Opening The Dharma of Desire (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:08:39

Let's continue our inquiry into desire, the whole realm of desire and desires, and expand our explorations regarding desire—our skills, our capacities, our insights in this area. I'd like to offer a different approach, a different way of working with desire than we've elaborated so far, and tie that together with some of the previous things we've been discussing while making some other observations about desire and our relationship to it.

This different approach I mentioned briefly in the past, in the talk "Beauty of Desire Part 2" from 2011. You can find it if you're interested in more details and examples. But I want to offer it again here.

What happened for me was this: I was meditating in my room at Gaia House and felt moved to try something different in my meditation. Through this approach—which I'll explain—I discovered something that was certainly new for me, something quite surprising that I'd not heard anyone else mention or describe or point to, something that had very surprising implications outside the box of what was, up to then, my understanding of Dharma, and any other understanding I'd heard of Dharma at the time.

I can't actually remember what was troubling me. I know it was something to do with Gaia House politics—I only remember that because it's in my notes. I didn't write down what it was. In the course of time, exactly what was upsetting me in the political situation at Gaia House behind the scenes has completely faded and is of much less interest to me than the actual insights that came and the possibilities for practice that emerged and felt like they were discovered.

So something was going on and I was troubled, agitated, and a little upset by something to do with Gaia House politics. I was sitting in meditation, being with this situation and my feelings. For some reason, I found a different way of approaching it, and I asked myself: What do I really want here? Is there a desire for something? And if there is, what does that desire really want?

I can't remember whether it was obvious to me that there was wanting and desire in the first place, or maybe I just assumed that because there was dukkha. But anyway, I asked this question: What do I really want here? What does this desire really want? I let that question reverberate in the being.

The answer that came was: freedom from constraint.

I understood that answer. It had meaningfulness for me, even though it might sound quite abstract. In its very abstraction—this is something I'm going to come back to—it was very meaningful for me. Freedom from constraint. This really was what the being, the psyche, desired.

So I felt into that desire for freedom from constraint and really allowed it, felt its movement within me. More than just within the psyche—within the whole energy body, actually. The energy body reflects the psyche, reflects the citta. They're completely intimately connected, as we've discussed before.

But not just allow it, accept that it's there. I mean really open fully to the energetic current of that deep desire for freedom from constraint. Really allow it. Really feel the movement of that current of desire, really open the whole energy body, the whole body, even bigger than the physical body—open fully, as fully as possible, to that energetic current or stream or movement of desire through the being, through the energy body.

When I did that, it felt like the quality that I was wanting—this freedom from constraint—was actually already available. It was, so to speak, made available or discovered to be already available through this way of approaching it. So I had, right there, the very thing that I most deeply wanted: this sense of freedom from constraint, this knowing of freedom from constraint.

And it came not from turning away from the desire, but actually going deeper into it and allowing it more fully, opening to it more fully. It wasn't a putting down, it wasn't a letting go, it wasn't a recognition that desires are delusions or anything like that—quite the opposite.

Out of this discovery, which really struck me very strongly—I thought, "Oh, that's really interesting"—so very enjoyable as an experience, but the insight there was really striking. This is not what should be happening according to conventional understanding. I haven't seen this before. I haven't heard this before.

This was condensable, filterable down to a set of basically simple practice instructions. When one notices that there's dukkha—whether one notices that there is a desire obviously there or not—in other words, sometimes we're experiencing dukkha, we're experiencing dissatisfaction, and it's clear: "I really want this, I need this," or whatever it is. It's clear that...

the desire is present within the dukkha and wrapped up in the dukkha. And sometimes we have dukkha, and it's actually not obvious that there's a desire there at first. So it doesn't matter either way.

When there is dukkha, whether desire is present obviously or not, the first step is to ask yourself: What am I really wanting here? What am I really wanting?

This question involves unhooking the desire from its most immediately obvious object—from the thing that captures our attention. I want that person, I want a relationship with that person, I want this event to happen, I want that object. This is the immediately obvious object of desire. And in a way, this question—what am I really wanting here, what does the desire really want more deeply—is asking us to unhook from that immediately obvious object that it tends to get stuck on, contracted around, infatuated with, and let the desire reveal what its deeper essence is, what its deeper purpose is, what is more deeply wanted.

This will often be, in fact it will always be, more general, more of a generality. It might even seem, if you're hearing this, more abstract. Notice too that it involves an unhooking from the image.

