Eros and Equanimity in the Movements of Soul

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:29:11

You know, we're practicing with and talking about soul-making and soul as almost kinds of fundamental concepts, fundamental orientations, fundamental commitments. But it's actually quite hard, perhaps impossible, to really define soul-making or soul completely, to really fully capture what soul-making is, for example, to pin it down. And I think perhaps that's quite appropriate. It's quite right. There's a truth in that impossibility.

There's something here in the poetry of these concepts. They resist full explication, full capturing. There's a balance between the poetry and the science, if you like, of what soul-making and what these concepts are. We want to understand mechanisms, processes, dynamics, what's involved in soul-making, how it works, but there's also an artistic dimension to all this, a poetic dimension to the words we use, and we've talked about this before. Something in the nature of soul and soul-making makes them actually appropriately hard to define.

Because of that balance between the art and the science of what we're involved in, it doesn't mean, just because things are hard to define, that we should abandon any attempt at making delineations or definitions. Can we approach a definition or start with definitions in ways that are actually helpful, without locking them down, getting too tight, thinking that we've captured something in some watertight definition or truth? Can we use the defining process, the defining movement in ways that are helpful? What for? To serve soul-making. The definitions that we come up with are in the service of soul-making. And for that reason, they need to be relatively light. At least I hold them relatively lightly, relatively loosely. They're serving the movement of soul-making.

So what is this soul-making? We've been circular already. But let's say, what is soul-making when we use that term? Having said what we just said, we could give a relatively abstract definition of soul-making and say that soul-making is a certain relationship with experience—but a certain dynamic relationship with experience because it is a relationship that involves the opening and the expansion of ways of experiencing, ways of knowing, ways of conceiving and imagining and relating to experience. So soul-making is this expansion of my sensing, my conceiving, my perceiving, and an expansion in the way that includes the imaginal. An expansion of the sensing, conceiving, perceiving of both object and subject.

Already there, I couldn't help but use the word imagining. What also makes it hard is that a lot of these concepts we're using kind of imply each other. So there's a circularity of definition. It's okay.

That more abstract definition may well sound really abstract. If you're quite familiar, if you've done a lot of work with soul-making, you'll actually recognize that there's an insight there that captures well in a

general principle something fundamental to soul-making. If you have a little less experience, it might just sound way too vague or open or abstract. But you will recognize soul-making in and from your own experience. In your own life, you will recognize the experience of soul-making.

When there is for us a sense of meaningfulness in regard to something or some movement—not so much meaning as it means X or Y, but meaningfulness, the pregnancy of all that's involved there—when there are multiple resonances for us in the soul, when there is beauty. This is also characteristic of soul-making. It has a sense of beauty, a wide range of possible kinds of beauty.

The imaginal images and fantasies—and because there's image and fantasy in the imaginal sense of image and fantasy, that involves, starts to involve other dimensions of the image, other dimensions of what we're perceiving come to be sensed by us.

Reverence is also characteristic of the experience of soul-making. Reverence is from the English word to revere, obviously, which is from the Latin *reverere*, to be in awe of, to be in awe of and to respect deeply. And this has something to do with the sense, when there is soul-making, of opening to something bigger than us. So it's connected with this opening of other dimensions, connected with the sense that goes with these experiences of the unfathomability of something, the inexhaustibility of an image or the perception that we're having. Inexhaustible in its meaning, meaningfulness, inexhaustible in different ways.

Different kinds of love are also present in soul-making. So soul-making usually, or I'd say always, has some kind of quality of love. And again, it might not be obvious at first. So all these are ways, aspects of soul-making, ways that we recognize soul-making in our experience, at times in our life.

And I would include, what we're going to get to shortly, that soul-making involves eros.

When we ask what does soul mean, and if we try to define soul, we could say soul is a perspective that brings soul-making, that gives a feeling of support and opens a feeling of soulfulness at any time. And you see the circularity of all these definitions.

It's the only way we can do this. It's better to say that soul is not so much a perspective but a set of perspectives—a potentially increasing or open set of perspectives. In other words, there are more and more perspectives that we are open to, perspectives that themselves open soulfulness and support soulfulness in different ways.

So we could say, if we want to avoid talking of soul as if it's a thing or an entity, we could simply regard it as a way of relating, a way of looking. It's an open and expanding, potentially expanding set of perspectives that supports and opens and gives rise to and ignites soul-making and the sense of soulfulness.

If we wanted to talk about soul as an entity, as if it were an entity, then we could say something like: soul is that which relates this way. Which way? That set of perspectives, that opening, open and potentially

expanding set of perspectives that support soulfulness. Soul is just that which relates that way—that in the citta, if you like, that relates that way.

And so in this opening set of perspectives, it will include image and fantasy. It will include the realm of imaginal perception and all that this implies and involves. So before you recognize this—the unfathomability, the inexhaustibility, the sense of the autonomy of an image, the mystery, divinity perhaps—comes in the dimensionality that opens up, that we start to recognize more and more in the imaginal experience.

Now, we said yesterday that eros is central in this process of soul-making, in the movement of soul-making. It's a fundamental, indispensable component, if you like, if we talk in that language. So how does that work?

If you recall our small definition—what we were calling the small definition of eros—we said that eros is the desire, the wanting for more contact with, more connection with, more intimacy with, more knowing of, more penetration of, and more opening to something, to what we're calling an erotic object, the beloved other. So there's quite a sort of small, humble, relatively dry-sounding definition.

We could add to that, just noticing there are certain aspects of the experience of eros that we will notice in our experiences. So for example, eros involves—there will be some kind of feeling or sense of juiciness, we could say—of different kinds of love, some kind of love in the experience of eros. There are many different kinds of love. There will be some kind of sense of energization and also of beauty. We could point to these as aspects of eros, as well as just the sense of attraction, of course.

