The Problem of Desire

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 58:08

The principal themes for our retreat are desire and soul making, as well as the connection and relationship between desire and soul making. These are themes that by their very nature are inexhaustible, endlessly profound. A lifetime of exploring these themes will not exhaust them. But let's at least try to find a way in and offer some introduction to these themes.

If you're the kind of person that's put yourself in the position to listen to this kind of talk, it's probably obvious to you—you'd probably agree—that looking at our wider culture, the wider Western culture, actually the wider globalized culture now, the world would probably profit from some more investigation, some more discernment, some more wisdom regarding desire. That's a theme you've probably heard many times in Dharma talks and other spiritual teachings.

In a way, actually, we can look at the history of our culture and see that, with regard to desire, there actually have been quite some liberations over several hundred years. But also some more entanglement and more complication with regard to desire. Part of it is due to things like the kind of economic thinking that underpins our societies and politics that absolutely insists on a growth economy. So it therefore insists on propelling and injecting, pumping life into consumerism. Part of it's dependent on that. Part of it's also our modern sense of self—our modernist sense of self is, if you like, based on the exercise of choice and the propping up and the inflation of certain kinds of identities that come through the exercise of choice and consumerism. So all these are complicated factors. There are reasons that give us a whole extra dimension of problem with desire related to all this economy, globalization, and the modern sense of self.

What I want to go into right now is the kinds of problems that we might have and confusions that we might have as Buddhist practitioners or people who are interested in Buddhism or similar kinds of spiritual teachings. In a way, again I'm sure you'd agree with this, we have a set of teachings and practices that actually help us a lot in regard to desire and a lot of the entanglements in desire. But at the same time, we can also be prey to a kind of cognitive dissonance with regard to desire. This is understandable, I think, and it's difficult. It's not easy. So it's not something to judge, just to become aware of. This is what I want to go into as a way of opening our topic up and setting a stage.

Because sometimes as Buddhist practitioners, spiritual practitioners, we can be prey to an oversimplification in our thinking of and conceiving of and relating to desire. Either that, or we are subject to contradictory messages, teachings that are mutually contradictory, that contradict each other, so that we end up confused with regards to desire, to clinging, to craving, attachment, and also with

regards to where we're moving in the whole path, what awakening or enlightenment is, and what that does to or with desire, clinging, craving, attachment. So there can be quite some confusion. Sometimes we're not even that conscious that we are confused and that we are harboring a cognitive dissonance, prey to different and conflicting messages.

Sometimes, for example, as I said, we oversimplify. And so we just say, "Desire is a problem because it brings suffering. Desire leads to suffering." And awakening, enlightenment, is imagined or conceived of as some state where there's the absence of desire. One has no desires. And so desire leads to suffering—it's a problem. At awakening, there won't be any desire. So that's the ideal of awakening. Very, very simplistic. What comes out of such a teaching? What comes out of such an interpretation of the teaching? What comes out of such a view? How does it translate into our life? Is it even coherent? Does it make sense? Does it work?

It can be very oversimplified like that in some instances, or a little bit more sophisticated, taking up the teachings and the differentiation that the Buddha made originally between, for instance, wholesome desires. He sometimes made this distinction between wholesome desires, kusala, or skillful desires on the one hand. So, for example, the desire for awakening is a skillful, wholesome desire. And the desire to cultivate, develop, possess path factors—factors that move us along the path: samadhi, mindfulness, compassion, factors of enlightenment that move us towards the end of suffering or the decrease of suffering or the end of craving and desire. This desire for path factors—these are wholesome desires.

Unwholesome desires, akusala, unskillful, would be desires for sense pleasure, or desires to avoid unpleasant senses, unpleasant sense contact, desires—the desire to shore up or solidify or boost the sense of self or the ego. These are regarded as akusala. So that in that kind of distinction-making, in those delineations, then the desire, for example, for jhana, to open to and explore deep states of meditative absorption, is regarded as a wholesome desire.

The desire for the pleasant taste or comfort we might get from chocolate chip cookies is regarded as an unwholesome desire.

