Opening The Dharma of Desire (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:19:02

Perhaps more fundamental than any of the details of what I'm talking about or elements of the fabric, the structure of what we're trying to communicate and convey, is this encouragement, permission, and even request to inquire for yourself—to experiment, to play, to ask questions, to turn over stones and see what's underneath. Let yourself find out, interrogate.

So the permission, the encouragement, and even the request to inquire. A part of inquiry is becoming aware of what our assumptions are and questioning those assumptions. Inquiry can be very much a movement of soul-making, part of soul-making. I would say the other way around: soul-making always involves some inquiry because of this expansion of the logos in the eros-psyche-logos. Inquiry can be soul-making.

More general and fundamental than any of the details or the little insights or this or that practice is this need for inquiry and this permission and encouragement to inquire.

In the practice we described in the first part of this talk—what we're calling the opening to the deeper current of desire—through that practice, it will almost certainly question or overturn certain assumptions if those assumptions are in place. For example, the assumption that desire that is not for ending suffering or a desire that is not just for metta or for jhāna—such desires that are not so narrowly conceived as kind of path desires—that other desires are defilements and lead to dukkha. Through engaging such a practice, it should almost inevitably upturn and uproot such assumptions, question them, bring one face to face with them and their questioning.

Or the assumption that desire is always from something called the self and leads to selfing, building this bad thing called the self. Again, looking at such desires and feeling where they come from and what they do when we relate to them in certain ways should confront us with these assumptions and hopefully bring more sophistication, more nuance, more depth and breadth of insight into our whole understanding and relationship with desire.

Through this course, we could say there are many uncommon observations—not commonly reported or talked about or chronicled or systematized observations in relationship to desire, what desire is and does and can be. Observations that are contrary to the usual assumptions and conclusions, at least in our kind of contemporary dharma understanding. We have quite a whole host of these observations that don't fit in the usual logos and set of assumptions and conclusions.

For example, we have talked about delineating eros from craving, saying desire is a large subset and we

can delineate something—a kind of desire called eros and a kind of desire called craving if we use language in a certain way and define them. We're saying these are not equivalent, interchangeable words. Eros is not craving. And the imaginal is not papañca. So the erotic-imaginal is a very different thing than the contracting and proliferating and crazy-making movement of craving and papañca.

We shared that if one is involved in one's life perhaps with some other who is unavailable for whatever reasons—either because of boundaries or because they're already involved with someone else or they're just not interested or unavailable due to health or whatever—and one feels the contraction of dukkha, stuck in the contraction of craving, looping in a circle and feeling the pain of that, contrary to usual instructions to "just let go," let go of that person, let go of the craving, let go of the attachment, one possibility is actually to allow more of the imaginal element, the imaginal realm. Allow the imaginal to open up in the seeing of the other and open up the whole constellation.

Everything that goes with that—the sense of beauty, the sense of meaningfulness, the sense of necessity, depth, dimensionality, especially the dimensionality that comes with the imaginal—so that this other that I seem to be so stuck with and frustrated by not being able to have, actually they become more through the allowing of the erotic-imaginal, through seeing and sensing in that way. They become, if you like, expanded imaginally. They become more angel, if we use that word in its imaginal sense. Their angelic function becomes more apparent to our erotic gaze, to our imaginal sensing. And also then, related to that, their divinity.

So opening—actually, rather than turning away and trying to close down or just avoid this person, or shut down the desire, or contemplate their foul body parts—another possibility, and yes, it's not easy perhaps at first, and it's certainly unusual, but with practice, absolutely possible, is to enter more into the imaginal, the imaginal vision, the imaginal sensing of this person.

The expansion that they then go through in perception of this other, the filling out and the expansion, widening, deepening, complicating of this imaginal object that they are, also brings with it, rather than more problem, the evidentness, the self-evidence that this is image. So rather than getting stuck in a kind of concretization and realism, as we let the imaginal inflate, give dimensionality, give extra beauty, give angelism, an angelic function, a divinity to this person, all of that, it's obvious that we're dealing with image.

The mindfulness is there, and the energy body, and the attuning to resonances. That takes, because it punctures the realism, the problem out of it and it's no longer craving. It steers craving towards eros more.

So letting the psyche, the image expand and deepen so that this object, this beloved other, this person that I feel I'm infatuated with or frustrated by or whatever, they're obviously more than just what they seem. And it's obviously imaginal.

When we get stuck in craving, even despite the papañca, there's the realism there, as we said before. Actually, the object is limited. It's limited, it's capped. Even if there's proliferation, it's capped.

