Dukkha and Soulmaking (Part 4 - 'Mastering the Fire')

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Let's linger a little while longer on our larger theme, considering different facets of the soul-making movement or journey that may ask of us greater attention and awareness. What needs care? What aspects and facets need attention, inquiry, and respect? What requires modulation and responsiveness in order that soul-making opens up and not dukkha—so that the relationship with the imaginal, the sensing of soul, and the whole soul-making journey doesn't bring dukkha?

My hope and intention is to offer things that might be helpful by way of advice, but also to stimulate and open your own reflection on these issues and aspects—your own soul-making reflections, observations, experimentations, and considerations. I aim both to disseminate advice and to open up a field, drawing attention to it while inviting you to create and discover within that field regarding these facets I'm highlighting.

We ended the last part by speaking about Eros, pointing out the distinctions between Eros and craving. Craving contracts the being, does not bring soul-making, and brings dukkha. Eros, by contrast, has an opening characteristic. It stimulates and supports soul-making and does not in itself lead to more dukkha, generally speaking. We've explored these subtleties and details in other talks on previous retreats, so I won't delve into them extensively today.

Instead, I want to dwell on a few other aspects of desire, eros, craving, and that nexus—what we might call "mastering the fire." Some of you will remember an alchemical maxim from the Middle Ages that I've used in perhaps one or two talks: "One who masters the fire, masters the work." This referred to alchemy and the transubstantiation of existence—transforming the matter of existence into sacredness. The fire that heats the alchemical vessel must be mastered to master the work of alchemy.

If we use that metaphor of fire loosely for this collection of qualities—desire, eros, craving—what does it mean to master the fire? What might be involved in such mastery? Because if we master fire, then that fire does not create dukkha.

Fire, from the beginning of humanity's discovery or harnessing of it, has been recognized as both dangerous and incredibly helpful. It's very potent and dangerous if we have the wrong relationship to it, yet invaluable for heating, cooking, warmth, protection, and countless other purposes. Mastering the fire—using this alchemical metaphor—means being in right relationship with it so that the path of soul-making and practices of the imaginal don't lead to dukkha, but rather allow alchemy to happen in

soul-making. Where there's the alchemy of soul-making, there is generally the draining away of dukkha, the release and freedom from dukkha.

Let's examine this fire as metaphor, shorthand, or image for desire and the different kinds of desire, exploring how to cultivate careful relationship and discernment with them.

I was speaking recently with someone in an interview about this—someone who'd been practicing quite a long time. Because the Dharma she had encountered hadn't included the element of desire, what she had absorbed from teachings was more about putting aside desire, shunning it, regarding it only with suspicion, ignoring it, or trying to quell the fires of desire. She was beginning to be interested in the wisdom and potential of actually having greater discernment and flexibility in one's relationship with fire of different kinds. We discussed desire in the broadest ways and the need to discern between different kinds of desire, their operations at different times in our lives, and what they need—some of what's involved in the metaphor of mastering the fire.

We talked about the necessity to learn, probably gradually, to discern between different kinds of burning. First, cravings. Second, devotional yearning. Third, intelligent, responsive, practical desire. And fourth, eros.

With all these, the divisions are not always clear. They overlap, and we find ourselves in situations, mind states, and states of being that involve mixtures of these. Part of the alchemical work is the refining, purification, and modulation that comes once discernment is there.

Craving, we've said, brings contraction. How do I know?

I feel it in the body, and yes, you can feel it in the mind in different ways—a kind of gripping of obsessive thinking, certainly, and also a shrinking of the space of awareness. But I would draw attention to how, when there's craving, we feel a contraction in the energy body and a non-harmonizing of the energy body.

As well, we notice that the sense of self and the sense of other or object—they are both reified. Both self and other, subject and object, are reified by craving or in the experience of craving. So there is not that sense of what we call the imaginary middle way, nor is there the sense of the emptiness middle way. There is, too, we can notice, not a sense of the object having a kind of unfathomable depth, and nor the subject, nor the self.

So one of the things about craving—and its closing down and kind of drawing tight limits and solid limits around what it involves, or what it connects, if you like, or disconnects in a way—is that it circumscribes subject and object and time. Rather than these soft, elastic edges, and rather than the dimensionality and the unfathomability, the unfathomable depth that we sense within the erotic imaginal, in our sense of imaginal figure and the subject, the self, there is not that unfathomable depth with craving in object or subject or world or time. And as I said, craving brings dukkha with all this contraction, reification, circumscription—it flattens things.

If we contrast that with the second kind of desire that I mentioned in this fourfold, loosely structured scheme—devotional yearning—for many practices, it's going to be really important to recognize, "Oh, what is that?" If I just lump that experience, that movement of the soul, if I just lump that into a category called craving, or "that's just desire, that's no good, that leads to suffering," boy, am I missing out on something that's so beautiful, so rich an aspect of human being, a possibility of human being.

Yes, there is often a kind of bittersweet quality, a kind of poignancy to devotional yearning. We yearn for the divine, we yearn for the beloved other of the erotic imaginal. We yearn for that depth that's just beyond. There's something beautiful here, and we can recognize that beauty mixed in with the poignancy and the bittersweet quality of it. It also has a kind of poetic characteristic to it. Our yearning itself feels poetic—and that's also not quite the same as the theatrics aspect, but something like that. We feel in a poetic frame of being, a poetic mode of being, when that devotional yearning is pouring through our soul, kindled in our soul.

Is that dukkha? Well, you could say the bittersweetness, the poignancy, the yearning, the not-yet-ness—yes, I guess you could say there's a kind of dukkha, but it's a different kind of dukkha, isn't it? It's got that beauty, that richness, that poetry, the bittersweetness in it.

And again, if we talk about distinction with craving, there is the infinite, unfathomable depth of the beloved other, the object of my yearning. That infinite unfathomability and depth and dimensionality is discernible. The divinity also is discernible, whereas craving, as I said, it flattens, it contracts things. Things become just that—what I think they are. And they don't have this palpable, discernible, sensible sense of infinite and unfathomable depth.

