Refractions: Of Body, Sensuality, and Sexuality (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:33:27

I'd like to say just a little bit more about our relationships with and our views, conceptions of and our experiences of body, sensuality and sexuality, in the service of opening up the discourse, opening up the questioning, opening up the exploration, and opening up, hopefully, some avenues there.

Before I get immediately onto that, I want to say something else that's related. The reason I want to say it is because it's so easy to listen or read teachings and approach them from within a certain set of fixed assumptions. Sometimes we're not even fully conscious what those assumptions are. Or we may be conscious, but they still go unchallenged—they're not really questioned.

Eros, we have said already many times, may be sexual or non-sexual. It can be very, very subtle, extremely subtle, and it can be very, very intense. Whether it's sexual or not sexual, the eros can have that whole range of force or depth—subtle to intense—and can be what some people would regard as extreme. The eros running in a certain direction in a person's life can seem to others quite extreme. Their devotion to their beloved, whatever that beloved is; the devotion of an artist to their art and the dedication that takes; the devotion, the eros towards a lover when one is in love; or a religious eros, the devotion to the religious beloved, whatever form that takes—all of this can seem extreme, obsessive, ruthless even, out of balance.

Easily, when the eros is very strong and can seem, from a certain perspective, to be extreme, it's easily pathologized by others. When the eros is towards, for example, the transcendent—someone wanting to know the unfabricated and, in some cases, staking one's life on it as the Buddha did—this kind of eros, from many perspectives, particularly from most modernist perspectives of our culture and non-religious culture, seems very easily pathologized as some kind of crazy thing. What you're wanting sounds like nothing for a start. It sounds very abstract and seems to be away from life.

From the other perspective—a more renunciate perspective of certain religious traditions—the eros towards a human being when one is in love is also pathologized. This is delusion, this is crazy, or the eros towards the world.

This pathologization, pointing the finger and regarding others as pathological because we don't share their erotic attraction, and certainly not the intensity of that, happens very easily, either way, in either direction, from either camp, if you like.

What happens there so often is that in contrast to this sort of extremity or intensity of the erotic movement and opening, moderation is elevated. Moderate in all things, and this is regarded as healthy. Anything immoderate or extreme is regarded as pathologized. That may have its place sometimes and may have a certain wisdom to it, but what are the consequences of moderation being elevated? How easily moderation can breed a kind of mediocrity in terms of what opens to us, what we can discover, what we can create. Remember, discovering and creating is the movement of soul-making—mediocrity in terms of what soul-making is then available to us and opens for us as one of the potentially negative consequences of this elevation of moderation.

Why shouldn't one be extreme in one's eros for the transcendent? Why shouldn't one burn with an intensity for knowing the unfabricated, for knowing the divine or the deathless, the divine beyond all concepts, the deathless beyond all concepts, beyond space, beyond time? Certainly, as I just said, the Buddha was extreme in his desire for that, or in regard to any kind of religious erotic movement or desire or longing or calling, yearning.

For example, someone who wants to become a celibate monastic or is a celibate monastic—for so many people, for some people who don't share that, who can't really resonate with that longing, it seems like such a strange movement. It's true that one may be desiring to be a celibate or a monastic or to go beyond the world to know the unfabricated out of fear, out of some kind of closing rather than the opening movement of eros. It's certainly true.

But I mentioned Thomas Merton the other day. He's this beautiful writer and he has an autobiography of a period in his life, I think up to the time he became a monk, a Trappist monk. At that time, the Trappists were an extremely strict order. Their rule was very strict. Not only were they, of course, celibate, but I think they couldn't actually speak, so they had to communicate when necessary about only very necessary things in sign language. It was known as one of the two or three most strict of the monastic Catholic orders.

He describes in this book, *Seven Storey Mountain*, his partial autobiography, the growing longing in him, an inclination to become a monk and to give himself to that life. He visits monasteries and talks with spiritual advisors and priests, and oftentimes the priest didn't share that extreme longing and regarded it as a bit too extreme. But at one point, I think with one of his spiritual advisors or a priest, he says, "Father, I want to give God everything. I want to give God everything." Because the priest was asking, why can't you choose a kind of easier order to go into, less extreme, less renunciate, less hardcore and full on. He said, "Father, I want to give God everything."

So easily that view is just not resonated with, not understood and regarded as pathological.

I also remember for myself when I was living as a musician in the US and I was in a PhD program in composition and teaching at the university there, I made the choice to give that life up and the plan was to ordain as a monk after doing a year retreat at Gaia House. People asked me or I met people and they

would ask me...

What are you doing? And this and that. And I would explain, well, this is what my plan is. And in quite a lot of cases, the person I was talking to, their face would drop, their jaw would drop, and a look of horror and disgust would come over their face in reaction to this idea of living as a monk or dedicating oneself to a celibate life and renunciate life away from sense pleasures, devoted to some kind of—what, as I said, probably seemed like just some abstract longing and life of loneliness and all this, who knows what they were thinking.

But this view comes out of not understanding, just not resonating, not having that—the soul aflame in that direction, in the direction of what we might call the religious, knowing God, whether it's the unfabricated or other directions of religiosity. The eros there is limited when people pathologize that or judge it as extreme, that kind of desire. Their eros in that direction is just very limited and therefore they don't value—they can't see any value in that.

And so often, as I said before, what happens is we prioritize something called balance and something called psychological health. First of all, we have very limited views, very socially constructed views of what balance looks like and what something called psychological health looks like—views that we've gathered from our contemporary society and worldview. So the limited views of something called balance and something called psychological health, which of course are related, and sometimes these almost become ends in themselves. I'm practicing my meditation for psychological health. Not that that's not important, but does it always need to be limited to a view that puts that first and sees that as the end or the only legitimate end?

And we've talked about balance before and actually the importance in navigating, but sometimes we prioritize—I feel sometimes we over-prioritize this idea of balance and being balanced. And we have either a static picture of what balance is, or we've just elevated the whole ideal of balance. Maybe there's a place and times for being really not balanced. I am falling, I am climbing, I am out of balance as I run towards something, whatever it is, as I dance. Maybe I just fall, I stumble, and it's part of the erotic movement.

