'The Holy Life' (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:19:59

We're looking into the whole area of Eros for the path, Eros on the path, and Eros for awakening—and how that ties in to, or what are the implications there, how it's connected to what's then allowed or supported in terms of Eros with regard to the world, to the senses, to sense experience, to what we might call life.

When we come to talk about Eros, we must be talking about soul-making. That involves images and ideas. So the ideas, the vision, the concept, the fantasies and images of path are involved in this. We're looking at that, wanting to open that investigation up a little bit. Implicit in that will be ideas and images, fantasies about awakening, of course, since path leads to awakening or in that direction. And implicit in that is again ideas and, if you like, a range—what range of images in relation to the world, the senses and life. Those three, we said, are connected.

Let's go a little bit more into this, specifically with regard to eros for the path, an erotic relationship with the path, with the path of practice, with that movement towards awakening. Most people, if you ask them, who've been practicing a few decades, will say, "Oh yes, I'm still very passionate," and so on. But when we say eros, we're talking about fire—fire on the path, fire for the path, fire for awakening.

So there, in comparing how that fire is now, how that eros is now in one's practice compared with ten years ago, twenty years ago, thirty years ago—is it honestly still the same intensity, depth, beauty? Are we still opening? There's still the penetration, still the inquiry, the heat of that, the flame of that, the passion. And that includes, sometimes, the hassle of that. Fire can be aggravating. There's this possibility of the breaking of the vessels, the shattering of what we once knew and how we once oriented, and the radicality that's involved with questioning and opening at a very deep level in terms of what's fundamental.

It's interesting for some of you who have been practicing many, many years to just really ask yourself about how the Eros is now compared to twenty or thirty years ago. This is what right now I'm interested in: Eros on the path, Eros for the path, and how that involves logos and psyche and sense of ideas and concepts and images and fancies of path, of awakening, of world, senses, life.

If the Four Noble Truths are central to our sort of conception of the Dharma—and for most insight meditation practitioners we'd place that there, even whether they were conscious of it or not—that means that we're approaching the path, we're approaching practice and approaching the movement towards awakening or what awakening is, with a vision and a concept that has to do with ending or at least reducing suffering. Because that's what the Four Noble Truths are referring to: there is suffering, there's a cause for suffering, there is the possibility of ending suffering, and there's a way to that. So the whole of

practice really is oriented towards lessening suffering. Freedom, meaning freedom from suffering.

Even if we put aside for now what those words mean—suffering and freedom and all that—we can say that this is a very common approach. Let's call it for now the medical model: the approach to practice and to the path that centralizes the reduction of suffering. The Four Noble Truths actually are, in fact, modelled on the Buddha's—in the Buddha's time, the Buddha modelled his Four Noble Truths on a physician's sort of way of stating diagnosis, prognosis, cure, the Four Noble Truths. So we call that the medical model in that it's trying to alleviate suffering. It's centralizing the alleviation of suffering.

Notice that this approach, what we call the medical model, can certainly, it's very happy to use so-called scientific data to shore up its claims and to perhaps give faith. So if a neuroscientist does CT scans of brains of long-term meditators or people in meditation versus non-meditators and finds that a certain membrane is thickened, which is associated with happiness, or certain secretions increase or decrease in the neurochemistry, then this adds sort of conviction to that medical model. We do measurements, questionnaires of well-being and that sort of thing, and we ascertain that yes, medically this is working—meditation is good for you, it increases well-being, really good for depression, and so on.

That's different from a second kind of fantasy of the path and of practice, which I might call scientistic, by which I mean that the practitioner, the individual practitioner, is actually motivated primarily by a sort of interest in consciousness or an interest in experience. And so sees themselves, has a kind of fantasy of themselves as a kind of researcher: "I'm a researcher into consciousness. I'm a researcher into experience and the range of experience and what's involved there."

Of course, I'm going to give four sort of generic models, and of course they can overlap, and it's really a matter of emphasis. But you can see that the medical model is different than what I'm calling the science fantasy, the researcher fantasy.

And then a third model might be what we might call the religious fantasy, in which what practice is and what the path is and what the movement towards awakening is essentially a replication—it's an attempt to replicate the experiences, insights, awakening, path and practice of the sages of the past, and perhaps the present. To replicate the Buddha's awakening, the Buddha's enlightenment to the best of one's ability. To discover, if you like, or rediscover their truth, the truth that they discovered, the truth that the Buddha discovered.

So it has this replicative kind of agenda to it, replicative fantasy, wrapped up completely, of course, with the fantasy of the Buddha, fantasy of the past, fantasy of the tradition. It's religious in that sense that it's tied to the past and puts the authority in the past, in the text. People say, "Well, the Pali Canon," or some other text, or whatever it is. The authority is in the past, which is very typical of the religious fantasy. Someone might even do that when they consider themselves a secularist.

There's still something religious about doing that.

