Doubt and Discernment (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:19:54

Of the practices that we've developed that we've devoted attention and effort to for many of us over years—the practices of mindfulness and the refinement of attention, the awareness of and skill with the energy body and the emotional awareness, insights into emptiness, spectrum of fabrication, dwelling in states of less fabrication—all that. Because of the practice with regard to that and the accumulation of those skills and arts, the diligence there, we are well-equipped for this investigation that we're unfolding. We have the tools and the refinement of discernment necessary to really open it up and make it fertile. And all that comes as a result of practice for many people.

And at the same time, being as many of us are used to a certain range of teaching and concept and direction within a tradition, one can very easily, as I said, doubts can arise very easily. So very commonly someone who's had quite a bit of practice, let's say in a more narrow context, tradition of insight meditation, will say, "Isn't this just feeding the kilesas, the defilements? Isn't this, all this, what you're talking about eros and being with eros and opening up, isn't it just feeding the defilements, greed, aversion and delusion?"

So again, can we actually take that doubt deeper and make it fertile, not paralyzing, but fertile, dynamic, make it into a real question and look, notice, find out? So that we see that eros, in the way that we are talking about it, and practicing with eros, has a quality. It opens. It supports opening. Opening of what? Opening of the energy body. You can feel this. It needs a certain sensitivity, but you can feel this. With eros, the energy body tends to opening up, the perception of the world tends to opening, and if you like, deepening. The sense of dimensionality opens. The senses of sacredness and divinity also are opened. So eros brings with it, supports, instigates opening of all kinds. Beautiful openings.

Actually, in the way that we are talking about it, because the imaginal is involved and wrapped up in what we're calling eros, then it doesn't bring this pressure to act out because there isn't the movement necessarily at all to concretizing, to simple concretizing. I have a desire for X, therefore I must get X, therefore I act to get X. There are all the imaginal dimensions that are opening out there, instead, usually. And there's also eros tends to relieve dukkha. Eros tends to relieve dukkha, although there is the pothos, this wanting more. So there's not complete peace there. And there is the erotic tension that we talked about. But in practice and in life we can see this tendency of eros to open things up in a beautiful way, to relieve dukkha and away from a sort of simplistic concretizing or being tied in to acting out this or that just because I desire it.

Craving, on the other hand, is opposite to all of that. It tends to close, close the energy body—you can feel

it, you can notice it, you can be sensitive to it. It does not open the cosmopoiesis, it does not open a sense of dimensionality, it does not open a sense of sacredness, divinity. It tends towards concretizing and a sort of pressure of the impetus to act out, and it brings dukkha. And we can see that, again, both in the meditation practice and in our life.

So it's possible to discern between eros and craving, in those ways and in others. It's quite possible to make these discernments. And it's not always easy and not always simple to discern between the two. Can we dare to experiment? Can we dare to question? Because this is how we're going to really find out and develop our discerning chops, if you like, our capabilities, the refinement of our discerning. It takes a certain daring to question these things, to open up these questions, to experiment and find out for ourselves.

The SAS, the British Special Forces, they have their motto: "Who dares wins." Sometimes, actually often in practice, when we talk about more radical practice, whether it's emptiness or this or that, at some edge, "who dares wins" means there's a certain daring, a certain boldness in venturing into the unknown to find out for oneself.

Sometimes, as I said, it's not always easy to discern between eros and craving, for example. Sometimes we think this is eros, and then it gets all tangled, and we feel, "Oh, well, the energy body is contracting, there is a contraction, there is dukkha." But even the entanglement there, or the tangling of eros and craving together, the two threads tangled, doesn't necessarily mean immediately throw the whole thing out. This is quite important.

There's a parallel here, for example, for anyone who's ever devoted some time and some dedicated practice to developing samatha, samadhi. And often, you know, if you make that intention and practice over whatever it is, however long, on retreat, off retreat, you will absolutely inevitably encounter this question of it's moving towards something, there's something I desire here, I desire to open up these states of samadhi.

I desire to discover them, to master them, enter them, whatever. And in that, I meet, I encounter the question of effort. I need to make effort. There's the desire involved. We talked about the Buddha and his four bases of success. His list there. And I encounter too much effort, too little effort, too tight effort.

So there's going to be dukkha. It gets too tight, the effort towards the samadhi, and here's dukkha. And how many people, what percentage of people in the insight meditation world think, "Oh, this is painful, forget it—this is ego, this is striving." They pick up some other teaching that says, "Oh, you know, just let it all be. Don't try and make anything happen or something." And the whole thing, baby gets thrown out with the bathwater, basically.

So that's a mistake—at least in relation to samatha, it would be a mistake. Rather, can I learn about wise effort? Can I learn about having aspirations and goals and things that I yearn to move towards and to

know and experience myself in meditation, in spiritual life, in life in general? And learn how to handle that, how to relate to it wisely without either just getting completely entangled in pain around that, or throwing the whole thing out and not getting anywhere—not really developing mastery of samadhi, etc.

So just the arising of suffering or contraction, if we're working in this area with eros, etc., I wouldn't just use that as a criterion of discernment between eros and craving. The two can get mixed, and our relationship with the whole thing can get fraught, and sometimes it gets a little tight. Remember I was telling you about those Upandita retreats, etc., where actually there's quite a lot of suffering in the service of something.