So we're on a slightly different tack now—a different way of working, a different approach to the deeper desire. In my case, like freedom from constraint. It wasn't that I wanted this or that to happen politically, or someone to say this or that. In the example I gave, it was freedom from constraint. It sounds more general, more abstract. It's the deeper desire there.

The answer to the question "what do I really want" was not so much coming from the mind, but it's like dropping that question into the being, to the whole citta, the whole psyche, the heart and the soul and the mind.

So first step: What am I really wanting? What is really more deeply wanted by this desire? What is the deeper desire?

Second step: clear away, clear off the table, sweep clear the table of any dharma preconceptions that one has regarding desire. Desire is a kilesa, it's a defilement, it's an impurity, it leads to dukkha, it is self, it brings self, it's craving and that's problematic—all this stuff that we're used to, familiar with, that's really important as perspectives and approaches. But just for this approach right now, clear it. Just clear the table clean of any preconceptions.

And in that open space, more open from preconceptions, just introduce—is it possible to play with, just a little bit, some kind of trust of the deeper intelligence of the soul, or of the desire? Just playing with the idea, the possibility, that this movement of desire that looks problematic, may even look petty, certainly looks like it's causing dukkha or wrapped up in the dukkha—just play with the idea that actually there's something to trust here.

There's a treasure deep down there in the desire. It manifests in its movement a certain intelligence of soul, like phototropism—the movement of sunflowers turning towards the light, turning towards the sun, and other plants as well. You know how plants and trees grow towards the light. Maybe the desire deep down—certainly it gets twisted, certainly we get into a wrong relationship with it—but maybe deep down there's something akin to phototropism there, a kind of intelligence of the soul.

But at any rate, let's just trust it and see if there's not a treasure here that, if it's not actually already there—if that's too much as an idea to trust—actually trust that the way of relating to desire can turn it into a treasure. That's an easier step in terms of trust.

So the second step: clear away preconceptions, introduce some degree of trusting this movement of desire.

Those first two steps are actually reversible. The asking "what am I really wanting, what does this desire really want," unhooking from the obvious object—that's the first step. The second step, clearing away preconceptions, introducing a little bit of trust, entertaining some trust of the desire—you could flip them.

Even when I don't yet know what the deeper desire is, I could just introduce the entertaining of the idea that there is a way of paying attention to desire that turns it into a treasure, or there's something buried deep in desire already that is a treasure that can be discovered. The order doesn't matter.

There are those first two steps. Then the third step in this three-step process would be to really feel that desire and really allow it. It's almost like you can feel it in the whole being and especially in the energy body and feel it—perhaps it's a current, a movement, a stream, a surge.

Perhaps it's really strong. Perhaps it's quite subtle. But really feel it. Really, really allow it and really open to that energy, that stream, that current, that movement. Really opening the space of the energy body and allowing that to flow. That's the third step.

So let's give some examples to flesh that out a little bit, that process, that practice. These examples are actually repeats from that talk I mentioned, The Beauty of Desire, where there are more examples as well. Part of the reason for repeating them is because after I discovered this practice, I became very interested in it and started trying it out with this hunch that I had about how it would work. I began experimenting with it on yogis in distress during interviews, with friends, colleagues, and with myself in different situations.

This was part of what I'm tying in now to the researcher fantasy—this whole exploration actually grew and emerged alongside that fantasy, though to be honest, it had been there on and off as an available fantasy for quite a while for me. But it emerged with this discovery, and then I rode with that expanding researcher fantasy as part of the whole investigation that fed into everything. So I was conducting research, if you like, on myself and with others, trying this process out when people were going through different difficulties.

I experimented with it for perhaps a couple of months, quite intensively. And I estimate that it was successful in the ways I expected about 95% of the time. It became so predictable—exactly what would happen, how it would open things up in this particular way. There are nuances I may come to later, but basically it would open up, relieve the dukkha, and reveal the abundance of what one was desiring. The dukkha would release, and there would be a transformation of the experience of the body, the energy body, the consciousness, and the psyche as a different state would open up.

This became so predictable that I actually stopped pursuing it so intensively in my research and stopped taking notes on what I observed with myself and with people. The one time I remember it not working was with a friend who, as we were doing it, was slouched on a sofa. I hadn't suggested—partly because it was a friend—that she sit up so the energy could flow more easily. Apart from that instance, I'm pretty sure it worked every time. So I became convinced and stopped taking detailed notes, which is why I don't remember many examples now, as I moved on to using the researcher fantasy to explore other areas.