That's a third model. And a fourth model might be what we might call the artistic. So this is, you know, if you think about an artist, someone who's really deeply involved in their art, that has a kind of open-endedness to it, to my mind, to my sense of that fantasy. It may involve the replication of the works of past masters and imitating them to learn how they did things and kind of, if you like, absorb and digest their styles, their artistry, their conceptions. And certainly that's part of developing as a deep artist and a powerful artist.

But it also goes beyond the merely replicative into the support for and the interest in new directions, originality, whether that's in terms of practice and path, whether that's new and original kinds of practices or kinds of concepts, etc. So again, all this is a matter of emphasis, but I mean much more by the newness and originality of practices and concepts—of what the path is and where it can go and how it can open and what its range is, etc.—I mean much more, for instance, than just teaching mindfulness to some new demographic, whether it's people in prison or people with a certain mental health issue or this or that, all of which is really, really valuable and really important, but it's really just extending the reach of the medical model, if you like. I'm talking about really, in the artistic fantasy, I'm talking really about the way art breaks and goes in very new conceptions and directions of what it's even trying to do.

So four kinds of fantasy there, which is really a matter of emphasis. But you'll notice, for instance, in the last one, actually in a lot of them to different degrees, but certainly the last one, the artistic one, that dedication and even obsession may be completely okay. Whereas from another perspective, we would say someone's completely obsessed with whatever they're trying to do, or with practice, or they are developing, and that kind of interest. So, well, maybe they're a bit out of balance, or this or that. But certain of these models, for instance, the religious one or the artistic one, actually allow a kind of obsession. It's different than, let's say, the medical model, where there can be a kind of like, let's find an easy medication for everyone. And if we find that easy medication for everyone, that's a really, you know, that's a goal that one might be interested in developing the medical model.

But really what I'm talking about here is how one sees one's individual practice. So whether one is regarding it as a kind of medicine, reduction of suffering, whether one's fantasizing oneself as a kind of researcher or in the stream of the tradition, religiously replicating the past or as an artist with that possibility of open-endedness. You never reach the end of the path with the, either with the scientific or the, well, actually, scientism might say you reach the end in terms of you know everything now. Some scientists have that fantasy. But certainly with the artistic, unlike the religious or the medical, there's no end there. It's open-ended. And although there can be an interest in replication, there's also this interest in the possibility of new directions, new conceptions, very different movements and ranges there.

Most people, in regard to their practice, seem to have a mix of the first and the third, the medical model and the religious model. So in other words, one really thinks in terms of reducing suffering, freedom from suffering, that's the language, that's the intention, that's what makes sense, and that's what's talked about and kind of taken in. And at the same time, we're in the stream of the Buddha, and kind of replicating,

discovering for ourselves a truth that they discovered, and the authority is in the text there, as well as it is in the scientific data that support the medical model.

The other two, the researcher fantasy and the artistic fantasy, need, can you hear, they need quite a lot of confidence. It takes quite a lot of boldness and balls even, to kind of even see oneself or fantasize oneself that way. And quite a sense of independence. So this to me is very interesting and has all kinds of implications, makes a huge difference for how our practice unfolds, how much eros is allowed in relation to the path, and what possibilities open up for our path, and the directions and the ranges, etc., that can be made available to us. So a lot depends on the fantasies operating.

But where there is devotion and deep love for the path, a lot of you listening to this will be devoted and have a deep love for the path. There is always some conception and some fantasy or image of the path of awakening, and of the self on the path. Always where there's devotedness and deep love, there is always some conception, some fantasy or image of the path of awakening and of the self on the path.

And the fantasies and images we have, or each practitioner has, or are operating for a practitioner, the fantasies and images, they need to be authentic to that practitioner, for that practitioner. If they're not authentic, they won't be fertile. There'll be a dryness and a certain amount of fertility, but actually a kind of a level of barrenness in what the path can be.

So, for example, if the ideas and the images of path and of awakening are just kind of inheritances from the subcultures that we move in, and maybe from books and talks, kind of indoctrinations, if you like, on whose rungs of measurement and attainment the ego fastens itself. Somehow I've just absorbed this way of thinking about the path, and there's some kind of sense of attaining or measuring or where am I at in this conception, this vision of the path. And if it's not authentic, what happens is what gets hold of it is the soul doesn't get hold of it so much as the ego gets hold of it in its habit of self-measurement. Here it's got something called awakening, something called reaching this insight and that jhāna or being such and such mindful for so much of the time or whatever it is. And what's got hold of it is just the ego with its propensity, its addiction to measuring, measuring things and measuring itself.

And the soul has not got, it's not really the fertile soil for the soul. And this ego measurement actually, and the lack of soul soil there, will smother and kill the soul-making that, if you like, we need, the path needs, the soul needs the whole path to have.

Whether it's mindfulness or insight into emptiness that is regarded as the essential aim of the path—whatever is considered the ultimate goal—if it's not authentic to me, if the vision I carry is not truly mine, then sooner or later a frustrating stagnation will set in. A person begins to wonder, "When am I going to get it together?" or feels, "Maybe I'm just not good enough, maybe I just can't hack this."

