Eros and the Brahmavihāras

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Until quite recently, I tended in teaching to try as much as possible to avoid repeating myself—repeating things that I had said in other talks or teachings. This was partly a personality style in relation to creativity, perhaps, but partly also because I felt it didn't serve the teaching or the student. In the age of recordings, or with a book where you can always go back and read again to do your own repetition, I thought this approach made sense.

I also used to think that sometimes it's better not to spell out fully the obvious consequences of whatever teachings one is presenting. For example, in the book I wrote or in other series of teachings, I didn't fully spell out all the consequences, partly because I thought that if the listener or reader engages and inquires and questions into the material, that personal engagement would actually lead to them digesting, understanding, and assimilating the material better, having it available to them more fully.

But I'm really questioning all that in the last couple of years. I think there are a lot of assumptions there. Certainly in terms of people engaging, I think that happens in different ways. It takes a certain amount of confidence to question or even make one's own conclusions from certain things that are presented. So I'm questioning all this and revising it very much.

Why I'm saying this is because now, at the risk of repeating myself but for the sake of clarity, I'd like to take a little time and explore the relationship of eros and the brahmavihāras—loving-kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity. I want to explore these relationships, the differences there, and also point to the possibility of using eros and the erotic imaginal in the service of brahmavihāra cultivation and practice, or even in actual brahmavihāra practice with metta and compassion.

As I've already said, with imaginal practice there's a lot that's not immediately obvious. Once we hang out with it and get used to that terrain and that opening, that world, we start to notice certain qualities or aspects, characteristics of that world and the relationships there. One of the things we've pointed out that's noticeable—maybe immediately, maybe very obviously, maybe really much less obviously, something that dawns on us slowly or gradually or only in time—is the presence of love.

Within the imaginal, in the imaginal space, there is love. Maybe obvious at first, maybe much less obvious. There is love from ourselves to the imaginal figure. We love imaginal figures. Sometimes this is really not obvious at all, but it's there in one way or another, in one form or quality of love or another. The range of kinds of qualities or presentations or flavors of love is enormously variable.

There's love from self to the imaginal figure, and there's also love from the imaginal figure to self.

Everything we just said applies: it may be really obvious, it may be not obvious at all. It comes in a whole wide range of flavors, colors, expressions. But what we're talking about here is erotic love, because eros and the imaginal go together. So we're talking about erotic love in the imaginal, in the imaginal world between imaginal figures and ourselves.

Eros has a lot of aspects in common with metta, but it's also more than metta. There's more to it. It's different, and this is what I want to really make sure we're clear about.

Most people, perhaps, when they practice metta—loving-kindness or compassion—use their imagination to some extent. At least you have some kind of sense of the person to whom you're giving metta. Maybe you use white light, or maybe you see them smiling, or you just sense their being in the imagination without a visual image there. The use of imagination in metta is great, really valid and okay, and for most people it's very helpful in whatever ways that works.

But that per se, the use of the imagination in metta, is not the erotic imaginal. Imagination doesn't equate as imaginal, and metta doesn't equate as eros.

We also gave the example of what we were calling in the last retreat an imaginal figure of love, and using them actually in different ways—one for the sake of cultivating the metta and the other for the sake of the whole movement into the erotic imaginal. We talked about, for instance, grandma or the lap of the Buddha.

I made the distinction that if grandma is not an erotic object for me—not necessarily a sexual object, but an erotic object in terms of meaning that she is full of dimensionality, my interest is aroused, there's more to her, I want to know her and contact her, she has these dimensions to her being that I want to enter and open to—if that is not there, then grandma may be a really valuable metta-figure, a figure for the cultivation of metta, an imagination figure, but she's not imaginal, and that's certainly not erotic there. There's no eros.

This is really valuable, certainly okay, very helpful, but erotic imaginal is something different than just the use of the imagination for the sake of metta, or this figure that may express metta to us but is not full of eros either way, from us to her or from her to us.

But there are similarities and overlaps between eros and the brahmavihāras. Certainly there are. As I think I said right near the beginning of this course, care, to me, is a part of eros. When there's an erotic relationship, there is care there.

And I was using love in that sense as care, care for the other's being. So to me, that's actually part of eros.

There are other similarities, for example, between eros and the brahmaviharas. Equanimity is something you may know that we can talk about in two ways. The Buddha kind of implicitly made this distinction between equanimity towards beings and equanimity towards phenomena.

So there's equanimity towards beings. Here it's related to compassion practice. We care for their suffering. We try and do what we can to alleviate the suffering of some being. But we also realize that in a way they need to take responsibility. There's a limit to how much I can do sometimes. There's a limit in complicated relationships, complicated situations and circumstances to what I can do to alleviate their suffering. Recognizing those limits and recognizing that they may need to take responsibility in some way is a part of what supports the equanimity towards beings in the context of compassion towards beings. And actually, sometimes another person's suffering is really up to us, and we can step in there and do something, extend ourselves.