So just because we meet a bit of tightness or entanglement or confusion doesn't mean we drop it and throw it out. It's actually asking for more subtlety, more artistry in the discernment, in the balancing, in the responding.

As I mentioned, we can start with the arrow. It's all very beautiful and there's the fullness of the image and everything. If something happens, it contracts until it gets diverted, perverted into craving, and vice versa. We start with what's obviously a state of craving and the contraction of craving and limited seeing, and actually with skillful, artful working, we can re-guide that and navigate to open that into the beauty and the fullness of eros.

So there's art here. There's skill. It takes care in the discernment between the two and in the navigation from craving to eros. But certainly in the discernment, there's art, there's skill, there's care, there's sensitivity. It's asking for quite a refined and, if you like, sophisticated kind of discernment. But we develop that. It's really possible.

One of the aspects, as I said, that can help us discern is the sensitivity to the soul-making dynamic and what is happening with that soul-making dynamic, meaning the mutual insemination, fertilization, ignition, widening, deepening, complicating, enriching of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic constellation. This tells us that we're on the right track, and you can get sensitive to the different aspects of that when it's moving, when it's in progress.

With a sexual image, for example, as I said, we can notice the specificity of the image and the kind of iconic quality of the sexual image, if that's what we're working with. It doesn't tend, mostly, to want to escalate to the next thing, the next thing, and then escalate: "Now I need to have an orgasm or now I need to release some steam or whatever"—the next thing until it goes towards, you know, whatever it is, genital intercourse or whatever. There's this specificity of the image. It's sufficient to itself, I think was the phrase I used. There's an iconic quality. It's not really going anywhere except deeper into dimensionality and divinity and beauty. It's not going anywhere in a kind of narrative accomplishment sense.

The pothos there, the desire for more that goes with the eros that we talked about, tends to go to find, to discover and create more in the dimensionality, in the multifacetedness of the beloved other and of the

self, etc., as we said in the cosmopoiesis. It doesn't tend to seek its more in the acquisitiveness of greed spreading one-dimensionally: "I have one car, now I need three. I have one lover, wife, husband, whatever it is, and now I need another sexual partner," because somehow they're not interesting to me enough, because I'm not opening to their dimensionality. So then the more needs to go out sideways to the one dimensionality, so we can recognize this difference.

And actually, as I said, we can redirect it, if you like. We can guide it. If it feels like it's getting diverted, contracted, craving, there are ways of seeing, ways of approaching it that redirect it back on the track of eros.

So yes, it's absolutely possible that some uses of the imagination—the imaginary and fantasy in the usual sense of the word—are not what we call imaginal.

Piaget was a very well-respected child psychologist, enormously influential thirty years ago when I was an undergraduate. In his developmental psychology, he said that the imaginary others of children—though I don't think he made that distinction—were "immature and egocentric creations designed for wish fulfillment." That was all he could see in children's use of the imagination. Or perhaps it was helpful in planning and learning conceptual structures, but really, is that always the case?

It's clear with a little more careful looking, a little less biased looking, that that's absolutely not the case. That's why we make this distinction with the word "imaginal" versus "imaginary," or certainly just the casual use of the imagination. One wonders what was influencing Piaget, because already by that time, the imagination had been severely demoted in the Western worldview and psychology. But that's certainly not what he was referring to—not the whole picture, and not what we mean by imaginal and fantasy.

And you can tell: is it wish fulfillment? You can tell sometimes in the sense of the autonomy of the image. Some people might want to discern between the imaginal and the imaginary, between eros and craving, because they sense the autonomy of the imaginal other. It has a kind of independence and intelligence and can actually surprise us. Its actions, what it says, what it does in relation to us—these things surprise us.

I could give so many examples of this, but here's one that comes to mind now. I was working in practice with this beautiful, erotic, imaginal meditation. At the same time, something in the wider politics of the dharma world had upset me—something that affected me directly but was really a much wider issue. I was disturbed by this and could feel that I really wanted to go into that and dwell with it, rather than engage this erotic, imaginal meditation.

The beautiful woman who was in the meditation—at some point she took my hands and put them into the prayer mudra, anjali. She took my hands, put them in that posture, and then mirrored that gesture herself with our fingertips touching, as if to communicate: "Just forget about that right now. We have this beautiful devotion to dwell on, to feed on, to attend to between us." That really wasn't what I wanted to

dwell on at that point. Another part of me was really wanting to figure out this bigger situation and upset. But there was a kind of autonomy there, and her intelligence—and of course it was the intelligent thing to do. There was deeper wisdom there.

We get the sense—I could give so many examples of this—is it really my wish fulfillment, as I asked the other day, that's happening with the erotic imaginal? Countless examples make this question possible.

So some people may want to use the sense of the autonomy of the imaginal other as an indication. That's good, but I would be a little cautious there. I know, for instance, James Hillman spoke very strongly against any kind of ego involvement with the imaginal. If the ego decided to do this or that, he was very suspicious of that. I'd like to question that, actually.

