

## **Dilemmas and Delineations: How did we get *here*?! (Part 2)**

### **Eros Unfettered – Opening the Dharma of Desire**

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If we just briefly sum up: why eros? Why make this delineation? Well, yes, because it's part of our life already, as should become more and more really evident. There's eros involved in our relationship with the path and with awakening. To different degrees, eros is involved in our relationship with the path and awakening and the notion of awakening. Therefore, eros needs to be investigated there, because it's part of my path, because it's involved in my relationship with it. It's certainly part of imaginal practice. Eros is certainly part of imaginal practice. And, as I said, eros involves and leads to soulmaking, and widening of the senses of sacredness beyond just the 'is-ness' of things, and even beyond the transcendence that's possible for us, for consciousness, transcendence in oneness or the Unfabricated. And opening up sacredness wider than a kind of universal sacredness. We've talked about this on other retreats, and we'll go into this on this retreat. There's a kind of universal sacredness, and then there's particular sacredness, theophanies, that preserve particularities.

I'm just recapping here. There's also the making the link between sexuality and sacredness, that sexuality and eros are not just defilements. We want a path that has more than nothing to say, or very little to say, about sexuality and about romantic love, that recognizes there's more involved, certainly than procreation, and also than *mettā*.

Before I venture a first definition/delineation of eros, I want to say a few things, three or four things generally about this definition, but also about making definitions and delineations in general. So firstly (and it's implicit in what I've been saying, I think, already), people use the word eros – if they use it at all in psychological or other contexts – in many different ways, and over the millennia, in fact, it's been used to mean many different things. There's a range in how people use it. It's important to be aware of that. We are certainly not saying we have the right definition and everyone else is wrong; that would be utterly ridiculous. It's really not about right or wrong. It's more, for me, about what does *this* way of defining eros lead to? Different ways of defining eros unfold in different directions, if you like.

The way we're defining eros sits within a certain conceptual framework of other things that I've mentioned, and a whole set of teachings. So what does that whole set move towards, and how does this notion of eros – how is it supported by that other set, and how does it support that other whole conceptual framework? Really not about right or wrong or arguing with people, but it's important to say this is just one among many possible ways. The way I'm going to define it in a minute is one among many possible ways. The way we're going to define it over this retreat, actually, is one among many possible ways. But it's also a delineation that's based on, if you like, a phenomenological approach, meaning just the observation of experience and what's actually happening in experience. But that observation is already informed and based on certain directions in practice to do with understandings of emptiness, and also imaginal practice and notions of soulmaking. Phenomenological observation is always informed by a conceptual framework. But the definitions we're using are based on, really, what is observed in experience in that territory.

So, not about right or wrong. That's the first thing. But what's it serving? And how can we define it

in a way that serves our purposes? Second thing is a more general thing about definitions and delineations in general. It has to do with something that philosophers call the ‘hermeneutic circle.’ ‘Hermeneutics’ is a word that basically means ‘interpretation.’ It emerged as a word in terms of the study of sacred texts and descriptions of what does it actually mean, this text; how should we interpret when the Buddha said *this*, or in some tantric texts it says *that*, or actually the Bible or whatever. So it has to do with parts and wholes, in a way. If I’m looking at a text, or if I have this concept of eros, it’s one part within a much larger whole. So this word that I want to interpret in the text, the word is part of a much larger group of words that make up the text, and the text itself is part of a much larger, probably, group of texts, or stream of tradition, or historical context or whatever. And I can’t fully understand the part unless I understand the whole.