But as well as equanimity towards beings, the Buddha talked about equanimity in a way that what he's really referring to is equanimity towards phenomena, pleasant or unpleasant phenomena. There's a kind of evenness, not getting so aversive to the unpleasant and rejecting it and trying to get rid of it, caught up in that kind of knee-jerk reaction. And so not craving and contracted around seeking out the pleasant or seeking to hold on to the pleasant, fear of losing it. So there's a kind of equanimity and evenness, an impartiality, if you like, towards phenomena - pleasant, unpleasant, beautiful, ugly.

So it's possible to practice equanimity, to have equanimity in relation to beings and in relationship to phenomena. And the same is true of eros. Everything we've talked about on this retreat - there's eros certainly towards a human other, but there's eros towards anything that can be alive for us as an erotic object, if it fulfills the criteria that we've delineated. The relationship with anything. It could be this lamp in front of me, it could be this talk, the ideas, it could be you as the listeners, it could be an imaginal figure, it could be a tree, anything. It could be a heartache, that there's an erotic relationship with my heartache. It's different than just a metta relationship with my heartache. And the heartache has dimensions, has divinity, has meaningfulness, has purpose. It comes alive in that way through the erotic relationship.

But like equanimity, eros can also be towards beings and towards phenomena - actual beings, physical beings, imaginal beings, and phenomena, actual phenomena and imaginal phenomena.

And maybe some of you will know this, some of you are less aware of it, but this is also true of metta and compassion, loving-kindness and compassion. Most of us understand those or have been exposed to those as teachings of what we can practice, qualities we can cultivate in relation to beings, to sentient beings. But I think really beautiful practice and very powerful in terms of the insights that it can liberate - not just the healing and opening that it can bring experientially, but also the insights into dependent origination - the practices of loving-kindness and compassion towards phenomena, directing love towards dharmas. This is less commonly practiced and much less commonly understood in terms of its implications for understanding emptiness and dependent origination.

But anyway, there are lots of similarities and overlaps between eros and the brahmaviharas. But what about the differentiations between them? Can we get clearer about differentiating between eros and the brahmaviharas?

So eros, we have said, has desire in it. It has this wanting, wanting to connect, wanting to connect more, wanting to contact, wanting to know, to penetrate, to enter, to open to. In that sense, it has attraction, it has desire and attraction in it. It also has delight as part of it. It's accompanied by delight, or delight is part of the whole experience of eros, we have said.

So desire, attraction, delight. Also with eros, the perception of beauty is an integral feature, an inevitable feature of eros. The perception of beauty and also, I would say, of meaningfulness. This erotic other, this beloved other, whether it's an object or a person or whatever, a being, is somehow meaningful to my soul. And the eros itself is also meaningful. But that is because eros goes with the imaginal. All these qualities are part of that.

So desire, attraction, delight, beauty, meaningfulness. In contrast, metta, for example - attraction is not part of metta. Metta does not involve a desire to connect more with, to know more, to penetrate, to open to.

Let's be really clear here. Metta may support a realization of interconnectedness, that we are already interconnected. There is already an interconnection, actually on lots of different levels, of being between me and this person I'm offering metta to, directing compassion to. So metta may support and open the realization of an interconnectedness that already exists. And similarly, a realization of interconnectedness supports metta. To the degree that we realize the depth of our interconnectedness, to that degree is metta made easier and supported. The practice of metta towards this person is made easier and supported by the degree and the depth to which I realize and the fullness to which I realize our interconnectedness.

But that's different - realizing interconnectedness that's already, so to speak, an existential fact, if you like, is different than a desire to connect more. It's different than that. You understand?

And again, in contrast, metta may support, give rise to, and increase our perception of the beauty of the other. If you've done much metta practice, you'll know this. Here's that person - they're just kind of neutral, I don't think much of them, or I actually find them aversive in some way, even ugly or repulsive. I don't like them. But as you practice metta, you start to see in different ways - all kinds of different ways - some beauty there. There might be some delight in their being, in their presence, certainly in the practice of metta itself.

So metta may support an increase in the perception of beauty and delight, but the perception of beauty and the experience of delight in the other - delighting in how they are - these are not essential to metta. Almost by definition, because that would make metta conditional. In metta, the whole point is that it's unconditional. I don't need to find you beautiful. I don't need to perceive you as beautiful. I don't need to delight in your being and presence. It might arise from metta practice, but the whole point of the unconditionality of metta - that's the goal, the ideal of metta - is that these are not essential, not necessary to metta: the perception of beauty of the other and the delight in the other.