So these are old examples. Excuse me for repeating them. They're actually good examples because they

reveal different facets of the process and the assumptions involved.

One involved a woman student who was not on retreat but had met a man in another country and was engaged in a long-distance romance. He was very far away, and this was a new romance for her with lots of texting and messaging back and forth. She came in for an interview that she requested and said, "I'm craving." She had done considerable dharma practice, and we had worked extensively in the past with vedanā—watching craving, stationing awareness on craving, noticing different vedanā, and learning not to get caught up in craving. We had done quite a lot of that practice, and she was very interested in equanimity. That had been her leaning and interest for quite a long time in practice.

She said, "I'm craving, and I feel that craving is a contraction of the being. It's painful. There's also fear that I might lose this budding romance—it might fall apart. I fear that..." She was planning to visit him to see what would happen. "I fear that it won't work out, and then there'll be the loss and the pain, and this is all dukkha." So amidst the loveliness, she was also getting into a reasonably difficult state with the whole situation.

She was aware that craving involves hype. We had talked about this before—how it involves constructing artificial differences and amplifying the differences between things and times, so they seem really different. That over there becomes so much more preferable than this over here. Here and now becomes less than, not so interesting, not so desirable. It's really markedly different from that over there. The papañca that comes in amplifies that process. The word papañca is actually connected etymologically with the word "amplify"—it implies expanding, amplifying.

She was already somewhat aware of this, but we talked about how it was operating in this case, because she said, "The adventure begins then." In other words, when her plane arrives in that country to see what happens with this man—"The adventure begins then," she said.

Now I'm just kind of in limbo. I'm just waiting.

We examined this and saw how much of a construction it was, because there was actually lots of lovely electronic exchange happening in the present moment. But the papañca comes in and the kilesa comes in and denigrates the here and now while raising up the there and then. Really inquiring into this - is it actually that different without the mind making it so? Without this process that craving tends to ignite, this papañchizing process that increases differences, which then feeds back to cause more craving in that whole saṃsāra cycle?

We talked about a way of looking that worked against the papañca. I suggested she recognize that she has six sense objects here and five aggregates here, and when she arrives in that foreign country to see him, there will be six sense objects and five aggregates. Is it really that different, or is it the mind painting things, making them seem different in a way that's actually not helpful?

This is fairly standard Dharma teaching. We went into deconstructing the hype so that craving could

release, and as craving releases, the hype gets deconstructed - a mutually reinforcing process. This approach was helpful, and we explored it thoroughly in our long interview.

But then I introduced another, less standard approach. I asked her simply, "What are you wanting?"

Her reply was immediate and certain: "Him." Very simple. Him. It seemed obvious to her - I want him. She looked at me as if I were asking the most elementary question imaginable.

You can see how difficult it sometimes is to look beyond the most obvious object that desire seems to be presenting. I want him. But I encouraged her to explore this more deeply. What's actually involved in that desire?

When I asked again, creating more spaciousness to open up the inquiry, she said, "I love that I can say anything with him and I'm listened to." Even this was more general - an expansion from the specific person to a quality of relationship.

We went deeper still, exploring what lay beneath even that desire. She identified four components of this deeper longing: "I want the opening of the heart. I want the expression. I want the connection of being received. And I want to love."

Can you hear how these are relatively general, more abstract sounding? Certainly more universal than "I want him." At this level, the desire is no longer hooked on or contracted around a limited object. What it wants is actually a more open object, a deeper-level object. It's not really even an object in the usual sense of the word.

Feeling into this deeper current, she recognized it as quite powerful and profound - not how she usually experienced herself or, in her words, how she usually took herself to be. I encouraged her to let this feeling fill her body, to really allow it and feel it, emphasizing the importance of opening the body to this current if possible.

As she did this, with my support, something remarkable happened. She reported that her self-boundaries - the sense of the edges of herself - began to dissolve, and an expansion started happening throughout her whole being.

Now, she had done some practice, but not much at what I would call the deeper levels. So this expansion of her entire sense of being, with boundaries dissolving, was quite frightening for her. Some resistance and contraction kicked in naturally.

I reassured her: "We don't need to force anything. Let's just respect the fear here. What are you afraid of?"

