Clinging, Craving, Eros (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 43:15

So, does anyone have anything? Ramiro, yes.

A very easy one.

Can you just remind me of the difference you established between craving and clinging?

Yeah, thank you. So can I just recap? I took somewhere or other and made a differentiation, a delineation between what we're calling craving and clinging. In a way, I'm making this up. I wish I was better at making words or whatever. So it's not necessarily the same as the distinction that you might be already familiar with.

Both clinging and craving are manifestations of desire, kinds of desire, along with eros. So you've got three kinds—eros, craving, clinging—at least.

Clinging, I'm just really referring to, is a quite generic term in a way. But really, what I want to say is that it has a huge range to it. I really mean any movement of body or mind towards or away from anything. So anytime we try and push something away from us—now that could be really that the mind is just "get it away from me, I hate this," or very, very subtle, there's no thought involved, it's just a kind of micro-energetic inclination of mind to push something away, or to pull something towards us, or pull ourselves towards a thing. So any kind of push-pull of the consciousness, something like that, is called clinging. And it has a huge, huge range.

You know when you're really in the grip of something, really, your whole mind is kind of rebelling or obsessed with that thing and the thinking is going round and round—that's a kind of intense, strong, gross version of clinging. The gross end of the spectrum. Down at the subtle end, you're really talking about micro-movements of push and pull. Sometimes there's no thinking involved. How do I know it? I see some kind of contraction in the being. It might be very subtly in the energy body. And it might be just actually in the space of the mind, the sense of the awareness kind of contracting a little bit.

At the really subtle end, clinging is involved in any perception. Not everyone in the Dharma would agree with that, but that's how I would present it. Actually, to experience anything in the world, there's some kind of clinging. There's Ramiro, and my mind is doing this a little bit. And that's a kind of grasping movement, just to have you in my attention for a moment. So any experience, in or out, there's some kind of subtle degree of clinging.

And we talk about—so that's a very subtle level of clinging, just that's involved in any perception.

Wrapped up in that, and also at the very subtle end, are things like: here I'm sitting, there's the sensation in the arm, sensation in the backside. Without thinking, the default, wrapped up in the default experience of that, these are my sensations. Of course, they're not your sensations. They're not Jill's sensations. So we have this appropriation in regard to any sensations as me or mine. And then we have even subtler, just the idea that it exists independently of the way of looking, that it has inherent existence. That's *avijjā*, the subtlest level of clinging.

So all that is clinging. Eros is a kind of clinging, in fact, and craving as well. Really the distinction is between craving and eros. The distinction I would make, or one of the distinctions I would make—actually, because there's probably quite a lot involved—is we just recognize that craving tends towards contraction. There's a contraction in the being, and there's a reification of something or other. So the view is contracted. It's a real thing that I want. Real me can get a real thing, or wants to get a real thing, or wants to push a real thing away. And with that, the being basically contracts in all kinds of ways. And this we can feel. It's palpable. So there's a kind of solidity and stuckness, reification, concretization, and dukkha involved.

Whereas eros, which wasn't in your question, tends to open things out. Because it gets involved in the soul-making dynamic—what we call this eros-psyche-logos business—it will tend towards opening things out, opening the being, opening the perception, opening the sense of things.

So you could look at these as two extremes, yes. Very nice.

If we tie this in with emptiness teachings, you could say something like: all perception involves fabrication. Perception is fabricated. Experience is fabricated. Clinging is part of what fabricates experience—some degree of clinging is always on that spectrum. Now, we can fabricate in a way that we call papañca. Do you know this word, papañca? Problematic, crazy-making, all that. That's fabrication in a kind of crazy-making, dukkha-making way. Eros and soul-making is a kind of fabrication, let's say, in a poetic way, in a magical way, in a beautiful way, in a soul-making way. But both are fabrication, as you put it. Very nice. It's kind of like that, if you like.

So you're asking: is clinging classified as an unwholesome factor in my view?