So in this case, we can’t actually take eros on its own and sort of understand *that* without understanding the other parts of a bigger whole of what we’re calling this integrated vision of practice, integrated conceptual framework or architecture of practice that involves imaginal practices, soulmaking. I can’t really take it on its own, eros, separate from those, and hope to understand it. But similarly, the conundrum of the hermeneutic circle is [that] I can’t understand the whole until I understand the particular parts. So I certainly won’t understand the whole text unless I understand the individual words within it, and I won’t even understand this text unless I see and have a bigger understanding of the tradition and the group of texts that it involves. This applies, actually, to everything. It even applies to our understanding of mindfulness. Mindfulness, to understand or to move closer, if you like, to an understanding of what the Buddha meant, we actually need to understand the whole of the path and the whole of his Dharma, because mindfulness is situated within that Dharma, and its meaning, and its directions, and what it draws on, and the assumptions and all of that, has a place, has a context. I can’t really understand mindfulness until I’ve understood the whole of the Dharma, if you like, and what the Buddha shaped with that and opened with that.

Similarly, I can’t really understand the whole of the Dharma unless I understand the individual elements of it. It’s the same here in relation to eros. Eros is, as I said, tied in with a whole other web of concepts, and to take it out on its own and try and define it is actually not really, strictly speaking, possible. It’s still helpful, and that’s what I’m going to do as a start, but it’s tied in with other notions, ideas, concepts, and experiences. Everything that I say so far, all these words that I’ve just sometimes thrown out without fully explaining, it will all get elaborated over the retreat. Because of this problem with the hermeneutic circle, what’s called the hermeneutic circle, because of this contextualization and relationship, and the place that something like eros takes within a larger set and framework of ideas and experiences, etc., it means that we’re going to have to move back and forth between a sort of small vision, big vision, and tie things together. So really, we’re going to elaborate what eros means over quite a long time, and ask for your patience with that, but it’s kind of necessary. That will give us a much richer, deeper, fuller understanding that’s actually much more helpful.

[10:14] The third thing about definition, in relation to eros specifically, is that Eros classically is a god, a divinity, and divinities are by their nature not fully fathomable, not fully capturable in concept. They have some kind of infinitude to them, and so they’re not fully definable. That doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t venture certain concepts. And I’ll explain this much more later, why (A) we can’t avoid conceptuality, and (B), actually conceptuality is necessary and part of the erotic movement. This is the

thing: an expanding, not a limited or fixed or stuck conceptuality; that's where the rub comes. It's not that we just say, "Oh, it's divine. It's infinite. It's undefinable," and we just shrug and forget about it. Then we don't amplify that. It doesn't come alive to us as an area of interest. But we *can* use concepts. We don't hope to ever completely capture it and say, "That's it. That's my definition. Watertight, very neat, thank you very much." Maybe in some traditions actually Eros is a semi-divinity, a sort of demi-god, in between the divine and the not divine, if you like. And that may also allow us to be [more conceptual], part of the reason why we can be more conceptual, or at least approach part of it or begin to approach it through some conception. We'll return to all this business about conceptuality.

But having said all that about caveats and qualifications and all that, and complications about definitions, let's start with a really simple definition, okay? Or a relatively simple definition. This is just to start, just to get us started, bearing in mind that we can't capture it completely, bearing in mind that it involves lots of other concepts, etc., and it's not right or wrong, all that. Let's start with a really relatively simple definition. I'll say eros is a desire. It's a kind of desire. It's a wanting, but wanting *what*? It wants, let's say, more contact. It wants more contact, more connection, with what we could call its object, or whatever erotic object we're talking about. We're going to use that language a lot. 'Erotic object' means what eros is in relationship to, or the 'beloved,' if you like, if you want that more poetic language.

So eros wants more, let's say, contact and connection with the erotic object. Now, because these words, 'contact,' and especially 'connection,' have become so sort of used, they've almost lost their power. So I'm going to elaborate this a little bit. It wants more contact and connection. It wants to touch the erotic object more. These words I'm using really quite broadly. What does it mean to touch? Does 'touch' just mean the skin touching something? Certainly it means that, but it means much more. What does it mean to touch? Think, think of the fullness of that word, and how we can touch things, what dimensions of our being and our psyche can touch things. It wants to touch. It wants to touch more of the erotic object. It wants to know more. It wants to know the object more. It wants to know the beloved more. And again, that word, 'know' – think of the fullness of what that word means: I want to know you. I'm really using the words quite broadly here. It wants to experience more of the beloved, more of the erotic object. So it has to do with experience, intimacy. Eros is a wanting to penetrate the erotic object more, to open more to the beloved, to open to more of the erotic object, to penetrate more of the erotic object, to penetrate more.