So that's the poetry, the beauty, the bittersweetness, the richness, the poetic quality of soul at that point, of sensibility, the infinite, unfathomable depth, the dukkha that one isn't sure that one really would want to let go of. All this helps us to discern this kind of desire, this kind of fire burning in the soul—devotional yearning that comes and goes, visits the soul, is kindled in the soul, in the being at different times.

And then there's a third category we could call intelligent, responsive, practical desire. So for example, one is practicing samadhi, and even in jhana—yes, in jhana, it may not be a kind of mystical or divine experience in a particular jhana, say, whatever it is, first jhana, second jhana, maybe, may not be. And the desire itself doesn't have that kind of poetic poignancy, but it's just practical. It's just the desire, moment to moment, to sustain the particular pleasure that is the dominant feature of this or that jhana. So the piti in the first jhana, the sukha, the happiness and joy in the second jhana, the exquisite peacefulness of the third jhana.

Just the desire to sustain that, to permeate it, to permeate that through the body, to stabilize it. This desire is operating in a very kind of low-key way, as a kind of engine, as a kind of navigator, as a kind of director, moment to moment, of what one is doing—yes, doing—in the jhana. And it's really not a big deal. It's just kind of a part of the mind is just intelligently, practically, responsively—in other words, it's responding to

what's actually happening. I don't have to push at permeating anymore. I don't have to desire permeation anymore if the body is already permeated. It's just a gentle ticking over of desire that's directing the attention and the intention to sustain, let's say, the pervasion of sukha, the permeation of sukha in the whole energy body.

It's really not a big deal. I can't get too tight with it. I can't get too kind of manic with it. I can't get my knickers too much in a twist with it. It's just part of the art of jhana, part of the skill of jhana, and it's very kind of low-key—just an intelligent, responsive, practical desire. Just as a kind of equivalent from the world would be, I've got a meeting somewhere...

I have to go to that meeting—a dharma meeting, a teacher meeting, an interview, whatever it is, a soul-making meeting with a friend. I have a desire to get to that meeting. So I get in my car, get on my bike, and drive or cycle there. But I'm cycling responsibly, responding to what the conditions around me need. There's a car coming around the corner—slow down. The lane narrows—I have to wait for this car to go by. Now I'm going uphill, so I change gear. Now I'm going downhill, so I freewheel with maybe a little braking now and then.

There's intelligent, responsive, practical desire. It's not a big deal. It's just part of life, an everyday element of our lives most of the time. We cannot make an enemy out of this. We have to recognize when there's just that kind of desire. We need it. It's part of our life. We do it all the time, whether we think about it or not. It's part of meditation, part of everyday life, part of sustaining what's beautiful. And it's part of our path.

The fourth category we can contrast is eros, which opens the imaginable, stimulates and supports and fertilizes and catalyzes the soul-making dynamic of eros-psyche-logos, bringing with it the unfathomable infinite depth, also recognizable there. The theatrical quality, the unfathomability, the dimensionality, the divinity of the object.

Contrasting it with craving, the object does not have that unfathomable infinite—this is how we can discern. There's not the reification with eros, not the tight boundaries. There are more porous boundaries or soft, elastic edges. The beauty, the divinity, the meaningfulness, the energy body harmonization and alignment and openness, again in contradistinction to the experience of craving. All that—subject and object, self and body, erotic object, erotic other, beloved other—opened up in depth.

We can discern between these different kinds of desire. And that discernment is part of what we might call mastering the fire. I need to discern if I'm on the path—any path actually, but certainly the soul-making path—because then that distinction, particularly with eros, needs to get made.

I've mentioned some of the different ways that desire and opening to the current of desire actually releases dukkha. Where there is dukkha, rather than just letting go of the desire—which is a very viable option, a very sensible option at times—there's a real art of opening to the current desire and releasing

dukkha, dissolving dukkha, and discovering treasure right in the heart of the desire.

We've also mentioned how in desires, especially in deep desires, in deep longings, in our devotion, is the gift potentially of equanimity. Connecting with, fixing on, focusing on, feeling in one's body, meditating on, surrendering to, aligning oneself with one's deepest movements of desire and devotion—hanging on, grasping onto that desire with the body, with the whole being, with the heart, with the mind, with the energy body—how helpful that can be for rooting the being.

In that deeper rooting, there's equanimity, and thus not the dukkha that comes with being blown this way and that, knocked over this way, knocked over that way, blown off course, unstable, unsettled.

So sometimes hang on to your desire, hang on to your deep desires. Find ways of doing that in meditation with the body, with the heart, with the whole being. Really skillful teaching.

But in giving such a teaching, it also invites and requires a subtlety of awareness, a kind of questioning, a probing, an asking, a listening. So it's good to be aware: is this desire that I feel, that I'm opening to or aligning myself with, is it an open-ended desire or not? In other words, is it a desire that I hope at some point to fulfill, to then tick off—done that, achieved that? Or is it a desire that's more open-ended?

There's no real end to this. And that can be a problematically open-ended thing or an unproblematically open-ended desire—that desire to close, to go out, to reach an end, to be limited, to not have more territory to open, to create, to discover. So is this desire open-ended or not? And in what kinds of ways?

Also, to be aware or to investigate: any desire happens in what we could call a context or a field of conditions, inner and outer, that make that desire feasible or not. Certainly, the achievement of that desire, feasible or not, or even just moving in the direction of the desire, feasible or not. In other words, I need to be aware if I have this desire, and it's actually, for that desire's goal to materially manifest, impossible with this set of outer conditions, or with this set of inner conditions. Or I can't even move in that direction with this set of conditions. Or I'm actually in a field where there is that possibility. Or it may be possible if the conditions change. So in a way this is just common sense. But this is part of bringing some kind of awareness and common sense to desire.