I've just done some other talks where I spent a long while on just this. In probably—I don't know if most or not—but certainly some traditions, and probably the ones that you're familiar with, clinging will be regarded as an unwholesome factor. It's wrapped up in the whole cycle of dependent origination leading to suffering.

Something really interesting happened with the emergence of the Mahāyāna tradition, because if there's this understanding that there needs to be clinging for perception to arise, then the question becomes: how does it work for a Buddha? How does it work for an arahant? And not only that, what kind of a Buddha is he who's just going to die and leave everyone suffering and not be able to be reborn back into the world of

perception?

So you could say—you could explain the Mahāyāna tradition, and I'm not saying this is the way to do it—but you could say that's part of what they were trying to answer. How does it all work? What is a Buddha? How does awakening function in relation to this understanding of dependent arising and the fabrication of perception? I don't particularly buy those kind of reductive historical models, but you could frame it that way. And then out of that came all this complex Mahāyāna philosophy, which is either horrific or beautiful to you, depending on your opinion.

So in my view—is what you asked—no, clinging is not unwholesome. Clinging is empty and can be used skillfully or not, beautifully or not, in the service of compassion, in the service of soul-making, or not. It's part of existence. Existence involves clinging. And that's part of what we dance with.

You know, we have this image of fire, and it's a double-edged sword, fire. You can get burned by fire. So it's like that. But fire gives us so much. It's something like that.

Then we have to kind of open up the understanding of: whoa, what are we doing with the Dharma here? Because I thought we were supposed to try and live without clinging somehow—as if that's even possible. I don't really think that's possible. Nor is it probably, I imagine, what anyone in this room actually wants.

I would just ask, maybe I should pose it as a question: if you envisage a life really free of clinging...

What is that? What does it look like? And is it what the being really wants? We can get back to that.

So Natalie's asking, in a similar way, is it possible to transform craving into something more useful? Yes, absolutely. Not necessarily easy all the time, but as you begin to discern more the difference, you find that eros can slip into craving without us sometimes even realizing what's happened. And craving can be transformed into eros, into something more open, more beautiful, more poetry-making, more soul-making.

The big question is how. I'll say two things for now. One is getting the energy body involved. There is this contraction that happens with craving. Here I am with this thing, whatever it is that I'm craving. If I begin to involve my whole body in the perception of that thing—this is a bit of a strange angle here, but one can see with one's whole body, let's say. Bringing the whole energy body into the relationship usually means opening it out from something that's a little bit more contracted. Do you see what I mean?

Everything that's involved in soul-making is involved together. So you might think it's a hopeless tangle when trying to understand things, but actually there's a gift in that, because it means you can wiggle any one bit and the other bits start jiggling. Do you understand? So, for instance, because the energy body tends to open in harmony, you can play with that, and it tends to open the soul-making. That's one thing.

Another thing is realism, concretization or not. Craving involves a real thing. I think this thing is real. I usually think I'm real. In a real world, in real time, all the rest of it. So sometimes what can happen is just

some way of loosening, liquefying that reality perception. This can happen in many ways. One is through a little bit of emptiness work. Another is actually by going more into the imaginary.

With this thing, you could say part of the problem with craving is that things have not gotten imaginal enough. This is completely opposite of what we've been taught and what we tend to think. Because the thing has no dimensionality—I just want that thing. I have no dimensionality. It's all so flat and so real and narrow. So it's almost like meditating more on whatever this thing is, whatever it could be, and letting it be more imaginal, letting it have its imaginal dimensions. Then the eros has something to move into, and it can do this eros-psyche dance. It can expand, and that transforms the whole thing. Does that make sense? So there are different ways with this real-not-real quality.

Those are two things for now. But I go back to this general principle that everything in soul-making, everything involved in soul-making, is almost like facets of the same thing. We think there's this and that, and there are all these pieces, but really, you can have so many different ways in that catalyze the process and support it. There can be a lot of creativity, and everything's connected there.

Does that make sense? Yeah?

Could a helpful question be, for example, if I feel some craving is happening, could I ask: What does it mean to me? Or what sense does it have? Or how does it speak to me?