So there's a certain sophistication and clarity in this framework. Yet nowadays, many of us—and this is very understandable, as this is not an easy area—have become quite confused about all this. Not always, not everyone, not in every respect, but there can be considerable confusion.

We often think, "I should let go of my desire for jhana. That would be a kindness to myself, to let go of this grasping, this striving." If we tell ourselves, on the other hand, "I won't have that chocolate chip cookie," this is sometimes regarded as an unkindness to ourselves. We've got it exactly backwards from what the Buddha might have said 2,500 years ago.

We struggle with the self's movement in time toward what it wants. We might use words like "aspiration," but we quickly encounter contradictory teachings about becoming—and becoming is not something to be

attached to. Becoming is ego, so this movement of the self through time is regarded as ego movement. These teachings don't add up coherently.

This becomes even more pronounced in the realm of romantic and sexual desires, longings, and relationships. It should be obvious to anyone over the age of fourteen that sexuality and romance do not bring the end of suffering. They don't usually even decrease suffering. Yet somehow, in our mishmash of teachings, we recognize that for most people, sexual relationships and romantic relationships—that desire—is important. So it's kind of okay somehow, but we say, "It's okay, but don't be attached." Does this even make sense? Does it work?

"Have that, because for some reason—I'm not quite sure why—it seems important to us, but don't get attached," whatever that means. What does that look like?

Or again, in relation to the world and the senses—sense experience, beauty—we might say, "Oh, enjoy it. It's okay to enjoy it. Just don't get attached." What does that mean? "Let it come, let it go"—this almost oversimplistic teaching. "Let everything come and let it go. Be in the moment. Be with what is. Open to the flow."

What does it look like to try to live life this way? Is it really a complete enough teaching? Is it an accurate teaching for what moves us, what we are moved by, how we live? Is it an honest teaching? If I am telling you to live this way, am I really living this way in regard to all this? Who lives this way? How can I have integrity in relation to such teachings? Are these teachings even enabling me to live with integrity with respect to them? Because they don't form an integral, coherent unit.

Perhaps there's something too simplistic in our interpretation, our understanding, our approach. There's not enough sophistication in the psychology. It's not adequate to our needs.

What gets served by this kind of oversimplification or contradictory teachings? What gets served, and what does not get served? Is there a way to serve what we most want and need to be served somehow in our understanding of all this? Is there a way to approach this that really makes sense in the deepest, fullest way to our whole being—a coherent understanding that opens us?

From a certain perspective, if we take that understanding that awakening or enlightenment is the end of suffering, and we reduce it in a kind of thin and brittle, reductionist way to really emphasize that awakening is the end of suffering, then actually you could say that even the desire for awakening is really essentially the desire for the end of suffering. If that's really what's moving us, then the desire for awakening from this limited point of view—this limited conception—is really just a desire for a radical decrease in our unpleasantness.

and unpleasant sensations. You can look at this a few ways. If you say, well, suffering is the second arrow—if you know that teaching of the Buddha's—it's just the second arrow, but still a kind of unpleasantness. It's the unpleasantness of the second arrow. So by removing that second arrow at full

awakening, in a certain system of what awakening means, then I've drastically reduced unpleasantness.

Or if my vision of awakening is not to be reborn, that means really the end of both pleasant and unpleasant sensation, the end of vedanā, the end of perception, the end of experience. So is that how we're going to conceive of what is moving us if we desire awakening? That we're desiring this radical decrease in the unpleasantness? Because conceiving it that way, this is what's moving, this is the desire there.

That's different than—it's not conceiving it as a desire for awakening, as the desire to know and to open to true nature. The true nature of oneself, the true nature of all things. It's not then being conceived as a desire for truth, a desire to open to and know the Buddha nature, to live the Buddha nature, and know that one lives the Buddha nature, to know, to open to the divine, or God, if you're okay with that language.

Some people say, "No, that kind of desire is just a desire for consolation. All this talk about Buddha nature and God and divinity, it's just consolation. That's what you're after, really, is it?" Really, let's look into the psychology, our psychology and what moves us here.