For me, it's fine if it feels like your ego is initiating something in the relationship there—in the imaginal relationship—or initiating an image or whatever. That is not necessarily a problem. The test is whether it feels soul-making. I've said this before, but it's really, really important: the test is you can actually feel the soul-making in all the ways that we've talked about in the past on other retreats. I would rather have that be the guide rather than: "Was that my ego? Did I just make that happen?" Don't worry about that. It's fine. It's fine if you did. It's fine if you didn't. I wouldn't get too caught up in that as a criterion.

You can tell if the erotic imaginal feels like it's soul-making. It's very clear in the beauty there, in the devotion, in the divinity, in the dimensionality—all of that.

Sometimes we get a little unclear about what's actually a problem here in our doubt. This uncertainty causes some confusion. What's a potential problem?

For instance, as we already touched on, sometimes something that happens with an image or an image itself, or an erotic relationship with an image, is really intense or just really weird compared to what other people seem to be speaking about or what we know from what the culture feeds us. Very easily a person can think, "I'm nuts, I'm crazy," or "If I'm not crazy already, this is taking me towards craziness. I'm going crazy. If I follow this, I'll go crazy."

This is the voice of fear, and the voice of the indoctrination from the cultures that we move in. As I said, the imaginal has no place. It's not given a place in the culture. We have a suspicion, unless it's quite contained—you know, making movies or writing sci-fi novels or whatever it is. So it's understandable that there is fear in relation to this.

We have been actually for centuries and centuries kind of indoctrinated, dogmatized if that's a word, to be afraid. Because it doesn't have a place, and there's all kinds of—it's not given a place, it's not given respect, validity, purpose, in our sense of our existence, of what healthy psychology is, of the spiritual paths, etc. So there's all kinds of cultural assumptions coming in there, in that kind of doubt: "I'm going crazy, this is too intense, this is too weird."

So what we're doing here partly is really trying to support, trying to move towards giving the imaginal and the erotic imaginal a place—a meaningful place and purpose in a conceptual framework that's coherent, that really serves something—and to come into relationship with these images. Wise relation, not just drop them and turn away, not just indulge without any sensitivity in a kind of imaginary, wish-fulfilling, daydreaming thing, seeking pleasure. Through the concepts that we're talking about, through the path that we're delineating and filling out, and through the sensitivity and the artfulness of the living relationships here—living, erotic, imaginal relationships—we want to move it towards all that and the fullness of all that.

And as I also said, we want to also give place to and respect to and trust, if you like, to what seems like the darker, more intense sexual images that come up and eros that comes up. Have a look. Is it disrespectful? Don't jump so quickly to conclusions. Is this disrespectful? If I want to devour you and drink your holy blood and lick your bones and eat your organs, is that sadism? Is that some kind of pathological cannibalism? Is it because I'm angry? Is it without love?

So easy to assume all this stuff. It's like, actually have a look, feel, feel what's there. Is it an objectification? To me, objectification means I don't see and value the totality of the other's being. The being of the other. I don't see and value all that they include. I'm bringing them down to one dimensional, one purpose. Whether it's an actual person, whether it's a purely imaginal figure. Is that the case?

Or we can also objectify because I just see them from me. And that includes a kind of spiritual or psychological objectification. I just see this imaginal figure, or this person, this teacher, or this whatever it is, this partner—they just exist. I've kind of shrunk down my seeing them. They just exist for my growth, for my psycho-spiritual process. And we tend to see imaginal figures that way. "Oh yes, I'm developing my faculty of X, Y, Z through this imaginal figure." That's an objectification. Or I don't see, as I said there, I don't see and value their totality. Is it objectification? And if it is, what do I need to do to let it fill out?

Is it out of control? People often go, "Oh, this... This will take me out of control, or this is out of control." Is it? Maybe a little bit at one level, but that's just the nature of things. But really, one can get up and walk away, or there's so much in the art of navigation and steering that we've talked about.

So right there in what for many would be kind of taboo, sexual erotic images and interactions frowned upon, regarded as weird or pathological, right there we can actually sense holiness, sense of sacredness, divinity, feel it.

Or someone might have the opposite doubt: "Oh, this isn't intense at all, and so-and-so shared such a weird image, it was really far out and incredibly dramatic and colorful, and mine is just kind of ordinary, so it's not working for me, or it can't be very deep."

Again, don't jump to such conclusions. Eros includes a great range from very, very subtle to intense, and the same with the imaginal. It can be very ordinary or very strange.

Intensity does not necessarily translate to potency, and it's potency we're interested in. Intensity can just be right there—that experience feels intense, and it's like, "Wow, now I have to tell the teacher, or I have to tell my friends," or I get worried, or whatever it is. And then maybe half an hour later, or a few days later, it's like nothing came of it. Maybe. Other times, something's not intense at all. And actually, because we're relating to it wisely and skillfully and with the art and with the discernment and the beauty of that navigation, the subtlety of that, actually what was not intense can be very potent long-term.

Or someone has the doubt: "Well, I don't really get any images." And I've been through this on the other retreats. So really? Really? Look, you might not get any visual images, but images can come in the way we're using that word. It doesn't just mean visual at all. It might not be anything visual involved at all. It involves any of the senses, as I've said before.