Yes, absolutely. So as a bit like Natalie was asking: Is there a way, when I feel some craving, to loosen it up and help it perhaps move in the direction of soul-making? One way might be asking myself, "What meaning does this have for me?" What was the other phrase you used? "What sense do I have of it?" Yes, absolutely. Or "What is soul looking for?" Very good.

What I would add to that, similar to Linda's question yesterday, is that it might be that one answer to that ignites something, and that's all you need. But it might also be that one answer is too boxed in. So there's a kind of openness in asking. You won't necessarily get some final understanding: "I understand that now. I put it down to this, and this is what it is." Sometimes that will work, but sometimes you have to have more of an openness.

Connected with that sense of allowing openness is what I would call humility and reverence, these words I was talking about. And when you ask that last question—"What is soul wanting here?" or "looking for?"—then listen to that question. It puts the agency almost outside you, or bigger than you. You didn't say "my soul." You didn't say "What am I?" I mean, you could language it like that, but there's a sense of something bigger that I'm receptive to, that I'm humble in relationship to. Do you understand? That attitude is also part of soul-making. That's an aspect of soul-making. So again, you're igniting one piece there, and the whole thing can start to shift. Yeah, absolutely. Beautiful.

Yes, there's someone back there. What's your name, by the way? Thomas, yeah.

So I've been working with an image and noticing the tendency for the subjective pole to dissolve.

Dissolve how? Actually, I'm going to repeat it anyway, so just finish your question.

Okay, so working with emptiness practices, and particularly with the emptiness of self practices, there is an ease in that dissolution into space, and also working with ājīrṇa practices. As you've mentioned before, that has a tendency to somewhat dampen the eros sometimes when the subjective pole dissolves, and then there is an identification with what was previously objective. I'm going to sound too technical, I hope it's making sense. Which is beautiful, because there is an ease and a falling away of dukkha in that moment, because duality is somewhat softened into a not-duality. And then the question comes: to increase that dynamic, to add, to adduce this dynamic, or to increase the whole thing, the creative fabrication of a new self in relation to object? This is something I'm just playing with right now, and I'm a little bit lost—not lost in the sense of... but on the intentional creative fabrication.

Okay, so let's see if I can sum that up. Thomas is saying, if I understand correctly—correct me if I'm wrong—he has found it very fruitful recently exploring a kind of practice that, through some understanding of emptiness, particularly of the self, kind of dissolves the experience, particularly dissolves the sense of self to some degree. And then there's this lovely openness of less fabrication, essentially—less duality, less polarity. And this is really nice. And yet in that space, because there's not so much of the two-ness, there isn't so much of the eros. So the question is how to navigate there.

First thing: this sounds wonderful, great, fab. I would put everything that we're talking about on this retreat into a larger context, which relates to Romero's question about—how would you say—unskillful fabrication, what's called skillful or beautiful fabrication, soul-making fabrication, and then there's the path of non-fabrication. Do you understand? All of that is our playground. We tend to say, well, unskillful fabrication—we don't want to be playing there too much. But actually, I'll come back to that because we can qualify that. So you've basically got a choice as a practitioner.

You're gliding around. With time and with development, you can simply incline where you want to go. You might have periods where you're really drawn to the dissolving dimension—emptiness and the fabric of experience. That's great. Go for it. But at some point, and that might be now from your question, you might say, "Okay, that's all very nice. What else is there? What's possible?"

One of the things about emptiness practices is they can, if I go back to a phrase I think I used before, make everything liquid or water. There's that kind of looseness. Samādhi does it as well. Mettā does it as well. All the traditional practices in the Dharma are actually movements into non-fabrication, and part of what they do is they simply liquefy.

So sometimes you go into one of these states, whatever it is you're talking about, and then you just have to kind of back out a little bit, just a little bit. You take the intensity down slightly. It might be at that point that there's a bit more looseness and liquidity in the being, and in that space, images can arise. You can be

deliberate about it. What I want to say is: don't be afraid. Don't be afraid of old patterns coming back. Just view it as a playground and see what happens.