Less perhaps obvious, and though in some ways perhaps even more important, is another aspect or set of conditions we need to be aware of. Often a desire that exists or moves in us or arises in us meets what we could call an internal pattern of habit with regard to desire. This, I think, is very interesting and very important in terms of one's psychological self-awareness.

So I might have, for example, a habit of feeling lack. I've talked about this when we discussed the beauty of desire and the opening to the current of desire practice. It may be that my tendency is to go into feeling the lack and not so much into feeling the desire and the potency of the desire. I get stuck a little bit in this feeling of lack. There may be, we could say, good reasons for that. It may be actually important to feel that. But that may also be a habit, an internal habit. That's what happens. The desire rises in an internal field of

a certain pattern or patternings. And one of them is this feeling of lack. That does something to the desire. It sends the desire in a certain way or dampens it in a certain way or blocks it in a certain way or convolutes it in a certain way. It ricochets off somewhere else.

Or a desire might arise in an internal habit field, if you like, or pattern field of expecting disappointment or expecting the frustration of this desire. Or it might arise in an internal habit field of disallowing or judging desire—again, for different reasons: cultural conditioning, education, spiritual education, family education, religious education, and so on.

Or their opposites, of course. I never feel a sense of lack. I just go straight into the desire, gunning myopically to get the thing that I want. I never expect to be disappointed or that my desire will be frustrated. I never question my desire. It's rarely "never" or "always," is it? But tendencies, habit patterns and tendencies, patterns of tendency.

These kinds of habit patterns, internal conditions around the desire, have a huge effect on what unfolds and whether the desire is felt or experienced as healing, as clarifying, as freeing, as empowering—as it may be, for instance, in that opening to the current of desire practice that we taught—or as dukkha in various ways. Desire can bring dukkha in lots of different ways, and it depends on what it interacts with, especially internally in the saṅkhāras, in the patterns of belief, thinking, assumption, tendency—all of that.

One other element to be aware of with one's desire if one is questioning whether this desire is worth opening to, whether this is something to hang onto: is the desire authentic or not authentic to my soul?

Often I have the sense that as human beings we can get caught up in desires that actually we don't really care about. Somehow we're putting a lot of energy chasing this and that, and actually we don't really care about them. I don't just mean consumerist movements of "I need this or whatever," but also spiritually. Sometimes, as a person, I really want to realize emptiness. That may not actually be, at this time in one's life, one's actual, authentic soul's desire. It may be that one has just got one's head full of "I need to realize emptiness, I need to realize the unfabricated," or whatever it is, because we've been exposed to certain teachings that emphasize it a lot, and certain people say this is the really important thing, and we're in a crowd that

People are really into that, and we pick up on that energy, getting swept along and pushed into a certain direction. It may not be authentic to our soul at that time.

It may be that when we think we want to realize this or have a deep insight or have that jhana experience or realize emptiness deeply, what's actually happening is the ego trying to measure up. I've touched on this in past talks, and I feel it's a really important possibility to be aware of. Is this authentic? In other words, is this desire coming from my soul, and will it be soul-making? Is it what I really authentically want? Authentic has to do with author and self—*auto*—yes, to me, to my soul right now.

I remember a conversation with someone, a very seasoned practitioner. She said to me as part of our discussion about Eros and desire and soul, "I'm not sure if I'm actually attracted to... if I actually long for the unfabricated and all that you talk about, Rob. When I look inside, I see that what I long for—I do long for the holy, I do long for a sense of sacredness—but I long for the holy embodied in this or that person and relationship." Then she asked, "Should I be more mature? I find myself not wanting this so much, but wanting that—this kind of holiness, not that kind of holiness. Should I be more mature?"

She was asking me, as her teacher, for my input. What felt important to say in that moment was to point out that the paradigm coming to us from the Buddha and the Pali Canon, from the Theravadan teachings, is a kind of paradigm filled with patriarchal assumptions and inclinations—or we might say, in quotation marks, typically masculine assumptions, movements, inclinations, priorities, and styles.

It's hard not to recognize—with all the caveats about language and boxes and gender—that the Pali Canon and the whole tradition emerging from it is really a patriarchal lineage, both in its power structures and its regard for women's inferiority and inability. This has been at the forefront of Theravadan Buddhist consciousness recently with the bhikkhunis. But it's also evident in the styles of being, the styles of aim, and the approaches to goal and desire.

The Rhinoceros Horn Sutta exemplifies this—a text where the Buddha extols and praises solitude and the solitary wanderer. Sangha is great, but the solitary wanderer is held as the highest ideal. Be solitary, be independent. The model of the Buddha himself represents a very—again, in quotation marks—typically masculine archetype. And there's this whole transcendent versus immanent thrust and priority.

As this person was saying in our interview, the holiness beyond in the transcendent unfabricated doesn't actually draw her. What draws her is holiness embodied in this or that person, in this or that relationship—a more immanent opening, thrust, movement, priority, and desire.

Do we have the courage and discernment and intelligence and openness to actually question some of the priorities that have come down to us through different spiritual traditions, teachers, and lineages? Can we recognize that while there may well be value in this or that teaching, we must ask what's authentic to our soul and what represents the partiality of this or that tradition, this or that lineage?

For some people, this questioning feels too scary or arrogant. One thinks, "How could I possibly do that?" Perhaps here again we need to expose ourselves to sangha. The image of the bold, solitary questioner represents one style. The image of inquiring together in relationship, hearing and listening to each other's heart and soul concerns, represents a different style of questioning—what we might call, in inverted commas, typically masculine or typically feminine approaches.

Please excuse that language. I hope you can understand what I'm getting at, though perhaps there are better ways to express it. What I'm really talking about is authenticity—authenticity to my soul, to my soul-making right now. Does this thing I'm setting my sights on, that I feel I have a desire for, is it

authentic to my soul right now? And does it bring soul-making, or is something else going on?