Then what often happens is either they tolerate those thoughts and feelings—sometimes for decades—or they become drawn to teachings that say, "Don't try, don't do, there's nothing to do, there's nowhere to go."

This becomes the only apparent option between frustrating stagnation and the painful cycle of trying harder, contracting, and giving up again while feeling like a failure.

But is that really the only option? Or is it, once again, a question of soul-making?

I wonder if our vision of the path might be primarily characterized by open-endedness rather than attainment. What if the path is fundamentally open-ended? Consider the path of the imaginal that we've been developing over these past years—to me, this path is inherently open-ended. When will I reach the end of the path of the imaginal? Never, in the conventional sense.

At first, yes, there may be confusion: "What are they talking about? What does this mean? Is this an image or not?" Initially there might be some frustration, some self-judgment. But once one grasps the basic concepts and modes of practice and experience, it becomes open-ended—an unfolding of richer and richer, increasingly diverse ranges and depths of experience.

If the path is characterized primarily by open-endedness rather than attainment, is that familiar kind of frustration and self-judgment even possible? The frustration that comes with thoughts like "I am awakened, I'm not awakened, so-and-so is awakened but I'm not"—can this arise when the path is understood as fundamentally open?

The fantasies, images, and views we hold of the path's goals and aspirations need to be beautiful for us. They need to be beautiful. But if we take them too literally, or if the image of the self becomes too bound within them, they will be neither beautiful, nor fertile, nor freeing. Can we enter into the poetry of the image? This poetic sense, this poetic understanding—the language, texture, and relationship implicit in the imaginal?

But woven into this need for beauty is a crucial question: What do you deeply want? What do you deeply want? Is it a reduction in suffering? The end of suffering? So-called freedom—if we just leave those words for now?

If it is freedom from suffering that you most deeply want when you really look and open yourself to that question, let me ask another: What kind of freedom? What kind of freedom, and in what domains? There are many kinds of freedom, many domains of freedom.

What do you deeply want? Perhaps a more essential question is: What does your soul need right now? What does my soul, what does your soul need right now?

Can we, in asking these questions, release the assumption that we are most fundamentally concerned with freedom, with liberation, with ending or decreasing suffering? We assume this so easily, and then all the language, all the discourse, all the movement and explanation and thinking about the path becomes wrapped up in this framework.

It may well be that ending or reducing suffering is actually the most important thing for you. There are

certainly times when that will be crucial. But what if we allow a little more space into this entrenched and pervasive way of thinking about path and practice?

Most Dharma teachings and most other spiritualities cast their paths and make their appeals in that direction—freedom from suffering—with the assumption that this is what we most fundamentally, most deeply want. But it seems to me, listening to people, watching people, reflecting on my own experience, that it's not always liberative efficacy that moves us most deeply. Not always the utilitarian question of how well this path or practice actually liberates me from suffering that attracts us most profoundly.

And who is to say it should be? Why should it be?

On whose authority? On what authority?

Someone was telling me about a sangha in another country where they have different teachers come for retreats, and they were debating whether certain teachers should come. Someone was advocating for two or three teachers to come who would teach together—they taught a kind of what we might call neo-Advaita style. The message they reported was that these teachers came into the retreat and sort of said to the group: "You know, we've all tried technique. You've all tried technique, and you've all tried striving, and we have all, all of us in this room—we and you—all of us have found that technique and striving doesn't work. Now, we are going to open you to the highest teaching. This is the teaching of no effort, no technique."

And so there's this argument that ensues very easily then: Is what they're saying actually liberating? And is it true that the people who teach technique and some degree of striving are actually teaching something that's less liberating or not liberating? And so the argument kind of locks horns on that level, deciding who should come to teach and whether it's okay for them to say that, etc.

But to me, there's a whole other level to engage that kind of claim, or any kind of claim, about any kind of path, which is: maybe this path that you're painting, whoever it is—could be these people or some other people—maybe this path is boring to me. It just bores me. It's not about whether it frees or not, or this or that, or works, or even whether the Pali Canon says this or that text says that. Actually, it's boring. What does that mean? It means it's not interesting enough for my soul. It's not sexy enough—and I don't mean sexual enough. It's not captivating. It's not full and juicy enough and doesn't have a wide enough range for my soul. It's boring.

And we'll think, well, what kind of argument is that? But actually, in terms of soul-making, it's very relevant. Instead of getting into this argument that's confined and constrained along certain lines of what is it that frees and does it work or doesn't it work to bring freedom, etc., etc.—sure, that's a part of what's important, but there's a whole other thing which is just to do with what is boring or interesting or fertilizing for my soul or your soul right now.

Sometimes people say, you know, nowadays we say we need a Buddhism for our times. We need a

Buddhism for our times. We have to rethink Buddhism for our times. And I would say, you know, I don't care about my times. I care about my soul and a path that allows and supports this soul-making dynamic, which means the eros, the psyche, the logos, the whole engagement of all that.