And also, our life is full of fantasies and images in the sense that I'm using that word. Look where you love. Pay attention where you love, where there's a sense of meaningfulness in your life. There is the operation right there. Somehow involved in that is the movement and the operation, the saturation of images and fantasies in the good sense that I'm talking about. Where you love, where things are meaningful, where something is meaningful. But I've been through all that before.

What's more a problem is, as I also said, reification—meaning identification with an image, a rigidification of the sense of self, a concretization of the sense of self, a realism of the image or of the self. Jung's word "inflation" is perhaps misleading. I think what he cautioned about inflation with respect to images—I think what he really meant, as far as I understand, is more what would be better to have said: that the problem is really, as I said, reification, identification, realism, concretization, literalism.

It's not a problem if, to the undiscerning mind, an image seems grandiose. Often it's, "Oh, I can't possibly have that kind of image." Sometimes they're beautiful images, images of service, and someone goes, "Oh, that's too grandiose, that's me in some Mother Teresa fantasy or whatever." Or if an image seems ungrounded because it's very light and insubstantial and involves a kind of flying or all kinds of things. Or if it's weird, as I said, or pathological, if it's not politically correct or psychologically correct. For instance, if it's a sexual thing and it involves some kind of domination or submission—well, that's not psychologically correct, that's not politically correct, this or that. The undiscerning mind can be too quick to jump in here with certain pre-packaged psychological truths about what it's suspicious about, what it's afraid of.

But rather the problem is realism, reification, identification. And it's a problem if, as we said, there's not a kind of equality and pervasiveness of seeing image as image, of seeing the emptiness of everything. So self, other, world, Eros itself, body—all this must be seen. If it's lopsided, where we see image as image and where we don't, where the soul-making is able to open up the dimensions and where it isn't, that also can be problematic, as we've talked about.

Or if there's a rigidity—so we talked about, for example, the image or the ideal of being a passionate

person or being an equanimous person. And the image and idealization that's kind of wrapped up in that can actually be a kind of attachment. There's an attachment to an image of what Eros looks like—passionate like this, for example. There's a rigidity there to the image. So all these are more the problem.

As I said, I think certainly on Re-Enchanting the Cosmos retreat, I'm interested in a path that actually really has an understanding of emptiness as a basis for the whole path—understanding the emptiness of everything without exception. What happens when that is placed as a basis of the path, not just emptiness as something we add on as an advanced thing or something that's an option? And not an emptiness, an understanding of emptiness that leaves some things tacitly not empty—the process or the time or the awareness or the "things as they are" or whatever it is.

So a basis in emptiness lies at the fundament of all this. There's a basis of emptiness, not a truth claim, not some or other truth claim. It's quite a different orientation. You could say, not so interested in building on reality claims—"What is reality?"—but rather on efficacy or potency. If we look this way, if we conceive this way, what happens? If we conceive in this slightly different way, what happens? What is the effect, the efficacy? What is potent there in terms of what it opens for the being, for the vision, for the sense of existence, for the life?

When we conceive only one particular way or look exclusively through a single lens, what unfolds? We begin to prioritize efficacy and potency over reality as our criteria—as the foundation for how we navigate this terrain and what guides our judgments and discernments.

I understand this can be challenging sometimes, this notion that something is "not real." How do I trust something that lacks reality? And if it's not real, or if I'm meant to question whether it's real or not real—if there's uncertainty about understanding this middle way between real and not real—tremendous doubt can arise.

Yet an understanding of emptiness opens immense possibility. It provides a basis of legitimacy for all kinds of beautiful and soul-stirring experiences, creating pathways for us. When we truly comprehend the emptiness of all this, doubt can genuinely subside. Some people, however, may not be quite ready for that understanding, and I appreciate this.

I also believe this can be developed—we can cultivate this stance and understanding that represents a kind of middle way between real and not real, an imaginal version of the middle way, positioned between existence and non-existence. This is developable. We can genuinely cultivate this as we engage with these practices in parallel, through emptiness meditation or through the imaginal itself.

Regarding emptiness understanding, often there's some degree of insight into emptiness that a person can draw upon. Perhaps someone hasn't engaged with the complete emptiness teaching and fully realized the emptiness of everything—that's actually quite rare. But they've practiced enough to perceive some degree

of the emptiness of self, to a certain level. Right there, they can draw on that parallel insight. Because they see some degree of the emptiness of self, yet they don't dismiss the self. They don't reject it or ignore it. They maintain respect for their self and for other selves. They have care for the self, for selves. They perceive selves.

Knowing that they're empty, they possess that insight, but they still perceive them and relate to them, and sometimes they release that perception. Knowing that they're empty, they can perceive, relate to, and care for the self. This represents a level of seeing that something isn't real and yet entering into relationship with it—a relationship of respect, interaction, taking seriously, caring. The same applies to the imaginal.

If you think you don't know how to approach this, perhaps draw on whatever level of emptiness insight you've already integrated. You see that emptiness doesn't mean you need to completely reject something, never perceive it, or never respect it. It's the freedom to move into relationship.

When we see the emptiness of something, it opens a freedom of choice regarding ways of looking. Yes, I can see through this thing and choose not to give it attention, or I can give it attention. I'm free. The emptiness makes me free either way. And as I said, I can relate to it, knowing that it's empty, while still respecting and caring. The same holds true with images.