Another piece worth mentioning: when we talk about fire—fire is hot—and with Eros as well, and with opening to the current of desire practice, some of what we've been implicitly discussing is the ability to tolerate that much Eros, to tolerate that much desire, and to tolerate that much energy. This involves learning to handle it through how one skillfully responds to it, addresses it, and remains in relationship with it.

This tolerating of intensity is sometimes a necessity—more for some people than others, which I'll explore further as we continue.

But in this soul-making process, in the soul-making path, we need to develop the capacity to tolerate the intensity of eros, of libido, of energy in general at times. To forge soul requires heat. Yes, the ironmonger's forge is a furnace and part of the process is heat. It also involves cooling, doesn't it? You take the heated metal and then you cool it and then you bend it and you put it back in the fire. So involved, part of the mastering of the fire is the timing of the fire. When, when hot, how much heat, what kind of heat—which we'll get into, hopefully a little bit—and when to take it out of the heat. But at times, yes, red hot, white hot flame in the forge.

And so tolerating the capacity, the ability to tolerate intensity at times of energy, of eros, of desire, of libido in general, to forge soul, to create and discover soul and soul-making, to forge the sense of self, of other, object, world, eros that goes with soul-making.

So again, we've talked about this, I've talked quite a lot about this in different retreats, especially recently the Eros Unfettered and the Alchemy of Desire retreat of Hermits and Lovers, and the different things that can help in practice there.

But it's also worth pointing out, I think, that again, personality is a significant factor, as is habit, as is cultural conditioning. So, you know, I've been at parties or dinners or dinner parties, and you can see sometimes certain personalities, good friends actually, have a different relationship with intensity. Putting on a piece of music at a party—there's actually some John Coltrane who I mentioned the other day—and a good friend of mine said after a little while, "Can you put something else on? It's a bit intense." Or when a conversation gets kind of heated, not necessarily arguing, but just kind of full of intellectual passion or brilliance, and some people it's just a bit intense and they'd rather not. It's just not the habit or it's not okay in a certain situation or whatever.

And sometimes that's personality, and sometimes it's habit, and sometimes it's cultural conditioning, as I said. And sometimes we create a habit, or we create conditions that have an effect on the fire. So I mentioned years ago, just a little bit of alcohol—drink a bit of beer or a bit of wine every day. What happens to my fire, my fires? It dulls and dims my fire, it dulls my intensity, dampens all that. It makes soggy that alcohol, that liquid dampens, makes soggy my fire. And one can see that in others. You see the

fire, their intensity, and over time you see that go out of their life. They actually become kind of lacking fire because of their daily or regular habit of drinking even just a little bit of alcohol.

And then there's cultural conditioning and cultural inhibitions, depending on the situation or upbringing and all that, that affects how we relate or whether we can tolerate intensity. Because intensity isn't just something to tolerate, so to speak. But if I then have a voice of cultural conditioning saying, "This isn't okay," or "It's not good to be intense," or "It's not good to be intense in a social situation," or "Not good to be intense when you're..." whatever it is. Or "This kind of intensity is okay, that kind of intensity isn't." That's going to put another kind of pressure on the fire that makes it also hard to tolerate. Either we just smother the fire or it gets smothered, or we actually feel a kind of intolerable pressure and we can't tolerate the intensity.

And implicit in all that, what I've just said, is our capacity and ability to tolerate intensity, heat, fire, is also dependent, of course, on the logos that's going on at the moment. So, for example, if it's with an imaginal figure and there's the fire of eros there, then the logos that we have regarding imagination, regarding soul-making, regarding the kind of perceptions that we're calling sensing with soul, the logos we have regarding fire, eros, desire, et cetera—all that helps or hinders my capacity in the moment to tolerate this intensity.

In other words, as I said before, and I think in that talk "Logos in the Garden of Souls" on the Eros Unfettered retreat and other places, a logos, if it's the right logos, it really helps give stability and capacity, and it helps the soul-making. A logos that doesn't—that is suspicious of imagination, or suspicious of eros, or a logos that kind of makes the fire burn, builds a structure of wood, if you like, if we extend the metaphor, builds a structure of wood where it all just burns too quickly—not that helpful for tolerating.

So tolerating depends on logos. My capacity to tolerate intensity depends on the logos operating. And also, of course, on the images operating, the fantasies operating that are in play. So, for example, the self images operating, the images that go back to that party of Coltrane and of that kind of music, and the images also of intensity, the images, if we're talking on a dharma path, of, again, of oneself, of what a seeker is and feels like, what it means to be a seeker. Is a seeker someone with fire? What kind of fire? What's the image? What's the fantasy of that? Again, the fantasy of the self on the path. What's the fantasy of the path? What's the fantasy of the dharma? The fantasy of the tradition and other seekers that we might know. And the fantasy of that lineage and their relationship to all this.

all the fantasy, the image of intensity with respect to talking about ideas, like that's not okay to have that kind of intensity. For what reasons? All this will affect our capacity to tolerate intensity, tolerate heat.

So the logos and the image of all of fire and all of that, what we've said as possibilities there, outlined as possibilities.

Now I should say, with all this, we're talking about fire, and it may well have occurred to you already that

fire is an image. We're using it as a metaphor or an image and not as a clear concept. It's not a clear concept if I say, what is fire? I'm not exactly just translating it as desire. But that's okay. It's not a problem. But we could go into it as a concept and have a look at what's involved in fire.

What does fire include? So we've said and we've dwelt a little bit on eros, craving, desire, and differentiating between them. But fire includes that. Passion. Commitment, energetic arousal, intensity of focus, mental arousal, alertness, sensitivity, receptivity, penetratingness. All these, we could say, are included in what fire can mean.

We talk about someone's fire or my fire, your fire on the path or in relation to something. We really mean all this. Eros, craving, desire, the play of all this. Passion, commitment, energetic arousal, intensity of focus. As I said, mental aspects like alertness, sensitivity, receptivity, penetratingness, all that.