For instance, that neo-Advaita path that's so attractive and so popular to so many people seems to be—or the kind of, yeah, if it's a secularist path—it's not about what's more authentic or what the texts say or this or that. It's about what's going on there. I've talked about this before in terms of soul-making. It's actually what engages my, or your eros, my intellect, the soul of my intellect, my imagination, the whole imaginal dimensions of my being, my creativity, the range and diversity of my longing and my devotion, my heart in its depth, the subtlety of my attention, my particularities.

I don't care if that fits modern times or if it's archaic or if it belongs to something in the future that modernism hasn't yet caught up with. All of that's kind of—who cares? What the soul cares about is what's fertile ground for the soul.

Something has to be, in my vision, in my sense, concept, fantasy of path and awakening—something there has to be fertile enough, provide fertile enough ground to birth, to galvanize and to support all this in me. The eros, the intellect, the imaginal, the creativity, the devotion, the longing in all its range and diversity, the heart's depths and subtleties, the subtlety of attention and sensitivity, all of that, and all my particularities. And to galvanize and support and give birth to and suggest a whole wide range of practices—because practicing in different ways and different directions is beautiful, is creative, is part of the love of practice. And again, to birth and support and open up all kinds of insights, all kinds of experiences and perceptions and openings, widenings of perceptions and all kinds of creative endeavors and arts, etc.

What the soul needs is something that's fertile and commensurate with where the soul is at. That may be bigger than the question of liberative efficacy in terms of reducing suffering. Of course, there's another kind of liberation there. Can you hear that as well? There's a liberation of the intellect, there's a liberation of the eros, there's a liberation of the imaginal, there's a liberation of the creativity, there's a liberation of the longing, all that.

Yet the point is the conversation gets constrained because we tend to keep thinking in certain ways and imagining in certain ways, and it's too small for the soul. Or at least it's too small for the soul at a certain point—it will be too small for the soul. And for many people, it will already be too small for the soul. We don't realize what's going on, and why are we feeling constrained here? Why do we keep going back into the same way of thinking?

So we need something, each soul needs something authentic to that soul, for that soul. But because of the soul-making dynamic and what we talked about—this expansion, deepening, widening—

complicating that happens with the eros psychologos, interaction, mutual insemination.

Even if a vision, a fantasy, a concept of the path and of awakening is authentic for a while, because of the soul-making dynamic and the expansion of eros psychologos, at some point we may well outgrow that vision, that concept, that fantasy. So this is quite common, it happens in all kinds of ways. Something is pushing against the walls and the edges of what the vision, fantasy, logos is of the path and of awakening.

For example, I know a young man who for many years had really quite a fairly strong eros with regard to the path. But the conception, the vision, and the fantasy of the path only really allowed that eros to flow in the direction of a certain image of a kind of monk. He was actually living as a layperson, but living in a very simple way. I think he didn't even have a bank account. He was doing service work and living in a retreat center. But there was this ethos and this mythos of the sort of free-flowing monk. That was the fantasy image.

So within that, the ideals and images of letting go, let everything come, let it go, easygoingness, fluidity, non-preference, whatever life gave him—that's what he would just go with. He wouldn't intrude into that process with his preferences and insist on this or that. The whole thing had a lot of spaciousness, so very beautiful, very potent, with a lot of freedom, a lot of ease, a lot of simplicity. There was this eros to know the transcendent, to know the unfabricated, but it wasn't so much dominated—it wasn't that that dominated his relationship with the experiences of life. So that was there, but not at the expense of a relationship with what was around him. But that relationship had some fantasy of easygoingness, fluidity, spaciousness, non-preferences. So very potent, very lovely, very freeing, very spacious.

But at some point, there arose an overwhelming attraction, almost to the point of a kind of imprisonment of the psyche, to someone, a woman, whose soulfulness extended and was more obvious in relationship to the world and the things of the world. Her soulfulness involved a much more involved relationship with things. Much more, instead of the simplicity of one fantasy image—and not even seeing it as an image. That was the thing. He was in this image. It was very helpful, as I said—freeing, spacious, peaceful—but he didn't realize that it was in fact a soul image that he was caught in the mythos of, caught in the fantasy.

She, on the other hand, had all kinds of images about self, about nature, about relationship, all kinds of things—complex, an enchantment of the things of the world that his fantasy didn't allow because it was a lot about letting things go and everything's just the same: good, bad, beautiful, ugly. It's all just beautiful, just one. There were fewer erotic objects in his world. In the space of that kind of fantasy, in that kind of logos, the world was not full of erotic objects. The world was just all a kind of ground for letting go.

James Hillman, I've mentioned this before, makes the distinction between what he calls spirit and soul. Spirit is this movement towards spaciousness, transcendence, letting go, disentangling. And soul, in his language, has more this quality of entanglement, complication. So spirit is the hermit on the mountaintop in the clean, clear, crisp air with long views. And the soul is more in the valley, in the undergrowth, in the complication, in the messiness of relationships and images and all that.