The extension of the object goes into fantasizing about the future rather than expanding the dimensionality of the object itself and of the self. So I'm reviewing now these unusual, uncommon insights that we've unearthed here.

In allowing the eros, in allowing the feeling of the eros, often that actually brings an equanimity in the experience of the eros, and a spaciousness at the same time as there is eros and soul. It's not an equanimity devoid of eros. It's not an equanimity and spaciousness devoid of soul, or at least with only very limited soul-making.

In allowing the eros—we've given examples of this—actually allowing the eros, trusting it, trusting the erotic imaginal, there can be peace there, even if I'm not able to have this person for whatever reason in the way that I think I want them. There can be peace here, not from letting go, turning away, avoiding, repressing, or deciding to see them as ugly or stupid or unworthy. But in the very opening more to the eros and the imaginal, we can have a sense of peace because somehow we have more. We have more through the image, in the image, with the image.

I'm not talking about daydream—I don't need to repeat all this now. But in the increase and the allowing of the imaginal and the erotic in relationship to this other, with whom I've been contracted and craving and stuck, there can be equanimity, spaciousness, with eros, with soul, and also peace.

So "just let go"—which is sometimes so simplistically offered as a teaching recommendation—is certainly an option. It's a good possibility sometimes. But it may come at a cost. What's the cost? What am I losing there in terms of eros and soul? It's an option, absolutely, and it's something we can cultivate—that ability and capacity and skill in letting go in that sense. But it's not the only option.

Wrapped up in that option of "just let go" is the assumption of all kinds of things. One of the things it's assuming is a realism: this real self is letting go of that real object. One can contemplate the emptiness of self and object. But there's also this other way of actually recognizing who this person is to my psyche, letting the psyche create and discover the depths and the fuller beauty of this imaginal other. Yes, maybe that sounds dangerous, maybe it sounds crazy, but it's absolutely possible. And it doesn't really take that much development of practice to be able to do that.

We've talked about fantasies of the path and self on the path, and one piece of that constellation I mentioned was the fantasy of the teacher, the fantasy of others on the path. As with working with a therapist or working with a teacher in any area or domain of education that one loves and cares about, there can be the fantasy of the teacher and the eros in relationship with the teacher. This is really quite common, I'm sure many of you are aware. At the same time, there's the boundary between teacher and student. It's not just a relationship where one enters into this or that and decides to consummate sexually

or just be friends.

Oftentimes the encouragement is to let go or just stop doing that—either the teacher says to the student, or someone else says, "Drop it. Think of something else, find someone else." Or it's conceived in a classical psychoanalytic model of the Oedipal triangle: "I want this mummy or daddy," and it's related to that way—it's a projection based in the past and needs a healthy walking through together, the disappointment and the firm keeping of boundaries, just walking through that disappointment there. Fine.

But in that kind of approach, other possibilities, other dimensions of possibility, are actually missed. Like any other teacher, I've been on the receiving end of that—that's a strange way to say it, isn't it? That has arisen. Students have expressed that from time to time towards me. It's completely what I would expect. When a person loves the path and there's that relationship, in the teacher-student relationship, and there's the fertility of the soul-making, the eros is going to involve, in this case, the teacher, as that's part of the constellation.

I don't take that, if it happens or when it happens, in some way that's going to puff up my ego. It's not me as real. It's not that it has nothing to do with me, of course, nothing to do with what I teach—

But I can't take it about me. It's about the soul. It's about soul-making. It's about the erotic movement of the soul and the erotic imaginal there. And if a person is told "just absolutely stop it, just turn it off," or if it's only reduced or shrunk into that kind of Oedipal paradigm—or variations of the Oedipal paradigm that are common in modern psychotherapeutic circles—if it's only that... I'm not saying that's not sometimes an important element to address, but if it's only that, something else gets missed.

Someone wrote to me a while ago, and I realize the danger of sharing this and how people might hear it and what they then assume. So I'm not talking about anything that involves boundaries not being there and being very clear. They absolutely were there, and neither am I talking about something that I took personally or got off on in some way at all. I hope you can really hear that and trust that and understand that we're talking about something that's a little more sophisticated than probably a lot of too easy assumptions and explanations about the people involved or about what's going on.

And the person wrote: "After some time, you and your teachings have never been just a teacher and teachings for me. You've been a key that's unlocked the whole cosmos and let it out of a box."

So this person then actually realized after some time what was happening in that movement of eros and the fantasy of the teacher. In this case, there's an erotic image, there's an erotic beloved other, and soul-making was allowed through that image, because she didn't just stamp on it and turn it off, and she didn't just reduce it to "it's about daddy and wanting daddy."