Now, we can nuance that and go into that in all kinds of ways. But let's also point out, in terms of aspects of the experience of eros, a couple of other ones: arousal. Now by arousal, I don't just mean sexual energy or sexual attraction, sexual arousal. It can be that. That's absolutely possible, of course, as one manifestation of eros. It may be that if someone hooks you up to some kind of scientific measuring equipment—measures your, I don't know what they call it, skin galvanization response or whatever it is, and measures of brain waves and such—that they can measure that there's arousal even there with non-sexual eros in the way that we're using it, in the way that we're calling part of our range of what eros means. Certainly that's possible.

But what we can say as part of eros is an arousal of interest. So something in the being is captivated, let's say, in a good sense. Captivated. It's attracted and there is this arousal of interest. Because mind and body, citta and body are always connected, that arousal of interest and the openness that usually goes with eros—this tends to energize, arouse, and energize the energy body.

So we're not necessarily talking about sexual arousal here—that's included—but there will be an arousal of the energy body, let's call it that. The energy body will feel energized. It will feel opened and probably aligned. And this we say is characteristic of imaginal practice too. This may be super remarkable and

intense, this opening, alignment, energization of the energy body. It may be very, very subtle. Oftentimes it can be there without feeling at all agitated, and so forth. So it's not an unpeaceful feeling. We'll come back to that. Let's come back to the energy body material.

So arousal as well as attraction, what we could call juiciness or aliveness, some kind of love, energization, beauty—all that. There are also two other aspects we could draw attention to in the experience of eros. One is dynamism and one is what I'd like to call autoeroticism.

Eros is dynamic in the sense—you can hear it—because the wanting, the attraction, there's a dynamic attraction, movement towards, if you like, the object, the erotic object. But eros has a dynamism beyond that, which I need to explain a little bit more in order to explain the fullness of that dynamism. And similarly with the aspect of autoeroticism.

If you recall that small definition of eros, I don't know whether this stood out to you—that word "more": wanting, desiring more contact with, more connection with, more intimacy with. This "more" is extremely significant. Classically, eros was part of a triad—

of gods or demigods that were called the Erotes, and there was Eros, and one of them was called Pothos. And Pothos is this infinite longing, always wanting more, always looking, so to speak, to the horizon, to the beyond. There's an infinite yearning that goes with eros, so to speak. So eros is always accompanied by Pothos, and that, in our more dry definition, that's the "more"—more contact.

This wanting more is not to imply that the connection we have and the contact we have is not fulfilling. There's not this kind of poverty there, or thirst in the sense that we don't have a sense of fullness. Part of, and I could actually say one of the aspects of the experience of eros, is delight. There is delight in the present contact, and the "more" in the definition of eros may just be a kind of wanting that delightfulness and the magic of that connection to continue, wanting to linger in that magic, in that beauty, in that opening.

This "more" may not be that obvious in the experience. It may not stand out in the experience. It may be really quite subtle. I'm emphasizing it, though, heuristically—for educational purposes. I want to draw something out here. I want to explain something about the process or the dynamic of soul-making, because it hinges, or it's driven by, propelled by, that word "more." It's extremely important.

So how does this work? What are we talking about here? When there is this Pothos with it, there's this desire for more contact, connection, intimacy, knowing, penetration and opening—as I said, all those words used in as full a sense as possible. This desire for more will set in motion a dynamic that can then unfold in different ways.

Now, one of the ways it can unfold is that if I am open to the imaginal, the realm of the imaginal and the realm of imaginal perception of this beloved other, of this erotic object, whatever it is—if I allow the imaginal aspect of experience to open up, the imaginal dimensions, if I respect that, if I tune and open to

that—then what's possible is that the movement there of the psyche with the eros and this desire for more actually starts finding more, discovering more in the beloved other, in the object. It also, we could say, creates more. It creates and discovers more.

What more? More in the imaginal. So that my beloved other—she, he, they, whatever, it, if it's an object—becomes more through the erotic contact, through the erotic connection and sensing and gaze. So that my beloved other starts to reveal to me, through my gaze, through my sensing, any of the senses, other facets, new facets. They become more complicated, more manifold. They have other dimensions, other forms, sides or faces, facets.

So, for example, they become a theophany, or they become a goddess, as well as who they are. I know them, I know their history, I know all their physical being. It's not as if that all disappears, but as well as that obvious physical dimension that we can all kind of generally agree on, there are other dimensions of their being that I start to perceive.

So the process of "more," it kind of thrusts in, penetrates more to reveal more, opens more, discovers and creates more in the erotic beloved. So, she, he, they start to gradually, in steps, show me more faces through the imaginal. I start to perceive their multidimensionality, this image coming through them, this god, goddess, or angel, or whatever it is—and all kinds of specific examples we could give here.

Now, because they are now more complicated, the jewel of their being is more multifaceted, shows me more faces, there's light shining from all of them, or more mystery there. They're, so to speak, bigger as an image, more complex as an imaginal perception, there's more to be attracted to. They're more mysterious, more unfathomable, more inexhaustible. There are more different kinds of shades of light and characters shining out of them. And so the eros is then further inflamed, further amplified through this increase of the image.

You understand? Through this making manifold and dimensionalizing of the image. It doesn't all happen at once. It happens—it can be really a process in steps, or usually is, over time. So the eros is inflamed more, and that, again, has this wanting more in it, and so the process goes around. It inflates, amplifies, expands, widens, deepens, complicates the image even more—the erotic, imaginal other.

As this goes on in the steps, at some point, it kind of knocks on the walls of my concept, my ideation, my belief structure about who this is that I'm encountering now. What a person is, what the soul is, what image is. My conceptual belief system is getting pushed on to expand with the expansion of the imaginal perception. You understand?

And that too then adds multidimensionality—in this case a kind of conceptual multidimensionality—and complication and deepening. I cannot, if my conceptual structure and belief system, my conceptual framework of who they are and who I am and what psyche is, all that, is pushed out—I cannot just believe this simple, flat, reductionist, one-dimensional view of who they are and who I am and all that.