So we can very easily hear or meet someone, or even in the instances of our own eros, look at ourselves and see a kind of—what from certain perspectives looks too intense, is too extreme, this eros in whatever direction. And I said, what about balance? What about psychological health? And I don't want to dismiss that. So again, all teaching is contextual. So I'm responding, as I said, to what can become quite entrenched, often unconscious, but quite a lot of the time not quite fully questioned views. Well, what is it that I have this assumption? And is it really a necessary assumption? What's it based on?

This prioritizing of balance and psychological health, whatever those notions come to mean for us, in contrast with another approach, which would be a little bit in line with what we're saying—let the eros lead. What if we trust the eros and trust even the directions that it wants to go in so that it will make soul

and forge ahead and open and penetrate and search and discover and burn through in the directions that it wants to? And if that's towards the transcendent, beautiful. How does it want to? Where does the eros want to move? And trusting that, and trusting that as we've been describing, at some point in that process, just because of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic and that mutual insemination, mutual fertilization, mutual widening and enriching, and how that will start moving out to touch everything else. The eros, the directionality of the eros and the directionality of the soul-making will spread.

So as I said, if one opens to the unfabricated, for instance, or even before one has opened, it starts spreading. Something happens. Why? If I don't dampen the eros, if I don't block the movements and the expansion of psyche and logos, it will do that. So another view is actually to trust that and trust being off balance at times and being extreme and people thinking you're weird and this and that.

There's a different kind of imbalance that comes when the eros is blocked or the psyche is blocked or the logos is blocked. Then, as I said before, some people entering the monastery or becoming deliberately celibate or whatever it is, or chasing some transcendent, unfabricated—because the eros is dampened, it's a movement of contraction, of fear of eros. And I'm afraid of sexuality, the body disgusts me, I'm afraid of human relationships, whatever it is. Or the logos is cramped. And this could be, as we said, in any direction.

Well, what about trusting eros and just opening the space for that soul-making dynamic to do its natural thing, which will be like water—it will find its direction, find its multiple directions where it can flow. Or like fire.

So this seems to me important just in the way we're hearing and viewing all this. But as I said, I just want to spend a little time talking a bit more about how eros and in its insemination, its ignition of the soul-making dynamic involving eros, psyche, logos, will affect the views, the relationships, and the experiences of body, sensuality, and sexuality.

So transforming, opening, giving dimensionality to all that. Because of what we said about the potential endlessness and open-endedness, and multi-directionality of the movement of the soul-making dynamic, these aspects of our existence—body, sense, sexuality, along with a lot of others—are potentially infinite. So the way the views can be transformed, the dimensionality given to them, the new openings of perception and view and sense and actual experience, what these things mean to us and the place they have, that is potentially infinitely openable.

In other words, wherever we are now, wherever I am now, there are some unforeseen insights, experiences, views, conceptions, openings, relationships with body, with sensuality, with sexuality, that I have no inkling what they are right now. It's unknown to me now. It's part of the beyond of the eros, of that whole soul-making movement. I just don't know.

So in this field of potentially infinite opening, you can only obviously say a little here, partly due to time

and partly because of the fact that relative to infinity, whatever we say is only going to be a little.

Just before we even get into it, notice that even if we have a strong desire, a strong eros flowing through us for the unfabricated—I want to know that, I want to open to it, I want to taste it—in the traditions of Buddhadharma, in following that eros for the unfabricated, we do not, in the way of the Buddha Dharma, the way that the Buddha taught to know that, ignore or cut off or beat down the body and the senses. Absolutely not.

There is mindfulness of the body as the first foundation of mindfulness. It's absolutely integral to the Buddha's path—careful attention, particular kinds of attention, mindfulness of the body, to the body, and to sense experience. So there's attention to sense experience, mindfulness of body, and mindfulness and attention to sense experience.

In some traditions of Buddhadharma, more in the tantric traditions, also with regard to sexuality and sexual energy, it's regarded as a vehicle. This is actually something we do engage. We don't ignore it. We don't cut it off. We don't beat it down. We engage it as a vehicle because we can gather and collect those energies and channel them in certain ways in the energy body, and this allows certain openings of the perception—particularly in the tantric schools, an opening to the clear light mind.

But in all traditions, certainly in Pali Canon Buddhism, the emphasis is that you're not ignoring the body, you're not cutting it off, you're certainly not beating it down. There's mindfulness of the body and mindfulness, certain kinds of attention to the body and to the sense experiences.

However, this mindfulness to the body and to sense experience and the attention to them serves the understanding of the dependent arising, the fabrication of the perception of the body and of sense experience. In other words, it's not for a reveling in the body and sense experience and sense pleasure. It's not for a glorification of the body. It's not to see the beauty or even the miracle of the body and all that. It's actually, at least in my reading of Pali Canon Buddhism—why are we mindful of the body? Why are we mindful of sense experience? We're mindful in certain ways to understand the dependent arising of the very perception of body and sense experience. And wrapped up with the mindfulness, in a context of practicing ways of looking that actually fabricate less perception of the body.

For example, the jhanas, the progression of the jhanas, you could say, are what they really are: progressively unfabricated perceptions of the body. So the first four jhanas especially, it's really about the body and the perception of the body. The body is, rather than being perceived as this solid material structure, starts to be perceived as fine material form, what the Buddha calls fine material form. The body becomes rapture in the first jhana, becomes happiness in the second jhana, becomes exquisite peacefulness—tender, exquisite peacefulness—in the third jhana, becomes just stillness, still light often in the fourth jhana. Very, very refined perception of materiality.

And then in the fifth jhana, that perception of solidity and what the Buddha calls obstruction is

unfabricated even more, is dissolved even more, is transcended even more. And there's no perception of solidity, materiality of body at all. One enters the fifth jhana, the jhana of infinite space. And then that too is refined through the remaining jhanas, all the way to beyond the eighth jhana to an experience of total unfabrication in the transcendent, in the deathless, in nirvana.