And if the desire for awakening is conceived too narrowly, this desire really essentially for a reduction or an end of unpleasantness, then it's not being conceived as a desire for beauty, to open to, to know, to live in beauty. It's not a desire for mystery.

So what about the desires of a mystic? Is that what a mystic wants? Just the decrease of unpleasantness? And is our desire, deep desire for beauty, or desire for deep beauty, is that just a desire for pleasant sensations?

What of our love of the world? What of our sensuality? What of our love and desire for that which is beyond the world? Beyond the senses? Beyond experience? The transcendent? The unfabricated? What about that desire? Is that really just about eradicating or drastically reducing unpleasantness?

What about our desire for art? To make art? To participate in art, to receive art? What about our desire for scientific knowledge and discovery? Is all that, are all those kind of desires, are they really just delusion? One could look at it that way, and I think some people do sometimes. Is science, for example, only for the purpose of—only non-delusion or not a waste of time when it's for the purpose of reducing suffering? For example, in medical research or in development of technology that makes our life safer or more comfortable or whatever.

Is romantic desire, sexual desire, is that delusion only? Is it only delusion? I mean, certainly delusion can come into all of these movements of desire, but is it only delusion? Is it only the seeking of pleasant sensations? Is it only an expression of love, meaning care, meaning mettā, really? Or a kind of search for security of the self, or a pumping up of the ego in some way, being reassured that one's attractive or desirable or lovable or whatever it is, or some kind of combination of all? Does that kind of combination of all those things, does that sum up the movement of desire in romantic desire and sexual desire?

Or is there something else too there, beyond all of those? More than, alongside even, something that's vital to our being and to our sense of existence, something vital to our psyche.

So we have—I don't think we have really a Dharma language yet, or a Dharma psychology that has words for the kind of desire that is not a desire for an increase in pleasantness, or a decrease in unpleasantness, or a decrease in suffering. The kind of desire that's not just to solidify the self somehow. We don't have a word for that kind of desire that actually is for the sake of, and leading to, and supporting, and involving soul-making.

And so, we don't have a psychology that really has a word for that. So we want to use the word eros, E-R-O-S. It's a word that's familiar. Different people define it a different way, have different kinds of associations with it. I'll come back to it in a few minutes. We want to define it in a very particular way.

Eros as a movement of desire, a kind of desire that involves, supports, opens, stimulates, and is for the sake of soul-making.

Just as in the realm of imagination we made distinctions, so too with desire we can discern different qualities and movements. In imagination, we spoke of what's imaginary—papañca, getting lost in fictions that entangle us and serve no purpose, mere delusion. We distinguished this from what we might call skillful use of imagination, helpful imagination that is creative: planning to build a retreat center, organizing a shopping list, preparing a lecture. One uses imagination in a creative, constructive way.

And then there's a third category we've been calling imaginal—something that doesn't equate to those other two, something else entirely. We need this other word to draw attention to something unique.

Similarly with respect to desire, I would like to distinguish three kinds: craving, clinging, and eros. We will be using these words differently than you've probably heard before. These are our definitions—not claiming they are the right definitions that everyone should adopt, nor necessarily the historical definitions. I simply want to make a clear delineation between three kinds of desire.

What emerges from making this delineation is recognizing that these desires each unfold differently. They each bring us to different places, lead in different directions, have different effects. Our task becomes partly to discern between these three. Can we recognize what's craving and what's eros? Can we navigate between them when possible? Can we transform one into another? Can we recognize clearly what unfolds from each and how, using them appropriately as needed?

Yes, absolutely, part of our path involves developing our skill and capacity to let go of craving—by which I mean the kind of contraction of being around something that does not ease suffering. It contracts the being, does not lead to soul-making. It's a movement intent on either seeking pleasure, decreasing unpleasantness, or solidifying the self somehow, yet actually gives us little. It does not open the being or expand our sense of existence—rather the opposite.