So this further creates more attractive depth, complexity, yumminess, and that further inflames the eros.

So gradually and in stages, the whole process cycles on itself, feeds itself, nourishes itself. All these aspects—the eros, the image, and the imaginal dimensions, and the concepts, the ideation—start to mutually inseminate each other, to mutually inflame each other, to mutually deepen, widen, enrich, expand each other.

So you've got the eros, what I'm going to call psyche, and the logos. Let me explain what I mean.

Eros, psyche, logos.

Eros is the eros, as we've explained—this movement. The psyche is really... I can use this word psyche in two ways. I can mean by it the totality of the citta, the psyche. I can also mean—and what I mean in this instance here—I'm using the word psyche to mean the totality of imaginal perception present in the moment.

And then the last word, logos, that I'm using as part of this dynamic—the eros, psyche, logos dynamic. Logos means my concepts, my ideation, my set of beliefs, my conceptual framework.

So these three—eros, psyche, logos—are the movement of eros and that particular kind of desire, the totality of the imaginal perception in the moment, and the ideation wrapped up in all that, the conceptual frame wrapped up in all that. Eros, psyche, logos come together to mutually feed, nourish, support, open, widen, deepen, inseminate, fertilize, ignite each other in what we call the soul-making dynamic.

And a big part of what that does is it widens, deepens, enriches, complicates, makes more manifold and more yummy the erotic object. So they become, for instance, a theophany. They're expressing some kind of angelic dimension or nature that's coming through them, in addition to their being—obviously, I know this person, I know their physical history, their psychological history and all that. But they start to have theophanic or angelic dimensions.

And there's also the movement into cosmopoiesis, which comes back to the imaginal—movement starts spreading beyond just that object, starts spreading to the world. We've talked about this in other retreats, so you should be familiar with that movement of cosmopoiesis.

Now, this eros-psyche-logos dynamic, or this soul-making dynamic, soul-making process, what I've just described could just keep unfolding like that in stages—very rich, very beautiful, very expansive, expanding. Or it can get blocked at any point, and actually from a number of directions.

So, for example, if I have a rigid—I don't know—secular scientific materialist conceptual structure, and that's my logos, and I absolutely refuse to give any validity or reality to the imaginal perception that I might have, then that will cause me to dismiss the imaginal perception and disempower it that way. So it cannot feed back into this whole soul-making enrichment process.

So it could be an idea that's more, if you like, existential. It could be an idea about who this person is. It could be a concept about what our relationship should be—I shouldn't look at them that way, or it needs to fit into this box or whatever it is.

It could be also something—the possibilities are endless—but for example, a person might think, "Well, I've been practicing the Dharma for ages, years and years and years. I know what the Dharma is." And if something happens in my perception which pushes the boundaries and starts to want to expand the walls of how I've boxed in the Dharma, and so I... I'm an authority, perhaps, or I know what the Dharma is, as I said, and then it's actually coming from the ego structure, the hardened ego structure that's creating walls that will not expand. Because I don't want to disrupt or threaten my self-view of knowing what the Dharma is or having it sorted out or being the one with answers or an authority or whatever it is.

So this could come from all different directions. Or it might be that a certain image is refused. So the block can come from the direction of logos in all kinds of ways. It could come from the direction of the psyche—in other words, the image. I refuse that kind of image. It's too weird. It's too, whatever it is, dazzling. It's too dark, whatever it is. And again, many ways that can happen. But a similar sort of arresting or blocking or constriction of this process will happen—of the whole soul-making dynamic and tendency to expand will happen, or can happen, being blocked through the psyche direction, through the imaginal, or the restrictions on image.

And it can be blocked through the restrictions on eros. Perhaps we feel that that energy is too much. We're not okay handling that desire. Perhaps there's been a certain psychological history with desire that we tend to limit how much flows through us, or the way it opens up the bodily energies we're not comfortable with, we don't trust, or the way it opens the heart, all of that.

So the blocks in the eros, psyche, logos dynamic... unhindered, it will just keep tending to expand in stages. There's potentially no limit to it. It's infinite—infinitely deepening, infinitely widening, infinitely complicating, infinitely enriching in potential.

But of course, being human as we are, it can get blocked and does get blocked in all kinds of ways. Hopefully these blocks are sometimes temporary—we recognize them, and then something either shatters and expands, or expands gradually through whatever means. But other times the blocks can be more habitual or longer lasting.

This eros-psyche-logos dynamic is really, really important. It's a fundamental concept that we'll return to again and again. You'll begin to see how this small definition, in the way it opens up this soul-making dynamic, is immensely powerful when we can understand it. You'll see how it applies everywhere in our life—potentially everywhere. Every domain, dimension, aspect and direction of our existence can be brought into and involved in this movement, the furnace, the beauty of this dynamic.

This is truly essential. We'll keep coming back to this and use it as something we can relate everything

to—we can relate all our experience to this understanding.

Once we open up that understanding a little and bring it to bear on our experience as it unfolds, we could also say that we have this small definition of eros that we've defined twice now. But in a way, when we use the word "eros," because of its tendency to fertilize, stimulate, inseminate, and ignite that soul-making dynamic—that soul-making process of expansion, opening, and complication—it's almost as if eros already implies and involves soul-making, and thus the imaginal and soul.

So when we use the word "eros," sometimes we'll mean the small definition, and sometimes we'll actually mean this larger definition of the whole eros as it exists in the soul-making dynamic, in the eros-psyche-logos process of expansion and mutual fertilization and feedback and enriching. There's a larger definition of eros with larger implications of what's involved with it. Do you understand?

Something should be obvious that I'll mention: eros is clearly not equivalent with metta. I would say that eros, similar to what I said about soul-making always involving love of some kind, always includes some kind of love. It might not be obvious—we've talked about this before in other talks. Eros, because it is involved with soul-making, always includes some kind of love. Part of our job is to discern and notice what kind of love, how the love is expressing, what's the character and quality of it.