So one is moving there, one is using mindfulness and an understanding of fabrication, practicing different ways of looking, of which mindfulness is one. Actually, mindfulness is several. If you read the Satipatthana Sutta, it implies ways of looking. But what they have in common is that they fabricate less to different degrees, and through that we understand fabrication, but we're moving—the experience is moving beyond the body and beyond sense experience.

So what this means is, yes, absolutely not ignoring, not cutting off, not beating down the body and the senses, but we're using mindfulness and attention to body and senses for very specific purposes in a way to go beyond them to the unfabricated.

What that means, though, is that there's limited value given to both the body and sense experience. Limited value in that transcendental inclination of Pali Canon Buddhism, of the Buddha as he originally taught, to know the deathless, to know the unfabricated, to know that sphere, that dimension, where the eye ceases, the perception of forms ceases, as I quoted. There are many passages.

So all this means that, yes, we pay attention to body and senses, but they have limited value. And the stress is on not desiring...

And the stress is on not desiring for the body and not getting attached to the body and to the senses and to sense pleasures and experience. They therefore—body and sense experience—have limited place given to them in the construction of the path in Pali Canon Buddhism. Even though they might feature very centrally, they're actually given a place that is quite limited because it's just serving this other movement.

I would point out that there is a limited—if you like—view, interpretation, and therefore sense of and perception of both body and sense experience. The whole view and interpretation is construed within the framework of a transcendentalist path, and so that actually limits and constrains the very sense and perception we have of both body and sense experience. Because experience and perception of both will be limited by view and concept and interpretation.

So, for example, related to all that, in the first foundation of mindfulness there's a passage on contemplating what the Buddha calls the unclean parts of the body—liver and spleen and kidneys and bile and blood and pus and synovial fluid and all the rest of it. And again, in the Satipatthana Sutta, there in the foundations of mindfulness, there's the encouragement to contemplate the body as the elements of the body—the classical elements of earth, air, fire, water.

One way of understanding that—the simplest, kind of the less contorted, probably, way of understanding that—is at that time, conceiving in terms of elements was actually just like what we would consider now,

conceiving in terms of atoms. Look at the body and consider it as just a group of atoms. There's probably calcium there in the bones and potassium and all the stuff that bodies are made of. So there's this view of the elements classically.

We can interpret it and take it in different directions which do different things. There's always a certain view, a certain spin will take the perception and open it in different directions. But one way is just to think of it—what the Buddha was getting at there was this was the view of materiality back then, that it was constructed of basic elements. And it's something similar to our kind of deconstruction. The intention was a kind of deconstruction then of the body. This thing that we tend to get attached to and think, "Wow, how wonderful," is just saying it's just the elements. It's just the elements. It's like us saying it's just a bunch of atoms—in the service of less attachment.

So there is wrapped up in... Actually, let's put it this way. Emerging from our heritage in Pali Canon Buddhism and the transcendentalist thrust there—that's not always acknowledged or realized or given emphasis or place in modern interpretations of the Dharma and teachings of the Dharma that still try to place the Pali Canon at their base—this causes all kinds of confusion and contradiction.

So one is in regard to the body, but also in terms of the senses. In the Majjhima Nikaya, in the snake simile in the middle-length discourses, the Buddha gives—he says sense pleasures, you know, don't go chasing them. So he's really reigning in the eros with regard to sense pleasure, certainly reigning in the craving, but it doesn't make the distinction with regard to eros. So it kind of all gets, as we've said, shoved in one basket, so to speak.

But he says sense pleasures are like fleshless bones. It's like throwing a bone with no flesh and just sort of blood-stained to a starving dog. It completely just gets the dog a little bit excited. The dog will gnaw and chase and chew on this bone, but it's not getting any satisfaction there. So the sense pleasures, the Buddha said, are like fleshless bones.

They're like carrying a flaming torch of straw. So imagine that—a collection of straw, and you're holding it, and it's a flame, and carrying that against the wind. And so what's going to happen there? Your hands are going to get burnt, your face is going to get burnt.

He continues: the sense pleasures are like a pit of burning coals, which you're dragged through. They're like borrowed goods. You might enjoy them, but they're temporary. You have to give them back.

He is even more extreme and more strong in his analogies. The sense pleasures are a slaughterhouse, he said, or like a butcher's block—the block of wood where a butcher will cut up the meat, the carcasses. They are like a stake of swords—those stakes sticking out of the ground with sharp ends where you're just going to get impaled.

They are like a snake's head. Yes, you get bitten and there's poison to the bite. These are really strong words - sense pleasures bring suffering and disappointment. Sense pleasures are perilous, he says.

It's very rare these days to encounter such extreme language or such a forceful thrust of teaching regarding sense pleasures, certainly in the insight meditation tradition and other Buddhist traditions I'm familiar with. I do know teachers who speak this way, though one I'm particularly thinking of does so quite tongue-in-cheek. But even among monastics, why is this approach so uncommon now?

Of course, some of you may know that Tantric texts in Tantric Buddhism actually reverse this teaching regarding sense pleasures - we may explore that more as we continue. But this teaching around sense pleasures in the Pali Canon, its current and tenor, strongly influences our present attitudes and views within the Dharma. Yet it actually results in quite a confused, unintegrated, and incoherent teaching in relation to sense experience and sense pleasure - and there are reasons for this, which we'll return to.

Especially regarding sexuality - sometimes it's actually avoided as a topic altogether in Buddhist teachings - there's this underlying attitude and view permeating the discourse, yet it's mixed with other attitudes and views that we can't quite reconcile. This applies certainly to sexuality, probably to all sense pleasures, and we could say more about romantic love as well, which we've touched on.