This contrast is quite important to be really clear about and draw out.

We have been saying that eros includes something like what we might call personal love - in other words, love for the particulars of this being, of this person or thing. Love for the uniqueness and through the uniqueness. And that's different, again, than metta.

Again, metta is just - you love them. Why do you love them? Just because they're a sentient being. It's not about loving their particulars. It's not love for the particulars. It's for the universals, in a way. Sentient beings suffer. We share suffering. Even if I don't share exactly the same kind of suffering that you do, there's something in common with suffering, with mortality, with fragility, illness, vulnerability, emotional vulnerability.

The compassion runs through those strands of universality. Just because you're a sentient being, just because I'm a sentient being - whereas the eros is for, in and through the particulars and the uniqueness.

This is noticeable with images in the imaginal realm. Sometimes it's immediately noticeable, and sometimes we need to perhaps spend longer dwelling with sensitivity, with openness, with receptivity and a kind of fine-tuning or attunement of our attention, of our being, in the imaginal realm with an imaginal figure, to realize: ah yes, there's more than metta here. There is this personal love, or love for, in, and through the particulars and the uniqueness.

In that story of the retreatant who had this beautiful relationship with the trees and the forest - loved them, was in love with them and their particulars and their uniqueness - at first felt there was discrepancy, an inequality: "I'm just loved because I'm one of Gaia's children," a kind of universality there. But then, actually hanging out with the image until realizing: oh, oh yes, there's something else here.

It might feel like something has shifted in the image. I actually think it's there from the beginning in the imaginal and we need to notice it.

What I want to say is we need that kind of love as well as we need metta. We need this personal love. We need to love particulars and uniquenesses. And we need our particulars, our personhoods, our particular personhoods, our unique personhoods, our particularities and uniquenesses loved. We need to feel that.

Why? Because we have - as I've pointed out before - we just have, we experience, we sense, we viscerally feel ourselves to be a different kind of self. We have a modernist self now. The whole self-experience is different. It's more complex. It is more individual. There is more complexity to individuality nowadays - more particularities, more edges, more contradictions.

This is something that modernism... Actually, I was talking to Catherine the other day, pointing out that it started with St. Augustine, perhaps, and then through centuries actually changed Christianity. The relationship with Jesus was part of what gave rise to more of the sense of individuality in the modern self.

But anyway, at this point, in our culture, we have a certain very complex, very multifaceted sense of self

of which uniqueness of that self and the personhood and the uniquenesses in that self and the particularities are absolutely essential dimensions. We can't just erase them and get rid of them.

And someone might say, yes, but that's a construct. And I say, yes, of course it's a construct. But it's also our experience, our visceral gut experience. Not all the time, because there are different practices, different ways of looking that move in and out of that and turn it up and turn it down. Bring out the contrast, fade them through less fabrication. But it is an experience that we will keep coming back to. And we will keep being confronted by it because we've grown up with it, but also because it's in our society.

And anyway, if a person says that's a construct, that kind of self is a construct, say yes, but everything is a construct. Show me something that's not a construct. Show me something that's not fabricated. As we've explored, if you point to bare attention or the moment-to-moment process of aggregates, I would just say, look deeper. More practice. More practice with the ways of looking that show that that, too, is a fabrication. That, too, can fade. How it gets fabricated is just a level of fabrication.

And thirdly, we could see, from everything we've been saying, what we've explored in this retreat, we could see that modernist construction of self as indeed a construction, but a construction emerging individually and culturally from the very process of the soul-making dynamic, from the stretching of the eros-psyche-logos. A new kind of self is created or discovered, or if you like, the self is expanded, complicated, enriched, widened, deepened, given dimensionality.

The modernist self may be, or one way of seeing it, is actually as a result of an individual and cultural process of soul-making. And now, that modernist self is inviting a further level of soul-making through all this, through the love that it's asking, the erotic love that it's asking for, asking us to open to this dimension, not shut it out, and open to what personhood can be and can mean and divinity of it and all that. It's inviting and asking for more soul-making.

But we cannot erase or ignore this self that we feel. You certainly can't erase it permanently. That can go quiet to different degrees, beyond the personality, and then much deeper than that even. But we can't live in a way that erases that self or ignores it. And to try to do that, or to think that one has to, would be poverty's mistakes, and they would make us poor rather than richer and fuller and freer. They're actually strangely kind of constraints. And to try and ignore it, to try and do that, would just betray actually a lack of full insight, I believe.

So there's this, what we're calling love for in through the particulars, the uniquenesses. And what would it be to dwell in that, to open to it? Both our love for the imaginal figure in their particularities and their uniqueness, or the uniqueness and particularities that are, so to speak, part of them, and also their personal love for us and our particularities and our uniqueness. To sit in that, to dwell in it, to abide in it, to feel it, soak in it, absorb it, take it in, either from the gaze of the imaginal other or from some other communication which may or may not be verbal, it may be tactile, it may be sexual, it may be from life streaming—all kinds of possibilities—but to open to and dwell in and open to receive the imaginal figure's

love for you.

