Eros and Desire (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:09:02

So again, apologies—I didn't really have time to order these questions into some sort of logical thread. Let's see what we can do anyway.

The question begins: "Not strictly on topic, but I'd love to hear your thoughts at some point. You've both emphasized the importance of the two-ness. On many occasions prior to the retreat, an image of an adventurer or warrior or samurai would arise. There would be two-ness, but often at some point we would merge for a while. I would normally enter them, as it were, and then become very active—slashing, fighting, jumping—with lots of energy arising in my chest and through my body. At times I'd be fighting soldiers. We would then eventually unmerge. Any issues or concerns with this merging?"

No. It's always hard to find the words for the different elements of the teaching. There are at least two reasons why we go on and on about this two-ness business.

One aspect of what we call two-ness is really about the balance of attention when you're working with an image, but also in a dyad with another person. As we've touched on, as many of you know, what can often happen is that we're not very free or flexible within that dyad, within that balance of attention when there's two. This is particularly true in human relationships.

We haven't talked about it so much yet in the teachings—we haven't put this out there—but there's a whole body of teachings about practicing live in real time with someone else, becoming image for each other in the moment, with all the eros and sharing that, handling that very carefully in a very formal way with boundaries.

On this retreat, we haven't done much, if any, but the last couple of retreats, we were doing quite a few exercises where people were in groups of twos or threes, sharing in real time what was happening energetically, emotionally, and then also, if they wanted to, sharing an image—which might have been something that happened yesterday, an image that touched them deeply, or something that was actually present right then as they were speaking.

Part of the reason we harp on about this two-ness is that in those kinds of situations, it can be very tricky for us as human beings, in this culture especially, to be in that relationship, to be in that dyad or whatever it is, or with more people, in a way that's actually fertile, that's not closed down, that doesn't lose myself because I'm over there, or withdraw over here, or some other aspect of my experience just shuts down. It becomes inaccessible, short-circuited, something becomes hard.

One piece of what we're calling two-ness is about that skill in twos, or skill in relationship with other. And

one of the basic skills of that whole range of skills is just: can I have both my experience and the experience of the other? How fully can I enter into the openness of relationship and relational possibility there? It sounds really basic, but actually most of you know how difficult it is. You know what happens, especially when the person is looking at you, to be seen so directly, so intently, so upfront like that.

So that's one of the reasons we talk about two-ness, or rather what we're pointing to with two-ness and the practice of two-ness. But it's not really what the note's talking about.

The other reason is that eros needs two-ness. Eros involves what we might call an erotic tension. Some people define eros as the movement or the wish to merge, to unite, to become one. In the Western canonical tradition, that's a longstanding definition of what eros is. We're defining it somewhat differently, and it might all sound like nitpicking or quite subtle, but as I said, the differences in the realms that will open up are huge.

When we talk about eros, there is an attraction. There is some kind of movement towards, but the two-ness is retained. It's like two poles of a magnet that are attracted, but are somehow held apart. There's a tension there, and with that there's some discomfort. If the poles of the magnet collapse, you lose the tension. The physics analogy breaks down, but if you're in oneness, there are no poles of the eros. Do you understand?

What happens when there's merging and union is there's a dissolving, a dissolution, a fading of particulars. Everything merges into one something or other—whatever that one something or other is: one being with a capital B, one awareness, one love, one whatever. This is wonderful. Of course, in the range of mystical experience that's available to human beings, to taste that, to know that, to be comfortable with it, to dip in and out of that—priceless.

Most spiritual teachings will tend towards that, will point towards that and even raise it up as the highest possibility for a human being. I think what we want to say is that's great and wonderful, and we could talk a lot about that. You'll find many teachings about that that I've given and many other teachers have given. It's great, but there's a whole other avenue, a realm of possibilities that opens up when the two-ness is preserved and that erotic tension is preserved that would otherwise collapse or get dissolved in this oneness.

So when we come to that element of the imaginal, the two-ness...

I would also add the word particularity, or retaining particularities. So in this instance, the person, the meditator, is becoming the image. They think, "Well, where's the two-ness? I'm not two with the image. I've become the image. I've merged." This is not a problem at all, and it's quite a common way for images to arise. Rather than there being other, we enter them, or they enter us, and we become them.

What is still preserved, though, is particularity. It's not that in this instance the person enters this samurai or this warrior and then everything just goes blank. The samurai or the warrior still has particularities, is

still differentiable from the environment, from the other soldiers they're fighting. They probably have certain characteristics, look a certain way, feel a certain way, have a certain character. So it's really that particularity we're pointing to.