So the soul-making was allowed through an erotic image, and when she said "a key that's unlocked the whole cosmos and let it out of a box," in a way she literally meant that. Because, as we've been talking about, allowing the eros and the erotic imaginal opened up the cosmopoiesis. The whole realm of the

imaginal perception of herself, of others, of the world—all this soul-making, cosmopoiesis, cosmopoetic sensibility—was opened through, yes, through the teachings, but also through the allowing of the erotic other and allowing of the eros there.

And she says, "Falling in love with you was falling in love with an entire world. No wonder it felt so big." You understand? She also says something... so it feels so big because it literally is big. It's a whole world. It's a whole world that's opening up in cosmopoiesis. That's actually what she's falling in love with. It isn't me. It's not me, this person, that I should then take personally and feel like, "Wow, aren't I this or that or attractive." It's actually falling in love with an entire world. What world? The world of soul-making and the world seen and sensed through the soul—through the eyes of the soul, the sensibilities of the soul.

And she continues: "I think I needed to borrow your soul for a while while my own was just waking up."

So the attraction, the eros and the love is for the soul-making. We could say psyche is in love with itself. Eros is sparked by the glimpse of psyche's own treasures. So you might see in someone else the treasures that belong to psyche, they belong to you, not just the other person. Psyche is sparked by a glimpse of its own vision—of its own possibilities of deepening, widening, being enriched.

Do you understand? Psyche is in love with itself. The eros is really—the eros of the soul, the eros of psyche—is for soul, for psyche. Psyche is in love with itself, it's in love with its own growth. Soul loves soul-making. Soul wants soul-making.

And when something happens with a person and there's that erotic connection there, often what's happening is they or the relationship or something in the relationship or the totality of that constellation is feeding soul-making. And at first sight, it can seem like it's them. "I want them. I need them in a certain form or mode of relating." Sometimes it may be that that's allowed for in the circumstances and it's the right thing and lovely. But oftentimes it's not really about that. We make the mistake. It's really about the soul-making. And we love it and we sense it and the soul longs for it.

And she's honest here: "Of course the immature enchantment got mixed in there too. Maybe if you'd been an eighty-year-old wrinkly sage, it wouldn't have. But I'm glad that part has been ebbing; soul has taken hold."

So there was this process over time of going back—there's soul-making, but it veers into craving and contraction: "I want this," or a very particular form. But the boundaries...

But the boundaries that the relationship has—that it only exists within this particular range and not a larger range, extending itself to manifest in this way or that way, whether sexually or as friends or whatever in the usual sense of the word—that agreement functions as a boundary. And the boundary creates a kind of container. It functions to create walls, if you like, that manifest the potential for an alchemical vessel.

In other words, that container can become, if it's related to in the right way, an alchemical vessel. The fire of eros heats up the soul material in that vessel, the contents of the vessel, and there is the alchemical process—the soul-making process that is allowed by the vessel and the fire and the imaginal perceptions.

So that container is not there to contain the feelings, if you like, so that one can feel the original disappointment with one's parents, in the more standard psychotherapeutic models. That may be part of it, as we've acknowledged, but principally it's an alchemical vessel, a soul-making container in potential. We still need to have the art of alchemy relate to it rightly—protect that vessel, watch the fire, work on the contents, on the images.

The walls there, note this too, are not walls or barriers or blocks to image, nor to logos, nor to eros. The Eros-Psyche-Logos trinity—no aspect of it is walled off or blocked or limited or cramped. It's the boundary that creates the agreement, that creates limits of action and actual manifestation. Of course, there's going to be friendship there, deep friendship, but it's limited in terms of how it manifests.

And that boundary—not walls of Psyche, Logos, or Eros, but that boundary—allows what we called before a *temenos*, another Greek word, which I translated as sacred space. Better to translate it, in this case, as a space that allows the making sacred. A space, *temenos* is a space that allows sacralizing, allows the alchemical process to transubstantiate the material into divine material, sacred material, soul material.

So *temenos*, a boundary, creates a space of potential. It may or may not realize that potential of soul-making. And how does it do that? This goes back to what we said much earlier on the retreat. How does it do that? It's because the more that's desired in the eros, the *pothos* in the eros cannot pursue or look for that more at a certain point. It realizes it cannot, it will not get its more on the level of one-dimensionality and the level of more contact or sexual contact or hanging out or whatever it is.