Is that possible? So much healing is available there. To feel loved, to be loved, to know one's love, to recognize that one is loved in all kinds of ways, in our particularities, and with all the sense of dimensionality to that love, to that figure—in other words, to the origin of the love. Because the imaginal figure in that case is the source of that love. And to feel like that source itself is multilevel, multidimensional, multiaspected. And also in ourself, what receives it within us is multidimensional as well, or it's received at different dimensions of our being, put it that way.

And again, as I said before, this can be difficult, this kind of opening to the loving gaze of the other, whether it's a human other or an imaginal other can be difficult. Oftentimes, teaching mettā practice is interesting because you just see for so many people, it's often harder to receive mettā and compassion, to receive love than to give it. Oftentimes that's—and perhaps in the Buddhist time, you would have found that very, very strange. Certainly, I know the Dalai Lama was very surprised when he came to the West first and saw that. For a lot of people, certainly not for everyone, absolutely not for everyone, but it's often harder to receive love than to give it.

And we talked before how even we can have in all this a very ambivalent relationship, a very charged relationship with being seen. Something in us yearns and longs to be seen, to be naked, to be gathered in another one's gaze, to be transparent, not hidden. And also, this can be very, very difficult, very charged, very hard to tolerate sometimes for some people, this being seen. So they end up with a—one ends up with a very ambivalent relationship, something we yearn for and fear or run away from or back off from or close ourselves off from, turn away from. Or it might just be, it might be the whole of ourselves, it might be just places within ourselves, parts of us.

I find that there are parts of ourselves where being seen places us right on the edge of ambivalence. Pain can be wrapped up in this dynamic, shame that causes this ambivalence. We're ashamed to show some part of ourselves. We believe we're unworthy, or we shouldn't be a certain way, or whatever story we carry. And grief, too, can be wrapped up in this difficulty with being seen.

This pattern is relatively common for us in the modern West. It perhaps exists in other cultures as well, though I'm less familiar with those contexts. When this ambivalence is present, we face the question: what order should we follow with these kinds of practices? How should we pace ourselves?

Am I going to acknowledge this real ambivalence, or will I force myself into surrendering to the gaze of this loving other—whether it's an imaginal figure with their erotic gaze or simply their loving presence? There isn't a formula for this. Not everyone needs to proceed in the same order. One approach won't always be easier than another, and there's no prescribed pace that works universally.

As always with these kinds of practices—with practice in general—we need sensitivity, the ability to feel what's right. This changes constantly. We must remain fluidly responsive to the whole unfolding of our

practice. But in time, with this responsiveness, perhaps with the help of teachers, loved ones, and friends, practicing alone and together, there can be an increasing capacity to expose ourselves to the erotic gaze, to the love of the imaginal figure or other, and to dwell there.

When we first explored this territory, I mentioned the possibility that if there is this ambivalence—if there's even an inability to give metta to ourselves in traditional loving-kindness practice—there might be an imaginal figure we can approach. We can bring this very difficulty to them and simply observe: What do they say? What do they do? How do they respond?

There's an autonomy here that imaginal figures sometimes possess, an autonomy that can truly surprise us. The way they express love, their desire to love us, their wish to communicate something—this can be startling in its authenticity. The word "angel" means messenger, communicator. The angels that come to us in the imaginal realm, the figures we open to there, they want to love us and they want to communicate something. They possess this sometimes surprising autonomy, a kind of intelligence that we couldn't have engineered or predicted.

Here's something that might seem to come out of left field, but there's love there anyway. Their love exists regardless. It's not something we have to earn or achieve. It's ongoing, whether we try to avoid it, turn our attention away from it, or resist it entirely. At one level, this love simply is.

We can and hopefully do learn about love through our human relationships. We can take care of and work at those relationships that matter to us, learning how to love and how to be loved, how to receive love. We discover what love is and what it involves through our commitment to staying present, working through difficulties, and hanging in there with the challenges that arise in our human connections.

But we also learn about love through, with, and from our imaginal figures—the beings of the imaginal realm that come to us. We can discover profound truths about love through our relationships with these figures.

Yet with all this exploration, remembering the distinctions we made earlier, eros involves more than metta. Whether flowing from us toward the other—the imaginal object or the actual other—or from the other toward ourselves, eros encompasses dimensions beyond loving-kindness alone.