The actual locus of the self-sense when we're practicing imaginal work doesn't really matter. There are no issues at all with this. Perhaps if you find in your practice that it's always "I am becoming image" or "I am entering an image," or if it's always other, then you might deliberately want to experiment with whatever the complement to that is. You could try retaining the image as other and play with being more deliberate about that just to see what happens. Or the other way around—if it's always other, it might be interesting to enter the image and become the image, to see the world through the perspective and experience of that imaginal being.

There are little tricks to facilitate this. I was talking to someone earlier—if the image is other, is sort of over there, sometimes looking deeply into its eyes allows you to enter it. You enter through its eyes. It's a little trick. And sometimes, curiously, feeling into what the small of its back might feel like is another way that can put you in its body. Why that works, I have no idea, but these are just little technical approaches. The main point is, if you find it's always one or the other, it might be interesting to explore.

We also had a question where there was this self and other, but they could become two others for a third that is the witness of that. There are all kinds of possibilities, and they're all good. You should feel free to explore.

"Is there any sort of eros in imaginal practice to be wary of? I am thinking of an image I had this morning that became eros for the self by the image of the self, if that makes sense. Is there any risk that this could become vanity or narcissism?"

So, no. We're probably used to feeling nervous about all this material, particularly about the object—what the object is. It's my girlfriend's mother, so that's a bit weird. Or it's myself, so isn't that egotistical? Or it's something that seems insignificant—how can you have eros for something that most people would regard as completely inconsequential? It could be anything, a glass of water.

We're mostly used to getting nervous about the object, thinking "that object's okay, but that one's not." I would say any object can become problematic as an erotic object, and any object can be entirely unproblematic. It's not in the nature of the object itself.

Is there any risk that this could become vanity or narcissism?

This follows on from other questions we've had, right? We talked a bit about this, and I would say no. We tend to get nervous around certain objects being taboo. In the Christian tradition, to have Jesus as an object of eros was completely taboo for most of the mainstream, but there were contemplatives who were deep into that practice of having Jesus as an object. It wasn't taboo at all for them.

If we take this question and replace eros with metta as a parallel question, what would you say? When I started insight meditation, no one was practicing metta in the 80s. All kinds of people, including myself, had apocalyptic, thermonuclear explosive experiences that were really unhelpful, and that actually lasted quite a long time. I moved out of the scene for a while—lots of therapy, other practices. When I came back, metta was a mainstream thing as part of insight meditation. People had realized, "Oh, this is really important."

In teaching metta, what they'd also realized is how important metta to the self was in the West. At that time, when people were introducing metta to the self, people were saying, "Well, isn't that a bit dangerous? Aren't you going to get self-consumed and self-loving? That's not a very good thing." Just the same. It's exactly the same. We're just not used to thinking this way.

As I mentioned before, we have a fractured, confused, ill-educated relationship with the idea of self in our society, so that something like this feels dangerous. Something about recognizing the divinity of myself in my particularities, my necessity to God, my necessity to the divine—it's not just that I am one drop in an ocean of divine light, just like every other drop. That is true; that's great, that's wonderful to be able to know and explore. But to know this being in my particularities as divine, as angel, with all the eros there—it's just not a concept that is supported in the culture.

The problem is not in the object of eros, whatever that object is. The problem is potentially when—if we translate it into the elements of the imaginal, the nodes of the lattice—it's when those switch off, or some of those switch off, and eros becomes craving and the imaginal middle way disappears into some kind of reification. When there's no humility, when there's no open-endedness, when there are not loose and elastic edges—that would be the problem.

In other words, it's not the object, any object of eros that's potentially a problem. It's, if you like, the kind of eros we could say. Or it's what's with the eros, what's in the field, in the relationship of that eros. Does that make sense? It's really, really important.

You will doubt all this stuff. Believe me, lots of doubt will come up. But something that may help is just making a parallel question with metta. So no, there's no risk—well, or rather there is a risk, but it's not because the self is the object of eros and has become a beloved, a divine beloved other. It's that the eros shrinks or something gets reified.

Would you say that on some level, the imaginal practice could be seen as a method of inquiry or contemplation and/or a way of gradually sanctifying selves, worlds, cosmos, thinking of the alchemical vessel and contemplation in mystical Kabbalah?