I'm less keen on that division and would prefer to just talk about these as both soul directions—both the

attitude of letting go and that monk image and the spaciousness and the sense of oneness as a movement of soul, one movement of soul, and other kinds of movements of soul as well.

But here was this someone caught in this fantasy of the monk and the spaciousness, the fluidity, the non-preference, the easygoingness. And he was then overwhelmingly hooked, almost to the point of a kind of imprisonment, I think he would have said, by an attraction to this woman who embodied and expressed and represented a much wider and richer kind of soulfulness, psyche.

It wasn't just that in his monastic endeavor he wanted sex. It wasn't just that he was dealing with "ah, yes, the sexual drive will get them in the end. That's the one that's really hard to overcome." It wasn't just that he was lonely and wanted romance. That wasn't really what was going on, I don't think, or that's one way of understanding it.

He could let go of everything else to quite a remarkable degree, and people were very impressed by his ability to let go, almost in relation to everything, but not in relation to this woman, not in relation to wanting her. It's one thing, this one thing. He can let go of everything, but what's going on here?

Could it be that what was happening was there was an unconscious attraction to psyche, to soul-making? You know, in the myth, Eros and Psyche are lovers. Eros wants Psyche.

We don't need to inquire into his relationship with his mother and locate the cause in the past. There's something present in the natural wish of the soul for expansion—the eros-psyche-logos dynamic moving in all directions. Something, a rigidity of fantasy that isn't realized, hasn't been seen, image as image, hasn't been recognized there, prevents this expansion. And so it knocks and insists. Eventually it will, or possibly it will cause an expansion or a rupture.

However—which I think is actually what happened after we talked—he develops and allows his actions, the sensibilities and the dynamism of soul-making in his life more widely. He starts opening and tuning to and allowing and supporting and investing in and exploring soul-making in his life more widely. That means in relation to everything—what's around him, money, body, relationships, whatever, everything, nature.

Then actually what can happen, what did happen, is he was no longer so imprisoned in his desire for this woman. There might still be attraction, of course, but in a way, what was, if you like, most deeply wanted there was soul. Soulfulness and soul-making wasn't being allowed. Something in him wanted it to go in these other directions. But now, actually, with a little time, actually the soul-making can be everywhere. It permeates life. And then it's not solely and inexplicably in her. She becomes inexplicably this attractive object that he couldn't let go of, his desire there.

The question is: what allows and supports the fantasy-image-logos of practice to be soul-making? What kinds of images or what actually would support the discovery or the shaping of fantasy images, logos, of practice, so that they can be soul-making? What allows the infusion or pervasion of whatever soul-making

fantasy and image works for us? What allows that to pervade and infuse the whole of the path for us, the whole of that movement and that engagement?

In a previous talk—I can't remember when it was on this retreat—I gave the example of someone for whom there is no real image in the meditation, there's no eros really alive, no aliveness, no arousal of the imaginal with respect to meditation practice. Very easily there's not this fantasy of the nobility of struggle and putting up with what's difficult. And very easily they just stop meditating or give up—peers go and they don't practice. It's not alive with fantasy, with the range of fantasy that's needed.

One response—a very common response—is: you need to make more effort. If you want to suffer less, you need to make more effort. So this person is suffering, and yet they can't seem to really get a relationship with meditation that really works. Someone might say it's a matter of you just need to try more, stick it out when it's tough, if you want to suffer less.

Is it that, or is it, as we suggested the other day, actually what needs to happen there—there needs to be a widening of the image and of the fantasy of meditation itself, in meditation, of meditation. So we have to approach the whole thing, perhaps, in quite a different way, in a soul-making way. Not so much: what's the easiest? So, oh, this is too hard, the meditation, I'll just go and have some cookies or have a little rest or be cozy or whatever. Not so much that—what's easiest? Not so much get it together, try harder, but rather the question: what is soul-making? Where is the sense of soulfulness for me right now? Is there a way of visioning this, imagining this, finding a fantasy and a logos that actually the practice itself becomes soul-making and soulful, even if it's difficult?

So when I use the word authentic and say it has to be authentic for a practitioner, it means authentic for the soul-making right now of my soul. For my soul-making right now, for your soul-making right now—that's what I mean by authentic.

When there is deep love for the path, when there is eros for the path, that includes and implies—involved in that is a love for soul-making in regard to the path. What we love is the soul-making. We love the soul-making that is involved in the walking of the path. It's not just that it releases us from suffering. We feel a bit better and there's less suffering. That's all good and important. For some people, that's all their meditation is or their mindfulness exercise or whatever it is. But when there's really eros there, when we love it, we love the soul-making that is involved in the path.

That means we love the image. We love the images that are involved in the path. We love the ideas. The ideas themselves are beautiful and attractive to us, interesting to us. We love the eros. We love the actual sense of eros there. We love the expansion of the psyche-logos and eros.