So yes, absolutely, one strand of our path is developing our ability and skill to let go, to drop craving when it arises, or to transform it when possible into something more skillful. For example, with those cookies or that chocolate cake—do I need it? What will it give me? If it's just pleasure or comfort I'm seeking, or that holiday where I imagine two weeks of pleasant sensations and release from unpleasant ones—can I recognize these movements? Do I have the ability, the know-how, the skill to let go?

Or when desires are actually not so much seeking pleasure but are movements of trying to avoid unpleasantness—running away from something, being driven by fear of facing something within ourselves, some difficult emotion. It might emerge as reaching toward that cake, but it's not actually the cake I'm after. I'm seeking something to shield me, numb me from something else.

All this recognition, this noticing and developing skill at letting go, dropping, transforming—this is really important. But the Dharma is much, much more than that. The possibilities of our being, the possibilities of our existence go way beyond just the dropping and letting go of craving in that repetitive, endless movement through life where it arises again and I drop it, it arises again and I drop it.

trying to drop craving and live without craving, and then sometimes just giving into it and then dropping it again, etc. And kind of reaching some kind of status quo that's sort of okay with that. There's so much more beauty, depth, possibility, wonder, magic waiting for us beyond that. Important, but so much more is possible.

So the second kind of desire is what I would want to call clinging. And again, these are not standard usage of these words. I just can't think of other words right now. I just want to make something clear.

So, clinging—by which I mean any pulling towards us at any level of being, even if it's just the subtlest movement of mind to pull something towards us or push it away or pull ourselves towards something, or any pull or push towards an object or an anticipated object or whatever. And there's a huge range of that push-pull, of what we call clinging.

So the most gross—literally clinging to someone who we don't want to leave us, for example, at one end, at the most gross end—and at the most subtle end, even just the momentary clinging perceiving of anything, the momentary experience of anything in the attention. Attention works by actually, if you like, grasping around the object that it's attending to. Even just for a moment, that's a very subtle form of clinging. And even just the sense or the belief, not even conscious, that the thing that I'm paying attention to has an inherent existence independent of the way I'm looking at it, independent of the mind's way of looking. That belief, which is usually not even a conscious belief, that belief is fundamental avijja in the Dharma tradition. It's fundamental delusion and ignorance. And that constitutes a very subtle form of clinging. This reification, this grasping at as real, is, if you like, the most subtle level of what we call clinging.

So there's this huge range of this push-pull. And what one can do in practice is develop different ways of looking, a whole host of ways of looking that one can play with, enter into, move in and out of, and

explore their effects on the whole world of perception. And different ways of looking let go of different degrees of clinging, different kinds of clinging, so that one plays moving up and down this range of how much clinging there is in the consciousness, so to speak, at any time.

And one learns from that—apart from the sheer delight of that play—one learns from that that perception, all perception of self, of object, of world, of space and time is dependent on clinging. To the degree that there is clinging, these objects appear and they appear solid and separate, etc. To the degree that I let go of clinging, that whole world of objects, selves, the world and space and time, all the rest of it fades.

So we understand, we begin to understand through this play in meditation with ways of looking, developing that art, we understand the fabricated nature, we understand the fabricating of perception and the fading, the dependent fading of all perception, all perception. So we understand the dependent origination and the dependent fading of all things, and we recognize, we come to understand gradually the radical emptiness of absolutely everything, all things, not just self, but every object, inner or outer element, or whatever aspect of experience, the whole world, space, time.

And in that, there's a possibility of opening to the unfabricated. It develops this art of letting go, of clinging more and more subtle, more and more deep, and there's an opening of the being to the unfabricated, what is not fabricated. And not that one lives in such a state, but one emerges from that with that understanding of emptiness, of going up and down, exploring dependent origination, and it opens up radically the whole sense of existence. Beautiful, precious possibility to know that in life and live with that knowing.

Living with that knowing, living with that opened up sense of existence is not to live without clinging. One actually comes to the insight and recognizes through this whole play with ways of looking, understanding dependent origination, etc. One recognizes a few things that mean that one would never regard it as a goal to live without clinging.