I would absolutely say that the whole point—the whole main point for me of imaginal practice, above healing, above reclaiming one's sexuality, above all of that—is as a way of gradually sanctifying selves, worlds, cosmos. That's absolutely the point. Anything else is kind of secondary, I guess is what I would say.

I'm not quite sure what "a method of inquiry or contemplation" means specifically, but if that's good enough for now...

So absolutely, yes. That to me is the point. Of course sometimes the point can get lost because there's so much material and so much detail, and who knows what someone just glimpsing it from the outside might think. But to me that's absolutely the point—completely, one hundred percent. It may include lots of other good stuff on the way, but that's the main thing.

Lying out on the lawn earlier, my body and mind were full of knots and chaos and everything felt wrong. An image came of another me who was also my friend and also my lover. She picked up another different other me who was lying on some different grass in much the same state of unhappy contractions my physical self was feeling.

Now, I think I understand what's happening here. This person is lying on the grass, experiencing considerable difficulty. An image arises that appears to be herself, but this image is situated on a different piece of grass where another version of herself is lying, and the first image picks up this other version of herself.

She writes: "I'll call these two other me's—psyche—the landscape they were in as well." When we use certain words in this work, and I want to keep you on your toes here, many of them carry double meanings and are employed in different ways. The word *psyche*, for instance, we sometimes use interchangeably with *soul*, but we also use it to mean *image*. In this case, she's using *psyche* to refer to the image itself—two selves, both resembling her, along with the landscape they inhabit. That entire constellation forms the psyche, the image.

"The friend-lover me picked up the lying-down one tenderly, then threw her violently down onto some jagged rocks. She picked her up and threw her down repeatedly until every one of the thrown-down me's bones were shattered. I, the physical one lying on the Gaia House lawn, felt my energy body become the stage in which this all played out. So it was happening between them, those two other me's, but also to me and also inside of me."

This illustrates something crucial: it's not in the object itself. It's not in what the mind's first reaction to the object might be. The invitation is to hang out, to trust a little, to listen and feel and see what unfolds. If the mind jumps in too quickly—"Oh my goodness, now I'm going to start self-harming" or "I'm going psychotic" or "I'm splitting personalities—now there are three of me, one of them obviously a violent, raging psychopath and the other just a neurotic mess"—all of this is simply mind creating stories.

This is partly why we emphasize the energy body and sensitivity. When we speak of the nodes of soulmaking, one crucial node is that an image, an imaginal image, brings soulmaking. Partly implicit in this understanding is the invitation to bring all the sensitivity, as much delicacy and refinement of awareness as possible into being, into relationship. Because that's where you'll feel: Can I do this? Is this

right? Should I follow this? You feel it in the body, you feel it in the soulfulness, you feel it in exactly what this person is describing.

Our minds have been conditioned in countless ways, and much of this conditioning operates beneath the threshold of consciousness, working in subconscious patterns.

"As I watched the scene unfolding, the physical and energetic knots and chaos I'd arrived with loosened and calmed. The more violent it got, the calmer I felt, and my energy started flowing more freely. I loved it." She continues: "I love them and I breathe appreciation for them, and my breath became like bellows fanning the flames of the scene, keeping it alive."

If I may extrapolate here, this person intuitively discovered a way to practice what I was describing earlier about attunement and lingering. In this case, it emerged through feeling into the breath as bellows, entering into relationship with the image through this physical, intuitive response. Now, I wouldn't necessarily have offered this as a formulaic answer, but she found it organically, somatically. "Ah, this is part of the tuning. This is part of sustaining and lingering with what wants to emerge in soulmaking."

Who could have predicted such a response? Perhaps it works every time, perhaps it doesn't. But one remains opportunistic, with as much openness, sensitivity, and receptivity as possible—all facets of one's being present and aware, ready and willing to be both active and receptive. And then magic can happen.

"It felt very personal—like who they were and what they were doing was meant just for me. And it is, it was. And the gift of it made me nearly cry in appreciation. There was an intimacy between us, me and the image, such that when the lunch bell rang and I opened my eyes, I felt I was kissing a lover goodbye. However, the image has lingered. I emerged into this lunchtime-at-Gaia-House reality, but I have not left the image behind, or rather it has not left me."