Sometimes we can be overly simplistic in how we understand the Dharma, in what we take from it and what we neglect to explore, flesh out, and bring alive in our lives. Very easily, we think there is just metta, loving-kindness, with its far and near enemies as traditionally taught. We learn that metta's far enemy is ill-will, and its near enemy is attachment. These become our categories, our complete map. But the territory of love is far vaster than this framework suggests.

And it's got to fit somewhere in there. So if you say, "Well, yeah, I really love my partner or my lover," and I say, "Well, okay, it's metta, definitely metta, plus some attachment"—and yeah, okay, it's just attachment. But actually, is that what's going on? I mean, not to say there isn't attachment there. There may well be.

There often is in the complexity of human relations, of course there is. But there are also other delineations that we can draw out that this doesn't really capture, does it? Metta and attachment—that's the mixture of my love here, the love that flows between us.

So again, we can be a little—I don't know what the word is—lazy, sloppy, simplistic, oversimplifying, a little too quick to close the case. But this is not to imply that eros is always better, or we should always strive for an erotic relationship. That's not to imply that at all. There's absolutely a place for metta and the simplicity and the simplifying that it brings and involves, and for its universality and for its unconditionality. Absolutely necessary. And that's why the Buddha placed such emphasis on it. I don't know how common that was in the teachings of his time to actually put so much emphasis on the brahmaviharas, but so important and skillful to really know those practices and develop them. I can't say how much treasure there is in that.

So I'm not saying eros involves more than metta, therefore it's always better, therefore always try and do that. I'm not saying that at all. There's really a place and a necessity for metta, compassion, and the brahmaviharas—their simplicity, their universality, their unconditionality. But there are differences.

In fact, related to just these factors that we just talked about—simplicity, universality, and unconditionality—in relationship with another, whether... and actually that other could be an imaginary other, an actual other, or the self, in relationship with the self, or in relationship with a phenomenon, the practice of metta, for example, or compassion, or equanimity, leads to, progressively, as you do it more, its direction is towards fabricating that other less, fabricating the perception of the other less.

Again, whether it's self, giving metta to self, whether it's giving metta or directing metta or compassion towards phenomena or equanimity, or equanimity towards phenomena, or towards another, the brahmaviharas actually tend towards a decrease of the fabrication of the perception of the other—of certainly the object to whom one is directing the metta or compassion or equanimity or whatever, but then eventually to all things. They simplify the perception of the other as part of that movement. And also, because self-other-world always arise as constellations, as we said, they will also simplify the sense of self. So the simplification is part of the movement of less fabrication.

And the perceptions of oneness that come out of that—self and other are really one, one luminous heart essence of love or whatever the perception is—the perceptions of oneness, as we've said several times on this retreat, are also, if you like, station points on the spectrum of lessening fabrication of the perception of the other and self that happens through the brahmavihara practice. You understand?

So the brahmavihara practice—they decrease, as you get deeper into them, they decrease the fabrication of the perception of other and also self. Part of that is the simplification of the perception of other and self, and partly also world, and partly the perceptions of oneness, the sense of oneness that happen there. It's all wrapped up in the movement of lessening fabrication.

In contrast, eros actually fabricates more. It doesn't simplify. It adds complexity to the object, to the beloved other. It becomes multifaceted, multidimensional, as we've said, this beloved other, whatever it is, whoever they are. And they may even increase in the images they sort of express. So one person for me might sort of hold a whole range of images and might manifest to me with different imaginal faces. The movement of eros is an increase in complexity, a complexifying, a complicating, as we said, and an increase in the fabrication of other.

Yes? Eros can go towards melting and union, so to speak, with the other. And we've talked about that in practice, and you've probably experienced that by now. But it will seek, after a sort of dip into that union, it will seek to kind of reinstate the sense of twoness, the erotic polarity, the erotic dyad there. There will be a return to that, because of the fertility of that and the necessity of that to the eros. Even when we know the oneness, it's like the knowing of the oneness would just be something that's sort of in the background, part of just the mix of what is known in the erotic twoness, in the erotic coupling, in the erotic tension of twoness there in the dyad.

What ensues from that particular difference—the difference in the movement towards less and towards more fabrication, if you like—what ensues is a difference in also the perceptions, the openings, the experiences of sacredness and divinity that come out of these two directions of practice.

Why is that important relative to the brahmaviharas? Because—and again, you'll know this if you've done a lot of dedicated brahmavihara practice, especially metta and compassion—but if you did that, say, cultivated metta and compassion, let's say on a retreat for some weeks or at home, you know, whatever, then there would be a point, and I think this is an inevitable point, unless something's kind of getting in the way, there will be a point, maybe quite fast, but usually quite gradually, where the metta or the compassion begins to feel like I'm not doing it. Actually, I sense it everywhere. I sense it in the air.

I sense it in the space. I sense that metta or compassion is woven into the fabric of the cosmos itself. There is metta and compassion filling this space, the space of the universe.