And, as I said, the image of the self on the path. Wrapped up in all of that love of soul-making is a love of beauty. Beauty is always a part of soul-making. So part of what we love, when we love a path, when there's eros for the path and for the practice, we love—there's some love of beauty there. It's not just a

purely functional kind of utilitarian exercise in reducing suffering and providing a bit more ease. Something in us finds beauty there, and that's part of soul-making always.

Beauty implies that what is beautiful to us, we draw close to. We want intimacy with—there's the eros. We want connection with. And we love the intimacy and connection. You can see how all this starts feeding on itself, fertilizing itself.

We love sensitivity. When you speak to someone who's really gotten into insight meditation, part of what they love is the sensitivity. Yes, the opening of the heart and all that, but part of what people love is the sensitivity that comes with it, that it develops. So we love the tuning, the sensitizing, the differentiations and nuances that go with rich practice. This is part of the eros of the path. Where there's beauty, there's sensitivity when it's soul-making. Beauty is part of the soul-making.

As I've said in the past, the soul needs some sense of beyondness—some sense of beyond that it can intuit or feel or dimly perceive or sense or that it's heard about—beyond what it already knows and what it already experiences. In order for there to be eros and soul-making, there needs to be some kind of sense of beyond. Perhaps, hopefully, a kind of infinities experience into which to expand, infinities to expand into. The soul needs that to stimulate the eros there.

The soul needs beauty, mystery, dimensionality, sense of sacredness and divinity, needs eros, needs the expansion of the logos, the enrichment of the ideas, needs fantasy and the imaginal, as we've said, needs a sense of meaningfulness and embodiment. So all these things—beauty, mystery, dimensionality, sacredness, divinity, eros, expansion of the logos, fantasy and image, meaningfulness, embodiment, the sense of infinities to expand into—this is needed. This is what the soul needs. This is part of the beyondness that the soul needs. There's more there of these things, of these qualities, if you like, these perceptions.

All these, you'll notice, are kind of implicit and organically and obviously involved when we're talking about practice with images and imaginal perceptions and theophanies and cosmopoiesis. There is the beauty, naturally, to that. There is the mystery, the dimensionality, the sacredness, divinity, the eros, the expansion of the logos that comes with that, the image, naturally, the meaningfulness, somehow the embodiment. There's a sense of the infinity of dimensionality to expand into, always, when we're talking about practicing with images, with theophanies, with cosmopoiesis.

When the practice and the eros is in this other direction towards oneness, towards the transcendent or a decrease in fabrication or the unfabricated, when it involves, in other words, not so much image and imaginal perception as a quietening of a degree of perception, including imaginal perception—so a quietening of images—we can, in terms of those elements that I just said that the soul wants as part of the sense of beyondness, see that they're all there in the relationship. We talked about this, in the fantasy of treading on that path towards this sense of beyond. It's around the actual experience or in relationship to the path to the unfabricated or to this insight into oneness or this perception of oneness. So the

soul-making comes most obviously in the relationship.

But it's actually also there, so to speak, directly. These elements that the soul wants and needs are available directly in relationship to the experience of transcendence or the unfabricated or oneness—a lot of them: beauty, mystery, dimensionality, sacredness, divinity. To a certain extent, yes.

For instance, the unfabricated itself—not speaking in terms of the journey to it, but the experience itself—we could say well, that transcends meaning. It's beyond anything we could call meaning. But I would say, somehow, the experience of it is deeply meaningful. And it's hard to actually say, what does that mean? Something about participation there, something about what it says about the whole of existence, potentially.

And there's also an expansion of logos. But there's no thought there, but actually in the movement towards non-conceptuality, the very fact of it being non-conceptual is in a way an expansion of the logos. Somehow I have to have conceptual movement that expands into non-conceptuality.

But if in that movement to unfabricating, to the unfabricated, or to certain levels on the way of that, to certain kinds of perceptions of oneness, if the eros, psyche, logos—if any of them are limited—then the sense of these elements of beauty, mystery, dimensionality, and kind of infinity to expand into, the sacredness, the divinity, the eros, the ideation, the image, the meaningfulness, the embodiment—the sense of those elements, the perception of those elements with regard to the world will be limited, even if one already has an experience of the unfabricated.

Even if the Eros Psyche Logos is limited, if the soul-making dynamic is limited, then the sense of these elements with regard to the world—the sense of these elements that the soul wants—will be limited.

For example, in a talk some time ago, I gave the example of the senior nun talking about the birds and seeing them in a very narrow way in terms of biological evolution: why they're colorful and what they're actually doing when they're singing or flying around. For her, these were all just the strategic movements of evolution or the effects of natural selection. Someone asked me afterward, "But this nun was a mystic, surely." Yes, she was a mystic, but the mysticism there was only allowed in the direction of less fabrication, toward formlessness, toward oneness or the unfabricated, or the movements toward that in terms of the jhānas, which are states of less fabrication.