It still feels very close, and I can see it every time I blink or close my eyes. It's like I'm walking in two worlds. The imaginal one is somehow affecting this one, leaking into it, so that Gaia House and the retreat and all my anxieties and preoccupations are smoothed around the edges through having the image beside me, inside me, all around me like this. Our love—mine with the image—blesses everything else. Can you say anything about walking in two worlds like this, interweaving this world with the imaginal?

Again, all the details are necessary, but this kind of experience is exactly what I would expect in time. You could say that this sense of parallel worlds or realms have mirrors of ourselves and of this world. There's just one level of world that we usually share. So that tree exists in all the worlds, but at different levels. There are different levels of worlds or planes of existence or realms. So I would absolutely expect this kind of thing. Often it doesn't happen until a little further on, but there's no real linear order in this.

Immediately, you can hear in the very idea, in the very concept, in the very sense of it—there's all this dimensionality. This world suddenly just has all this implicit dimension. What that does to the world, to the sense of self, to the sense of care and sacredness—it's beyond priceless.

That as an idea, you will find throughout mystical traditions. You'll find it in mystical Kabbalah. You'll find it in some Islamic mysticism, this idea of levels of worlds. You'll get it in Buddha Dharma as well—talk about other worlds, other realms of being, the deva realm, this realm, that realm, and so forth.

The person isn't asking if there's a danger, but no, there's no danger. There's absolutely no danger. There's nothing in here that at all hints of "get away from this world, this world is not worth it, I'm off to that world." There's no escapism at all. Nothing like that. Instead, it does something—it fills out the beauty, the dimensionality, the sacredness, the poetry, the love, the eros for this world.

I don't know what to say other than just trust it, feel its beauty. There will be eros for this, tremendous beauty here, and how much it's touched the being. Because we love eros and all of that, you're going to want to linger with that sense. Sometimes it will come up very vividly for a long period of time. Sometimes—there's a saying I can't remember now—but you can bring it up deliberately, or it's just a hint, just the echoes of that experience.

But those echoes, those little moments, affect our sense of this world. And we can bring that back deliberately, just for a moment or two. It could be anywhere—you could be sitting on a bus, wherever. It doesn't matter. It doesn't have to be a formal practice. Or it might just come by itself. But it's in the repetitions and those moments and those little tinctural exposures, and in the way we let them seep out—as in the note here, seeping out into the world.

So letting it seep out into the world, into the sense of self, into the sense of others, into the sense of not just the self right now, but also the narrative of my life. You understand? Remember, we're not shutting out narrative. We're not shutting out self in these practices. And what does it do when I then consider my death or the difficulty of my past or my problems or whatever, when I see it in the context of this multidimensional cosmos? Huge.

Another word we haven't used so much, but this would also be an example of cosmopoiesis in a way. There's an image, and that image begins, because of the way that it's working in the soul and in the psyche, to affect the self-sense. Obviously, there's an image there, so the image is already impregnated with soul. And then that seeps out into the very perception of the world.

When we talk about cosmopoiesis—poiesis is just a fancy Greek word for a kind of artistic creation, like poetry, like writing poetry. So poiesis. Cosmopoiesis means world-making, world-creating or world-discovering, cosmos-creating and discovering.

When an image becomes alive, sometimes it comes alive in a way that begins to spread into this world. The same world—with the trees outside, with lunch at 12:30 and dinner at 5:30, with everyone gathered here. Same world, yet also different world. This is cosmopoiesis. This world has been recreated through the power of the soul-making dynamic, through the tinctural power of that particular image. It spreads out into the land, into the grass, into the sky. Do you understand?

That's very, very beautiful. Thank you for sharing that. I'm not quite sure which to choose.

Can emptiness be imaginal? Yes. Does the person who wrote this want to say a bit more about their sense of what they might have been glimpsing or wondering about?

Karen is sharing that sometimes it's all a bit much to do imaginal practice—which is something we should have mentioned on that opening morning, but we said it this morning instead. Sometimes there's too much intensity, and we need balance. We could say imaginal practice is skillful fabricating, but what we want sometimes is skillful unfabricating. Samadhi practice, metta practice, emptiness practices—these are all unfabricating. They all quiet the perception, whether it's regular conventional perception or imaginal perception.

It's really important to move between these modes, in all kinds of ways. That movement can be very fluid, as we've touched on.

Sometimes Karen finds herself in imaginal practice, then goes to some kind of emptiness practice or contemplation, and finds at times that the emptiness itself becomes imaginal. There are actually many ways this can happen.