So the only way it can get more is—it's forced, if you like (maybe that's too strong a word), but it's contained in this alchemical vessel. The only way it can get more is in the imaginal. Only or principally, let's say, the imaginal is the direction and space made available and offered for the movement of eros and the more of the *pothos*, the more that it wants. So this is the available space. This is the fire of the eros and the materials directed into the imaginal.

And there's, in the discovering of the fullness of the imaginal, more and more fullness of the imaginal, the creation of that, the discovery and creation of that, there is soul-making. And because self too, we've touched on this, will be wrapped up or involved in that constellation—soul-making constellation—it's not just about the other, about the teacher, about the therapist or whatever. Self, other, world, Eros itself—the whole constellation will be involved there and is supported to heat up and have that soul-making process.

And the soul-making is allowed to deepen and widen until it's seen for what it is. And it's not that object that I want, that person in that form. I actually want something more than that, deeper than that. Yes, in some instances I will get that through a certain form of relationship and that's all fine if it's okay. But

actually the soul is after something else, hungry and thirsty for something else.

So then that, as you said, that part of it ebbed away. And there's still strong love, she writes, but it's very different now. It's eros, and love and care, minus the craving. The craving has been drained out of it.

So that whole process was allowed to give rise to soul-making—more and more, wider and deeper, a complicated and beautiful process of soul-making over some time, and peace, supported by the *temenos* or the alchemical vessel provided by the boundaries and provided by the teachings and provided by a certain way of relating to the whole thing.

All this is still talking about assumptions now, and opening up assumptions and inquiry. Do we trust Eros? Do we trust the imaginal? Do we trust the erotic-imaginal? Do we understand Eros? Or put it another way, because we said it's impossible to finally answer: is there an expanding of our understanding of Eros? Are we moving in that direction, or have we just decided something and stopped looking?

Do we trust the movement of soul-making and the intelligence that might be propelling that movement of soul-making? Can we trust that?

Sometimes what happens is there's a sort of partial trust of the eros in one direction but not in another. So, for example, in that polarity we've talked about between the unfabricated on one hand—some people with a longing and a desire, an eros towards the unfabricated, if you like—and they might look, such people might look with distrust and suspicion and disrespect at people whose eros seems to be for the world and for their senses and for others.

And vice versa. The people whose eros seems to be, or they feel it, directed to this world and the senses and beauty here and other human beings, look with perplexity or suspicion of some kind of psychological wounding or something at those whose eros wants the unfabricated and maybe has chosen to leave aside the world and the senses and the kind of erotic engagement for the sake of the erotic movement towards the unfabricated.

So these two camps of directions are often suspicious of each other.

This becomes so heated and contentious philosophically within the Dharma as well. This assumes one even allows eros, but such opposition is taken for granted between what we might call the transcendent, spirit, or the unfabricated on one hand, and the immanent, matter, the senses, or worldly things on the other.

But this opposition—whether in terms of inclination, philosophy, or otherwise—can only really hold if there's realism. This dichotomy, this tug of war, this mutual suspicion can only exist on the basis of realism. If we don't understand or see the emptiness of both—the emptiness of the world, the emptiness of sense perception, and the emptiness of the unfabricated—only then does this opposition hold.

Or perhaps we've moved beyond realism because we've explored the eros sufficiently in both movements.

We've explored eros enough to understand that whole movement of rendering things, allowing their imaginal nature to open up, seeing image as image. And perhaps we've explored both directions.

So there's this apparent opposition between the transcendent, the unfabricated, and the world or matter. We need to account, as I said, in our logos—I feel we can't really ignore this phenomenological observation that when clinging is reduced, to that extent there's a decrease in the fabrication of the perception of self, other, and world. Somehow I need to account for that. I can, based on certain epistemological assumptions, decide to ignore it, but to me it's something we need to account for, especially as meditators.

So we need to account for it. But it also seems to me that if eros is strong—if there is a strong, deep, and powerful eros running through a person—and if there's a logos or intelligence that allows expansion and understanding, and also if we've been exposed to a concept or idea of the unfabricated or transcendent, or if an intuition of it or the possibility of it has emerged somehow in consciousness—a glimpse, an intimation of it, either in meditation or through a certain direction of inquiry around fabrication, or as one moves about in the world and there's perhaps the veiled sense of it, the glimpse of it, there as an intuition of a possibility—then the eros will actually eventually go in both directions.

It will be eros for the transcendent, if we've been exposed to the idea, probably. If there's a certain amount of intelligence and logos that can hold such a concept, even if we don't quite understand it yet, and if the eros is strong, then the eros will go towards the transcendent at some point. It will actually go in both directions. We've said this before.