One realizes, first of all, that it's impossible. Clinging is involved, subtle clinging is involved in any perception, any experience whatsoever. So I cannot live without clinging. Even just to pay attention to anything at all is to cling. It's impossible to live without clinging.

Would I want to anyway? Do I not, when I love my family, when I have friendships that are important to me, or I'm with a lover, or in a romantic relationship—these kinds of relationships, the way we understand them these days, the way they are beautiful and meaningful to us these days, they actually involve clinging and attachment. We are not trying to live with some kind of monastic ideal like that or hermit ideal like that in society. And it's not that having that attachment is some kind of second best in terms of awakening.

This understanding of emptiness actually, as I said, opens up the whole sense of existence and liberates ways of looking. So existence becomes the art of ways of looking, the flexibility of ways of looking, the play

of ways of looking. We realize, too, that clinging itself is empty. Through all this thorough, radical, deep investigation into dependent origination, we realize that clinging, too, is empty.

And then there is freedom there, freedom to look in different ways, freedom to relate in different ways, including clinging. So we can move in and out of different kinds of clinging. There's freedom there, not trying to live without clinging. Because if I do try and live without clinging, that's impossible, and what would it mean anyway, and would we want to?

But one of the most essential things I want to highlight right now is this: if I'm trying to do that, if I'm oversimplifying, if I'm trying to live without clinging, I will actually miss eros and soul-making. There's a good chance that I will miss eros and soul-making, the soul-making that goes with eros.

We're free, rather, to move and to explore and see what comes from what. So there's craving, there's clinging, and there's eros. And eros, as I said, is intrinsically bound up and intricately bound up with soul-making, the whole movement and dynamic of soul-making. Catherine's going to talk more about soul-making shortly, but let me take a little time right now to define what we mean by eros.

I'll offer two levels of definition. Right now I'll give what we call the small definition of eros, and we'll explain more later how this is bound up with soul-making—and it's really important to understand how.

As a small definition of eros, what is this word and how can we begin to understand it? Eros is a desire, it's a wanting. Eros is the wanting of more contact with, more connection with, more intimacy with, more knowing of, more penetration of, more opening to an erotic object or a beloved other.

Let me say that again, because I'm using these words in a really full way with all the range of their implication. We'll come back to this, and why that's actually intrinsic to the definition you'll see. But just for right now, this small definition of eros is very important: Eros is a desire, a wanting for more contact with, more connection with, more intimacy with, more knowing of, more penetration of, and more opening to an object, an erotic object, let's call it, or a beloved other.

Now, you might not recognize your experience of eros in that, and it actually sounds perhaps quite dry as a definition. It's quite humble, if you like, as a definition. But there's tremendous power. I hope by the end of the retreat, at least, you're going to see just how powerful that definition is, how much emerges from it, how much it implies and sets in motion and implicates.

So can you remember that small definition for now? Eros is the wanting of more contact, more connection with, more intimacy with, more knowing of, more penetration of, more opening to an erotic object, a beloved other.

Eros, you'll notice in that definition, is certainly not just sexual attraction or sexual energy. It includes that—you can hear that in those words—but it's more than that. It includes sexual attraction, sexual energy, but it's much, much more than that.

We're also not equating eros, in our definition, with Freud's usage of eros as the pleasure principle, essentially just the seeking of pleasant sensations by the organism. Yes, pleasure is involved, but it's more than that. Our definition will actually include that, but be broader than that. That's not the principal movement. That's not the principal principle.

I think later in his theorizing, Freud equated eros with the life instinct in contradistinction to thanatos, which is the death instinct. So there's a relationship between our definition of eros and that life force, but we're not equating them.

Notice also that we're not equating eros with love. Some people just say eros just means love, and that's fine. How other people define it is completely fine. I'm not arguing with anyone. I'm just saying we're going to use it in a very particular way.

Neither—and this is subtle but really important—neither are we equating it with the way the Neoplatonists characterized eros as a movement or force for unification, towards a unifying movement towards oneness. Again, there's a real relationship there between that movement and what we're calling eros, but absolutely not—we'll say more about this—we are not reducing eros to that at all.