When I begin to feel that, I can let the cosmic metta, the cosmic compassion that pervades everywhere, do the work. Often people having this kind of experience—opening to it—apart from the relief and beauty and how deeply it touches, find it brings also a sense of divinity. They will often start speaking in theistic language, even if they've had no inclination to do that before.

As I said, it begins to feel like it's not me doing the practice—I'm not cranking this wheel of metta and compassion. I'm not holding the other person's suffering, if that's what I'm trying to do within compassion practice. I'm not having to respond. It's almost like it's already there, a little bit effortless. It's like the cosmos is doing it. The divine is doing it. Buddha nature is just doing it. All I'm doing is opening to letting that happen as it's already happening and recognizing it. All I'm really doing is opening and tuning my attention to that, tuning into that wavelength of perception.

Because it doesn't feel at that point like the self is doing it—the self is responsible, the self is having to work at this compassion, I'm responsible for this compassion, I'm the one holding the suffering—this brings huge relief. There's this sense of "Oh, wow, phew."

With all that, equanimity comes in. The vastness gives rise to an automatic sense of effortless compassion and love, and the holding equanimity and steadiness that are shot through the cosmos allows the self to be much more equanimous in relationship to the suffering we're touching in compassion practice. Correspondingly, with all that, there's an increase in our capacity to face suffering, to open to suffering. We don't have to run away. The heart—in some respects we could say literally—gets bigger. It's no longer my personal heart; it's the universal heart. It's the universal compassion, the divine compassion that the heart is opening to.

Our capacity to meet suffering, to face it, to hold it—although it doesn't feel so much that we are holding it—is vastly expanded when we're in touch with that sense. Because it's not me that has to do it. It's not little old me that has to somehow hold this enormous suffering you might be going through, or that's in the world, or that we see on the news, or that the planet is facing. Something much vaster, more powerful is holding it. We don't have to create and work at it; all we have to do is recognize.

Now that kind of divine or cosmic, cosmically infused love and compassion could be just from normal, standard loving-kindness and compassion practice, or it could be coming from the erotic imaginal—even the sexual imaginal. We can know both these possibilities.

That sense of cosmic, divine love and equanimity that imbues loving-kindness and compassion can come from more standard Brahmavihara practices—loving-kindness and compassion without any of the imaginal, certainly without any erotic imaginal, and certainly not with any sexual, erotic imaginal. That's very possible, and I've just described that—a very normal thing I would expect for people doing the Brahmavihara practices in the standard way.

But we can also know it through and with the erotic imaginal, and as I said, even the sexual, erotic imaginal. We can explore both, know both are possible, and explore the differences.

What's part of the differences? Well, they both give rise to this divinity. They both sacralize. They give rise to and spread a sense of sacredness.

Eros does it because of the eros psyche logos dynamic we've talked about—giving a sense of dimensionality and beyondness to, at first, the erotic beloved, the other. That's part of what will happen with the eros psyche logos dynamic as it gets going, if it's not inhibited, if it's not blocked. In the sense of dimensionality, in that sense of beyondness and mystery and beauty, there will at some point be some kind of sense of the divine or the mystical.

I'm going to come back to these words because they're actually hard to define, and rightly so. But the mystical is, you could say, partly just—when does something become mystical? When it's beyond

whatever is agreed to be the normal, agreed-on perception of what something is. Obviously there are lots of caveats with that definition, but because of the eros psyche logos dynamic—the opening up of dimensions, the perception of dimensions, the perception of the sense of beyond, of mystery, of beauty, the logos then expanding the idea of what that thing is, what that other is, and all the soul-making involved—there is an inevitable sacralizing that comes with it through eros, because of the soul-making dynamic that it instigates, ignites, inseminates.

Metta and the Brahmaviharas also sacralize, but they sacralize through this decrease in fabrication, this lessening of fabrication of perception that they support or unlock. Because of that, there's a kind of limited direction of the sacralizing. It's always going to be in the direction of less fabricating, and that follows a kind of spectrum.

Perhaps you could say there are infinite gradations on that spectrum, although it certainly seems in my experience that there are typical or common stations along the way—stopping points, plateaus along the spectrum of lessening fabrication. But there's a limited direction. It will always have something about oneness in it, some kind of oneness, and to greater or lesser degrees and different kinds of oneness, always then some sense of universality, often some sense of luminosity as well. But universality and oneness will be characteristic of this narrowing of the direction of sacralizing.