But the desire for mystical knowing and the desire for the unfabricated, to me, when they are there, they are signals, almost always. They are signals of a rich, deep, powerful eros in a person. People with less eros tend not to want to know the transcendent, the unfabricated. That very desire indicates a deep, powerful longing, a deep, powerful movement of eros.

It's really quite remarkable. Several people have reported to me that others look at them—maybe they know them relatively well or perhaps less so—and they see someone who has this mystical inclination and who has a desire to know the unfabricated, and they assume that because they want that, because there is this eros in that direction, this movement towards the unfabricated and the mystical sensibility, they assume that they're therefore not interested in close relationship, in erotic or sexual relationships. Strange assumptions, based on this opposition, this dichotomy.

Actually, it's probably the opposite that is the case. A person who longs for the unfabricated, who moves in that direction, who makes inquiries and practices in that direction and wants to know and wants to open and wants these other levels of perception that we could call mystical—usually that person has a lot of eros and also has a lot of eros in human relationships, and sometimes in the purely intrapsychic imaginal.

Sometimes there are assumptions made by those without so much eros running through them. They make

assumptions about other people in a way they don't understand, because they don't know, because they're basing their view on just how much eros they have. Or there's actually an anti-libidinal kind of fear that we talked about, that they're making their assumptions based on—this fear of allowing eros. Not just that they don't have it; they might have it, but they might be dampening it. And so their eros is dampened or only channeled or allowed in a few limited directions because of this anti-libidinal fear of disappointment, rejection, whatever it is. Based on that view, the view that comes from that limited eros, they're reading other people and making assumptions about other people and what's going on for them or what they're like.

So there can be so much—it's so easy, again, just on the theme of this part of the talk—it's so easy to not let our questioning loose, if you like, or not to gather power in our questioning. Questioning is related to eros. It's penetrating, if we use that image, or it's opening. So sometimes the questioning is actually driven by eros. And again, sometimes people who keep questioning—it's also indicative of the movement of eros, of the fullness, the depth, the force, the power, the richness of the eros there.

But with all this, we see just how easy it is for assumptions to be operating without us even realizing. And these assumptions wield a lot of power and they have a lot of effects. They really affect how we view things, how we view others, how we view self, how we view existence, and then what unfolds for us. All kinds of assumptions.

So we mentioned, just as an example, the assumption that desire always comes from lack, from a feeling of lack. Does it? Does it? Can I question this? And it's possible—I would say it's possible—for desire to come out of joy, out of a sense of celebration, out of a sense of abundance, overabundance even, superabundance.

Somehow the desire flows out of that. Again, this word "flow" is intimately related to libido. There's an overflowing of the libido that manifests as desire. And sometimes, at another level—and we've already touched on this as well—there's a recognition that desire is somehow already flowing from me to you on the imaginal level, in the imaginal realm, so to speak. It's already flowing. It's not coming out of lack. It's already there in some fullness.

I think earlier, at some point in one of the previous talks, we explored how desire may be viewed in different ways. We can view it as really not okay—it's a defilement. Or even if we don't use such strong language as *kilesa*, we somehow anticipate or imagine that in awakening there's going to be zero desire, and we're just kind of going along with the flow without really wanting anything or desiring anything. Somehow the whole movement is away from desire. Desire becomes a sign of non-awakening.

Or we might have a view that desire is, well, it's okay. Everything's okay. Everything's all equal, it's all one—whatever it is, no problem. There can be that kind of view of desire.

Or there might be a more nuanced view that only some desires are okay. For the Buddha, the desire for

jhāna was certainly okay. The desire to cultivate the brahmavihāras was certainly okay. The desire for awakening was certainly okay, the desire to live an ethical life, the desire to ordain into the monastic order. Some desires are acceptable depending on what they're for, where they're headed, while others are not.

Or we may have the view that desire is okay if it's only a momentary arising. In other words, you get a pop-up of something called desire or craving, and as long as the mind doesn't cling to it and attach to that desire, get caught by it and dragged along with it, even just in the mind, then it's okay—it's just a momentary arising.

That would be a fourth view. Or a fifth view: that desire is something divine. There's a treasure there, a divine treasure of great beauty.

I can't quite remember if I've shared this before on this retreat, or even on another retreat, so forgive me if it's a repeat, but our word "desire" in English comes from the Latin *desiderare*, which derives from *de sidere*, meaning "from the stars." In other words, from the heavenly realms, from the gods, as the stellar constellations were seen and regarded as gods, as divine. So right there in our English word "desire," it bears the etymological origin of a regard for it as divine.