But eros, though it includes love, is in a way more than love and not equivalent with metta. It's more than just metta. Metta is implicit in it. We'll come back to the relationship between eros and metta in a little while, but notice a few other things as well.

As we mentioned the other day, eros is not just, as some people define it following the Neoplatonic tradition, a movement towards union, unification, or oneness. Actually, if we draw out one of the implications of what we've just said about the way eros operates in the soul-making dynamic, eros actually both needs and creates and discovers otherness. Eros implies and involves otherness, two-ness.

Eros needs this polarity of something that it's attracted to—it needs that two-ness. But also, in its whole movement, as we said, it creates and discovers, or creates-discovers, other aspects of the object. It creates more to the object rather than collapsing the object or collapsing into the object in oneness—a sort of melting in white light together or whatever. It actually creates more complication, facets, dimensions.

And it needs that to further stimulate the eros. So it needs this two-ness, this otherness, these facets and dimensions—these othernesses, plural—that are attractive to the eros. It needs them, but it also stimulates the creation and discovery of more and more otherness. And if, as I said, this soul-making dynamic is potentially infinite, it will just keep creating more and more otherness.

There's a kind of tension there. There is the attraction towards, and partly there is an attraction towards melting at times—we'll come back to that. But at the same time, there's a need for otherness and two-ness, retaining the two-ness, retaining the polarity of the two: the subject and the object, the self and the beloved other, connected. I might even know that we're one, but I need to retain the two. The eros needs

to retain the two, and it will stimulate further and create and discover more of that otherness, and more and more othernesses in fact.

We'll elaborate this as we go. So intrinsic to, or implicit in, the movement of eros—as it is allowed, to the extent that it's allowed to fertilize the whole soul-making dynamic and be involved in it—is that it does create and discover more to the object, more to actually everything in the end. So it creates-discovers more. It's both a creative process and a revelatory process.

There's a lot we could say about this, but let's just say that for now. Part of what's implicit in what I've just said, implicit in the sense of two-ness and implicit also in the otherness that it creates and discovers and needs, is that there's a beyondness that's part of the erotic connection. Again, it's both a need, a necessity for eros, and also a creation of eros. It will create some beyond what I already know, and it will discover a beyond what I already know and experience, which serves to attract the eros more.

Now, that beyondness is not totally transcendent in the sense that the eros still delights in the appearance that's there and in the connection that's there. So it's not "I want the beyond—who cares about this now that's here, that's present, that's immanent in the appearance." It's not a beyond that's dismissive of the tangibility and presence in the sensual appearance as it is right now in whatever stage of perception or imaginal perception. It delights in that. It includes that.

But there's also, as part of the dimensionality, there's a beyondness as well—shining through, or intuited, or glimpsed. And that's part of the whole package of soul-making, part of the whole constellation of eros, and what eros constellates. Both a beyondness and a presence in the sensory contact, in the imaginal perception, in the appearance. Both are attractive. Both are delighted in. Both captivate the eros.

There's a lot here. We're moving quite quickly, I'm aware of that. We can bring this out more in the groups and the Q&As, and the individual meetings as you start. And I would like you to really start trying to relate this to experience—your experience as it unfolds—as much as you're able, to help digest this and let these ideas and concepts, let the logos, in fact, be really fertile for you for the soul-making process.

If we think about the relationship between eros and equanimity, there's quite a lot to explore and unpack there. These may be words that we don't often think go together—eros and equanimity. What is the relationship? Are they mutually exclusive? How does it work?

Related to all that are questions about balance in practice, equanimity being related to a sense of balance, or rather balance being one of the factors involved in a state of equanimity—equanimity implying a balance of the consciousness, of the citta, of the being. What is the relationship between eros and equanimity, and how might we support our navigation in these kinds of practices so that there can still be a kind of balance there?

Again, there's so much to say here, but let's just say a few things. This soul-making dynamic has, as I said, a natural inclination, when it's not hindered, to just keep cycling on itself—growing, fertilizing itself,

inseminating, giving itself the eros, the psyche, logos, the different dimensions, just feeding more and more, giving each other more complication, more expansion, widening, deepening, everything that we've said, more enriching.

Now, that process of expansion, that soul-making expansion, also wants to expand in different directions. So it's not just in the direction of eros, in the direction of psyche, in the direction of logos—which anyway are really three aspects or connected aspects of soul, you could say, rather than three separate things or mechanisms. The eros-psyche-logos dynamic, the soul-making dynamic, also wants to expand in different directions.

By which I mean—and again, this is something to notice in the practice and really, really important for navigation—what sometimes happens, what often happens, is that, let's say we're working with an image, and there's some kind of eros in relationship with that image, as there will be when an image is imaginally alive. Some kind of eros—could be sexual, could be not sexual, whatever. And the soul-making process, the eros-psyche-logos, starts to impregnate and expand and create, discover more to the erotic object, more to the object, to the other.

Oftentimes, what we don't notice in the imaginal constellation—or rather, we each have different tendencies here, but what can be quite common is for some of us not to notice that at the same time, at the very same time, that the object of the imaginal perception is expanding, the subject is similarly expanding. My sense of self is also becoming imaginally infused, imaginally enriched. I also become for myself an erotic object. The image of myself is part of the whole imaginal constellation. It includes self and other. It's not just other.

Oftentimes our gaze is so transfixed by the beauty of the other or the awe or the fear or the weirdness of it, or just in attending to it out of habit, we put the attention on the object. So it's making the attention a little bit bigger to notice what's happening with the imaginal sense of self in this practice right now, in this imaginal constellation, and you will begin to notice that the self too, as I said, is drawn in and impregnated, amplified, complicated, widened, enriched, deepened, in the imaginal perception, in the web of the imaginal perception. It includes not just the object, but also the subject. Not just other, but also self.