So even after attaining or opening to a direct experience of the unfabricated—which one assumes, based on what she shared and wrote, that she had—the mysticism, the mystical perception, was limited in terms of the world. The mysticism was all in the direction of oneness, of states of less fabrication, and of the unfabricated. There was then, in relation to the world, a kind of renunciation and a denigration of the world of things and sense experience. The images and fantasies that were attractive were only forms of the Buddha or of the Buddha-Dharma—only these were regarded as worthy of veneration or holy.

Other forms—the birds, the other particulars of being and life and others and things and nature—were

not available to her as theophanies. The perception of them as theophanies, other forms that were outside the range of classical Buddhist forms, were not available to her perception as theophanies, except in the sense of being just equally, like everything else, manifestations of universal oneness, universal emptiness, or whatever.

What I want to say is this: if the eros is strong in a person, and if the psyche and the logos—the range of images and the ideation—is not blocked, either by dogma or rigid adherence to some tradition or teaching, or politically blocked; if the eros is strong and the psyche and logos are not blocked, then even after an experience of the unfabricated, after one has gotten used to that and digested it, I would predict that there will be a return to the world of sense experience, to the world and to particulars, and to beginning to see them as theophanies, beginning to see them imaginatively, beginning to see and open to the holiness in them.

In other words, there is a movement from transcendence—not throwing away the transcendence, but a movement to then extend what the soul-making wants to extend into what we called, at the beginning of this long talk, the immanence. And not just in the sense of "oneness everywhere," "it's all one love," "it's all one awareness," "it's all one whatever." The soul is hungry. The soul wants more.

So we go back to that Gregory of Nyssa quote: "How could this limited world suffice? For the thirst of human souls requires some infinite water." The emphasis I would put is on that word "limited." If the world is seen in a limited way, yes, the soul is going to want more and move into transcendence. What is beyond this world? This is a really beautiful, important, profound opening of the understanding and the vision, the experience, the consciousness, the citta.

But it won't stop there. Back to the world—back to the world of sense experience and particulars, but not the limited world, the unlimited world. Unlimited because liberated through the imaginal and through the eros and through the soul-making dynamic. So there's a return to that, even after one has had this transcendent experience and digested that and been liberated by that in certain directions to a deep extent. There is a return to the world and the imaginal and the logos and the eros engaging, infusing, filling out there in relationship to the world and the experience of the world.

There's an expansion of the soul-making eventually in all directions—in all directions. This is what we're suggesting in terms of the theory: that the soul-making will do this eventually, in all directions.

If I start with a flat worldview—flatland, one-dimensional—but I don't insist on that rigidly so that it blocks the logos, and I don't refuse the imaginal, and I allow the eros to flow, then even if I start with the flat conventional view of modernism, that eros and soul-making dynamic will liberate the perceptions and the ways of looking that reveal dimensionality. Eventually, one of the directions of dimensionality will deepen to a perception of the transcendent, the unfabricated. One of the directions of the dimensionality deepening.

But even if I start with a transcendent inclination and path—if that's what I've been taught, that's what I grew up with, I do my practices, I discover that for myself, I experience that, and the citta opens to that unfabricated, unfabricating, marvelous, staggering—even then, if I don't stop the soul-making dynamic there, if I allow its natural organic wish to grow, to open, to fertilize, then I come back to what we're calling immanence. I come back to the world and fill it out, giving it depth or allowing its depths to open in the immanence through the imaginal, through the soul-making, in relationship to the senses, to the world. The beauty is there, divinity is there, meaningfulness is there, all these other pieces we talked about—mystery, sacredness.

So eventually, the transcendent and the immanent, the immanent and the transcendent—just because of what the Eros Psyche Logos dynamic will naturally want, the ways it will naturally want to grow: multidirectional, unstoppable, infinite.

We could go even beyond this, even more than just the inclusion of the transcendent and the immanent. In the last few years, several people have either said to me or written to me—I don't think they're meaning it as a criticism, but maybe some people are, and maybe some people are meaning it as a compliment—they've labeled me or called me an iconoclast. I really don't think of myself that way at all, for a number of reasons. But if you're going to think in those terms, maybe a better way of saying what I'm interested in is: I'm more interested in smashing idols.

An idol is different than an icon. Better to say, I think, that I would maybe—again, if you're going to speak in these terms—say that I'm a seeker of icons, or even a creator of icons, as we all can be.

An icon is something with infinite depth, infinite capacity to open itself, to open us. It's in relationship with us, and it opens us, opens our psyche, but it itself opens infinitely, potentially more and more.

It's, if you like, a gate to infinity, a gate of infinity, a portal to the infinite. But it's also a portal from the infinite. And I don't just mean infinite space—I mean the infinite riches of the soul, the infinite diversity of perceptions and holinesses and all that.

So an icon keeps opening out to more depth, more dimensions, more possibility, more divinity, more soul-making, without end. There's no end to that.