My experience teaching this reveals that someone can have very little understanding of emptiness from previous practice, and yet somehow sense, in working with the imaginal, that it possesses what I mentioned the other day—this theatrical quality. It's both definitely not real and has a different kind of quality. The way I'm seeing this self in interaction, the way I'm seeing this other, carries this quality that resembles theater. It's not real, but there is a kind of reality to it. It exists somewhere in between, in a middle way.

I'm not simply relating to this self's process and the image of the self undergoing this process in this imagined relationship as merely real—as if what I see of this self is just reality. There's an element, or rather a feel, a quality of theater to it. I'm uncertain whether the word "theater" relates to "theos," meaning divinity, but even without practicing emptiness, sometimes you can actually sense this difference.

Even in using and opening to imagination regarding psychological work on the self—I was discussing this the other day with someone working with inner child work, that therapeutic approach popular some years ago, or other methods where imagination is allowed, such as certain Ridwan inquiries—the imagination operates there, skillfully and beautifully used. But the self inquiring, the self observing that imagination, regards it as real. This becomes a real aspect of self; it doesn't possess that theatrical quality.

Imagine something different, and we can notice when it's one and when it's the other. Even without knowing anything about emptiness, it carries a different quality—the quality of theater, the quality of not being real yet still being genuinely potent, beautiful, moving, and transformative.

Again, something I mentioned before but bears repeating: the big picture, the conceptual framework, will help with our doubt in the broad sense and also inform our micro-choices, our moment-to-moment decisions in practice. This is genuinely important to me.

To cultivate that sense as much as possible—to build the big picture, the conceptual framework: how does this all function, how does it fit together, where are we going, what does this mean as opposed to that? It truly informs our choices. But all this is really an art.

I like to think of it as an art. Which means, and for me, art involves one element—one aspect of art is there is a conceptual framework involved. No matter who you think you are, free jazz, going out of tonality and out of rhythms, there's still plenty of conceptual framework. Jackson Pollock, whatever it is, there's a conceptual framework there.

And if it's art, it involves the conceptual and the intuition, the following of hunches that arise, the arising of what surprises us and what's unexpected in the process of the making of the art, in the process of working in the meditation with the imaginal relationship. And then there's the improvisation of responses to, and the navigation of all that. And that includes the art of working with the energy body, and the art of the different emphases and leaning this way or that, more or less, that we discussed before.

So all that is involved in the art, and all that helps in relation to our doubts and kind of unsurenesses with regard to all this. Understanding the conceptual framework, as I said, functions as a kind of—gives context, gives support, like that trellis in the rose garden. Giving support to what wants to flower.

And out of that conceptual framework, it frames and gives rise to—helps to shape and direct our intentions, which helps so much. Because the intention is for soul-making, for the increase of the sense of the sacredness, the widening of the sense of sacredness, the diversity of the sense of the sacredness, for the perceptions of the other subtle dimensions, for subtle discernments of sensitivity. All these intentions are given, if you like, are determined or handed to us by the conceptual framework that we're developing. So all that really helps.

But discernment, you know, discernment is so key. So for example, regarding the discernment between just what we're calling desire, what we're calling craving, what we're calling eros, and the various responses there. Discernment and response, responsibility. All that's really important.

What is the appropriate or right or necessary order for you? Now at this stage in your practice, in your life, what's the necessary order of practice development with regard to what we're calling craving, with regard to what we're calling clinging in its relationship to that deep investigation into emptiness, that whole revealing of the deep meaning of dependent origination, and with eros?

So even just with those—with craving, the exploration of what we're calling clinging, and what we're calling eros—what's the order necessary for you, your soul's calling? You know, just discerning that is not always so easy. And I don't want to shove it into a formula. You have to do this before you do that. I don't

think souls fit in formulae so easily at all.

But if we want to explore making a little more finer distinctions, discernments here—so for instance, between eros or the question of eros in relationship to resting and also in relationship to jhāna practice and in relation to mettā practice. Some of this we'll revisit, but I just want to say a little bit about this now and get a sense of how the discernment can go even deeper.

So human beings, you know, we need to discharge, if you like—if we're kind of like energetic systems, sometimes we need to discharge after we've been charged up. Even when, certainly when the charge is just stress, you know, but even when the charge is wholesome, some creative endeavor or inspiration that comes through us or a beautiful kind of electricity of the being, flame of the being that's there at times, you know, there's a charge there and the system needs to discharge often or usually. And so there's, you know, we rest. We find different ways to rest.

Now what's the relationship between rest and eros? Because we can rest with or without the erotic imaginal. So perhaps more often we are accustomed to a resting, a going to sleep that's a kind of wanting to turn the world off. It's a vibhavatanhā, the kind of craving for non-being, if you like, that we talked about in some of the first talks. There's not the interest alive there. I just want to basically go into a kind of not engaging mode. There's not the interest. There's no image alive there. There's nothing imaginable. And there's no soul-making or eros there, because there's no image. No aliveness there, really. And we just want it to rest, to turn off.