So we could say there are five ways that desire may be viewed. But actually, maybe even more discernment is needed than that, more nuance to our views of desire.

If I haven't said it already—and I hope I have—the conception I have of desire and the evaluation of desire plays a role in what the desire does, or what happens to it, or what unfolds. It's not a neutral factor; it's part of the dependent arising of the desire itself. The same is true with anything, in fact. The conception and evaluation of desire plays a creative part, plays a role in fabrication.

And there's always some conception and view of desire. Sometimes it might be quite elaborate and involved, especially if you've had a lot of teaching and Dharma training, and desire is quite a loaded, central subject. But even if not, there's always some conception and view of desire.

There's also always—and I'm just reviewing a few things before moving on—an imagined or assumed relationship with getting the object that we desire. For example, here's this desire, and I anticipate getting what I want. Something simple like being thirsty, so I want some water, so I go to the tap. I anticipate getting it. I don't anticipate a drought, or certainly not in Devon anyway. I don't anticipate not being able to find clean water, because one of the good things about our society is it provides clean water.

But that's part of what comes into the whole relationship of desire. And this is often overlooked, because it's very different when I have a desire and I anticipate not getting it, not getting the thing I want. How does that color and shape the whole experience and the very desire itself?

Or then there's this other possibility—as we said—of realizing or sensing that on an imaginal level, there

already is what I desire. What I desire is already here. And that means there's a relationship with eros there in the imaginal.

So there's a relationship with the anticipated getting, or not getting, or realizing it's already here on another level in the imaginal realm. We're talking about very different things then, and there's always going to be some view about or relative to this getting, or not getting, or however we relate to the object.

So that last one—the sense of it already being here—as I said, already involves the imaginal.

Again, just reviewing a little bit. Desire with the imaginal—desire that's become eros—opens up all kinds of possibilities. We explored several ways of looking, which are really practices for transforming desire into eros, allowing more equanimity and spaciousness while supporting soul-making and beauty.

Four approaches emerged from our exploration. The first involves seeing one's desire—perhaps a desire that feels problematic because fulfillment seems impossible—as having its origins in divine influx. When we recognize that the desire itself springs from this sacred source, what happens to our experience? What transforms in the desire itself, in our sense of the whole situation, in any dukkha that might be present?

The second approach, which we just touched upon, involves recognizing through imaginal sensibility that what we desire is already happening in what Henri Corbin called "hierophantic time." Through attunement to the imaginal realm, through opening that particular lens of perception, we discover that our longing is already being fulfilled on another plane of reality. Again, what does this recognition do to the dukkha, to the desire, to our entire perception of the situation?

A third possibility involves the practice of seeing—and this requires developing considerable facility and skill with imaginal perception, which can indeed be cultivated to extraordinary degrees—seeing the desire, the beloved other that one is yearning for, and the self as theophanies, as faces or aspects of the divine. This differs slightly from the first approach. Rather than the desire originating in the divine, here the desire itself *is* divine. The desire is divinity, is God, is the primordial Buddha or an aspect of the primordial Buddha.

The fourth possibility we explored was practicing a way of looking that sees the image of the other, the image of the desired object, the image of the self desiring, and the desire itself—all four elements—as the primordial Buddha making love to herself, or God making love to himself.

Now, for some of you hearing this for the first time, the question naturally arises: "How could I ever develop the capacity for such perception?" Actually, it's far from impossible and not as distant as it might initially sound, especially if you haven't yet engaged deeply with imaginal practice. We can learn to play with the views of desire, of self, and of the desired object or other, developing this as a genuine art.

These approaches differ fundamentally from seeing that desire is not-self, is anatta—they represent entirely different ways of looking. But we can indeed develop these skills, this art of perception, and

discover the extraordinary diversity of beautiful possibilities awaiting us.

All of this emerges when we include the imaginal in our relationship with desire—when we allow the imaginal to enter that relationship and infuse it, amplify it, extend it, and beautifully complicate it.

We can also transform our relationship with desire by working with the energy of desire as it manifests in the body. This becomes particularly clear with sexual energy—sexual energy that feels problematic because it cannot be moved or released due to circumstances. Pressure can accumulate in areas of the body, often in the genitals, creating sensations that can be uncomfortable, even painful, and genuinely difficult to bear. This is, of course, a perfectly normal human experience.