What's the fear that's causing this resistance and contraction? Is it fear? Yes. What is it? Is it losing yourself? Is it disappearing? Is it just the unfamiliarity? No.

At that point we ran out of time in the session and I had another meeting or something. But we talked

about the need for compassion for the self that's resistant and fearful to that opening and that new experience. The compassion, introducing the compassion and not forcing over a threshold into new territory of being and experience. The compassion for the self that feels fearful, that is resistant, that is a little bit contracted there, or trying to keep contracted, can really help.

It's possible to play one's edges with new experiences. But eventually—and whether it happens immediately or relatively quickly, or really quite at a gentle pace, slowly over some time—these kinds of expansions of being, and I'm mentioning it because it's actually quite a characteristic experience of working with this practice that I'm elaborating on right now, not always, but often. Eventually, we're able to allow that kind of expansion.

We can feel in that a whole new sense of life force, libido, connected with the desire, a whole new sense of self that goes with that, a whole new sense of strength, openness, independence—being independent of this or that thing happening, event happening, getting this or that object. One sees this abundance and opening and independence and strength and beauty that comes. All that treasure that kind of comes up to the surface and is made available is strangely not seen to be dependent on the object of desire being there, as I said, on having it.

We are fulfilled to a huge extent, to a surprising extent. I mean, almost always there was a surprise involved here for people. Fulfilled to an extent more than what we are used to feeling in our lives. We're not used to feeling that extent of abundance and fulfillment and openness and treasure and brightness. But we're fulfilled not by getting this or that object, and not even by trying to renounce or ignore or "let go" of the desire, but actually through the very flow of the deep desire. We're going, as I said, deeper into it and really respecting and really opening to it. The libido, the life force is opening the being there through the desire.

Then we may wonder: is it actually possible that craving, which as we've been saying has this kind of contraction to it, feels painful—in this case, this woman, there will be the swings to the fear of loss, of rejection, involves this repeatedly moving away from the present moment to daydreaming and being lost in the future and that kind of poor fantasizing—is it possible that that kind of craving, in that sense, the contraction of craving, is actually a result of not connecting to, not allowing, not realizing, recognizing, and not allowing the deeper desires to unfold, to be felt, and for those currents to flow?

You understand? What we call craving is a matter of not connecting to, not realizing, not allowing the deeper desires to unfold and to flow. Similarly with eros, it goes to craving when it doesn't have the imaginal dimension, when something is blocked in terms of psyche and logos. Here is a slightly different approach that we're talking about, and it will move to contraction of craving when there is not this deep respect for the desire, connecting to it, recognizing it, feeling it, and really allowing it.

This funneling into craving and the contraction of craving and the pain and all the kind of craziness that goes with that may just also be a habit of the being. In other words, we are trained away from the erotic

imaginal and away from the deeper levels of desire, as we talk about in this other approach.

One wonders, what is going on here? Why does it take one course habitually into the contraction of craving and not others? Is it that actually there's a result of not allowing something else—not either in the context of the erotic imaginal direction, not allowing the psyche and the logos to expand, not allowing the imaginal dimensions to flower? In the context of this kind of practice, not allowing the deeper levels of desire and that movement of the being there—the contact with it, the allowing it, the opening to it, the respect for it.

Another example I could give is actually also from myself, partly because it's a different kind. This goes back a few years when I was interested in—still am actually very much—what a study of modern physics could bring to a Dharma understanding and the ways it could open up certain parallels with emptiness, but also the implications there for ontology, cosmology, and more and more now, actually, epistemology as well, studying the philosophy of science.

But this is back then, as I said, these are old examples, and I was studying a lot about modern physics. In the heat of the eros there, of the desire, I felt something which I recognized was familiar to me and my kind of personality structure or constellation. It was a kind of impatience to understand and a pressure to understand. So I was hungry to understand. I was studying a lot.

Really the sense was, well, you read something, but that just takes you to the next thing to read, the next book. One book leads to another, and you kind of follow these leads. The feeling of impatience and pressure was coming in, sort of in the background, but then a little bit pushing on the whole psyche. It felt like I was unable to read these books fast enough. There was something, a sense of, I wanted to arrive at the sort of end of the whole process. Now I understand. Now there's no more books to read. Phew, done.

So I recognized this pressure, actually just as dukkha, didn't see that there was a desire in it, then recognized the desire that was pressuring there, and felt it, as I said, with these instructions I've outlined, and going to the deeper question, what is it wanting, this desire?