We can also say, in terms of what's involved in fire, what are the aspects of fire that we might need to be aware of in mastering the fire? I actually don't want to go into this too much, so I just want to throw some things out relatively briefly for you to reflect on, for you to consider in your awarenesses, in your investigations, experiments, explorations, conversations.

Talk about mastering the fire and use that as a loose metaphor, a loose image. What might be involved for me right now? What can I notice? What can I take care of? What can I perhaps modulate and respond to there? What are the elements involved?

So again, I'm not intending to be rigorous or complete or systematic here, but just to sprinkle some seeds for your process, for your creativity, for your discovery. I'm actually quite reluctant to be systematic here. Again, that reluctance is probably my personality style. Partly because there are, as I've said before, different soul styles. Different souls or different souls even at different stages in their life. The fire burns differently. It's a different kind of fire burning in that person. And that person, you can't really say it's more or less. It's just a different style of burning. This one rages and it's that colour. And that one's...

So there's different soul styles and soul styles need respecting. It's not for me, not for anyone to say, all fires should look like this. Your fire should look like this.

So as a teacher, what's my responsibility to a student in regards to their fire? And what's your responsibility as a practitioner in regards to your own fire? What is my soul style? What is your soul style, your fire style, or your fire style in relation to this or that aspect? And what actually needs some attention, needs some care, needs some mastery, some active responsiveness, some taking care, some change, some adaptation, some steering.

So again, there's this dialectic, this tightrope is too dramatic an analogy, but with all this.

So for example, emotionality is, we could say, an element or a character, a characteristic of fire. So sometimes it's characteristic of certain people's fire. It's like their style, their fire style, their soul style, is

very emotional, and less so with other people's fire. And again, it doesn't mean there's less fire, or it's a fire of less quality.

It's a fire of different quality.

So the question is, for example, here is the passion, and how much emotion is there in that passion? Passion can be very steady, very unremarkable and kind of undramatic looking to the outside eye and also to the inner sense of it. It hasn't got a lot of emotionality in it. And other people or other styles or the same person at a different time—the passion has a lot of emotion in it.

If there's emotionality in the fire, it has a characteristic of fire. Whatever emotionality is in the fire, it needs to be relatively fluid. That means not too rigid or frozen, either in fixed, repetitive patterns. "I always get really upset about this," and it gets locked into something in a way that's actually frozen, rigid, repetitive. This is just samsara. This is just this dukkha cycling around again. It's got a lot of emotion, it's got a lot of fire, but it's just a kind of samsaric prison—only certain emotions around certain things, and I'm just locked into that. Too much, too constrained, too small, too repetitive. The fire is frozen, in a way.

You get this, and this is just a side point, but you get this also with the range of a person's empathic warmth as well, if we talk about heat and fire. Sometimes a person can be very empathic with something where they agree with or understand or are familiar with a certain logos, and they have a certain view of why that person is suffering and that kind of suffering is justified according to a certain logos. The compassion flows, the fire flows, the warmth there, the compassion, the empathy flows very freely.

And when a person is describing a kind of suffering that doesn't quite fit into the remit, into the extent, the circle of the logos that that person has, then this person is suffering maybe just as much as the first person. But the listener has no empathy there because the logos, as I said, functions as a face, as a connecting point, a connecting strand of intimacy between people. Because the suffering that you're talking about, I just can't really understand it. Or I can't, in my worldview, my logos, my dharma view, whatever, it just doesn't make sense. And I can't therefore really empathize much. I can't really extend the warmth of the empathy and the compassion, that kind of tender fire there.

So there needs to be a certain fluidity to the emotionality, to the fire perhaps, to the way it burns. But not too much fluidity so that one is kind of emotionally disturbed and agitated about everything. Everything sets off my fire. I'm just on a hair trigger. Everything disturbs me. Everything agitates me. The fire is not—it's too undisciplined in a way. Too fluid. This little thing I get upset about or on fire about. And that little thing. And then this little thing. It's just flitting. The fire is flitting all over the place in a way that's not really harmonized, not really building anything, not really opening anything at all. Just one agitation after another.

So these elements, you can see again how they're related, how they overlap. Passion needs commitment, and commitment needs passion. We talk about a fire that's steady—that's the commitment element and

passion. I feel really passionate about this, and I look at my behavior, and it just doesn't play out in any kind of consistent dedication or devotion or commitment. But a commitment needs some kind of passion. It needs some kind of warmth and fire and ignition, sparkle.

And part of that is the fluidity, if you like, of the fire being neither too great nor too limited. And again, that has to do with the tension—the tension flitting from this thing and that thing. "Oh, that's got my fire now, that's got my fire now." There's a certain amount of harnessing that needs to happen for the fire to really be soul-making. But not too much, too tight, too small. And also of the emotionality.

So we could say the fire needs to sustain, it needs to not burn out or exhaust its fuel.

What does this mean as far as soul-making is concerned? As far as Eros is concerned, the fire must sustain, not burn out and not exhaust its fuel. What does it mean for our path, our paths?

It must burn, fire must burn, our fires must burn in ways that support the sustaining of something else. That is the path, our commitment, the necessary practices, study, preparation, questioning, struggle, hassle, purification, all that. The fire is in the service of sustaining something else. Fire must sustain, in our case soul-making, everything that's involved in that.

Fire itself is not soul-making, just as fire itself is neither helpful nor unhelpful. As I said, it can be dangerous, it can be extremely beneficial. Fire in itself is kind of neither this nor that. So fires in the service of something, we want it to burn in a way that it can actually support and serve, sustaining other aspects.

Because you get, you know, quick-burning fires. Or there's wood, there's kinds of wood that burn very quickly, and there's kinds of wood—and I think hardwoods, you know, they burn much slower. The flame is more steady. What does that have to do with patience, longing, devotion, yearning, Eros, and patience? This is one of the paramitas the Buddha talked about.