I don't want to foist this on you like a religion or a dogma, but I would venture to say that as this whole thing gets underway, we begin to have more of a sense of soul being something bigger than us, so to speak. And then we even get to a point where it's like, "My personal dukkha, my history, my patterns—these also are kind of lessons from soul." It might not be that I'm quite relating to them the right way or seeing them the right way, but even if you take that question and apply it to my patterns, this dukkha, there's something that starts to get re-enchanted. I start to see and experience my patterns in a more soul-making way, and then they take on other dimensions. Do you understand?

So if old patterns come back, no problem. What you want with this emptiness thing is just this facility to say, "Hey, it's fine if dukkha arises, if I get contracted." The whole thing gets very fluid—in and out of dukkha, in and out of contraction, in and out of reification, no problem. I'm not trying to live in some kind of state of dissolvement all the time.

Don't be so afraid of that. And in terms of other images of self coming up, you could play with a Vajrayāna deity, for instance, just identifying with that. You could take anything that has already become imaginal for you and just linger with that in the meditative imaginal practice.

I'm pretty sure I must have said this last night in the talk—I know there was a lot of information there. Sooner or later, the self pole of that whole constellation will start to come alive imaginatively. I'm not making that happen. I'm just dwelling with whatever has become alive for me as an object. It might be the world. It might be whatever it is. And then at some point I begin to notice—I expand my awareness, so to speak, metaphorically—and just check out: "Well, how am I sensing myself now? What's the image of self?" And you will, at some point, notice that the self has become imaginal. It's taken a different form, or the energy body has shifted, or the image of the body, or the whole picture. Do you understand?

You don't have to force this. It's more like you notice this stuff. You're kind of letting it happen and just gently inclining one way or another.

Joel, hi. We've not met before.

Johan, sorry, hi. Okay, sorry. Yeah, thank you, Johan.

So Johan's asking—we're talking about alchemy of desire. And is there an alchemy of anger? And an alchemy of confusion, or delusion even? Then you've got your three main Buddhist *kilesas*. And this could actually be one view of the tantric path: it's the transformation of the *kilesas*, that there's treasure in each. So absolutely, yes, no question about it.

The other thing I was going to say to Natalie as well, and this applies here too: when there's an emotion, when there's something like desire or like anger, there's a lot of psychic energy involved. It's just the way

we've got hold of it that takes it into the not-so-skillful. But part of playing with this kind of path that we're filling out now is this: let's just play with the idea that there's a treasure here, that there is an alchemy. You know, mercury in alchemy can transform things. So we're just playing with the idea that there's something potentially gold, potentially a treasure in there.

I would say, if you feel comfortable with it, let that anger be there. Feel it in the energy body. You're caring for it. And let it constellate an image. Does that make sense?

Well, the image that came to me is this young man. He's quite... It's hard for it to form an image, or it's hard for me to just sort of dwell on this aspect of that image without leaning into the unskillful anger.

What gives you the sense that it's unskillful?

Oh, I just feel like a contraction.

Oh, okay, yeah. Does an image—there's an image there?

Yeah.

Oh, okay. So the anger didn't start the image. The image had that in it.

Yeah. It has it as one of its aspects.

Yeah, yeah. Would it be possible to just play with the idea of trusting it? It's like, you know, sometimes in practice what you're doing is setting up a playground or a perimeter which is safe in that period. And kind of just seeing what happens if I trust. Because the presence or the absence of trust makes a big difference. What is he doing, this young man in the image?

I think it's just like, you know, metaphorically he wants to slam the door and leave.

Leave. Okay. Yeah, yeah. So it might be that it's not going directly through the anger first thing. This poet has become image for you, and he's probably quite a complex character. There's some mystery to him. It might be going through different aspects of this image, going through different other doorways rather than directly through the anger. That might be helpful.

When you're meditating with this, do you really feel like the energy body's involved?

You do.

And what happens? The energy body fills with anger?

Well, actually... yeah.

Now, is that charge—is that the way his body feels?

I don't quite know.