One possibility we explored involves expanding awareness, ensuring it stretches to encompass the entire body, the entire energy body. Sometimes simply stretching awareness allows the energy to begin spreading naturally. What often happens in the uncomfortableness of stuck energy is that everything contracts—around the desired object, around the imagination of fulfillment—and the energy itself becomes contracted. This contraction creates pressure, for pressure and contraction are intimately related. When gas is compressed, it exists under higher pressure, and that pressure becomes uncomfortable.

Sometimes we don't even need to actively try moving the energy around, though that remains a valid approach. A more subtle and refined method involves simply spreading the awareness itself.

Because the awareness has more space, the energy will also spread to fill that space. And because it spreads, it's less contracted, there's less pressure. And sometimes what can also happen in that movement, in allowing the energy to move because it has more space, because the awareness is giving it more space, is that the pressured, uncomfortable sexual energy actually turns to bliss, to something like pīti or rapture.

There's a second possibility I'd like to offer as well. If there's a similar kind of situation where the uncomfortable pressure of sexual energy is gathered in one area of the body—say the genitals—try being aware at the same time of the heart center in the center of the chest. Be aware of both regions simultaneously: the heart center and the genitals where the pressure feels gathered uncomfortably. Just being aware of both will allow the energy—I don't have to move the energy or make it do anything or yank it around, all of which is fine too, but this is sometimes all you need to do—just be aware of the heart center as well. Not instead, not saying "go away from the genital area," but include both. It's almost as if there's a channel then made between the heart and the genitals, that area of pressure.

One's including both. And naturally, what will usually happen is the energy will begin moving up that channel and into the heart. So then it's spread between the heart and the genitals. What you then have is it stimulates the heart or re-invites the heart back into the energetic experience and the emotional experience. So it actually allows more love and warmth and connection with the other that one might be desiring. So you've got the heart as well as the genitals. And in that spreading and in that softening with

the love and warmth, it doesn't take the sexual energy away or dampen it or get rid of it or anything like that, but it allows it to spread and include another dimension—in this case the heart dimension—so that it's less pressured and less uncomfortable.

So that's just a little suggestion, an offering, if that's sometimes the case, if that experience arises and it's difficult. But the main point right now is that, like anything else, like images, like actually any perception, any desire is dependent on how it is looked at. It's dependent on the way of looking, what we're calling the way of looking. And if you remember, the way of looking includes the way of conceiving and the way of relating to it.

So any desire is what it is, how it is, how it's felt, what happens to it. All that depends on how it is looked at—the way of looking, which includes the way of conceiving of it and evaluating it, and also the way of relating to it.

Whatever name we give to desire, we've chosen to use certain labels. But whatever name we give to it, it's not good or bad in itself, so to speak. Neither its nature nor its trustworthiness is determined by its obvious object. In other words, not "that's a sense desire, therefore it's a kilesa," or "that's a desire for awakening or compassion, therefore it's positive." It's not so much as we would usually tend to think with Dharma teaching—that this is a desire to trust, this is a desire not to trust, dependent on what it seems to be for. Because we've gone into this "what is the desire for" in a number of different ways, whether actually allowing the imaginal amplification and dimensionality to open up through the imaginal of this obvious object, or through asking the deeper question of what is being desired.

Sometimes we think about this desire or that desire and imagine that it's a thing in itself, but we get confused because we're kind of implicitly including the idea of acting on it or following through on the desire physically or practically in the world.

So when we go into all this, or just this question of even the impulse to inquire into desire, we start to realize—in addition to all that I've just said in this talk, much of which is just reviewing what we've already been through—we start to see we need to consider and differentiate in our inquiry. If we're going to inquire into something called desire, then there are differentiations to be made between:

Desire acted on, or desire repressed, or desire "let go of," or desire not noticed. Or desire whose energy is open to, but in relation to a deeper object, if you like, as we did in the opening to the deeper current of desire practice. We need to differentiate desire from the movement of what we were calling pathos and that kind of infinite longing as something spiritual or soul-making. The kind of desire when we realize, in relation to what we said a few minutes ago, desire when it's realized to be already consummated in hierophanic time in the imaginal realm. Desire seen as empty.

All these differentiations: desire seen as divine influx as we talked about; desire regarded as defilement or problem or sin in other language; desire regarded as or assumed to be originating in lack, whether that's

an emotional lack or an intuition of the existential lack of a solid self. Some people explain the Dharma that way—that actually we have a suspicion or intuition or occasional glimpses that we lack a solid self, and based on that we try and solidify a sense of self, as if getting things and getting involved with desire will somehow shore that up. It's based on this intuited sense of existential lack, lacking a solid self. Or desire assumed to be originating in the existential intuition of impermanence of all things. The sense of impermanence of all things—that's why there's a kind of hunger there. Or desire regarded as an avoidance strategy, avoiding grief feelings or these feelings of lack. Can't handle the impermanence. Can't handle the lack of a solid self or whatever.