Other times, and probably more rare, but really available to us, is a kind of resting where we're still in relationship with the imaginal, either the intra-psychic imaginal or the imaginal perception, the fullness of the imaginal perception of something or someone in the actual world. And there's the eros there in the imaginants, in relationship. And sometimes there can be, with that kind of resting, a really beautiful, pervasive blessedness at the same time as resting.

And here, actually, because the erotic imaginal are involved, the self, the sense of the self, the image of the self, the other, the world, the eros itself—all these four in that co-constellation are alive, multidimensional as images. They're alive as images. And then they have that multidimensionality and perhaps even the sense of divinity that comes with that as the dimensionality gets kind of richer and deeper. The Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic is alive there.

It is working and moving, and there's rest. Usually then the rest feels very beautiful—there's a real quality of beauty and blessedness present. So it's perhaps rarer, but really available. Again, can we discern the difference there?

Sometimes in regard to rest, what we want is to be cozy. That's quite an interesting phenomenon, perhaps, relatively speaking. Is the imaginal operating there with this desire we have when we want to be cozy and rest? Is that what I just referred to—this kind of resting in relationship with the erotic imaginal, where

there's blessedness and the aliveness of multidimensionality?

Some of you will know Celestial Seasonings teas. There's one—I don't know if they still make it—called Sleepytime tea. On the cardboard box, I think I remember, there's a sort of drawing of a cute teddy bear dozing in an old armchair. He's wearing one of those old-fashioned sleeping gowns and a floppy sleeping hat, and he's by the fire in his living room—in his snug. I learned that word because I have one in the cottage where I'm staying. The snug is a little old-fashioned living room with a fireplace and armchairs, and the whole idea is that it's snug, it's cozy. Actually, the one I have is completely freezing and drafty, so I don't even sit in there, but that's the idea. So he's in this old armchair dozing in his sleeping gown and floppy sleeping hat by the fire.

So there's an image—the image on the tea box. And it has a certain attractiveness to us. But is that an image for us unless there's eros, unless there's this sense of dimensionality, multidimensionality, unless there's an opening to a kind of sense of sacredness or divinity, unless the eros-psyche-logos, the soul-making dynamic is aroused, ignited, inseminating each other? And there's an interest in the image and in the images of self, other, world, and eros in the constellation.

Now, that image, that kind of image of coziness may be an imaginal image, may be an image in the sense that we're talking about. But in the discernment, the question is: Is it in this moment for you? Is it really imaginal in the way that we're talking about it? Or is it just an image in the flatter, cheaper sense that is in common parlance? And of course, even if it's not an image, it may still have its place in our life. That's fine. But we're talking about the discernment. When is it eros? When is it imaginal? When is it not?

More interesting than that is the whole question of what's present and what's involved in states of jhana, or states of less fabrication, where there's a lot of letting go, a lot of reduction in clinging, and we're resting in awareness, or resting in a vastness of awareness, or in a state of so-called just receiving, and so forth. Any of those states of less fabrication, or states of jhana—the progressive states of jhana—are actually states of less fabrication. This is quite interesting with regard to eros. So there's a kind of rest in these states, but they're very alive as well. This is quite interesting in relation to eros.

In themselves—is there such a thing as "in themselves"? Is there such a thing as anything in itself? No, there isn't, because of emptiness and dependent origination. But for the sake of what we want to draw out right now, let's go along with this idea. In themselves, these states are only soul-making in a quite limited way. Why? Because they involve actually a quieting of image. You understand? Jhana and other states of less fabrication involve both perception and imaginal perception getting less. So there's a quieting of the imaginal faculty, among other things.

Although the series of jhanas or states of less fabrication moves on—so there's something beyond this state, until a certain point there's something beyond this state—each state by itself doesn't have an unfathomability, a sense of unfathomability of meaningfulness. It might have another kind of unfathomability. I actually think jhanas are unfathomable in quite specific ways—for instance, the degree

of concentration.

The degree of concentration in jhana is in many ways infinitely increasable. But there's not this sense of unfathomability of meaningfulness within each state itself—not in each jhana or each state of relative unfabrication. This is quite significant.

What does this mean for eros and the imaginal? It means there's a limited kind of soul-making involved in those states. Now, there is a dimension of the soul that loves and desires to know the oneness that comes with these different states—different kinds of oneness—and desires transcendence and the unfabricated. That dimension of the soul is very much nourished by these states.

But the dimension of the soul we've been exploring is only nourished and supported by these states through the fantasies and conceptual frameworks that surround the experiences. These fantasies and conceptual frameworks may support the soul-making dynamic—the ignition, insemination, and expansion of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic. This is an important distinction.

For example, when there's pīti or rapture and bliss in the first or second jhana, a person might interpret the experience within certain contexts. You don't have to be a Buddhist to enter jhana—these are simply human experiences. A person might say, "This experience of total bliss and rapture and white light—this was God making love to me, making love to my soul." There's a certain concept and fantasy image of the experience.

Or someone might say, "That experience of jhana, that bliss and rapture, was my participation in—I entered into consciousness of my participation in the divine or the cosmic sat-chit-ananda"—borrowing from traditions that speak of being, consciousness, and bliss.