There are fires, there are woods or conditions of wood where the fire causes a lot of smoke—more smoke than fire. Or conditions of fuel where there's very little smoke. It's all fire. What might this mean? What might this mean when it comes to our fire and the possibilities of mastering the fire, or just discerning, discernment with regard to the fire, awareness, responsiveness, possible responsiveness?

So we could say, related to a lot of what we just said, discipline is necessary for a holy fire. Discipline is an interesting word. So I mean it in both senses of the word. So we've got this retreat coming up in a couple of months, tending the holy fire. And what do we need for a holy fire? For that metaphor, that image. Discipline is actually an ingredient, as well, perhaps, or some discipline, let's say. Because a lot of these things, there's kind of opposites, complements, paradoxes.

So discipline, I mean it in two senses of the word. The actual word has this—discipline is a teaching. A disciple is a pupil, is someone who studies. So discipline in a holy fire requires learning. I have to study in

the broader sense of what that means. I have to develop. And implicit in that is a stance, a poise, an attitude of humility. And that's necessary for a holy fire to burn within me, within my life, within my path, on my path.

And the second kind of meaning of discipline, some kind of steadiness or rigor or actually containment. So it's interesting. If you think about those religions or places or traditions that burn a kind of eternal holy fire—so there's that in synagogues in Judaism, there's that in the Parsi religion, I'll come back to the Parsi attitude to fire, or the Parsi teaching and ritual around fire in a little bit. Also, other places, the Olympic torch, I think under the Arc de Triomphe in Paris as well, where there's eternal fire—that eternal fire is contained.

So in other words, the fuel is brought to the fire in order that it keep going. And it's contained in a small space. And then compare that with a wildfire where the fire finds the fuel. It spreads to find the fuel.

Maybe the soul needs both. The soul needs us, needs a fire that's contained, and it also needs to spread. The soul-making dynamic, as I said, spreads. The vortex of Eros, Psyche, Logos spreads in different ways, into different domains. It's breaking the vessels. There's a wildfire.

So some discipline and some, whatever the opposite of discipline is, some wildness—I'll come back to that too. Perhaps the soul needs both, but discipline for now, let's dwell on that one, in both senses of a willingness to learn, an attitude, a poise, a relationship of learning, studying, developing, humility, and of, let's say, the rigor of containment that allows steadiness.

Our word, talking about containment now, our word focus actually comes from a Latin word which means hearth or fireplace. And so, you know, in this word focus, as in a hearth or a fireplace, it was where people gathered before there was electricity and before there was central heating and all that.

The family, the village or whatever, would gather around the hearth, the fireplace. That would be the focus—the focus of social life, the focus of spiritual life sometimes. This word focus has everything to do with fires burning, with mastery of fire. A gathering of energies. Like a magnifying glass that focuses the rays of light and energy intensely enough that something can actually ignite.

So listen to this with your soul. All of this is what we might call poetic metaphor. How will it translate? How might it translate? What might it mean for you? What might it give you to consider? There's something that needs, or that involves, a kind of gathering of energies, a kind of focusing in the way fires sometimes need to burn.

And there's also—back to this word focus and its meaning in Latin of hearth or fireplace—the fact that when a fire is burning in our soul, it brings to it, it gathers to it other qualities. Other beings gather. Beings gather around fire, the focus, the hearth, the fireplace. And soul—part of the alchemy of the fire in the soul is that it draws to it other aspects of soul. Images, imaginal figures are drawn to that fire. The divine is drawn to the soul's fire.

Actually, staying with this just a little longer, this business about focus and gathering energies: In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, many of you will know, in the English translations, often translated as—for example, a monk, a meditator dwells or abides, looking at or regarding or contemplating the body in the body, the feelings in the feelings, etc., ardent, alert and careful. And "ardent" is a very common translation. It directly translates the Pali word ātāpī, which itself translates as heat, as the heat from the sun, ātāpī, or the fire or burning of zeal. Again, you have—actually also in Latin, ardere, to burn.

So there's something about the Buddha's... we're talking about gathering the energies in a certain way, gathering the focus—mindful, sampajāno, fully alert, knowing what's happening, and satimā, careful, with mindful care, and ardent, with the fire gathered, focused, or with one's fire burning in relation to this, with zeal.

Of course, in that more Theravādan style of the Pali Canon, the combination of that description—mindful focus, ardent, alert, careful—repeats in the refrain throughout the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. Implicit in that combination, with the sampajāno clearly comprehending what's happening right now and carefulness with the ardency, with the burning zeal, the fire—implicit in that combination is a style of burning that is very focused, contained, we might even say restrained. The fire is restrained.

This is not a wild and ecstatic fire burning, as it might be in other traditions—say tantric traditions, or some tantric traditions, or Dionysian kinds of things. So there's fire there, it's a certain—if you like—image of the way a fire burns. It's much more contained, much more steady, but there's fire.

We could also point out that fire needs—I don't know what to call it—intelligence, perhaps. So sometimes what happens is we get into, as human beings, a kind of black and white thinking with regard to something. And that black and white thinking is coupled with and fueled by a certain reification and a certain clinging to some self-view. So that something that sounds perhaps really good is actually being fed by a kind of thinking that's not so fully explored or perhaps lacking a certain kind of intelligence.

So even like: "I must do a year retreat so I can realize emptiness. And then"—you know, implicitly, why?—"because then my problems will go away." And maybe even underneath that, if you ask why: "Well, maybe I'll be a better person then," or again, "I have proved my self-worth," measurement, etc. Again, we have this: Is it authentic? Is it authentic? Is it soul-making? But also, what's constructing a kind of black and white thinking and involving, pulling in a kind of reification, a self-view there, perhaps in a way that the fuel for that fire is going to make that fire burn not in a way that's really helpful.