And this soul-making dynamic also wants to naturally include the world. Its expansion into the world—in other words, the environment, the world around us, and the fullness of the senses—is just another way of referring to what we've talked about before, the process of cosmopoiesis. That through this beautiful other that I'm with, whatever it is in the image, whoever she, he, they, it are, that becomes imaginally alive, imaginally deep, and there's the eros there. Also the self, and also the world.

This cosmopoiesis is a natural movement, the expansion outwards to include the world. It's like the imaginal perception spills over to imbue, to fertilize the perception of the world. I'm not going to say too much more about cosmopoiesis because we've dwelt on it a lot in past retreats.

So the imaginal constellation includes not just the other, the object, the imaginal object, or this person who I'm perceiving imaginally—in other words, I'm including the imaginal dimensions in my perception of them—not just the other, but also the self and also the world, three aspects, and a fourth aspect, the eros itself.

In other words, our very sense of the eros involved in relationship to the image, the imaginal, the eros with the image, erotic connection with the image, that too begins to be subsumed, to be drawn into, to be imbued by the imaginal erotic gaze. It's subsumed and drawn into the soul-making dynamic and the fertilization by eros-psyche-logos. So that the eros itself that we are experiencing, our eros right now in relationship with this imaginal object, also begins to become imaginally alive. We perceive it imaginally.

It starts to have other dimensions. The eros itself can eventually become a sense of theophany—it is sensed to be sacred, sensed to be divine in different ways. It appears to us gradually as unfathomable, mysterious, inexhaustible in different ways.

This eros-psychologos dynamic, that three-faced soul, also wants to expand in this fourfold way—towards object, towards self, towards world, and towards eros. Self, other, world, eros. It wants to move in all those directions. In a liquid analogy, the waters of soul want to flow in all those directions. Or if you prefer a fire analogy, the fire wants to spread in all those directions—the fire of soul-making, the fire of eros and the erotic imaginal.

Why am I mentioning this? Partly it gives us a clue about navigation in practice. We can check at any moment: am I including all four directions? All I have to do is include it in my attention—just what's happening with the self. Sometimes just including the self-sense, the image of the self, in the attention allows it to be fertilized by image and eros, and it comes alive. Or the world, or the eros itself. So sometimes it's just a matter of attention.

Now we might have, as individuals, certain habits of tendency. Some people's attention tends to be more habitually focused on the self when they're doing imaginal practice—and probably in life as well—and they tend less to be able to keep the awareness open to the object at the same time. Or vice versa: we become so transfixed and captivated by the divinity of the object that we don't pay attention to the self-sense. And if we did, that would start becoming correspondingly divine. It would start to grow in divinity as well.

For example, if you're doing a devotional practice with a tantric deity or yidam, or just an imaginal figure that's divine for you—and there are all kinds of possibilities—let's say you're somehow resting in the lap of the Buddha or Tara or whoever it is, being held by them. They appear to have all the divinity and I'm the human receiving their love and their healing energy, whatever.

If I dwell in that image, just keep dwelling it and letting it do its thing by the way I'm tuning, by the way I'm opening, by the way I'm sensitizing in the practice—opening the energy body, paying attention to the

resonances—if I just let it do its thing, it will just be a matter of time before the sense of myself in that image, resting in the lap of the Buddha or being embraced by a divinity or loved by a divinity, starts to feel my divine dimensions.

The divinity in the image, the theophany starts to spread or catch light, so that not just this Buddha or this yidam or whoever it is—this tantric deity, this imaginal figure—is divine, but I am both human and divine at the same time. I'm given dimensionality just through the soul-making process happening.

So sometimes it's just a matter of attention. Other times we have a more long-standing tendency—and there can be different reasons for this—for not being able to open to a sense of, for instance, our self as image. We've rarefied the self, and the other is image, and there's something blocked there in the whole soul-making dynamic.

The dynamic wants to flow into the self. It wants to impregnate the imaginal perception of the self, give it dimensionality, beauty, mystery, unfathomability, inexhaustibility, divinity. But for whatever reason—whether it's habit or other reasons—I'm only allowing it to go and do its work and fill out and come alive in, let's say, one of these directions. For instance, just towards the object and not so much towards the self, and not so much towards the world or the eros.

There's a sense somehow: I have all this eros towards this person that I'm perceiving with such beauty, that they have such beauty and depth of divinity, but I'm feeling myself as just a human, and my eros is just maybe a little bit embarrassing or clumsy, or maybe even still carries remnants of the view that it's defiled or defilement in some way.

Or the block may be towards the world. The person's doing all this practice—I touched on this in the last retreat, the re-enchanting retreat—doing all this practice, good work on their psychological process and all this. But the world in which it takes place just remains a flat world, remains unenchanted because it's unimpregnated by the soul-making movement, the soul-making dynamic. The eros hasn't reached there to bring it imaginally alive.

So it's worth checking a couple of things. One is: is there a long-term tendency to always lean one way? That's interesting to know about oneself. And then: can I practice including the directions of self, other, world and eros where I don't tend to lean habitually?

Or maybe it's just a momentary imbalance, if you like, or non-opening in one of these directions. And what the practice needs in that moment is just: ah yes, I can let it include that. Which oftentimes just means, as I said, just opening the attention there to include. Let's include the self.

So I'm aware of an imaginal constellation here—self and other, maybe self and other and world. And let it spread that way.

My experience teaching and working with people with this practice is that this dynamic is not at all

obvious. We often don't realize that the soul-making dynamic can open, wants to open in all these different directions, is even potentially open if we would only notice it. We might feel stuck, or more often we feel out of balance in some way. Sometimes something is very hard to tolerate—the eros is hard to tolerate, or we're toppling over in some way. In other words, there isn't equanimity, there isn't balance.