Let me share something from an interview, if you don't mind. I remember we were working with one of your particular figural images, and then it faded and there was just emptiness. There was a lot of bliss with that, and you dissolved into it—it was lovely. I said that was wonderful, and then mentioned there's another option: not to let yourself dissolve so much, but to step back a little and see the self in relationship with this emptiness.

By doing that, it's possible for a relationship to emerge between the emptiness and the self. The emptiness starts to feel like it's gaining personhood in a way, being in relationship to the self. The self too becomes an imaginal self. Does this make sense?

So that's a possibility—you're steering between pure emptiness practice and the quieting of fabrication back into something more imaginal. It's not better or worse, again, but I would consider things like: does it always tend toward that dissolution and dissolving bliss? If so, it might be good to explore something different. If it happens by itself, that's fine. If it always keeps happening that the emptiness fills with content, then I might think about how to keep it as a purer emptiness practice and go deeper with that.

The sense of emptiness itself becomes an object. If you love emptiness, it becomes a beloved object. Then there's a way of having an erotic relationship with that. If you preserve the self-sense a little—the twoness between them, the separateness—then that kind of thing becomes possible. All kinds of things can ensue from that.

So Karen is asking: is that a legitimate way to deliberately enter imaginal practice—via some kind of emptiness or quieting of fabrication? Absolutely. You'll find that in classical Buddhist Tantra, this is

exactly how it's taught. You do the emptiness first, then you do your visualizations or deity yoga. We're a little more fluid in our approach, but it's definitely possible.

So any of those practices, because they fabricate less, they tend to loosen things. Now, if I go too deep, everything goes quiet—the imaginative faculty, everything, all perception will just go quiet. So it depends. Sometimes you can go deep and then come out. Sometimes you can go just a little bit if your intention is to do more imaginal work. But yes, that quietening loosens things, makes them more fluid. I used to use this phrase: "don't proceed until everything has become liquid"—it's an alchemical maxim. And emptiness will do that, but so will samadhi and so will metta. So you dip in and it loosens things, and then in that looseness, something can arise. So it's totally valid.

There's one more possibility I should mention. For many people who love the path and love practice and love Buddha Dharma and love the promise of emptiness and the teachings of emptiness—even when they don't fully understand it or love whatever glimpses they have—when they start to practice with emptiness or even aspire to practice to some degree with emptiness, emptiness or the unfabricated becomes an object of eros. "I want that. I want to know it. I want to move towards it." And one loves it. So emptiness itself, or the idea of emptiness or the unfabricated, becomes an erotic, imaginal object.

But again, with that, what else will happen? The self will get involved, because it's not just object—it's not just other, but self as well. So the self as practitioner, as one who aspires, as one who's moving towards that realization or that mystical knowing, as one who is supported by, borne along, nourished by the truth—that self, and even the tradition, all this starts to become imaginal. We're talking about fantasies of the path and that sort of thing. Does that make sense? So that's another way emptiness can become imaginal, in a more comprehensive way.

A participant asks: "I have a technical, practical, and pedagogical question about the distinction between erotic or soulful desire and craving. In my own practice and the work I do with others, I find universally that both flowers share the same root. So both erotic desire and craving share the same root—it just needs trusting and following back down the stem, or the onion needs a few layers peeled, to mix metaphors. The sacred jewel is always there either way. So my question is: in practice, what is the scope of usefulness or effectiveness of this distinction between eros and craving?

"Two things I see are: one, labeling a desire as craving raises a flag that signals attention needs to be paid to the subjective pole—has it collapsed and tightened around the object? How is the integrity of the energy body? And two, if that way of working is beyond the abilities of the practitioner in that moment, then a new object should be chosen. Or is that too binary? Any clarification is much appreciated."

I think for simplicity, I'd agree—they have the same stem. So craving and eros may well share the same stem. They're stimulated by the same movement. We could actually make a very fundamental postulate and say the soul loves soul-making. It sounds simple, but actually a tremendous amount follows just from that. So the soul loves soul-making, and eros is a part of soul-making. The soul has a natural inclination

and movement toward soul-making and toward eros, toward impregnating things with its eros so that they can bloom, so that psyche can bloom, so that logos can get stretched—all of that.

You could put that as more fundamental than—just playing with ideas here—attachment theory or evolutionary theory about what's operating in a human being. I'm not going to argue about realities, but it might be quite interesting to actually place this as really fundamental: This is what souls want. And then what follows from that? What does it imply for developmental psychology, which operates from a very different set of assumptions?