Therefore, this process that we're engaged in, or part of the process of what we're engaged in, involves questioning more typical or rigidified ideas of the path or awakening, which have actually become idols—idols in the sense of something solid, unmoving, fixed, of a fixed and limited form and depth. We're questioning those idols of the path and of awakening, what have become for me or for you idols regarding the path and awakening, opening up instead new possible visions and ideas of awakening where awakening is not limited either by an endpoint or by a direction. Then we're converting idol to icon. What was stuck and rigid and anything but infinite, what was quite limited in form and depth and range, can actually be liberated and opened up into an icon.

And then, with an icon, an icon of awakening, the eros never collapses. Because there's always an infinity of possibility beyond—an infinity of possibility of what is not yet known, into which the eros can move, which it can penetrate into, which it can open to, and into which the soul-making dynamic can expand. The soul-making dynamic actually creates this infinity because of all we've explained before.

So, if you like, the eros never collapses, it never dies down. There's always the possibility because there's always more, there's always beyond, there's always unknown. I don't even know, I can't even construe what might open. Can't even yet imagine the directions and possibilities, ranges, particularities of what might open as awakening opens more and more and infinitely.

So awakening is not something we reach and then tick off.

Again, just with all this to say something we've already said, but to draw it out a bit more as well: Eros for the path, eros for awakening, needs us to see the beauty of ourselves on the path. Yes, just like we talked about in relationship with any erotic object. For eros to really be allowed and supported for the path, for awakening, we need to see the beauty of the self on the path. The image of the self on the path needs to be beautiful to us.

And the beauty of our longing, our yearning, our desire, our passion for the path and for awakening—this also needs to be beautiful to us, needs to be seen as beautiful to us, as well as the images of the path of awakening, including the image that we have of the tradition, the idea of the tradition, the image, the fantasy, the idea of what a Buddha is and what the Dharma is and all that.

Eros needs psyche. Eros needs images and fantasies and ideas that are soul-making. Ideally, we really see and understand images as images. Those images of path, of the self on the path, of our passion, of the tradition, of the Buddha, of the Dharma—all as images. We see image as image.

And because of that, we can actually allow this inflation, this expansion, this deepening of the fantasy and the image. So we're allowing eros, but not craving, because there's not this rigidification and reifying. The eros is stoked, ignited, supported, fed. The craving is released.

So that expansion of the fantasy and image of path, of awakening, and of what the Dharma is might involve—well, we've been talking about a fantasy of the path of awakening and of the self on it that allows an endlessness or an open-endedness. So what fantasies of the path of awakening, of me on the path to awakening, allow that kind of open-endedness, such an expansion and deepening of the very image and fantasy of path and awakening that actually it's expanded in some senses infinitely?

If we go back to our generic models—the model of the researcher, the scientist, the research scientist, or the model of the artist—these allow, as we mentioned, an endlessness, an open-endedness, assuming you regard science as never getting to the end. Although some people do think we'll reach the end, for me it will be open-ended.

But also, other fantasies and ideas of the path. For example, the Mahayana presentation of path and what awakening is, and the Vajrayana presentation of path and awakening. They involve such a vastly extended and deepened and complicated image, an idea of where the path is going, what it involves, what awakening is, what a Buddha is. They're effectively impossible to reach. There are goals that are impossible to reach. We'll never reach such an awakening, realistically. It will always be further. There will always be a beyond, which is what the soul needs. They're effectively infinite.

And what does that mean? It might mean, with these kinds of fantasies of the path, and there could be others, that something in us can relax and give ourselves fully and passionately and dedicatedly and with fire and aliveness to the path, but enjoy it, enjoy its fruits without getting constrained and hung up and cramped and self-measuring. There can be momentum, practice, dedication, devotion.

The Eros-Psyche-Logos can be active and mutually inseminating, but without judgment or self-judgment, without pressure even, without the pain of the kind of constriction that comes from self-measurement. This happens when the ego is involved and grasping in its measuring tendency, but not so much the soul.

So there are other possibilities. I offer this just to give you a sense of what might be needed if we really take soul-making seriously.

Can you get a sense with all this? I hope you can get a sense. I hope it's not just conceptually, but striking a chord in your soul, something deep in the psyche. Can you hear how this is opening something, if you like, at a whole other level?

The very ways we think of, construe, and imagine path and awakening are part of what path and awakening means. The very ways we think of, construe, and imagine path and awakening are actually themselves part of what the path involves and what awakening involves. There's some infinity here. There's some potential, if you like, for involvement of the totality of our being in all this.

And that totality itself is acknowledged. What we mean by totality and what we recognize to be the totality itself will expand because of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic expanding. Something—even I can't quite articulate what kind—it's like a gong resounding deep in the soul. Something is asking to be opened here, and it has very much to do with participation.

The whole soul is participating in the creation and discovery of what the path is and what awakening is. The whole soul is participating in that and also participating in what even the meaning of soul is and what it is to be fully involved. All this is being created, discovered, expanded, and involved. There's a sort of profound sense of participation in all this.

This is available to us—this kind of level of involvement, level of beauty, soul-making, eros. It's there. It's asking a lot, for sure, and we'll come back to that, but it's possible. And for some people, it will probably be profoundly attractive.

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