But can you see, even if we use a physical analogy, that if the flow of the eros is allowed to go in these different directions—towards the other, but also back towards the self and out to the world in all directions and to itself—then the whole movement, like water flowing, balances itself? We're not toppled over towards the object or imploding in ourselves. Playing with this, making adjustments, cultivating awareness, opening up to include all directions, tuning to this—this is crucial if we're interested in allowing the process to open more fully and have its full life and power. Not just efficacy, but also navigating in a way that's actually balanced and sustainable.

Related to this, I'll make another distinction. It's close, but different. Again, something to check, something we might have individual habit patterns around, either just out of habit or for particular reasons.

I was working with someone recently who felt there was a lot of eros with a certain image, but there was too much intensity. It was hard for her to bear. She felt it was just going to blow her fuses—she'd short-circuit or get too excited in a way that would just dissipate and fritter away. What had actually happened was that her attention and consciousness had become captivated, not in such a helpful way, by what was happening in her energy body, specifically around her heart area, with the eros and beauty and opening—this flame there. It was hard for her to bear that flame. She felt it was getting too intense in a way that would explode the process, leaving her with nothing. Not that she thought she was going to go mad, but it felt so powerful that it was actually fragile.

I recognized what was happening and also saw that she hadn't realized she was putting too much focus in one place. Because she was so captivated by the intensity of the feeling in her heart, she was actually giving less attention to the image—the very thing that had started the whole process with its beauty and eros. As the energy built in her energy body, she began giving less attention to the image. The concentrated attention on her heart area was putting it under too much pressure. There wasn't enough spaciousness in the attention to allow the energy to move more widely. Instead of flowing freely, it became like a pressure cooker in her chest.

This opening can happen in two ways. One is opening of the energy body. You should be familiar with this—opening the awareness, letting the energy and currents move how they want to move within the energy body, giving the whole sense of the energy body more space. Because the awareness is bigger, the sense of the energy body will be bigger, and the energy can flow how it wants to flow—in, out, up, down, around, spirals, whatever it wants to do.

Especially when there's intense eros or intense sexual energy, it often gets caught somewhere in the body—maybe around the genitals, maybe around the heart, could be anywhere really—and it needs more

space. It needs to be allowed to flow and fill a space or even move in or out of a space as it wants. Sometimes we don't give it enough space with our attention and it constricts, becoming unbearably uncomfortable or intolerable, throwing us out of balance. To have more capacity to hold what wants to move through us—in terms of eros, energy, beauty, opening—what can really help is creating more capacity in the space by opening the awareness. The energy body opens, and we allow it, even help it by imagining it flowing. We've talked about this before on other retreats.

But there's a second way the awareness can open to help. Related to this example and to what I said before about the constellation of self, other, world and eros: recognizing when we have too much attention too tightly bound and myopically focused on one aspect of the energetic experience. In this woman's case, there was tremendous intensity, but because attention was so caught up, it felt like it would just dissipate somehow, discharge or short-circuit.

The solution was to keep aware of the energy, give it more room, but primarily to re-include the imaginal other. Include not just the energy body experience—which is vital to imaginal practice, as we keep stressing—but also don't lose track of the other, of the imaginal object, the erotic object, the beloved other. Then you have a constellation. You have the imaginal other, and attention becomes interested again in their beauty, not at the expense of your experience here, either energetically or imaginally, but not denying them either. There's this openness and inclusion. The energy, instead of being caught up in the physical energetic body in one location, can both spread through the body and through the whole imaginal constellation of self and other and eventually world.

Do you understand? So there's more capacity there, and the whole experience can have more potency. The whole soul-making can be more potent.

Intensity is actually neither here nor there, and this goes for all kinds of meditation practice. Intensity can feel like a big deal—wow, something really important is happening. It may or may not be. What's more important is the potency. In the case I've been describing, there was a lot of intensity, but there wasn't going to be much potency until she opened up that awareness to re-include and balance it with awareness of the imaginal other and the beauty there and the erotic connection there.

Anytime there's a choice between intensity and potency, we want the potency. We want the soul-making to fertilize the soul and open it. Otherwise, I just have an intense experience and then it's over. So what? Nothing's stretched, nothing's changed. Maybe I even get a bit freaked out or scared.

Intensity can be a lovely and organic part of the process, remarkable even. But what we're more interested in is the potency. That potency sometimes will require intensity of experience as part of it, and sometimes it actually doesn't even need to be that intense. We can still have the potency. Sometimes something's gotten too intense because it's not balanced—the awareness is not spread in the directions it needs to balance.

We're talking about balance, about navigating in the practice, developing our art, developing our skill. I should point out that with self, other, world, eros, energy body, imaginal, emotions, and desire, it's not that all these elements need to find some perfect point of static balance where they're always equally balanced in attention.

It's more about understanding, having a conception that these are aspects of the total imaginal experience we can pay attention to within our field. At any time we can lean more or less and emphasize more or less any of those aspects. We can bring them into some relative balance, which doesn't necessarily mean equal balance.

We can move—lean more towards the object or more back towards awareness of the self, the image of the self, or more out towards the world or all equally. More towards the energy body, or more towards the sense of desire itself, or more towards the image. The whole thing is dynamic and fluid, a kind of dance that's really an art, rather than some static ideal or formulaic thing.

We can play with this. All practices involve finding out what the moment needs, what unfolds from different emphases and how I lean. That's part of the beauty and fun and potential of practice.

I should also add that when we're talking about balance and equanimity, developing our skill in letting go, in dropping craving, in easing craving when it arises—just letting go of something, not being compelled to engage or give our attention to anything at all—that skill and capacity to let go is something we want to develop.

For many people doing this work, they will have developed quite a lot of that capacity before they even go into these kinds of practices involving the erotic imaginal and opening to desire. It's not always that things move in that order. Some people are actually open to explore practices of eros and opening to desire at the same time as they're learning practices of letting go and putting down and dropping.