This example is a little bit interesting because the desire at first blush seemed to say, I want to end this process of inquiry. I want to understand everything so I don't have all this kind of continuous more books to read sort of thing, because one thing leads to another and one understanding leads to another, or one line of inquiry opens another one.

When I went more into it, actually, what was deeper and more fundamental was that it was a desire for inquiry itself. It was this desire to question, to make discoveries, to explore. In this case, discovery for myself by absorbing what others had discovered and making connections with what I was doing in my own practice.

This question—what is it wanting—actually opened this sense of joy in the ongoing inquiry. So the desire changes tack in the inquiry. Or we could say that it opened to a realization of how much of a desire for

inquiry was ongoing. The change in tack is that ongoingness becomes beautiful and becomes the thing that's wanted.

And there was tremendous joy liberated with that—the joy of ongoing inquiry, ongoing questioning, ongoing discovery. So this whole pressure that was felt and the sense that "it needs to end" was liberated through asking the question and opening to it. There was a whole beautiful and energizing opening that happened in the energy body, in the whole citta, in the whole psyche really, of this joy of discovery.

Let me state again those three steps. So there are two examples, three steps. First—and I may clear away... let's reverse that, because the first two steps are reversible, so we'll put them in the other order this time.

First, one clears away whatever dharma preconceptions make one dismiss desire, or denigrate it, or be suspicious of it. "It's a kilesa, it's only coming from self, or it feeds the self, or it causes selfing, or it is selfing, or it's craving, it just brings dukkha," all that. Just clear away, even just momentarily, even just as an experiment, just temporarily—without needing to clear them away forever or saying there's no insight involved in them, that's absolutely not true. Just temporarily clear them away and see if you can introduce, just temporarily, a kind of playing with or entertaining of a trust, a trusting of a deeper intelligence to the movement of desire. That there is, either in the way that I relate to it, or already there at bedrock, if you like, a treasure waiting to be discovered in the movement of desire.

And then this question, second step: what am I really wanting? What is this desire really wanting? What is the desire really for? Unhooking or ungripping, if you like—letting the desire ungrip from its immediate, obvious image of what I want, or this person or that object or that event, whatever it is to be this way or that way. And let it find or reveal to you what's the deeper thing wanted, the deeper level, if you like, of the desire, which will probably sound more general.

And then really feeling that in the psyche, in the body, and allowing it, especially in the energy body—really opening, really opening the space for that current, that energy, that movement there.

Now, I was going to report some more findings regarding the actual experiences and the states that seem to tend to open up when one does this kind of practice and bring a bit more specificity and nuance to that. But I think I'll leave that actually for now and leave you to research it for yourself and play with it and see what you discover in terms of the directions and the experiences and the states that can open, and if there's patterns there and repeatable kind of observations and movements that happen. So perhaps that will be for another retreat.

But just to say something around all this—actually around everything we're talking about on this retreat: sometimes with desire there is lack wrapped up in it, or it's coming from a sense of lack, or another emotion, or something like that. And sometimes, of course, we may need to first be with the actual emotional experience of distress or difficulty or lack or sadness or grief or whatever it is—anger, upset—that's going on. And maybe that too has a few different aspects, or is a mixture, as often an

emotional state is, a mixture of different emotions. Not always, but often. And just to be with that, and see, and feel, and allow what's going on there emotionally.

And oftentimes there is a lack there that's felt. And the question then is: two questions. One is, do I have the skill to do that? Do you have the skills to do that? As we've talked about in some of the energy body work and on other retreats and teachings elsewhere—just really developing my ability, your ability to work well with, in this case, difficult emotions. Also, beautiful emotions can be difficult to handle. But do I have that? Do I know that? Is that in my toolkit—that I really have different ways of working well, meeting well, opening to, caring for, in meditation, in my life, the range of emotions that come up for me in the course of life and practice. So do I have that skill? First question.

And second, is it necessary to first do that before trying this other approach? Because what can often happen is we assume that it is. And even more than that, we can get into a kind of habit where we always go to the lack or we always go to the negative and we always kind of linger there in a way that just keeps it at a feeling of lack. In other words, it doesn't really transform it very much, or maybe it just kind of...

gradually, gradually soothes and we're kind of okay or we just get distracted by the next thing that's demanding our attention. But we can kind of get stuck in a habit here and also in an emotional constellation of lack.