Neither of these interpretations—God making love to my soul, or participating in divine being-consciousness-bliss—are classical Buddhist ideas. What's more likely within a Buddhist framework is the sense: "Not only was that amazingly pleasant and beautiful, but I am experiencing what the Buddha described." Coming out of jhana, there's this powerful sense of matching his descriptions, of walking the path of the elders, walking in the tradition. This can be such a beautiful, striking feeling.

But there are fantasies wrapped up in that too—fantasies of tradition, fantasies of self (and I use "fantasy" in a positive sense), fantasies of awakening and moving toward awakening, fantasies of being on the path, fantasies of the Dharma itself.

So the soul-making we've been discussing comes through the fantasies and concepts around the experience of quietening perception, unfabricating, entering jhana. It also comes through the longing to know and attain these states that are beyond what I already know. They live in my imagination as a "beyond" for the pothos to desire. This very beyondness creates eros, and in relation to them—and the self and tradition—there is this erotic-imaginal connection. But it's primarily in the fantasy and concept around the experience.

Let me draw another discernment to illuminate these subtleties. What about experiences like resting in the lap of the Buddha, or resting in Grandma's love? If you were at the Re-enchanting the Cosmos retreat, we did an exercise with the imaginal figure of love. Some people chose figures like Grandma, and later Catherine and Nick sang that beautiful Bill Withers song about Grandma's hands.

When I'm resting in the lap of the Buddha or in Grandma's love—is this the imaginal? Is this eros? There's certainly love there, and use of imagination. But if Grandma or this figure represents simply mettā or unconditional love—which is beautiful and can be profoundly helpful—but if I'm not deeply interested in Grandma herself, if I only want the feelings of warmth, comfort, coziness, security, or just the quality of mettā, then this figure will not be soul-making, will not be imaginal, because there's no eros there.

I'm not deeply interested in them. It won't stimulate the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, or only to a very limited degree. Grandma or the Buddha, in that instance, is not an erotic object for me. "Erotic" need not be sexual, but there's no erotic dimension in the sense of unfathomability, of wanting more discovery and enrichment through the eros-psyche-logos dynamic. There's no aliveness and arousal of interest in her depths, her dimensionality. There's no sense of divinity—it's very sweet and lovely and helpful, but I don't find those aspects of unfathomability and mystery in her.

Perhaps with Grandma or the Buddha in this flatter way, we want to rest and sleep in that love, in that comfort and security. This can be perfectly okay, but it's not soul-making.

And it may be actually necessary sometimes, perhaps at certain stages in our life or certain stages in our practice. It may be really necessary, but it's not soul-making.

Or it may be that we're relating to it because we're actually using it in a certain way. We're using this imaginary figure, figure of the imagination, to get in touch with, for instance, the quality of metta or a certain degree of metta. And then we actually forget them. We forget grandma. Grandma, in that case, is just a springboard, a kind of touchstone for a quality of metta. So it's skillful. You use that, you get the quality, and then you can forget grandma. Great, skillful. It's a springboard, a touchstone into the quality of metta. But the soul-making then will be limited. It would be limited soul-making, because it doesn't have this interest in her and her unfathomability, her dimensionality and her depths.

So if I'm primarily, if at any time I'm primarily looking for pleasure, or for rest in this sense, or just for the quality of metta—or if the self and the other, the images of self and other are too concrete and not unfathomable as images are in the sense that we're using, they're not unfathomable, they're too concrete—then at best, in those cases, the soul-making will be very limited and the opening and the expansion and the fecundity of the soul-making dynamic of Eros, Psyche, Logos together working will be very limited.

So there are all kinds of discernments that I think are important as we develop these practices, develop our range and go into this territory.

Another discernment, another thing to notice is where for you the imaginal, the soul-making, the erotic imaginal is alive, and where is it not alive? So for example, some people in meditation, or with respect to meditation practice, there's actually very little eros. There's very little arousal of interest, maybe in general, but there's very little in the way of images, imaginal images of self, other, world, eros, alive with respect to or in meditation. Whereas in some relationships in their life or some actions in their life, all that is alive. The interest, the images of self, other, world, eros are alive there and soul-making—maybe in relation to service, or maybe in relation to activism, or in relation to one of those but not the other, perhaps service but not activism, activism but not service. Whereas in practice, in formal practice, there's very little eros there.

Other people, it might be the other way around, that the eros and the soul-making is alive in and with respect to meditation practice, but in actual life it seems harder to be suffused with the imaginal, to be impregnated with the imaginal. Harder for life to become imaginal in our perception. Harder for soul-making in life, in activity, in relation to the world more widely.

Now, either of those two types or categories—either the one who has the soul-making alive in the world but not in the meditation, or the other who has the soul-making in the meditation but not so much in the world and activity—very easily when there's something not working in my practice, very easily one of the answers that person gives themselves is "I need more concentration, I need more samadhi." So maybe, maybe that's what needs to happen in your practice to open it out, to make it more potent, more widespread, pervasive in its potency and deeper. Maybe that's really what you need, more concentration.

But maybe not. And again, just a little footnote here: please hear all these teachings in context. I'm addressing common assumptions that I meet as a teacher at the same time as probably a good proportion of my teaching over the years has been teaching samadhi, teaching jhanas, and really helping people develop that art and the mastery there and go deeper and deeper through the jhanas. So please take this right now in context.