But there is a question here about what to practice when, what order in my life of practice I develop these different approaches. The capacity for cultivating equanimity, for sitting in a really still, equanimous state—whether that's more absorbed in jhāna or more open to the multiplicity of experience—the taste for and accessibility of equanimity in our life and practice is really, really important. It complements what we're exploring now, the kinds of things we're emphasizing on this retreat.

But can you see that if the eros is allowed to do its thing and inseminate the whole soul-making movement, inseminate psyche and logos and re-inseminate eros and spread out that way and spread out in cosmopoiesis and include not just the other but the self and the world and the eros itself, then there's a kind of balance implicit in that? Balance being characteristic of equanimity, there will be equanimity that comes from the eros being allowed to do its thing, not from shutting down the eros.

We tend to think either I'm in a state of desire or eros, or I'm in a state of equanimity. There's a way of going about it like that, but if I actually allow and explore allowing the desire in different ways, then

actually I can have an equanimous eros, or at least a balanced eros.

If we allow eros to do its thing and open up in all these dimensions and directions and aspects that it naturally wants to and will open up, then you can also see that there's a kind of equality of things. Not just the other, but the self also, and the world also, and everything in the world is involved in, drawn into, subsumed in, caught up in, imbued by this whole erotic imaginal process, the whole soul-making process and the opening of imaginal perceptions.

In the cosmopoiesis and in that inclusion of all these aspects, there is an equality of all things. Everything becomes imaginally infused, imaginally alive, imaginally perceived. Everything becomes dimensionalized, unfathomable, inexhaustible, mysterious, beautiful.

There is equality of all things. Some of you will know that an equality of all things is one of the ways, particularly in the Mahāyāna tradition, they actually define equanimity—regarding all things as equal. That's also in the Theravādan tradition.

These characteristics of balance and the equality of all, balance in relationship, and the equality of all things that comes to our perception—these are characteristics of equanimity, by definition, in Buddhist usage of that term. And they're also characteristic of the whole soul-making dynamic, the whole movement of eros, when it's allowed to do its thing.

When it's allowed to expand that way, when it's allowed to impregnate that way.

There are certainly differences, of course, between eros and equanimity conceived in a Buddhist way. Equanimity, being one of the brahmaviharas, shares a characteristic that all the brahmaviharas have. Like metta, it actually moves in the direction of lessening fabrication—lessening the perception of the other, lessening the perception of objects, lessening the self-other divide, the subject-object divide. All this—and if you've done dedicated metta practice over a while, you'll see that this fading is characteristic. I and the object of my metta begin to melt into oneness, a oneness of being, a oneness of heart. We are one luminous heart together. This is the way metta goes.

Deep equanimity practice, being the quieting of the push and pull with all experience—I'm talking about equanimity towards phenomena now—leads, because of the quieting of the clinging, the push-pull there, to less fabrication. There's a quieting of the fabrication.

Eros, on the other hand, in distinction to that, actually moves in the direction of more fabrication—more beautiful and skillful fabrication. It's the path of tantra, if you like, of skillful fabrication premised on, based on, involving an understanding of non-realism, an understanding of the emptiness of what is fabricated. I know it's empty, therefore I can fabricate. I see image as image, therefore I fabricate.

So in contrast to the fabrication of papañca, which has a kind of realism to it—I believe this thing is real, I believe whatever the imaginary thing is—the fabrication that comes out of eros when it's allowed to

impregnate the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic is not based on realism. So it's this magical, beautiful, skillful soul-making fabrication, in contradistinction to metta and equanimity which tend to quiet the fabrication.

So there are differences there. But this aspect of the presence or absence of realism—to me this is really pivotal. I actually still haven't thought of good words for this. What's a good word for an image or a fantasy when we believe them to be real? I use the word "image," and most of the time when I use the word "image" or "fantasy" in these contexts, I really mean an imaginal image, an imaginal fantasy with everything that's implied by that use of the word "imaginal" in the way that we're using it. What might be a word for the kind of image or fantasy when it really is reified, when it's not soul-making, it's taken as real, and it's kind of one-dimensional? It doesn't have that dimensionality, that seeing image as image.

I realize this is difficult for people—this whole what we're calling the middle way between real and unreal. So it relates to the middle way of emptiness between is and is not. But there's a similar middle way in terms of imaginal practice for me.

I often get nervous when I'm with someone and they're using the language of images, but it seems to be somehow that there's quite a lot of ego in it and quite a lot of realism in it. Sometimes people use the language of divinity and soul, but somehow it's just—I've talked about this before—somehow about me and my process. And the reality of the self is still somehow really central. Even if they're using the language of God's will, this or that, it's all very reified. And the ego is actually getting quite solidified in that process. It's very dramatic, but it lacks that quality of theater, of knowing that it's theater. Personally, it makes me quite nervous, and I've seen some quite difficult and abusive things through that kind of engagement.

In defining soul-making, you may remember from talks from another retreat, I actually included in the definition of soul-making an awareness of seeing image as image. I was very hesitant about that and thinking about, for example—Catherine, I was talking about Mother Teresa, who saw people as her beloved Jesus. So there's an imaginal perception there, and I wonder what her notion of real or not real was with her whole concept of Jesus and Christ and the Catholic doctrine. I'm actually not sure. But I sort of hummed and hawed for quite a while and then just decided to land on the side of including that awareness—this is image, seeing image as image—this awareness of the kind of middle way between real and not real, including that in my definition of what is soul-making and what it means to have an imaginal perception.

There's a problem here, and I realize this is difficult for people. If you say "image is image," or "don't take it as real," then people understandably go to the other extreme and dismiss. It's not real, therefore it's just delusion, or it's worthless, this image, or any sense of divinity I had is not real, therefore it doesn't have its power. It's a tricky one.

I think maybe this comes in stages for some people, and there's a journey towards that. I can just say that for now, when I inhabit what feels to me to be that middle way, that razor's edge between real and not

real—

either in regard to all things in terms of emptiness or in regard to images and the whole notion of soul and divinity, that this ultra-narrow razor's edge or tightrope—what seems so precarious—actually ends up being incredibly powerful. Incredibly powerful in what it liberates in terms of perception and transformation and dedication.