So there is this tenor, this voice, this thrust running through the teachings right from the early sources. And I think it has all kinds of consequences. Some people regard the Buddha Dharma, across different traditions, as quite misogynistic. You'll know that in the Theravada tradition there's been considerable controversy and heated debate in recent years around whether nuns can be fully ordained and have equal status to monks within Buddhism.

Quite rightly, I think, there's a case to be made that a kind of misogyny runs through Buddhism - through many Buddhist traditions, not just the Theravada. I've certainly heard stories from women, even teachers of mine, about being in monasteries as young women trying to practice meditation with dedication, only to have many monks treat them with disdain and disrespect. One teacher told me they basically looked at you like you had the plague, as if all they could see was someone distracting them from their path because you appeared to them as a temptress.

Again, you hear this fear and avoidance, this contraction of view and contraction of eros that we alluded to earlier. But I sometimes wonder if the misogyny actually has its root, at least partly, in something more fundamental - a stance of being anti-sensual eros. It's as if sensual eros, eros in relation to sense experience, has no place in certain communications of the teachings, in certain movements of practice.

There can be eros for the transcendent, and there can be eros for the Buddha to a certain extent, in terms of soul-making and imagery. But there's a cutting off, a dismissal, a refusal of place, and a fear of sensual eros - eros with regard to sensuality. And out of that, at an even more fundamental level, perhaps comes the fuel for misogyny. I don't know, but I wonder.

Because in some visions or images - even if a person doesn't think that imagery and fantasy operates for them regarding the path and awakening - it's almost as if the very vision, the fantasy itself, the image and

concept of awakening is exactly a life without eros. That's what awakening looks like: the flame has gone out. There's certainly no eros toward sensuality or with regard to sensuality, and there's no eros even for the unfabricated or for any other kind of contemplative opening because that has been realized.

So there's this sense, this image, this fantasy of awakening as what it looks like: a life without eros.

I've touched on this before - oftentimes in teaching insight meditation, if one even mentions or gives instructions around what to do with sexual images or sexual energy that arises, it might be in the more generous and somewhat open traditions. The guidance is usually: "Just notice them, just allow them. That's okay." But implicitly: don't encourage them. For heaven's sake, don't encourage them. Sexual energy, sexual images - as we've said before - they are not...

They are not given any positive place on the path. They simply don't really fit. The only way they fit is in the sense of, well, they're just something else to be open to in a kind of attitude—which is relatively popular—of just being open to all things. They're just equal to anything else, and our job, like with anything else, is just to let them go. Let them come, let them go.

Underneath all that is this: it's better if they don't arise—at least less hassle if sexual images and sexual energy don't arise. But regarding that, and regarding sense pleasure, there's this—sometimes it seems to me, or has seemed to me, and I know that other people feel this way—it's hard. It's rare for them to actually be able to articulate it to themselves or to another. There's a kind of confusion, especially regarding sense pleasure, even more than sexuality. Or there's a kind of lack of coherence or integrity often in our thinking about this, in our view, in our conceptual framework.

So we might say, for instance, contrary to what the Buddha taught for the most part—we turn it a little bit upside down. We say very often to meditators: "Don't chase meditative pleasure. You might have a blissful sitting, but don't try and make it happen again. You might fall into a jhāna, but these are really things you want to be careful not to get attached to them, and don't try and repeat it," etc., etc., etc.

Whereas almost every day in both monasteries and retreat centers, extremely pleasant-tasting food is served. A lot of time and energy goes into preparing that for the retreatants, for the monastics. And if someone dedicated to the Dharma wants to share about, "Oh, I'm going to go skiing in such and such a place," or whatever it is, it raises no eyebrow—even if it's just, "Oh, that's going to be a pleasant sense experience. It's going to be fun and pleasant."

This is completely the opposite of what the Buddha would originally encourage, which is: "Yes, strive to attain jhāna, strive for that bliss. This is something worth striving for. Develop it, don't fear it." Whereas in relation to wanting sense pleasures—nice food, nice sights, sounds, etc.—he was very discouraging.

So there's something here. First, we've mixed up the emphases the Buddha placed on these two things—where we should actually strive for and put effort into, and where we shouldn't. But even more generally, there seems a kind of confusion in our minds and a lack of integrity—coherence is perhaps a

better word.

If we're wanting to lessen our confusion, to increase or support a sense of more coherence, more making sense in terms of our vision and our concept of the whole path—what that really means for our life—because we can have a concept that makes sense, and then when it comes to our life, we're not actually really living it. We're talking about people who really love studying the Dharma and are involved in the practice, but actually, these things don't really hang together very coherently in terms of what the teachings say and what one might communicate with others and what makes sense, but then how one actually lives and the choices. There's a lack of coherence, a lack of integrity often for us there.

So if we want less confusion, if we want to support a making sense of the whole thing, integrating it into our life and feeling like we have integrity and there is coherence there, then this means getting clear about a few things. Or becoming more clear regarding quite a few pieces here.

But by clear, I don't primarily mean clear seeing, as in "I see clearly what's there," which implies a notion of reality. Maybe clear means, and getting clear and clearing means more like something like "clear a path"—clear a path for movement. And what movement? The movement of soul-making, the movement of eros, the movement of creation, discovery, etc., that we've been talking about.

So yes, there's some clear seeing in terms of distinctions and delineations, like we've talked about between eros and craving, for example. But more it's like: what's blocked for us? And when does that blocking not serve? So clearing a path, but also clarity of delineation.

Now, included in all that is being clear, delineating between the three or four possibilities that we already talked about—ways that the path and the vision of awakening and the concept of awakening construe our relationship with sense experience.

So, for example, just reviewing now, as we talked about: one very common view is that regarding sense experience, maybe sense pleasure, our job is to cut the papañca—cut the proliferation, cut the veil of images and thoughts and concepts around sense pleasure. Cut it, remove it, so that we can just meet experience "barely," "nakedly," "directly," etc. There's this myth, really, of bare attention—something the Buddha never talked about.