Okay. So that might be something to play with. It's almost like getting a sense of what his body feels like. Sometimes you can enter an image and become him. And that might actually do something to the feeling inside.

Jill is just sharing two images. One was looking out of the window from the meditation hall and perceiving a kind of corridor of light from the window into the nature. That came up later, and following it brought a sense of mystery and unfathomability.

The second one is actually something she wrote, and is a lovely piece about going through very difficult elements to reach this woman who recites this piece of her past as a soldier. Her lover was killed in battle, and she decides she's not going to wear that sort of armor anymore. She puts on the robes of the contemplative, and so she's become this hermit, this solitary, who receives visitors.

So that piece of writing might be something to revisit and play with imaginally. Does that feel right? Yes.

Yeah, I think what I would say about both of them is they're quite different, but both of them are, I think, potentially rich imaginal images for you. And what I would perhaps emphasize with both of them, particularly because you're quite new to this, is very much beginning with the energy body, actually sensing that corridor of light, that tunnel of light. What is the effect on your energy body? Or when you contemplate this figure and your relationship with her, what happens with the energy body? And very much keep, like we were saying earlier, that whole body sense of the relationship with the image, with the other, with the beloved, with that light, with that mystery.

Beginning there means that the play with the elements of the imaginal becomes a little easier. They somehow open naturally. So rather than just trying to pile on the meaningfulness or the dimensionality, sensing into how it affects the energy body, how it opens the energy body, what it does with the energy body really helps. And then it's actually like the image gives, it gifts new aspects, new qualities, new dimensionalities. You feel like you're kind of co-creating together rather than you trying to impose some kind of thinking on the image.

Both really valuable, and the range of imaginal practices is just huge. But both of them, absolutely, go for it. You recognize the imaginal not so much in what the kind of image is, but in what it does. How do I recognize imagination? It's soul-making. How do I recognize soul-making? By the emotion, by the meaningfulness, by the beauty, by the depth, by the dimensionality—by all these things.

So here could be a king and a wizard and a fairy and a dragon and all that, and one might say, "Oh, it's imaginal." But it could be completely not imaginal if it doesn't do anything. Or here's this room right now. Here's my hat—it could be an imaginal hat. It is, in fact, an imaginal hat. But it doesn't matter what it is or how weird or mythic it seems. It's not in the thing. It's in the relationship.

And so there's this—I almost feel like saying, I don't know. I don't know how to do it either. What this is, is an exploration. What happens if we bring mindfulness, sensitivity, curiosity, energy body awareness, this

sophistication and care around the questions about reality—what happens if we bring all this into this practice and see what unfolds? If you can have that kind of spirit, I think it's certainly better than asking me. I'm happy to help, but I don't view this as something I've figured out and am handing down. I view it for myself as an exploration. We are discovering, you are discovering, I'm discovering—not just images, but also how they work, and what the conceptual framework needs to be. To me that's beautiful. So you're absolutely on the right track.

We've talked about the ways you can work with these things. And sometimes an image informs my life, the directions I take, what I decide to do, what I manifest in the world. Sometimes much less so; it's not so obvious. And then eventually it will spread into the world so that the sense of the world itself begins to get more imaginal. That, for me, is where we're going. Some people will start there. But for many people, I think the intra-psychic imaginal starts expanding into the world of relationships, into the world of relationship with the self. That corridor of light could be—we talked about cosmopoiesis—the way that images start to spread through the world, into the world of nature. And that could be one of the doorways into that.

It seems to me we don't know. Sometimes images might be one-offs. They're just one-offs. But they're still somehow significant. They do something. They're part of the whole song. But the image never comes back, and we don't particularly feel called to draw it back. Other images might be around for years, and there's a real relationship there.

All I would add is that, like with a human being—if you think about a relationship with a human being—hopefully we don't just have a one-sided relationship, like "What can this imaginal figure do for me?" If we open up, if we play with that kind of way of entering into a relationship, where the image has a kind of autonomy and there's a two-way quality, then there's a fullness and multi-dimensionality. And yes, some relationships with images could go on for years. Absolutely.

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