So that, yes, lack and desire often go together, not always, often as I'll come back to. And we can get more into or have a habit of tending towards, going towards the lack thread of those two threads that are interwoven, the lack and the desire. We always go to the lack thread.

And we might feel, because of our habit of doing that, that this practice that I'm explaining now regarding a way of being with desire, this practice, that's a kind of artificial construct. You're making something happen if you do that because it's not natural if you do that. The real thing, the thing that's actually present, the thing that's natural, the thing that's unartificial, not a construct, is the lack itself. And that feels like the natural thing. I'm just, quote, "being with what is."

Failure then to see the dependent origination. This is so important. We've touched on this before. So, so important. I'm not seeing the dependent origination. If I have that kind of view and that kind of response to hearing these different practices and these different approaches, I'm simply not understanding the dependent origination of experience.

And it may very well be that through the habit of what I pay attention to and the ways of paying attention to it, that I'm actually, I just keep building this particular range, limited range of emotions and experience. Through what I pay attention to and how I pay attention to it and the habit involved in that, I do not see that I'm actually constructing. I think I'm just being in a way that's very natural and not adding anything to the experience. I'm just being with what is, but I keep constructing that same "what is," whether it's a sense of lack or whatever it is. I'm not understanding the dependent origination, the fabricated,

constructed nature of all experience and all perception. And I'm just locked into a kind of habit there without even realizing what's going on. And I take it as the truth, reality, quote, "what is." Things as they are, et cetera.

So again, you know, it's just my particular emphasis in how I teach is that can we hold this aim of flexibility—flexibility of practice, flexibility of approach, flexibility of conception—that can we hold that as a principle aim of practice so that we can do it lots of different ways? Here's this dukkha, I have lots of different ways of approaching it. Here's this feeling of lack, I have lots of different ways of approaching it. Here's this desire mixed with the lack, we have lots of different ways of approaching that. Lots of angles and ways that it unfolds the experience in different directions.

Can we, again, experiment and see, rather than just being locked into a set of assumptions that we're no longer investigating. Experiment and see. Okay, can I go to the emotion and care for that and be with that in different ways? And can I actually other times try this thing with the desire? Can I do both? Can I learn to do both? Do I have that in my repertoire? And if not, can I actually gradually move towards a place, a time when I have that—then both in my repertoire? They're both just ways of approaching things.

Part of that might be that I actually need the skill to differentiate lack and desire. Because they're not the same. They're two different things. I mean, they're connected, for sure. They can be connected. But I can differentiate them as two strands that are perhaps entangled, and actually unentangle them.

And I'm not necessarily assuming an order. First I have to do this, and then I'll be able to do that. Well, then only then am I allowed to do that. Only then should I do that. First I have to do this. Yes, sometimes, and sometimes not. Sometimes you could go straight to this working with the desire, as I've elaborated in this talk, and the Beauty of Desire Part Two talk, and sometimes not. Sometimes I want to dwell more with the emotional difficulty, care for that in different ways, then maybe go to the desire thing, or not do the desire thing at all.

So there's a lot here about ways of practicing and order of practice and our assumptions around all that. And again, presenting this kind of practice, is it a desired prerequisite, a necessary preliminary capacity to be able to let go of desires and cravings that we talked about right at the beginning? You know, some familiarity with that. Do I also even allow myself to feel desire? Or is there this kind of—we talked about this anti-libidinal force.

I just shut it down before I've even felt it. And then it's wonderful to find Buddhism because it seems to validate this approach: "Yes, desire is bad, therefore just shut it down." But what's actually propelling me is a kind of anti-libidinal drive—in Fairbairn's terms—or this deep fear of having desire at all.

Can I actually feel it? Can I feel the energy of it, have the feeling? Do I recognize it? Do I know it? Do I know the different shades of it? These may well be prerequisite skills—capacities and abilities that could be necessary for these kinds of practices.

So there are three basic steps, and this question about being with the lack beforehand—or how much, or whether I need to—these are questions involved in all of this that I'd like to open up as inquiries. There's this need, I think, to experiment, to learn how to approach things in different ways, from different directions, in different orders, questioning our assumptions throughout.

Another element to add to the instructions for this practice concerns posture. For most people, certainly at first but often most of the time, posture will be quite important. Allowing and opening to energy flow—the third step of this practice—will be easier when the physical body is relatively open and upright and uncontracted.