And then there's either this construct of being with what is, meeting the touch of life, meeting life, open to the touch of life, whatever it is. Or there's this kind of movement to a kind of atomistic reductionism: you cut papañca and you're just with the micro-moments of vedanā and perception and all the rest of it.

Both of these—either the myth of "what is" and the touch of life, or the atomistic reduction to perception, conception—both of them are realist, as we've said all this before. But that's the first group of views: cut papañca and practice bare attention to sense pleasure.

And then it's just a moment of pleasantness, and there's nothing else with that.

A second view has a broader and deeper meaning given within it to the word papancha. And the whole movement there is not to the touch of life and the atomistic reality, but rather beyond all that to the unfabricated, to the transcendent, beyond all sense experience. So here is sense pleasure, sense experience. Cutting papancha really means unfabricating. And for the sake of that transcendental thrust, the opening to the knowing of the realization of that sphere, that dimension where the eye ceases, where the ear ceases, where the perception of forms, the perception of sound ceases—that unfabricated, deathless realm we talked about.

In contrast to those two, a third construal or conceptual framework regarding the senses and their place on the path and in the vision of awakening contrasts papancha with what we might call psyche or image or fantasy—good terms in our vocabulary—with soul-making, basically. Papancha versus soul-making, erotic, imaginal engagement with the senses, or in the language of Tantra, with skillful fabrication, the fabrication in which Tantrism engages.

So there's a deliberate fabrication of perception, enrichment, if you like, of perception, a multi-dimensionalizing of perception. Eros, the imaginal soul-making, comes in to enrich, imbue, complexify, widen, deepen, and give dimensions to the perception of and relationship with the senses. Whereas the first two construals—cutting the papancha and being with bare attention, or cutting the papancha as the movement completely beyond the senses to the unfabricated—these do not allow that in those thrusts or those visions of what the path is. They do not allow the erotic imaginal and the soul-making with regard to the senses.

But with respect to all that, what we've been saying is, first of all, to acknowledge that soul-making already happens. No matter what view you have, it will come in one way or another to our path and to our relationship, our view of ourselves and all that. What we need to do is acknowledge this—acknowledge the presence of eros, fantasy, and soul-making in our lives, in what we love, and if we love the path, that means in relation to the path and to awakening.

And acknowledging that and then delineating that, and delineating that by creating, as we've done, making these concepts and then seeing what that does and what opens up in terms of perception. And also being clear about what we talked about, the degrees of fabrication. So in other words, there's a place for this bare attention, a small place, and there's certainly a place for the whole spectrum of unfabricating, and there's a place for skillful fabricating, for beautiful fabricating, for soul-making fabricating. And there's also a place for the different directions of eros, towards the senses, towards the beyond the senses, the unfabricated.

So all of that, to me, creates more coherence, more sense, allows us to actually have more integrity with respect to all this, and for all that to be integrated more into a vision and a fantasy of the path and a relationship with sense experience, which we can't avoid. You can only transcend sense experience for certain periods of time in deep meditative practice. Otherwise we live in the world of sense experience.

That's what the Buddha meant by the world—sense experience, as he says. That's his definition of the world.

So it seems important to open up a conception and a vision here that does justice to really how we're living for a start, but also to soul-making and to that, the movements of eros in the soul and the opening, the discovery of the sacred.

Now, if we're talking about eros, we're talking, as I mentioned, and soul-making, we're talking—eros implies soul-making, soul-making implies eros, and both of them imply a sense of beauty. And beauty and the senses, of course, go together. So sometimes we can, again, here, we can almost be a little simplistic or naive or unquestioning in our assumptions around what beauty is and what its place is or isn't and what it is when it's in the realm of the senses.

So eros implies beauty and a love of beauty and an attraction to beauty. And we've touched on this. What we love in regard to beauty and in regard to soul-making and that whole movement of eros, is the intimacy with beauty. We love the connection that's involved when the beloved other is beautiful to us and there's that soul-making. We love that. We love the sensitivity and the tuning. We've touched on all this.

But what actually is beauty? Now, I've actually written about that, so I don't want to go off on a whole big, too long tangent on all this. I'm not going to say too much about it. But actually, it strikes me as a really important question. What do we mean when we say beauty or we find something beautiful?

So this is an experience we have as human beings. Again, we can ignore it, we can try and put it in the dustbin or whatever, but we have the experience of beauty as human beings. Can we reduce beauty to just pleasantness? To me, they're just not equivalent. Pleasant sensation does not equate to beauty. And any time you feel touched by beauty or in awe of beauty, have a look, you know, look more carefully. Is this just about pleasant sense experience? A pleasant, even if it's art, is it just a pleasant arrangement of colours and proportions on a painting or of pleasant sounds and their temporal arrangement in a piece of music or whatever?

Is it really just about pleasantness? What's happening when we're really touched and moved and kind of opened by a sense of beauty? To me, it's a really interesting question, a really important question for us as human beings.

Is it that there's some kind of resonating going on between us or between the soul, in the soul, with what is beautiful, with the beloved other? Is it that this, whatever it is that I'm finding beautiful, is mirroring something in me? What's going on? Is it that I recognize something?

And if it is any of that, is there some kind of sense of belonging when there's beauty? Like I somehow feel like I belong to something, and I'm not even sure what that thing is. Maybe I don't have a sense of it, maybe it's just this sense of dimensionality that opens, and I belong to that dimensionality. Or maybe it's a

divinity, maybe it's not, maybe it's an archetype, maybe it's clear, or not at all, maybe it's just a very vague sense—and often it is.

One of the things I would like to actually insist on—and again I'm not going to go into this now too much—is that a sense of beauty implies a sense of depth. Now some people would do their utmost to try and refuse that notion. But I think for us, when we have a sense of beauty, I'm talking about a sense that really touches us, when we really feel like the heart and the soul and the being is touched by a sense of beauty, there is a sense not only of our own depths, but also the depths of that which is beautiful to us.