But yes, for now, for simplicity, we could say the root is the same. What happens is we cannot sustain that—basically because of all kinds of reasons, but often because we're not taught how. We're indoctrinated in a way where we don't have these words. We don't have a word for eros; we just have words for craving or whatever. There are all kinds of taboos, all kinds of ideas about what's real and not real, limits on this or that.

So it actually becomes very, very hard for many reasons to allow the soul its love of soul-making and allow it to flourish—all kinds of ideas or energetic habits of constriction or short-circuiting or collapsing or non-attention or non-care. It takes so much. So many conditions need to be there to actually allow this soul love of soul-making to blossom into soul-making. But when it doesn't, we could say that one of the things that happens is it becomes craving—the eros becomes craving.

Now, where I would maybe expand a little on what this person has written: "Labeling a desire as craving raises a flag that signals attention needs to be paid to the subjective pole"—in other words, over here. "Has it collapsed and tightened around the object? How is the integrity of the energy body?"

I would probably point back to all of the elements. Particularly reification, and some of the ones that are more about the object as well. In a way, there's not really a difference, but it could be anything—anything at all in that sense.

But yes, a good working assumption, even if we take away the assumption that they're coming from the same root—and some people might think, "Oh, that's a bit much for me." I'm happy with it, but some people might find it a bit much—practically speaking, most if not all craving can turn into eros and be helped to become eros and open out into everything. And most eros can quite easily collapse into craving.

So the question as a practitioner becomes: Am I on the lookout for that? Do I recognize when that kind of thing happens? And do I have some things that I can do? One thing might be that all the elements of the lattice might be relevant—any of them.

Another thing—and I've said this before, but it feels important and relevant, so I'll say it again—relates to what we were talking about earlier in this session. Here's the beloved other, and there may be an enormous amount of eros there. So easily, all my attention and devotion and eros goes towards the other. And I unwittingly am not allowing the self-sense to be caught up in the soul-making process and not

allowing the self itself to become an object of eros.

I think of this as a bit like some kind of circular tray or fountain. The eros is all flowing over there—the water is flowing all over there. If it's just flowing over there, it's going to tip the balance of this tray. It's precarious because it's all about the object.

If I allow—and to some people it doesn't even occur to them that actually the self can also be seen as divine—I'm so taken by the divinity of that beloved object. But if I can allow, and this may take some work, it may just be a matter of including the self in the awareness and remembering to do that—if I can allow the self to be caught up in the soul-making, in the imaginal, and actually allow the self to become an erotic beloved as well as the object at the same time, then what happens to this tray or fountain is the water is flowing on both sides and it's more balanced. It doesn't capsize.

Then if we extend that also—and this relates to some of the questions from before—if I allow it, it will also spread to the world. If there's eros for some beloved other, the self will also become—I recognize the divinity and dimensionality of self, the self becomes erotically beloved to me. And not with all images and not always immediately, but then that can also—I go out of the meditation, I open my eyes and just hang out there. How does the world look now when you've had a particularly beautiful or touching image? Check out the sense of self and the sense of world.

When you walk out into the garden after such a meditation, how does the world seem? This is another way in which this water actually wants to spread in all directions, and the fountain tray becomes much more balanced. Do you understand the point I'm making here?

One more element that can become caught up - and should eventually become caught up - in the erotic soul-making process is the eros itself. Self, other, world, and then also the elements of the self, including the eros.

So at some point, all this eros - whose eros is it? One looks through the soul-making lenses, through the imaginal lenses, and sees it was my eros, of course. But it's also divine. It's as if I'm somehow - I don't know what words we could use - the channel of God's eros, the divine eros, the eros of Buddha nature manifesting through me. And the eros itself, my eros, becomes erotic for me. Do you understand? All this is helping that fountain tray to become more rich, more full, more balanced, able to tolerate more flow and become larger.

But regarding the second point here - there are people I've worked with or known who ask me, "I want to do imaginal practice," and my sense is that they're just not ready. There may be mental health issues or all kinds of things, or a person simply isn't ready. Like when someone asks about practicing with someone as an imaginal erotic other - sometimes the person doesn't have the practice wherewithal to do this. It keeps getting rarefied and they have no sense of something that's not rarefied. Or they don't really have their energy body, or they can't tolerate much emotion. In such cases, it's probably not a good idea to try this

practice. Perhaps another object would be better if one is attempting this work.