These words – 'penetrate,' 'open,' maybe 'know' – these are also words with sexual connotations, right? That's deliberate. It's not *limited* to that (and we're going to come back to these words in particular), but using these words broadly: eros is the wanting of more contact, more connection, more touch, more knowing, more experience of, to experience more of, to have more intimacy, more penetration, more opening to the erotic object or beloved. Now, that erotic object could be *anything* – anything so-called outer or inner. The erotic object, the object of eros, can be anything. And notice, also, about this simple definition for now, notice that word, 'more.' I put a lot of emphasis on that word, 'more.' I don't know the myth from the classical myth, but Eros always goes along with – I think he's another god called Pothos. Pothos is another Greek word. And Pothos is the infinite desire or the desire for the infinite. It's the 'more.' This is the 'more.' Pothos has something like it always wants to move on. When it's got something, it wants more, more, more. So I'm going to say that that pothos is a part

of eros. When we talk about eros, it implies and involves and has as an intrinsic element pothos, and that's the 'more.' It wants more touching, more knowing of, more experience of, more penetration, more opening to.

You might be like, "Well, that's not a very interesting definition." It's quite a humble definition, in a way. It's really starting quite simple. And in some senses, it's quite a broad definition, and in others it's quite narrow. You might think, "That's a bit of a disappointing definition," or maybe not a big deal. But my contention, what I hope you will at some point be convinced by, is actually the beauty of this way of defining it, and that you will begin to see – slowly, hopefully more and more – the power of it as a way of thinking about eros, that it has all kinds of implications and consequences that emerge from it, that are kind of wrapped up not so obviously, but are intrinsic to it, and create, if you like, the beauty and the fullness, and the richness and the multidirectionality of what eros actually *is* and what it *does*.

[18:05] Okay. So again, notice again, eros is *not* – we're *not* defining it as, or rather we're saying it's *not* the same as sexuality or sexual attraction or sexual energy. It includes that, in our definition. That's certainly part of it, and you can [hear] – it's wanting more touch, more penetration, more openness, to know, to be intimate, so sexuality is one dimension of that, or one manifestation of that, at a certain level and in a certain direction. We're not, also, equating it with Freud's pleasure principle, the seeking of pleasure and pleasant sensations, which would be akin to one of the Buddha's lists of what craving or clinging involves. So that's certainly involved, pleasure is involved (I'm going to come back to this) in eros, but it's not actually what eros is after. Nor are we equating it with what Freud would call the 'life instinct' versus the 'death instinct,' or even the life force (in other words, the sort of life energy), nor love. The way we're using the word eros, we're *not* equating them with all these. There is a relationship of the way that we're using the word eros with each of those, but they're not equal.

In some instances, eros is the bigger concept – for instance, in relation to sexuality. In other instances of these other definitions, eros would be the smaller concept. I would say eros is a part or an element of life force, or, better, a certain direction or manifestation of life force. As beings, we have a certain amount of life force at any time, or just in our existence, and eros would be one directionality and one manifestation of the way that life force manifests. Eros is one kind of desire. Craving would be another kind of desire. Craving for sense pleasures would be another kind of desire.

But also notice something else. In some traditions, ancient traditions, and it's continued to this very day – I think it came either from the Platonic teachings (I don't know enough about it), or from the Neoplatonic tradition. For instance, there was a mystic and a sage and a philosopher with the wonderful name of Dionysius the Areopagite. Actually, the guy that I'm talking about had the even *more* wonderful name of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, because, it seems, for very complex reasons, he was pretending to be the other guy, Dionysius the Areopagite, who had lived a few hundred years before that. Anyway. *This* Dionysius the Areopagite, among other teachers, defines eros as really that force that moves towards unification, towards union, towards melting in oneness, etc. So we are *not* defining it that way. This is important. And this is quite common in some psychologies and some spiritual teachings these days. There's a *relationship* between this movement towards unification, but actually it's more complex.