There was a Scottish psychoanalyst active in the twentieth century called Douglas Fairbairn. He belonged to the British Object Relations School, if you're familiar with that. He defined libido as the wanting contact or wanting connection with an other. So you can hear the similarities there between what he calls libido and what we're calling eros, but there are still really important distinctions between how we're using it and what he described and what he was pointing to, and we'll come back to that.

So notice a couple of other things about this definition of eros, or what we mean just for now. One is that it has a huge range.

Eros really encompasses a huge range. It certainly includes the most intense sexual desire. Absolutely, it includes that. Voracious desire, fierce desire, sexually or whatever. Absolutely, it includes that. And in the realm of the imaginal, when the sexual eros is very strong and intense, sometimes it can open up the image or cast an image or vivify an imaginal scene that involves images that wouldn't actually be possible physically, sexually, because the anatomy just doesn't work that way. Something that's beyond what's physically possible just because the eros and the soul, if you like, is demanding it and needs it for the soul-making. Or it might involve things that you would never, even if they were possible, actually do.

So there's a whole range there, from very, very intense, down to really quite subtle movements of eros that are just kind of pregnant there in the subtle attraction, for instance, between two people or with an image or with something in the world, the subtle delight or magic or magnetism that can be there in the beauty of certain connections in that subtle attraction. The subtle opening and magic that can be there in the contact with an object. And that object can be anything and that subtlety can be really, really very subtle.

So for example, it could be with—I'm looking at a cherry blossom, the cherry blossom on the tree. And there's that beauty there. And I'm present there just with this some kind of subtle magic in the perceiving, in my opening to, in the way my gaze and my being, actually my whole body, penetrates and opens to that vision in this case. And maybe I just want it to continue. I want to continue in that subtle magic. I want to linger there.

So the point is there's a huge range, huge, huge range of eros in terms of intensity and subtlety.

And a little bit implied by what I just said, eros can be in regard to anything at all. There can be an erotic connection, an erotic regard, an erotic relationship with anything at all. Any experience or any element of experience—an external object, an internal object, an intra-psychic image, a perception in the world, of the world, anything, any object, even an idea, an emotion, even a suffering, a dukkha, a sense of divinity. All of this is possible to have an erotic connection with. Eros can be there with regard and in relationship with anything at all.

So we're going to fill out later as we go on just what the relationship is between that wanting more contact, connection, intimacy, knowing, penetration, opening, et cetera, and soul-making. We're really going to explore that and fill it out. But for now, I just want to point out that eros, what it does in a nutshell is it opens up and stimulates an opening of dimensions and facets of existence, of the beloved, of the erotic object. It opens up dimensions and facets beyond what we already know and experience. That's what eros moves towards, that's what it instigates.

That involves—that can involve, most of the time it does involve the imaginal. So in this opening up of dimensions and facets beyond what we already know and experience, it involves the imaginal. There's also a way it can work by the quieting of the imaginal and the quieting, the unfabricating of perception. But for this retreat, we're emphasizing mostly the way that eros involves soul-making and the imaginal.

Now, eros is already in our life. I'm not talking about something that doesn't exist for you, that you have to kind of have this experience that you've never had before. Same with soul-making, in fact. What we want to do is get familiar with it and draw it out by defining it in a way that will enable us to investigate it, to explore it and see what it does, what it opens up, where it takes us, where it takes the being and the sense of existence and how it does that. Also to understand how it does that.

I mean, I've said already, it takes us, it opens up soul-making. Part of soul-making is it opens up, it expands and enriches, widens and deepens our senses of sacredness. To me, that's an inevitable and intrinsic part of soul-making. It's what soul-making does. And one of, for me, the most important aspects, tasks, if you like, results of soul-making. Eros also, in its movement, in the soul-making movement, will also make possible for us a view of eros itself and desire as sacred. That view becomes possible as something we can enter into, play with, entertain.

So why are we bothering making this delineation of eros? Because, as I said, it's part of our life already,

just as soul-making is. Where there is love, where we really love something, where we're devoted to something, where there's meaningfulness to us, there, there, there, there is soul-making for us, and there, there is eros. So we're talking about something that's already in our life that we would do well to understand more.