What appeared—I can't remember if I said this before—what appeared to be really narrow, with no space on either side and very precarious balance, actually opens up. It's not narrow at all when you get inside that understanding and live it and feel it deeply in the core of one's consciousness. This middle way actually opens up a vast playground or dancing hall, and there's so much freedom and power and beauty and room for movement—creative movement and dynamism and energy that can come through there.

I've alluded to this before, but just in terms of this realism question, maybe you already know that kind of power—to some degree at least—because it comes through in our relationship with art. We've touched on this before. A piece of literature, a novel that you're reading—something moves you so much. You know it's not real, but it still has immense power. Or poetry. We talk about poetic truth. We've been through all this before. Or theater. You know it's theater. I'm sitting right there. I know these actors. Some of them are my friends even. Something about it moves me in a way sometimes more than so-called reality itself, as we tend to think about it. Or in movies, or whatever it is.

So there's a power—you can have a feeling of this power through art, and that's exactly what we're talking about. Or you might know it in your own Dharma practice. To whatever degree you have realized the emptiness of self, to whatever degree, and you know this self is empty, you still can engage yourself, think in terms of yourself, feel yourself, respect yourself, care for yourself, and others' selves—the selves that you care about. So the knowing of the emptiness doesn't make something worthless. It doesn't make yourself worthless. It's not only that you throw something out.

So you may have tasted—I know it's difficult—this what I call the razor's edge or the tightrope of the middle way here, whether it's in regard to emptiness, whether it's in regard to the imaginal. But I think there are other avenues in our experience where we may already have a sense of how to come into relationship and occupy that middle way, how to be balanced there. It's maybe already in our life to a certain degree. But again, I acknowledge it's difficult, or it can be difficult.

The thing about it, though, as I said, is it liberates. And where there is the seeing of emptiness—this neither is nor isn't, neither real nor not real—and seeing image as image, this allows the erotic engagement, allows the power and the potency and the magic of that and the captivation of that and the dynamic of that, without being out of balance. So this, out of everything, is the most powerful thing that allows, so to speak, equanimity in regard to eros, balance, and so forth. It's that balance of the tightrope of the middle way, which turns out, as I said, to be a whole beautiful playing field, a whole dance floor, rather than a thin, precarious tightrope balance.

So the seeing of the non-realism, together with everything that we talked about earlier—the other aspects, balancing them—but the seeing of the non-realist seeing allows more opening, more intensity if intensity is appropriate, if it feels appropriate to what's going on. It allows more trust and allows us to move and navigate and dance with all this.

I actually feel that that sense of the middle way, that sense of theater, is actually right there in the imaginal perception. In other words, I think it's intrinsic to her. And again, it's one of these things that we begin to notice. It's like, oh yeah, if you ask someone who's with an image and it's clearly alive for them as an image in an imaginal way, "Would you say it's real or not real?" and they say, "Well, actually, no, it has some other category. It's palpable image." This sense of theater is endemic, intrinsic to the imaginal experience. And that's why I wanted to include it in what I call soul-making or imaginal experience by definition. I feel it's intrinsic.

Okay, very last thing for now, and I realize it's a lot of information. Hopefully this will be useful to you for some time. Very last thing: with images in general and with imaginal practice, the way we're conceiving it, a lot is about my relationship with. Part of that relationship with means exactly what kinds of awareness and sensitivity and attunement I'm bringing to the engagement with the imaginal, to the erotic connection.

As we talked about, it's like being aware. What's the natural register of this image? What register of substantiality or insubstantiality does it want to exist in, to play out? I can play with that deliberately, but it might also be listening, attuning, sensitizing, respecting something.

With regard to sexual erotic imaginal—where it's clearly sexual and sometimes intensely sexual, or even, from a normal perspective, bizarrely sexual, whatever—you'll notice something else. Again, a lot of this is just stuff to notice, aspects to notice of imaginal experience. You'll notice that when we're entering into imaginal practice, and here's a sexual image, it doesn't tend to escalate in the way that, say, a non-imaginal sexual fantasy tends to escalate.

You're daydreaming and thinking about whatever, then this person appears, and you have a fantasy that tends to head in one particular direction. There's a kind of escalation, a movement toward a certain goal that plays out in the fantasy.

What characterizes images in general—and particularly sexual or erotic imaginal images—is that they are more iconic, more timeless. Rather than escalating with this narrative movement through time toward some grand finale of orgasm or climax, they tend to remain as one thing, something that stays relatively static in time. They don't have this goal orientation.

It's as if the image, when it's truly imaginal, becomes sufficient unto itself. It might depict sexual intercourse or any intimate act, but it tends to exist complete as it is. The image might simply be holding hands, or any other expression of connection, but it doesn't carry that escalatory, propelling movement

through time toward some goal. There's something iconic about it. This image in itself reveals theophany—it doesn't need to go anywhere else.

This is something we notice more and more as we begin to trust this quality in relation to sexual images, in relation to strongly erotic imaginal images, and in relation to imaginal experience generally.

Connected with all this is a larger point: in time, we begin to trust the imaginal soul-making process itself more and more. No matter how bizarre, strange, unusual, intense, or even understated an image may be, we develop an increasing sense that there is something bigger than us here. There's a movement bigger than us, an intelligence, an autonomy that extends beyond our individual will.

At the same time as we understand imaginal experience as dependent arising—shaped by our way of looking and the concepts we bring—there's something that, from a certain perspective, is bigger than us and worthy of our trust. We start to trust the imaginal, to trust soul-making, to trust where it leads us and what it brings us, including the beauty it reveals.

This trust also encompasses what appears to us as dark, weird, or bizarre. We've explored all of this territory before.

Thank you for listening.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.