And this is very much connected with the whole movement of Eros and soul-making. We've said Eros needs this depth, this dimensionality, this unfathomability of the object, and that's part of what the imaginal gets fabricated with, or is inherent, if you like, in the imaginal—this unfathomability, this dimensionality and depth. So something here about unfathomability and depth, wrapped up in beauty, wrapped up in the erotic relationship with anything.

Now if we think for a little bit, or consider for a little bit, different styles of meditation, even different styles of insight meditation. Many of you will know of the Mahasi style, taught by Mahasi Sayadaw, beginning in the twentieth century. It was really one of the absolutely dominant influences or streams within insight meditation for many years. So one of the very first influences in the construction of insight meditation was this Mahasi style. Sometimes it was almost an exclusive prevalence of that or domination within how insight meditation was taught. Certainly when I started in the mid-eighties, insight meditation scenes and circles and retreat centers and retreats and teachings were all very dominated by Mahasi-style teachings, alongside others—Ajahn Chah and a sprinkling of Zen. But Mahasi-style was very dominant.

In that style, there is, I would say, a very precise noting of moment-to-moment experience and it tends towards a narrow focus of attention, so a very penetrative, intense application of continual mindfulness to sense experience and an emphasis on bare attention—that notion of bare attention—moment-to-moment, intense sustaining of the mindfulness on the particles, if you like, of experience.

I would say with that, that there is either no, or let's say very limited eros there. There's either none or very limited erotic possibility. Why? Because sense objects are not unfathomable. In that whole presentation of the path, in that whole way of teaching, in that whole presentation of the concept of what one is trying to do, sense objects are not unfathomable. And we've said Eros needs an unfathomability to it.

There is an assumption there in that whole presentation of the teaching—related as it is to Abhidhamma, Theravadan Abhidhamma, which tends towards atomistic reductionism, actually a whole set of teachings of atomistic reductionism that was so criticized by Nagarjuna in the Mahayana teachings on emptiness. But there is an assumption that this atomistic reductionism that's happening through my very probing, narrow focus of sustained moment-to-moment mindfulness on the particles of sensation and sense experience and mental experience, there is an assumption this atomistic reduction reveals reality.

When I'm paying attention in this way, this so-called mindfulness, this so-called bare attention, by its very nature this label is regarded as penetrating to reality. And that assumption supports that kind of attention, that attention reinforces that kind of assumption, and it's a kind of attention and a kind of assumption that stops the eros and therefore the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, because there's not this unfathomability that eros needs.

There is a sense of beauty there, but the beauty comes—people love, you know, actually some people hate it and some people love it, and whatever people have an ambivalent relationship to that way of practicing. But part of the love of the beauty there is more in what I was relating to before. It's in the intimacy, in the connection, in the sensitivity. That's what people love about that path. I don't know whether anyone can really love that kind of atomistic reductionism. So there is some degree of beauty, but the eros there is actually very limited.

In recent years, the predominance and prevalence of Mahasi style in the insight meditation tradition has waned, and it's become part of what informs retreats, and some teachers who just teach that way and practitioners who just practice that way. But more, it's just kind of waned and taken its, I would say, rightfully more modest place and mixed in with other concepts and approaches to practice and teachings.

And then also more recently, in recent years, a kind of elevation of the idea of insight meditation and practice as being most authentically—or one is most truly practicing—when one is practicing "non-doing" or just receiving experience or opening to experience and sitting in or walking in a non-doing, standing in a non-doing and just receiving experience.

I would actually say, in terms of we're asking about eros and sense experience, that that mode of conceiving and perceiving practicing and the assumptions there also limit or there is a lack there of eros as well within that way of practicing. Why? Because again there's a tacit assumption of the reality of being, and being as opposed to doing, that this is somehow real and reveals the way things really are.

Doing would distort the way things are. This non-doing or being or receiving reveals the way things are. And that reality, that barrier there, prevents eros. So where there's a fixed reality view, the eros is limited, in this case in relation to sense experience, in that mode of thinking about practice, in that mode of practicing.

Secondly, you could point out that we used words with sexual connotations – opening and penetrating – to describe the erotic movement, opening to the erotic object, the beloved other, and penetrating it more, wanting more opening, wanting more penetrating. Here, in this mode of practicing – this kind of receiving, opening to receiving experience, and non-doing – the erotic movement is limited to one of opening. In the Mahasi style, it tends to be limited to one of penetrating, not always. And so that style is, if you like, more phallic in its thrust, and this style is more receptive. But either way, this style limits the range and the style of erotic movement there.

But perhaps most importantly, the reason why it lacks or limits the eros is this way of practicing of so-called non-doing and receiving, opening to receiving. It tends towards the perception of oneness and not particularity, and not the retained otherness of eros. It tends instead towards oneness.

In other words, if I just sit, and I really practice – as much as it seems to me, if I don't realize that it's a bit of an illusion – if I just sit and I believe in so-called receiving and opening to receiving and non-doing, what will happen is it will unfabricate sense experience to a certain extent and it tends towards less of a perception of separation and distinction and towards more of a perception of oneness of all things.

Sense objects, then, are not unfathomable. They don't have an infinite dimensionality of depths in that sense of unfathomable, because at some point in doing that kind of practice we recognize that rather sense experiences are universally one with – probably awareness is the most likely thing, sometimes one with a kind of universal awareness – although as this practice goes deeper, before one realizes that it's actually based on a mistaken conception, an illusion of non-doing and realism. At some point, though, we have the perception and the sense and the kind of recognition that all sense experience and all sense objects are universally one, most likely with awareness, with a universal awareness. And so that's the way that that practice would go as it deepens, as one dedicates oneself to it.

In which case they are then fathomed. I've fathomed their true nature. They are awareness in their essence, or they are love in their essence. Even if the awareness or love is infinitely vast in space or in time – in other words, this awareness seems to have no limits in space or in time, and this love seems to be infinite in space and in time – there's a certain kind of infinity there, but I've reached the bottom level of the dimensionality. It is awareness, or it is love. So they are not – sense objects don't have this unfathomability; they reach a fathoming, they reach a level beyond which they don't go deeper. You understand?