So an implication from what I just said—it's there when we love the path. And so we have, in other words, an erotic, or we can have an erotic relationship with the path. An erotic relationship with the sense of where the path is heading—to awakening, enlightenment, whatever word you like. And understanding that as a potentially erotic relationship has all kinds of implications. All kinds of implications that we often don't realize.

Far-reaching, profound, radical implications. We'll go into this.

Eros, as I've already intimated, is an intrinsic element of the imaginal, and therefore of imaginal practice. You're certainly not doing this retreat if you're not already involved in imaginal practice and deeply interested in it. So it's part of what we want to understand when we understand imaginal practice and develop that.

And as I've already said, eros potentially instigates and supports soul-making. Part of that soul-making is a widening and deepening and enriching and making more manifold, a multiplication of our senses of sacredness. So beyond, for example, just a sense of the sacred being universal—some kind of universal oneness or whatever—we're making more and more manifold, more and more multifaceted, multidimensional our senses of the sacredness, wider, deeper.

And also, lastly, I'm answering the question: why get interested in eros? Why make the delineation? Why bother? Because of our relationship with sexuality, and I think a need to bring sexuality more actively into the path so that it forms an integrated part of the path. It's coherently woven into the threads and strands that make up our path. It has meaningfulness, it has place. It has a relationship with sacredness or the possibility of sacredness in and through sexuality as a possibility for us.

It's not just defilement or delusion, or just that we have nothing to say about it in relation to our path other than the few ethical considerations which people tend to interpret very widely anyway. Or we just say, well, it's just an expression of love—people showing their care, which what they really mean is metta. And then we acknowledge that, yeah, there's also some craving for pleasant sensations. It's some kind of mixture like that.

There's so much more richness and depth and beauty potentially available for us if we can weave and open up our exploration of sexuality as part of the path. And beyond including that—beyond also just the view that says sexuality is a desire for merging union. That's what it is. That's what the movement is, as well as some craving and some care. It's actually a mystical or regressive, either way, urge for union somehow in our sense of what sexuality can be, and the eros involved there.

Lastly, we're trying to explore eros and make the delineation, trying to understand it, but eros, I think, will always keep some sense of mystery. It will always remain at least partially mysterious, some sense of something that's not been fully fathomed there, finally understood or captured in some conception or understanding or definition or whatever. Eros will always retain that mysteriousness, that beyondness.

Partly, that's because of the soul-making dynamic itself, which we'll explain later as we go in. There's something in the soul-making dynamic and in eros itself which keeps making eros bigger than we have understood at present.

But also, I just want to finish with something I think is important to recognize about what we're trying to do here, and again, what we're trying to serve.

In relation to understanding anything, it's important to understand something about understanding. Our understanding of anything, our concept of it, or the conceptual framework we approach it with—our understanding of anything—is part of what determines, shapes, conditions, fabricates what that thing becomes for us and part of what unfolds for that thing.

So the very concepts that we use, definitions, delineations, understandings of whatever it is—in this case eros—are part of what determine, condition, shape, fabricate what that thing, in this case eros, becomes and what it leads to.

So if we want, if we're seeking a kind of final watertight understanding, as if there's some kind of objective understanding we can have of anything, then this insight into understanding presents us with a conundrum. Because whatever concept I have—and there will always be some concept—it shapes the thing. Is that just a dead end, chasing my tail round and round? Or is there an insight there that we can actually use well?

I think the latter. Because rather than aiming at some kind of objective assessment or truth about what this thing or that thing is—in this case eros—rather, we understand something about understanding. And so we use that insight because we recognize: okay, well, we want to support whatever conception or understanding or conceptual framework will open up more soul-making. We support the conception, the understanding, conceptual framework that opens up more soul-making, that supports more soul-making.

It's that that we're after in our use of concepts, in our use of understanding. Soul-making. Not something called truth or objective truth or neat watertight definitions or cleverness or anything like that. Soul-making. That's what we're after.

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