Whereas with Eros, when Eros and the sense of love and cosmopoetic divinity come out, there are infinite possible directions of sacralizing because the Eros picks up on and amplifies, ramifies the personal, the particular, the characteristic, unique qualities there. It multiplies or spreads them through the soul-making dynamic, perhaps in cosmopoiesis, to discover and create them—discover/create/discover/create—everywhere throughout the cosmos. So it's infinite in the sense that there's not a limited number of possibilities of the flavors that can have and the characteristics that can have. It doesn't just move along this narrow line deepening into oneness and less fabrication. Certainly there's depth there, but it's much wider in the sense of the number of possibilities being infinite.

So what I would like to open, apart from getting clear conceptually—because I think it is helpful—is also the possibility of practice. If you feel enough trust in practicing with Eros and the imaginal and the erotic-imaginal, you may want to explore this combination, this navigation, this mixing of the Eros with the Brahmavihāras, if and when you feel enough trust in the practice of the erotic-imaginal. And again, I'm really including the sexual erotic-imaginal as well.

Though it might also be that doing this kind of practice and seeing how the erotic-imaginal, even the sexual erotic-imaginal, can support the Brahmavihāras greatly adds to your trust in the practice of the erotic-imaginal.

So one possibility is working with imaginal practice, getting a sense of the Eros involved there in the practice with this imaginal figure and all the beauty of that and the multi-directionality and multi-dimensionality of that. And then when that's there—and sometimes that can be very quick if you're

familiar with it, and sometimes it takes time to get used to all those different aspects and qualities and linger in it and feel the beauty there, but actually it can be very quick—then one can navigate either straight into a mettā and compassion practice and just let the image go. But more interesting for us is actually to direct it, including still the erotic-imaginal and the Eros and the sense of the Eros and even the image, and directing, navigating, steering in a way that includes the erotic, the Eros, and the erotic-imaginal while opening to the mettā and compassion. So it's a kind of fusion, a mixture.

For example, one can be working with the Eros in the imaginal practice, and then introduce a person that you know is suffering. Of course, it could be your own suffering, but for instance, introduce a third person. So there's the self and the beloved other, the object of the Eros, and then a third person. And you know that they're suffering, and you just introduce that into the constellation. Maybe it has to constellate spatially a certain way—you can be really creative here.

And what's possible, as I said, is the erotic divinity, the sense of the divine love that's coming out of, being supported by, emerging from the erotic image, can actually be what then spills over and meets the suffering and the suffering person. So it can become like water spilling over, like a tide coming in, or light can radiate, or all kinds of possibilities. Actually, all kinds of possibilities. You can be very creative here for the way that the divine love that is emanating or being expressed through the erotic image extends and carries over to include and to meet and encompass and address the suffering other and their suffering. All kinds of possibilities. Again, we can be really surprised here. The imaginer has a dimension of creativity which is not our own. And we can also be more deliberate and bring our own steering—do it this way or that way, more deliberate, more intentional navigation.

When I first started exploring this nexus, this meeting point of Eros and the Brahmavihāras in practice, this was really interesting to me. Because typically we would assume that Eros, in the way that we usually think about it, is associated with craving, and it's kind of self-interested. What can I get for me? I'm interested in my pleasure. I want to keep this erotic object for me. I want to hoard the pleasure for myself, or my whole being and my orientation is contracted around the Eros, contracted around the other, and around the self. And one sees that, actually, that's not the case. Interesting.

Again, because Eros tends to open, open up in all dimensions, in the energy body and so forth as we've talked about before, this was much more possible than I had anticipated. I mean, I thought actually that it would work, but it was really much easier than I anticipated.

Also, what was easier was the fact that we can actually hold two very different images simultaneously. So there's this image of the beloved other and whatever Eros is happening inside, communicating, flowing between us in that image, or maybe not even between us—it could be a couple, an imaginal couple that we are witnessing outside of ourselves. But then we can have a third image of this suffering person. So there's the erotic other, and there's the suffering person. And this possibility to hold a kind of network of images, certainly more than one image or two images at the same time.

And also that because we tend to think, especially with mettā, of it being something very tender and gentle and soft, and that's the direction of the mettā practice as it evolves—

This transformation unfolds with surprising ease—the dharmic possibility becoming accessible through what reveals itself as a natural capacity to hold multiple images simultaneously. There emerges the erotic beloved, the flowing eros between or through us, perhaps witnessed as imaginal couples existing beyond our immediate experience. Alongside this, a third image: the suffering being, whether within ourselves or another. This network of simultaneous images expands our contemplative range beyond the typical constraints of single-pointed practice.

The discovery challenges our usual assumptions about metta's trajectory. We expect loving-kindness to evolve toward increasing subtlety, gentleness, and steadiness—less tempestuous, less tearful when compassionate, moving toward reduced fabrication with greater equanimity. This movement represents the natural progression toward less constructed states of being.