So both these styles – the Mahasi style and the way of non-doing, if you like, or the way of receiving – tend to actually limit the eros with regard to sense experience through the whole way of thinking and through the way of practicing that comes out of that way of thinking and then reinforces that whole view and that whole relationship with sense experience, so that there cannot be the erotic soul-making in relation to the particularities of sense experience and that unfathomability that's part of that, and otherness that's part of that, that's part of the direction of a certain kind of soul-making.

So this, to me, is again – what are we trying to do here? How is our conception of the path and the way we're practicing limiting certain possibilities, whether that's the possibility of a deeper understanding of dependent origination and emptiness, whether that's the possibility of degrees and depths of freedom or directions of freedom, or the possibilities of soul-making and opening to sacredness? So these questions to me are really, really important. These considerations are really important.

So easily we can bring in assumptions or rest on our practice and our view of practice and of path and of awakening. Rest on certain assumptions that are not fully checked out. All kinds of assumptions.

So in relation to sensuality, the experiences of the senses, and the beauty there, I would say – beauty, what is our relationship there? What place, is there a place for beauty? What does that mean?

So we could be talking about art here, any kind of medium of art. We could be talking about nature. We could be talking about whatever. But as I said, is the beauty that we feel in relation to art or music or whatever it is – is it only sensual? Is that what's happening for us, that there's a sensual pleasure because of the arrangement of these colors or these sounds or whatever it is? Is that what beauty is? Is it just reducible to sense pleasure?

And I can sort of... I'm best served by kind of giving a bare attention to the object of art, whatever that is, or the thing that's beautiful, and then just enjoying the pleasing effects of the arrangement of these elements of the artistic work in time and in space – the colors, the form, whatever it is, the proportions there.

What happens to our sense of beauty if we actually do manage to kind of squeeze it down to that mode of relating to the object, to the art or the beautiful thing?

What happens also, just as with images, if we reduce whatever this beautiful thing is, whether it's something in art or something in nature – what happens when we reduce it to "it means X"? It represents specifically exactly X or Y. What happens when we reduce it to a kind of monovalency of meanings? What happens to an actual experience of beauty?

So beauty seems to me, as I said, to involve this. Yes, of course, that's part of beauty. If you make art, of course it matters—the proportions, the timings, the spatial patterning, the colors, whatever it is, the timbres. This matters greatly. You can't talk about the art separate from those elements. And it may well mean this and that, but to reduce it to either of them or both of them will kill the beauty.

Beauty needs something unfathomable in the depth, some kind of dimensionality to it—I would say some kind of inexhaustibility, including of meaningfulness. In other words, I can't quite capture everything about it. Beauty and eros implicating each other and soul-making and all that. And it has this beyond—I can't quite capture or define or reduce it. This, as I said, applies also to our relationship with nature.

For example, consider landscape, or a tree, or going for a walk in autumn, where there's the autumnal scene with trees of vividly bright colors. One can be really moved and touched, of course—I hope you know this—by the beauty there. Sometimes it moves us to great depth, this kind of beauty, for instance, of an autumn scene.

Is it just that they are pretty, vivid colors? Sometimes we talk as if that's what the beauty consists of, alone. How much can that really touch us? How much depth and beauty can that have? Or is it that, plus the fact that we're amazed at the biological wonder of it? How amazing that trees evolved, with the light and the photosynthesis, and then the chemical changes occurring with the change in light and seasons, making the colors certain ways—that's amazing.

Or even in the autumn scene, the poignancy of impermanence. Here is decay, here is death, here is the cycle of life and death and the poignancy of that to the being. Or even all of those—pretty vivid colors, amazing biology and evolution, and the poignancy of impermanence that the autumn scene speaks to us.

It can be all of those, and yet I would still say that in what I'm calling a sense of beauty, and in what really touches us in the relationship with the sense experience there, can be all of these, but something more is there when we're really touched and we really have this sense of beauty. Something else can be there and hopefully is there because we don't cut it out.

So in our relationship with sensuality, what can be there? What needs to come in in order for beauty to be there? Something that we can't quite define or capture. Some other depth, some dimensionality. Not the monovalency, not the reduction, not just plain or mere sense pleasure, pleasing sense experiences. Yes, that's all fine. Those levels are included. But more.

So I would say, if we want to include a sense of beauty in our lives, and on the path, and include it on the path, and open it, and have it be alive, and give it place—and if we're interested in soul-making and eros, which, as I said, always include a sense of beauty—then it's actually necessary that in our relationship with the senses, in our relationship with sense experience, we don't reduce the view to "this is simply seeking and enjoying pleasant sense experience." Whether that's what we want or that's what we dismiss, there's not a reduction. We don't see it that way. We don't conceive of it that way. Nor are we denigrating the senses because we only want the transcendent beyond. There's something else that's possible here in the relationship with the senses.

I'm talking about how can we understand, acknowledge, recognize, practice, live in a way that allows soul-making, allows eros, understands differently in our relationship with sense experience—so we don't just dismiss it or feel guilty. And we don't flatten it, which would actually kill the beauty and kill the soul-making. We actually acknowledge, get interested, allow and support this sense of dimensionality, which is available to us in relationship to the senses, necessary for beauty and necessary for eros and soul-making.

And in that, something in the whole relationship with senses and sense experience and world transforms, opens up. And in so doing, a whole sense of the path can as well.

German philosopher Heidegger, the twentieth-century philosopher, traced the etymology of the word for beautiful in German, das Schöne. And he traced the etymology to Scheinen in German, which is the root of the word for illusion, Schein.

So that's interesting. He's tracing the notion of beautiful to the word for illusion. Now, we could hear something like that and put it straight into a kind of narrow interpretation—for some streams of the teaching, a very typical Pali canon influenced interpretation. Yes, sense beauty is illusory. And that's what we get from this etymology that Heidegger's pointing to.