Actually, if we stay again with this—go back to this containment analogy—then sometimes a person is kind of enamored with fieriness, or there's a kind of—to use words we used on a previous retreat—immature enchantment with fire or with passion. And so the fire tends to get itself always reified. We're talking about fire now; it's an image. And the relation with that image, when it's imaginal, can be loose and responsive and poetic, and not so clung to in a way that's unhelpful, not so with the tightness of craving and grasping.

But sometimes you see in a person's style some kind of tendency to almost always reify and concretize—to be enamored of passion and then to reify and concretize what fire is going to look like and to make it visible. It always needs to manifest, and perhaps again in a very sort of—through a very sort of black and white thinking: "My passion for this, my fire with regard to this manifests in this kind of total action," a very extreme kind of implementation or playing out or expression of something or choice.

I drop everything and I do that.

And of course sometimes that's part of a freedom—it's exactly the right thing to do, and there's some beauty in that, some radicality in the best sense. But partly it's more that there's this immature enchantment with fire, as I said, and with that, a rigid belief in what it looks like, a too-tight tendency and impulse to always concretize, wrapped up with this black and white thinking. If there's fire, fire is good, and passion is good, and if there isn't, I do this, and it's very radical and black and white.

Is it really necessary that there's that kind of black and white thinking or concretization, this total concretization of something? Is the image we have of fire and passion being reified and clung to in ways that are perhaps not that helpful and not necessarily that soul-making? Do they end up yielding interactions in the world or situations that are not soul-making because they're built, again, on some kind of reification, some kind of black and white thinking and attachment to self-view and attachment to a certain idea of fire and passion?

What would happen instead if the fire and the passion itself were allowed to become imaginal—properly imaginal, authentically imaginal, genuinely imaginal? This means lingering with the very sense of fire and the perception and the ideation of fire and passion, sensing its beauty, sensing its unfathomability, its dimensionality, its beyondnesses, its divinity. And in that, discerning what is the actual duty that's wrapped up in the beauty of this fire for me, of this sense of passion for me—not just plugging in an automatic, immature enchantment, black and white thinking, reification, solid self-view.

Then, if we can approach it more imaginatively, more maturely, our enchantment becomes mature enchantment, and we can have the beauty and the dimensionality of that imaginal fire. We can have action that is not burdened or injected with reification and identification in ways that make it problematic, that issue in something problematic or meet something problematic later on in the world.

In a way, we could say that's also a kind of containment—not just jumping into this immediate translation into immediate black and white interpretation, concretization of duty. The fire needs a little containment. Let's stare into that fire a little bit. Let's feel that fire. Let's meditate on that fire. Let it become imaginal and see what comes from that.

So sometimes we could say fire needs a bit more containment, or containment of a different kind, and sometimes it needs less containment. These are seeds for you to reflect on, to consider, to talk with each other about, to inquire into, to experiment with, to become aware of in practice.

We can talk about fire in different dimensions of our being. To feel fire and to allow the fire and to respond to the fire in or of the mind—the fire of attention, the fire of the intellect and the brilliance of that, the fire in thought, in conception. Or the fire of the heart. Does it need to be either in the mind or the heart? Or can we have both together? Why not?

The fire, as we said, includes empathy as a kind of fire, a kind of warmth—the fire of the heart's passion, the heart's being moved, the heart's longing. And fire in the body, so to speak. And then even in different parts or dimensions of the body: what does it mean, fire in the whole body? What's fire in the belly? What's fire in the loins? These are all directions or kinds of fire or elements of fire that we can explore.

I mentioned that the Parsi religion of ancient Persia actually came out of the Zoroastrian religion, or rather is the continuation of Zoroastrian religion. It was based in Persia many centuries ago. In that religion, Catherine told me about this, and I did a little research on it, they burn—they keep burning a holy fire, an eternal fire, as part of their ritual.

But to make a new fire and to consecrate a new fire and a new fire temple takes more than two and a half years. It's not just that you light a fire and then decide that it's holy. Again, listen with your soul. Listen to what it means for you and for us with regard to soul-making, with regard to passion, with regard to eros, with regard to path, with regard to ritual—all of that, both outer and inner.

So it's a big deal to consecrate a new fire, to consecrate a new fire temple. There are sixteen different kinds of fire that need to be brought and gathered together to consecrate a new fire. Each of those individual fires needs to be individually consecrated. This newly consecrated holy fire in the new temple needs to be ignited from sixteen different kinds of fire, each individually consecrated, brought together. One by one, they contribute to this newly consecrated fire.

Those sixteen—I'll read them to you if I can find them—are the fire used by a dyer, meaning someone who dyes wool or cloth or garments or material, in a pot, in a cauldron. The fire from a dyer. The fire from the house of a king or a ruler.

There's two. This is not in any particular order, by the way. The fire from a potter, someone who makes pottery with clay. The fire from a brickmaker.

How might each of these kinds of fires function as little images or imaginal seeds that might get translated and planted in the soul? This kind of fire, that kind of fire in the soul. I'll leave you with that if it's interesting to you or if you're attracted to it.

The fire from a potter, the fire from a brickmaker. They do different things in the culture, don't they? Someone who dyes cloth or wool or whatever. Someone who rules. Someone who makes pots and dishes and jugs. Someone who makes the bricks that build houses and buildings and temples.

The fire from an ascetic. The fire from a goldsmith—the fire that burns what is precious and makes of it

beautiful ornaments and decorations, beautiful things of great value. The fire from a mint, the fire that burns metal to make coins. The fire from an ironsmith—the fire that burns iron, heats iron in the same way to make different tools, different implements. The fire from an armourer, making very particular kinds of implements: shields and swords.

The fire from a baker, from the baker's oven—fire that makes the goodness of bread, the nourishment that comes from turning the earth and the wheat and the rye or spelt or whatever grains from the earth, helping that to become nourishment for us, wholesome nourishment. The fire from a brewer, someone who brews alcohol. That's interesting too, isn't it, if we connect that with Dionysus.