So it's interesting. We, as usual, assume something to be findable as that thing. There are things and they're findable. They're obvious what they are. So we assume desire is findable as something—a mental event, if you like, a momentarily arising quality, an inclination, a factor in the process of the citta, whatever language you want to use. There is a thing called desire. There it was, right there in that micro-moment in the process of the citta.

But actually, desire is inseparable from all kinds of other factors.

It's actually inseparable. I cannot find this thing called desire in itself—not just inseparable from the thoughts and actions that follow from it or are imagined in pursuit of the desired, but also at a much more subtle level, from the very conceivings of object and desired, of objects in general. Inseparable from that, inseparable from time view, time sense, self view, world view, philosophical system—even unconscious philosophical systems, which actually most philosophical views and systems are. They're just kind of habitual views about what's real and what the world involves.

In a person's life, in any instance or any moment, the relationship with desire and the conception or view of it—conscious or unconscious—the relationship with it and the conceptual view of it, view of desire, conscious or unconscious, whether we're conscious or unconscious of the conceptual view—these are woven into a whole view and sense of existence and cosmology. You understand? It's wrapped up in the whole thing. It's implicit in what we've been saying all through the retreat.

The relationship with desire and the whole view of desire are woven into a whole view and sense of existence and cosmology. If it's a flat world, this is it. If there's an assumption there's no real meaning or purpose to existence, then let's just maximize the pleasure. The view of heaven and hell, reward, punishment, sin. Or the view that we need to transcend this world, as the Pali Canon suggests, with its transcendental thrust to achieve an ending of rebirth. All these, and much more subtle ones, are woven into our relationship with desire.

This is woven in and informs our relationship with desire. All these assumptions about objects, things, time, self-view, world-view, philosophical systems—this informs and shapes the relationship with desire. And similarly, the relationship with desire and the conceiving of desire, any desire, or desire in general—both will make a big difference. Again, the causality is both ways. The very ways we conceive of

desire will make a big difference, not just to the unfolding of that desire and the actions involved that it impels or doesn't impel in the world, but also to the view and the sense of self, other, cosmos and desire too. How I conceive of desire makes a big difference to all of that—the very view and sense of self, other, world, cosmos and desire.

I'm just drawing out what we've perhaps only alluded to here over the days. We asked, what is desire? Well, on one level we can define it. Of course, on another level it's an unfindable element. I can't find it. I can't find it separate from all this other stuff. It's inextricably interwoven and linked with all that. It's unfindable.

And yet, amazingly, we can still inquire into unfindable things, and we can still talk of the alchemy of this unfindable element, the alchemy of elements. The alchemists used to talk about different elements—mercury and this and that. Unlike the alchemists who used to work purifying this or that element, it's not possible to have pure desire, just desire in itself as some kind of isolated thing. We can't reduce this complex, interwoven mass of existence, can't really reduce it down to its basic elements and separate them. But still we can talk about the alchemy of those elements and the alchemy of desire.

I can't remember if I've already said this, but it's hopefully obvious by now if I haven't—that phrase, "the alchemy of desire," we were using with a double meaning. We're talking about the transformation of desire, greed and craving, what we were calling greed and craving into Eros, and into the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic being liberated—into the liberation of the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic soul-making movement. The transformation of greed and craving into Eros and the Eros-Psyche-Logos movement. In other words, the transformation of a desire that's neither freeing nor soul-making into a kind of desire called eros that is more freeing and more soul-making. So that's the first meaning of alchemy of desire.

And the second meaning, which it means at the same time, is that the possibility that desire, when it manifests as eros, and that eros is allowed to stimulate and galvanize the eros-psyche-logos dynamic—when neither eros nor psyche nor logos are blocked or cramped in some way or another—then that kind of desire, that kind of eros and the eros-psyche-logos dynamic will lead to a transubstantiation, a sense, a perception of the transubstantiation of other, self, world, and eros itself. There is an alchemy, if you like, of everything—of existence, of the whole cosmos. Transubstantiation of how? Given these imaginal dimensions and depths and divinity and sacredness and beauty and all of that.

So on one level we can't find it. On one level we can delineate it and make these delineations. On another level we can't find it, desire. And yet we can still talk about and practice this alchemy of desire and all the beauty and the soul-making that comes out of that. As we said before, knowing the emptiness...

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