Heidegger, one of the things he was accused of was very dubious etymological playing with things. So it may or may not be the case, but again, what matters more to me with playing with words is what comes out of it in the soul-making. Because we could hear it that way—sensual beauty is exactly illusory. It's illusory. There is sense experience, and there is the experience of pleasure or unpleasantness in regard to the senses. But sense beauty is illusory. The beautiful is related to illusion.

Compare that with a deeper understanding of fabrication, the more tantric view, the soul-making view, and the view that allows the erotic-imaginal. And there we acknowledge, if you like, the fabrication and that the beautiful is created and discovered. It's created by the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, giving more dimensionality, giving more multifacetedness, in relation to that. But because of our deeper and more integrated understanding of what fabrication is and what it involves—the inevitability of it, the place of soul-making and the necessity of that, the place of eros and all that—there is no problem that the beautiful is connected with the illusory or the fabricated. No problem at all. We understand this is expressing a deep wisdom and a deep way of integration. It unfolds the possibility of a path. It opens the door of a wider avenue of practice, of creation and discovery, and of sacredness.

One of the things I've been thinking about for quite a while in art and beauty and all this is that in a lot of modern Western poetry, there was a point—I'm not sure exactly when it happened—when the emphasis shifted really to things. It's like the important thing to have in a poem is things. In other words, don't talk about your feelings. Don't talk about—certainly for heaven's sake—metaphysics or spiritual realities or that kind of thing. Talk about things. Depict things. Give us, in a different sense, images of things.

So that's the most dominant tenor or fabric of a lot of modern Western poetry—it's really based in things. The message there to budding poets is everything to sense experience. Tell us about things. Don't tell us about your feelings. Tell us about things, and your feelings will be communicated indirectly by what you say in and through what you say about things.

But the things there are so often just imagined purely materially. They are conceived of as purely material. There's a kind of one-dimensionality or flatland view of things, and therefore of sensuality. And that view of things is also tied together with a view of things and human beings as well, of their fragility—the fragility of these things and the fragility of human beings, of the ephemeral nature of both humans and things.

All that is wrapped up, of course, in a kind of assumption about the reality of our existential situation, our death and our finitude. All of these—fragility, ephemeral nature of things, solidity of things, the sensual being the only important thing, finitude and death—all of these are taken as realities in the unspoken backdrop.

So that so often what the poem becomes is just about things, and about holding things and others as dear, because that's all we have given our existential situation. We have these flat things and humans, and these things can become dear to us. But it's all against a kind of tragedy—though not in the classical sense—of

our existential situation, of finitude, of death, and of one-dimensionality.

How different the view of the image of things and the image of human beings. So there's a whole current—and some of you may be aware of this—there's a whole really dominant current in modern poetry in the West that kind of ties all this together. These are the kinds of poems that are acceptable or taken seriously, and others won't be taken seriously.

And it's all based on a certain worldview. It also tends towards the kind of deflationary art I mentioned the other day. So the view of art and sensuality and life and what's beautiful reflects the culture's conceptual framework and logos regarding reality, regarding the senses, regarding things, regarding apparent existential situations, regarding what human being is. It reflects the dominant worldview and the actual lack of eros and soul-making within the wider culture.

To me, these things are really important. They might not seem relevant to you, but to me, poetry is very important, art is extremely important, music, all these things, and the relationship with nature. And what then is given, for example, to our relationship with nature if we can open the view of all this—in regard to our sense experience, in regard to the eros and soul-making—and let that in: dimensionality, and the non-realism.

What is given to our relationship with nature, and therefore to the environmental movement and the ecological movements, if we open our view and if we understand the soul-making dynamic and eros, psychologos and everything that we've talked about? I would say that whole relationship with nature and also the environmental gains are given other levels. It opens up in different ways. The environmental movement is given other ways to enter the discourse.

So it's not just about one-dimensional nature in a materialist sense that we're somehow trying to elevate in value. And so we can only speak in terms of humanistic values or instrumentalist values as resources or this or that. There's very rarely any talk of sacredness in relation to nature or anything else, apart from mainstream religion, because that's kind of gone out of the discourse of the worldview. And I wonder—I've talked about this before in those talks on ecology of love, so I'm just moving very quickly here because I need to end—but I wonder, can we dare to talk that way and dare to open up that kind of view and relationship with nature?

Then we see, in understanding all this and what we're talking about in this retreat, then we see the soul, the citta, is not separate from the beauty, from the divinity, from the dimensionality, from the unfathomability of nature. And we open those dimensions and that sense of sacredness. And then that can open the whole discourse around the environmental movement, which sometimes just seems so stuck on one level.

So if we go back to what Heidegger wrote: the illusion in beauty, or the fabrication. This doesn't—the realization that fabrication, if you like, which is tied to the word for illusion—something is a fabrication.

The acknowledgement of that, the realization of that, the entering into that does not at all demean the beauty that is fabricated there.

Beauty is not separate from us. There's a whole other level of participation being alluded to here. What does it mean to participate in nature? Yes, I've touched on this before. There's a whole other level here in the soul level, in the soul-making level, in the erotic movement, in the recognition of fabrication, in the recognition of the creation and discovery of beauty and dimensionality.

So illusion is only a derogatory word when we're harboring an assumption somewhere—usually at the back of our mind if you're used to these teachings, still harboring something at the back of the mind, or at the front of the mind if you're not familiar with these teachings on emptiness. But illusion is always put in contrast to some assumption: there's something that's not illusion, there's something that's not fabricated, some experience, some bare experience that's not an illusion.

But there isn't. The only thing that's unfabricated is beyond experience, beyond the senses, beyond any form, beyond any being of an object. So there's not this supposed non-illusion to which illusion is compared and found to come up short. And when we realize that, then the fact of fabrication, the recognition, the admission, the entering into that is not a demeaning.

And there's something—can you hear it? Can you grasp it? What this is inviting us into in terms of responsibility, but also in terms of the awareness of the multi-leveled participation we have in the cosmos, in divinity, in being. Opening up the preciousness there.

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