Catherine spoke about relating to one's own body as the beloved and an object of eros as part of the energy body practice. Could you say more about the fullness of this practice?

I'd probably want to hear more about what's prompting the question. Does the person want to elaborate?

When using the body as beloved, some of the nodes didn't really feel like they came alive. This will always happen with any object - there's really a spectrum when we talk about fully imaginal and not, and sometimes you don't want to get too hung up about that.

What I was thinking when I received this note was something I said the other day: sometimes what galvanizes and empowers imaginal practice is that we're dealing with something that really matters to us. If I just choose an object and think, "Oh well, I'll choose that. That's interesting. Let's see what happens," it might be that in that moment of relating to it, it's actually a fairly neutral object. You can do things and it becomes somewhat imaginal, but there's not a kind of soul need at that point for it to become fully imaginal.

So often, again, we go back to dukkha and soul-making. When there's some kind of pain - either physical pain or painful relationship with the body, whether it's about dying or ugliness or whatever it is - then there's enough in the crucible. And we still have to make it crucible-like, but I have to really feel the pain of the issue. Or it might be the other thing - that I'm suddenly struck by the miracle of body and gratitude to my body. Again, there's enough charge to start with to galvanize a process, and then there's more likelihood that the nodes fill out that way.

I'm not sure what else to suggest, but is that okay for now?

I've been trying to find a female representation of the qualities that eros stands for. To have a female archetype, goddess, or whatever figure would feel very empowering. Do you know of any female manifestations of this desire, longing, passion?

I can't think of anything straight away, but there's Aphrodite in the Western canon. There are all kinds of goddesses if you look in actual tantra. Ragarati is a goddess of the Guhyasamaja tantra, and raga means desire or lust.

Jung introduced and popularized the concept of archetype, but for him, an archetype was not a form. Aphrodite is not an archetype, nor are Tara or Quan Yin. They are not archetypes themselves. An archetype is a forming principle—it has no form of its own, but it shapes and influences this or that, including human beings. It's like a program, though that word is too narrow. It's more a style of forming, an intelligence that forms things in certain ways.

What this means is that as we look around the world—going to movies, reading novels, walking down the street, meeting friends or teachers—we see people manifesting certain archetypes. They're probably

manifesting a mixture of archetypes. But it may be just as powerful and transformative to start tuning into this directly. This person, that movie star, that character in a novel speaks to me in a particular way. They embody and manifest something that attracts me. We can follow that attraction: what am I attracted to? I'm attracted to the divinity, the goddess or god energy coming through them.

This approach follows your own attraction. There are certainly figures you could choose—I'm not sure what else to say about that at this point. Often these things are more powerful when they come either as spontaneous images for ourselves, which will have more power than someone like Tara or Ragarati, or when we see them in someone else. We start to really appreciate how that person moves, something in their being that emanates and communicates something that touches us.

Again, it might be outside the box of our usual sensibilities and conventional acceptabilities. We have to be alert for what doesn't quite fit. For something to come up spontaneously, there may need to be a certain amount of emotion—even wish for that to happen, distress that it's not happening, or frustration. All those kinds of emotions can sometimes function as generators.

You could try both approaches. There may well be figures available—the Guhyasamaja Tantra has Ragarati.

*Student**: The word eros has a lot of masculine connotations and it makes it hard for me to integrate it into my being and relate to it.

Is there a word you prefer? Do you want to try a Sanskrit or Pali word? Like raga? Ragarati, this goddess, embodies raga.

It may be that the word is important. But it may be less about the word and more about getting glimpses and trusting what glimpses you have. Even if it feels like some of what you're feeling surely isn't what we're talking about—that's fine. I return to what I said about trusting. Just get a process going by trusting. You'll increasingly differentiate in your own time between the different kinds of desire or whatever we want to call them. But you'll know it more from the inside, from those glimpses.

You might look around at women who seem to embody or express something that attracts you, something that you feel has that quality.

I think we probably need to stop—it's almost ten to six.

That's fine. I return to what I said about trusting—simply getting a process going through trust. You'll gradually differentiate more and more in your own time between the different kinds of desire, or whatever we choose to call them. But you'll know this more from the inside, through those glimpses, and proceed in that way.

It might be that you look around you—in this case, at women who seem to embody or express something that attracts you, something you feel has that quality. Maybe.

I think we probably need to stop now, as it's almost ten to six. I'm sorry I didn't get to all the questions here. Should we have a bit of quiet at the end?

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