I'd like to offer this practice and encourage you to pick it up as another possibility and play with it—try it, do it repeatedly. It doesn't have to be now, but at some point, engage with it repeatedly until you understand how to do it. Have it, as I said, in your repertoire. But to have it available as a working resource, you need to actually do it. You need to try it. You need to experiment with it.

My suggestion is that through experimenting, through trying it and making that effort to play with it for yourself, it can become incorporated into your toolbox. And that's a really valuable tool to have—not to use all the time, certainly not. It's like a toolbox: you have a range of tools. Apart from being genuinely helpful because it increases your resources, it's also enjoyable. That's part of the creativity. But you're only going to incorporate it and have it available as a tool if you pick it up, listen again to the instructions, play with it, and make it your own. This applies to all practices, of course.

One thing that struck me when I first introduced this in teaching was that I only heard back from two people who actually took it on board in a way that they repeated it for themselves. In other words, not with me sitting there guiding or offering it to them, or even asking if they were willing to try it and then guiding them through it, but doing it independently.

Now, it could be that many people were practicing it everywhere, but I doubt it. I could be wrong, but I only heard back from two people. One of them actually died a few years ago. The other—I don't know if she ever repeated it after the initial thrill of discovering it, the ability to do it, how transformative it was, what it opened up, and how remarkably easy it was to do.

This observation is quite interesting to me. Either people simply weren't telling me, or it reveals something about my own naivety in not repeating teachings sufficiently. I think that for new things to be taken on board—new approaches, new teachings, new practices—they need an enormous amount of repetition, probably by much more than one person. They probably need to be quite widespread in their dissemination, across continents and over time, with different voices. They also need to be offered much more slowly—even slower than I'm doing here in this talk—so that they become integrated into instructions repeatedly and people become accustomed to them, really hearing and doing them.

Maybe it also needs a special name. We have names for different practices, and perhaps that's part of

what allows something to be digested and assimilated organically. I'm not very good at names, but something like "opening to the deeper current of desire"—that's a way of summarizing this practice. Still quite a mouthful, but anyway, this was interesting to me. And again, it connects with this whole researcher fantasy theme that runs through these teachings.

I wonder why people didn't learn the practice or repeat it for themselves, apart from this need for repetition in teaching. Often what happened when I worked with people through this practice, taking them through it step by step, was that they were so struck by the actual experience and transformation—the sense of the body, the state of consciousness, the feeling of super-abundance that arose. It was a "wow" experience.

But this is really interesting to me: how we can be captivated by the intensity of an experience—I've talked about this before—the wow factor, and miss the principle involved. This relates to the researcher fantasy because it's the principle, the learning of the technique or practice, and then the principle that emerges from it. What is it saying about desire? What are the principles of the practice and what are the ramifications, the implications?

Actually, the more significant "wow" to me is not so much the experience that opens up in the moment when you do this, but the principle itself—how it fits or doesn't fit with narrower Dharma understandings, the greater freedom that emerges from that, and the questioning of it all.

So one thing I observed was that people were often quite struck by the experience and neglected to inquire. In other words, there was an absence of the researcher curiosity to explore the principles.

What's going on here? Isn't that surprising? What does this imply? What does this mean we have to rethink? What avenues does this open?

Sometimes, of course, part of this absence of deeper inquiry stems from people simply feeling relieved to feel better. Someone might have been feeling quite upset about something, and after working with this approach, they're just grateful for the relief. This is entirely understandable, but there's a way the deeper investigation gets eclipsed. This connects directly to our exploration of fantasies of the path and of the self—the researcher fantasy isn't being supported in these moments.

One final observation about this practice: I've found myself explaining this approach in various settings, and occasionally someone will respond with something like, "Oh, so what you're saying is just to accept everything and be with what is." For many reasons, I've come to expect this kind of response. There's a tendency to hear something new or different and immediately assimilate it into what we're accustomed to hearing, what we already know.

People are familiar with basic dharma teachings about being with what is, accepting what's happening. Even when someone might be presenting something quite different from that, it can simply get missed. This used to shock me, but I've grown accustomed to it. I think it stems partly from how we're taught and

partly from how we learn as human beings—it's important to create categories and fit experiences into those boxes, but there's a cost at certain stages of development.