The fire from a soldier. Again, I've talked about nobility and the duty of the warrior image, the soldier—everything that goes into being a soldier in the best sense of the word, or at least the imaginal soldier. The fire from any house in the community—just the kind of ordinary hearth.

Those are fourteen so far. Then two fires that come not from humans, or not from living humans at least. One is the fire from the burning of a corpse, fire from the cremation pyre. And lastly, fire from lightning, from clouds.

So the first fourteen are all fires from different kinds of human and social interactions. This is one of the ways that, socially at least, we can say that the Zoroastrian community, in their sacredness, gathered together, pooled together the social cohesion, involved everyone.

But to me, it's more than that. Again, translating for us: it's not just me and my fire, but our eros, our fire, our soul-making ignites from others, with others, from the sangha, in the sangha, as we've pointed out.

But then these last two fires—the cremation fire is the fire from the dead, so there's a connection with the ancestors, fire from the beyond of this world, the beyond of human beings. Fire from the dead, the connection with death, and soul has a connection with death.

And then the fire from lightning—the fire from the heavens, from the sky, again another natural or non-human dimension.

So I offer that as something that perhaps for some of you will stimulate a kind of further reflection, thinking, poetic imagining into fire and kinds of fire—what might be involved and what might be necessary, what makes a fire soul-making, what allows and supports a fire to be soul-making.

A couple of things just to end. Having said all this and played a little with this metaphor of mastering the fire in the context of really saying: if our fire is not mastered, if it either just goes out or if it burns in a totally uncontrolled way, then there is dukkha. There are different ways that fire can create dukkha in the soul-making process, in the erotic-imaginal process, if we're not careful with it, if we're not attending to it, if there isn't enough mastery of the fire.

But in a way, I can't help but want to qualify all that and contextualize it by saying a couple more things.

One is that there has to be, at least in the way that I would conceive of the whole soul-making process and dynamic, a realization that we will never completely master soul's fire or fires.

So it's a good metaphor, it's a lovely image, an alchemical image, and it's really important in this consideration of how we actually have this vehicle of soul-making work well for us—deliver what it can, open what it can open, issue where it can issue. Mastering the fire is part of that.

But I have to say, again, complementing or in dialectical tension with what I've said: I don't think we will ever completely master soul's fires. And I'd say we wouldn't want to. The soul wouldn't want to master its own fires, if you like. The soul will always, as I've said, be and have more than me somehow, more than my sense of ego.

So again, to borrow that phrase from Jesus—sorry if I'm misquoting it—no one knows where the Holy Spirit bloweth. And he's making an analogy with the atmospheric wind of the earth. No one knows where that bloweth. It comes, it goes, it changes directions. We can't predict it. We receive it, we're pushed and pulled by it. We can do something with that push and pull, as sailors do, but no one really knows, and you can't predict where it bloweth—where the spirit bloweth, where the Holy Spirit bloweth.

And the soul's fire, like the Holy Spirit—and fire is also an image for Holy Spirit in many traditions—is not going to be completely predictable or completely controllable. I cannot ever completely arrive at final mastery of my soul's fire, and nor would I actually ever want to. There's the beauty of that beyondness, of something bigger than me, of the unpredictability of it as well.

So yes, at times it blows out of my control, or I don't quite know where it's blowing or why. At times it seems to blow out, and then at times it comes back. It re-emerges from the embers, from what seemed like the ashes. It doesn't seem to be always directed by me. From some perspective, it seems never to be directed by me. It's given to me by soul, as I said, and it's my job to harness it, to respond to it, to have some mastery in relationship to it.

We talked about, on previous retreats, the potential realization somewhere on the trajectory of soul-making that my desire, my eros, my will even, is actually rooted in or emanating from the divine eros, the divine desire, the divine will. This fire is not even my fire. Now that's a genuine—and I'd also say inevitable—soul-making perception that arises inevitably at a certain point, with a certain maturing of the whole soul-making movement. It arises at times, in and out, and then it's something that, with practice, we can deliberately tap into, that perspective.

I'm talking here about it needing to be an embodied, sensitive way of looking, a perspective. It's not just a kind of attractive idea—and actually a kind of convenient one, because then it's like, "Oh, any desire I have is good because it's God's desire, it's divine"—that kind of very immature, ego-serving appropriation of a perspective.

But there's this humility, and I would say beauty, mystery, and magnificence in realizing that yes, I can

reflect on and practice and attend to mastering the fire and my capacity and my ability with that, and tolerating, and everything that we've talked about and more. But I will never completely master the fire. There's always something—soul will always be bigger. Soul will always be greater. Soul will always be more powerful, in my book.

And on that note, related to that, again in the context—we've talked about how we can take care and attend and respond in imaginal practice, in sensing the soul, in the whole soul-making path, so that it doesn't create more dukkha or lock dukkha into place or exacerbate it. And so this is really important, this business about fire and exploring that metaphor and seeing what it means in my life, on my path, in my practices. But there's a sense where it's never going to be under my thumb completely. And thank God for that.

Donald Winnicott, the psychiatrist D.W. Winnicott, wrote somewhere, "We are poor indeed if we are only sane." Here's a man who devoted his life to psychiatry, to the support of sanity, if you will. And he wrote, "We are poor indeed if we are only sane."

There's always going to be some part where the fire rages out of control, some thread, some times. There's always going to be something Dionysian, some craziness, some insanity, some holy madness. I hope it's holy and not unholy. We are poor indeed if we are only sane. We could also say we are poor indeed if we are only safe—just to play a little bit with what he said.

So if the fire is always under my thumb, if I've always mastered it, if it's always under my control, if it's always just contained just so, then I'm always sane, I'm always safe, I have a feeling of always being safe. But maybe I'm not then receiving the full grace and gift and impetus and direction of soul and soul's desires, designs, and intentions for me.

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