Yet what emerges as particularly striking is how the complete spectrum of erotic expression translates directly into the brahmaviharas without dilution or domestication. The carnal and voracious eros, those demonically divine images that carry such power, lends itself remarkably to compassion without requiring transformation into something merely tender, sweet, or desexualized. Similarly, the most subtle eros—perhaps just the gentle holding of hands, or even subtler intimacies of pure non-physical connection—translates with equal authenticity into the qualities of divine abiding.

Fierce eroticism might give birth to protector deity consciousness, manifesting love and compassion with that same fierce quality. Even the seemingly transgressive images of consuming or feasting upon the beloved's flesh and bones can transfer directly to the suffering other, where this apparent devouring expresses profound compassion. The strangeness dissolves when we recognize that in the imaginal realm, such fierce intimacy can embody the deepest care.

Catherine once witnessed this principle embodied in Sarnath, where a wounded dog—throat somehow cut—was surrounded by other dogs who licked the wound continuously until it healed completely over several days. This tender persistence, this healing through devoted attention, mirrors how erotic licking in imaginal practice can transform into the gentle ministration to suffering hearts. The dogs' instinctive compassion reveals something essential about how intimacy and healing interweave.

The translation between erotic image and brahmaviharic expression takes many forms. Sometimes the action itself transfers directly—the licking becomes tender care. Sometimes light emanates from the body parts or actions central to the erotic image, carrying both erotic quality and compassion toward the suffering being. Sometimes a particular emotional quality—devotion, for instance—becomes amplified and spread, washing through the suffering person with that characteristic devotion now expressed as compassionate care.

The possibilities are truly infinite. Light may beam directly to the suffering person or suffuse in all directions. The transfer might occur through qualities rather than actions, through emanations rather than direct contact. Each practitioner discovers their own pathways of connection.

What surprises many practitioners is the natural arising of bliss—not merely sexual pleasure, but authentic pīti, sukha, and samādhi. These jhānic factors emerge from the erotic imaginal whether practiced alone or combined with the brahmaviharas. This challenges our assumptions about what constitutes spiritual versus worldly experience.

Perhaps most remarkably, a natural, effortless equanimity accompanies this practice, particularly when working with suffering beings. Anyone engaged in sustained compassion practice quickly recognizes the necessity of equanimity when opening the heart to worldly pain. The cosmopoetic dimension—the recognition that divinity or deeper sources operate through these practices rather than the small self performing them—naturally generates this supporting equanimity.

These possibilities deserve our attention and, when readiness arises, our experimental exploration. They invite play and discovery within the sacred space of practice.

One might ask: why complicate what already works? Why not simply practice metta and compassion in their established forms? The traditional approaches certainly need not be replaced—they remain foundational and complete.

It may be that for some people at certain times, because there's so much libido involved, so much energy available when Eros is alive in us, this gives a whole other level of energy to loving-kindness or compassion or mudita practice when it's allowed to infuse those brahmavihara practices. There's an immediately available depth of energy that becomes possible when we can join them and make the navigation work.

But I also want you to know that sexual images, sexual energy, eros—none of this has to be a distraction. If one is intent on brahmavihara practice and it feels like the eros is coming in, the sexual desire is coming in, the sexual energy and images are arising, and this seems like a distraction from metta practice or whatever it is—actually, it doesn't need to be regarded as a distraction. You can include it in very creative ways that actually give a whole other depth and texture and range of possibilities to the brahmavihara practice. So just to know that's possible.

But for me, it's something in just knowing that it's possible that's opening up our views and our understandings and our conceptual framework and our exploration. And this, to me, is really important, really, really important.

It's not that doing this is just for the sake of the brahmaviharas, because then you might ask, well, why not just cultivate them without the erotic imagination? It's more complicated, you've got more to learn, and so on. Fair enough. If my goal is simply the cultivation of the brahmaviharas, if that's the sole purpose of my

practice, then certainly this might seem unnecessary.

But in this wider understanding of what practice is, where we're going, what the possibilities are, what I want involved and integrated into my sense of practice and life, integrated into my understanding—if it's more than just the cultivation of the brahmaviharas, then this integrating and including and experimenting with eros and the imaginal and the ways they may interface and contribute to and flow into and open up directions and possibilities with the brahmaviharas becomes a necessity. There's a point beyond just the opening up of the brahmaviharas. Soul-making.

For me, what's so important is the opening, the increasing, the adding to our sense of sacredness—our senses, plural, of sacredness. The pluralizing of our senses of sacredness. The giving of depth, breadth, and range to the senses of sacredness, the experience of sacredness, the experiences of sacredness, the expansion of all that. To me, that's one of the main reasons for all of this and all these teachings.

So I offer this as an opening, as a possibility, as something you may want to practice with and experiment with, and also as an avenue for further investigation. You can find out things here for yourself. You can add to the research, if we borrow that fantasy. All kinds of things are possible.

Thank you for listening.

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