in this interaction, what are the subtleties of the relating that seem to be asked for? What kind of eros, what kind of love, is alive here and now? With the erotic imagination, we're speaking of living relationships—responsive, sensitive relating.

It's so easy for things to degenerate into just a set of techniques. We need vigilance about this. Keep the sensitivity alive, keep the subtlety of discernment and attention vibrant so it doesn't become merely formulaic—"Here's my image, then I do this, then I do that." We want it living, alive, like any practice, but perhaps even more so in the realm of the imaginal.

An imaginal figure, an imaginal relationship—hopefully it never gets consciously or unconsciously dumped into a category we consider completely known. "I know that one, completely understood." What if we approached human others this way? Human relationships with this attitude: "Oh yeah, I know all about you. I know who this person is," with a sense that we completely know them. Of course we know some things, rely on certain recognizable patterns. But what if we carried this attitude into our caring relationships, our erotic connections with human others, our sexual intimacy—just "Oh, I know that. I have the whole thing packaged"?

Or with our perceptions and conceptions of nature—how easy it becomes: "Oh yeah, I know what that is." Perhaps there's some scientific understanding I lack about how trees function or animals behave or evolution works, but there's this sense that nature and all its diversity, nature as a whole, is just "kind of known" in my perception or conception. What happens then to the relationship?

Again, when we use the words "image" or "imaginal figure," we're not speaking only of so-called intra-psychic phenomena, but also our perceptions in the world—perceptions imbued with the imaginal. Imaginal perceptions of self, other, world. All of this is included.

It's important to recognize what differentiates meditating on an image of an explicitly sexual interaction from mere indulgence in what we might call more typical sexual fantasy—fantasy in the small sense.

What creates this differentiation?

Everything that differentiates imaginal practice from daydreaming and craving. The mindfulness of the energy body, the sensitivities of the energy body, the subtlety of attention to emotions and soul-making resonances throughout the body and the whole psyche. The non-identification—quite significant, isn't it? The sense of both other and self as theatrical. This is theater. There's something not real here.

The self engaging in this, or involved in this, is not real—but is also real. There's a middle way parallel to the middle way of emptiness between existing and non-existing. There's a middle way of the imaginal between real and not real. There's a sense of the theater of it, different from much psychotherapeutic work or some spiritual work where the self uses imagination but maintains a sense of the self's reality.

Here, what characterizes this is more this sense of theater, and yet potent theater, as theater can be, or as all art can be. There's something palpably not real in the way that we usually think of that word, but also real and powerful there. In other words, we're seeing image as image, to use that phrase we've used before.

But it's also differentiated—this kind of erotic imaginal practice differentiated from what I don't know what to call it—humdrum sexual fantasy, typical sexual fantasy—by the conceptual framework that's operating. So there's a whole, as we said, there's a whole logos here. And that logos structures things and navigates and gives a direction and a purpose.

Wrapped up with the logos, or emerging out of the logos, is a whole intentionality. Because the logos, the conceptual framework, also constellates an intentionality with respect to the image and the eros. So I'm not just chasing pleasant sensations or distracting myself because I'm procrastinating on some project. The intentionality is wrapped up in or emergent from, given by, determined by the conceptual framework in part. And that intentionality, as well as the conceptual framework, makes a big difference.

And the sense of dimensionality in the image that we're relating to—that's a key piece. That's characteristic of the imaginal and the erotic imaginal. And the eternality of the image. These are things, as I've said before, you may not notice at first if you're new to this, but then you begin to see, "Oh yeah, that's there." The dimensionality, the eternality—that differentiates imaginal from imaginary, or just imagination.

And of course, eros is distinguished from craving, and imaginal practice is distinguished from daydream, differentiated by what they lead to in the moment, in the energy body, in the soul-making, and long-term as well, in terms of engagement and longer-term soul-making. The opening of beauty, both in the moment but also longer-term. Meaningfulness, again, both in the moment but also long-term in the life. And the soul-making is the stimulation and the opening of eros-psyche-logos.

So also the mind is involved here. The mind is stretched. The conceptions, the visions, the perception—all of that is stretched into what was previously unfamiliar territory. This is the soul-making expansion. So

what's the difference? Well, one leads to all that, and the other doesn't.

And again, as someone asked me just this morning, "Just remind me why we need all this. What's the purpose of all this? What's the purpose of delineating something called eros?" Again, I've talked about it before on this retreat, but just to say one thing right now: we can have a spiritual practice or a path where, for instance, I'm moving towards the insight and the perception of oneness—universal oneness. And actually many kinds of oneness: universal love, universal awareness, universal being, or the unfabricated. There are different kinds. Actually, there's a limited amount of kinds. I've never actually bothered to count, and then there are micro variations of each.

But once one has seen, had those experiences enough times that it's really gone in there as a viable perception and has changed my sense of what existence is and what the self is, opening to all these kinds of oneness, then you're sort of done. And then you either declare yourself liberated or do what you do based on that declaration. But there's a kind of—it's just done, it's finite, and there's almost a formulaic quality. You can map this stuff out.

So in terms of that movement towards oneness, you can pretty much map it out—what the perceptions are, the various ways they might happen. There's always the possibility it just goes by itself, but generally speaking, if you do this and that, it will tend to open this way and that way. You can map it as a kind of predictability or formulaic nature to that kind of opening. Important as it is, I'm really not knocking it. It's really crucial.

So that's one thing about that kind of path of oneness. The second thing about it is that the particulars and the uniqueness of things or beings or aspects is not actually that important. So there's a kind of equivalence or replaceability. Because everything is one, it doesn't really matter what there is. Because whatever else there is in this thing's place, it will also be one. It's all the same. So if this forest gets cut down and made into a car park, or even if species go extinct, it's all one.

Whatever I say, it's all love or it's all awareness or it's just the play of awareness or something.

So there's a validity and a value to these perceptions, absolutely. And there's also, again, there's a danger, there's a risk. In this case, non-engagement and a certain... certain directions and certain doors won't open that way.

Because in contrast with the expression of the erotic imaginal, I would say it's infinitely creative. There's infinite possibilities for creation and discovery of beauty, meaningfulness, dimensionality, dimensions, a sense of sacredness and divinity. The opening of eros, psyche, logos, meaning ideation and image, is actually infinite in its possibilities. It's not just a sort of set and fairly predictable range of experience.

And with the erotic imaginal, the sacredness and the divinity is in and through the particulars, as well as in and through the universal oneness. In and through the particulars. It somehow rescues the particulars. And actually gives them more dimensionality, more kinds of sacredness, more kinds of senses of divinity.

How many? I think infinite, potentially infinite.

This is infinite possibilities for creation and discovery. The path of soul-making is endless, open-ended, infinite, potentially infinite.

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