But oftentimes people have this thought, "I need more concentration, I need more focus." It might be that that's what needs to happen, or it might be actually that what needs to happen is the imaginal needs to be released. There needs to be more suffusion and more fullness and opening of and opening to the imaginal. A wider, deeper imaginal sense igniting, involving Eros, the interest, the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic and soul-making. Maybe that's what needs to happen. So somehow I need to allow it to spread to the areas where it isn't.

Or it might be that the kinds of images and fantasies that are operating are too restricted, too narrow. So again, there could be many examples here, and I've given them in the past in relation to engagement or whatever it is, or also in relation to actual meditation—many possibilities. But for example, just one I mentioned: it's very understandable with some people because of what they've been through and everything that they tend to look to meditation for rest, for some degree of comfort and even coziness or a

sense of safety. That can be very understandable and quite important sometimes.

But maybe a person has also been in that and actually got stuck in a narrow range of image in relation to meditation and practice. And that's what needs to expand, is the imaginal range, to for instance include images and fantasies of struggle, of courage, of putting up with difficulties. The fantasies of nobility, the nobility of courage, the nobility of being able to sit through the fire, through the struggle, through the difficulty, the nobility of the soul's willingness to do that, the self's willingness to do that, the beauty of that.

Sometimes that whole range of fantasy is missing in a person. They just don't have that there. And without these, there's a kind of—you know, with all the best intentions, there's a kind of flaccidity in their practice. They keep, somehow, something keeps collapsing, because it doesn't have the imaginal support, it doesn't have the filling out of the beauty of the fantasy that would allow one to sit through the difficulty. It's not rendered beautiful, the courage, it's just not given this nobility through the beauty of the fantasy and the richness of the fantasy.

There's a caving in again and again, something collapses, something just stops practice. You just stop practice, turn away from the difficult, always looking every time for what's easy, for what's comfortable, because there isn't the imaginal support for something else, for a different relationship.

And if we do that every time, that has massive consequences in terms of the patterns it sets up—certainly in meditation but also in one's life. Massive consequences. So that's just one example—I could give many, quite opposite ones.

But really, this discernment and noticing where the eros, the imaginal, the soul-making is alive for us and working beautifully and potently and impregnating, and where it's not—it's for us to look and see in our lives.

And related to that, of course, is the discernment and the noticing of: What do I really desire? What do I really want? What is it that I long for? Do I even allow my being to have deep longing? This is an interesting question—we'll come back to this.

But there's the discernment of what do I long for? And then there's also discernment, if I can let myself feel at times the deep longing of my soul. There's a discernment within the longing as well, which is quite interesting.

Deep, intense longing has this bittersweet quality, something that's hard to bear, and yet also has a great beauty in it. But that's longing—it's a desire for me. I want this. My soul yearns for this.

But wrapped up in the very longing is another aspect. It's telling me about what I'm devoted to. It's telling me about what I want, what I serve already or what I want to serve. You understand? The longing is telling me what I'm devoted to. It's not just for me, but it's telling me what I'm devoted to, what I serve or

what I want to serve.

And so the longing, the experience of longing, if we can bear it and open to it and even nourish it, can help us discern what we want to serve. Through my longing, through my deep desire, it's telling me something, it's guiding me. So with the longing, there are both important aspects. What do I want for me—this soul wants something for itself—and it's telling me about what I want to serve. There are facets, if you like, to discern between—two facets of the same current, the same deep current, deep movement of longing.

And again, in relation to all this and the doubt that arises: why is this important? Why is this thing about longing important? Well, it's exactly what matters most deeply to us. It's almost a definition of importance—it's what matters most deeply to us.

And it matters to make these discernments. It matters to discern what is craving. If I'm not conscious of craving, if craving gains in power in the way that we're using it, what happens? I end up squandering my energy. I end up squandering the treasures I've been given. I end up dissipating my soul, if you like, my citta—the energy, the strength, the coherence of it, the beauty of it, the gift of it. I squander and dissipate in the end. I squander and dissipate my life and my soul through craving.

And the discernment of what we mean by clinging and the exploration of all that—why is that important? Because through that I can really understand something profound, radical, utterly surprising in a way that opens up the whole sense of existence. That's important.

It's important to know what matters most deeply to the soul—the longing. It's important to know what is craving and therefore squandering or dissipating one's life, if it's given too much leeway and power. It's important to investigate clinging because of the jewel of the Dharma and the teaching of dependent origination, emptiness, and what that can open for us.

And it's important to discern eros because it brings soul-making. And soul-making is what the soul needs, what the soul loves. Soul-making is what the soul needs and loves. And soul-making needs eros. Or souls, to different degrees, let's say, need eros and soul-making, more or less. We'll say more about that later.

But it already exists. Eros and soul-making in our life already exists. We need to acknowledge it—it's important to acknowledge it, to see it, to discern, to see that it's different from craving or just any ordinary desire. We need to understand its movement and to care for it.

It's important to make these discernments, to be clear and to care for what serves, what opens beauty, what opens a sense of the sacred.

Thank you for listening.

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