Clearly, though, if we examine the three steps of this particular practice, it's not the same as simply accepting everything. It might sound somewhat similar, but when we say "really opening to the energy," this isn't the same as mere acceptance. Acceptance can be very passive, very "meh." It's not the full-bodied, complete movement of opening within the energy body that I'm describing.

Neither does simple acceptance include this active engagement with trust—entertaining the idea that desire might be trustworthy, might conceal or eventually reveal treasure if we relate to it differently. This element isn't present in generic "be with what is" teachings.

And there's certainly no exploration of the deeper level of desire—this question of "What am I really wanting here?" Generic acceptance might notice, "Oh, I desire this person, I want this to happen, I wish that wouldn't happen," but it remains at the more immediate level of objective desire, not diving into the deeper currents.

So this approach is actually quite different. If we have a limited conception of what the dharma is—if it's simply about being with what is and trying to accept everything—then our understanding remains constrained. And when our understanding is limited, our practice becomes limited because it flows from that understanding. Practice gets reduced to generically trying to be present, to what someone once described to me as their understanding of dharma: "essentially just trying to be in your body."

This limitation in concept and practice inevitably leads to limited experiences and insights. The range of practices available to us, the spectrum of experiences that might open, the possibilities for shifts in perception, openings in consciousness and feeling—all of this becomes constrained by the narrowness of our conceptual framework and the practices that emerge from it.

One final point: this practice of opening to the deeper current of desire—surely there's a better name—is also different from what we've been exploring in imaginal practice. In imaginal practice, the image is always retained. It may deepen, it may transform slightly, but the image remains central and is always preserved. By central, I mean we don't reduce the image—we don't say it's "really just" a representation of something else.

In this practice of opening to the deeper current of desire, however, the image is regarded as secondary to discovering the deeper, more fundamental desire. In this sense, the image might be seen as representational and secondary. Generally, the image isn't retained because we're moving toward what we might call the more general, deeper level of content—both the object of desire and the energy involved.

We're exploring a different doorway into the experience of desire, a different approach entirely. Though having said all this, it's really a matter of emphasis, and there's certainly overlap between these

approaches.

Erotic-imaginal practice, as we've emphasized throughout this retreat and others, involves trusting—playing with trust, offering at least some measure of trust to both eros and image. It also involves working with the energy body, including opening and expansion. So there is overlap here.

And when we look more deeply at this practice of opening to the deeper current of desire, we discover that this whole deeper trust of desire we're entertaining is both an idea and, in its own way, a kind of image.

So I hope in the future to explore how image and idea are really not separate. They shade into and imply and connect with each other.

We could say there is overlap here because the opening to the deeper current of desire practice already involves image in the imaginal, in its relationship with desire, in the form of this deeper trust of desire that involves the imaginal.

But to say something we've emphasized right from the beginning of the retreat—and hopefully by now you're getting very aware of this, it should be blindingly obvious—just how easy and relatively common it is to stop or arrest prematurely what could be much wider, deeper, more nuanced explorations of desire, craving, eros, clinging than we may first assume are warranted. It's so common to just stop that movement of exploration so it doesn't actually get very wide, doesn't go very deep, and lacks subtlety and sophistication around this whole area of desire, craving, clinging, eros.

We see this in the practice I talked about in "The Beauty of Desire Part Two," which we're now calling opening to the deeper current of desire. We saw it in terms of this bigger and more subtle exploration with what we were calling clinging, and realizing the spectrum of clinging and all the subtlety that can be evolved in that, along with the framework of understanding what's happening there—that when we let go of clinging, there's less fabrication. When we fabricate, there is less fabrication of perception, self, other, world.

This is telling us about the Buddha's teaching about dependent arising, dependent origination, and emptiness, which is intimately connected with the understanding of dependent origination through the fading of perception that happens, and through the fabrication moving up and down the spectrum. We've talked about this extensively, and I've written about it a lot. That's a whole other deeper exploration of this whole question of desires, a whole direction there that goes much deeper. We can actually realize a whole integrated conceptual framework of understanding regarding dependent origination and emptiness through the investigation of clinging and playing with clinging and the spectrum of clinging and its reduction and what that means.

So that's two large areas. And then of course the whole area that we're focusing on for the most part on this retreat—eros and soulmaking.

Just see how much there is worthy of a wider, deeper, more sophisticated, more subtle, more careful and more nuanced exploration in these directions. In other words, with regard to desire, eros, craving and clinging.

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