Going back to our definition: eros is this desire, this wanting for more contact, more connection, more touching, more knowing, more experiencing, more intimacy, more penetrating and opening to the

beloved or the erotic object. So there's a relationship with the movement towards unifying, but – and we're going to elaborate this – eros will *always* want more. It will always want more, more of this connecting, touching, etc., opening to, which means that either it will, if you like, resurrect a twoness – it will resurrect the beloved object after an experience of oneness or union – or it creates or discovers *more* of the other, other othernesses, other things to reach towards in the object; it complexifies it. I'm going to explain this much more. Or it simply does not go towards union. It does not move towards dissolution, towards union, towards melting, towards a collapsing of the twoness into oneness. So either it *does*, but then it will re-instigate, actually create or discover (this is something we'll come back to) other othernesses, or recreate a kind of more of the beloved other, so to speak, to move towards, or it will simply not. It will resist somehow that collapse to oneness. It will preserve the twoness, the self and the erotic other, the erotic object, the beloved. Much more about that later. But this is a really, really important point.

So how do we recognize eros? How do we recognize the presence of eros in our experience, in our life, in our meditations, in our relationships? I remember teaching many years ago – well, a few years ago – and giving some instructions on mind states, emphasizing the awareness of developing sensitivity to how the mind state was sort of reflected in and affected the body and the experiences in the body, and also just the general texture of the mind space. My two co-teachers commented afterwards and said that they thought some people just would never be able to do that or couldn't do that, and a much better way of going about it was to say that you recognize the mind state through the thoughts. The kind of thoughts you have tell you what mind state you're in, so if you have angry thoughts, you know that you're angry, etc.

All I can say for now – and actually, for the way that I would conceive of this whole set of teachings and the Dharma in general – is that as practitioners, we need to develop our sensitivity and the subtlety of our awareness to be able to notice mind states. If we're calling eros a mind state or a state of being, to develop the sensitivity to that without relying on the clues and cues of thoughts. Seeing how the energy body is affected, developing the sensitivity to that, to the textures of mind, and what we might call the space of mind, the subtle mental movements that are there even when there is no thought, or they're underneath or alongside thought. So I, in a way, stand by that, in the sense that I can't really see how the kinds of things we're talking about, and the capacity to work with them in practice, would even be remotely possible without those kinds of sensitivities. We're talking about developing practice in a way that demands quite a lot, and one of the basic things it demands is a sensitivity to the energy body, and a more subtle sensitivity in general to the mind.

But this ties in to a point anyway that I've said before and will repeat again: when we talk about eros, like everything, we're talking about a spectrum. It can be incredibly intense and, in a way, quite gross and obvious, or really, really quite subtle. Somehow we want, if we're going to explore it and investigate it and include it as part of our reach of what the Dharma means and our practice means and our path means, then we're going to have to be sensitive, and recognize its presence, and be able to work with it across that whole realm of subtlety and intensity. That means that we can handle and work with and not get bowled over with really intense eros (and we'll come back to that whole question about balance, etc.), and also that we can recognize and work with it when it's really very subtle, and that that's still recognizable, sensible, and fruitful.

Also, you'll notice, kind of implicit in the definition, and part of recognizing eros, is that eros involves attraction. There is attraction in eros. It wants more, more X, Y, Z, as we said. So attraction is implicitly part, the force of attraction that one can recognize in oneself and feel and actually explore: it's attracted to *what*? But included in that, or because of that, or with that attraction, eros has this felt tension in it. So eros usually involves some degree of tension, often because of the 'more' (it always wants more), and/or because, as I mentioned, the attraction towards the erotic object is not dissolved, or if it's dissolved, it's only temporarily dissolved in union. There's an element in eros, if you like, that preserves the otherness, and therefore the tension of the two and the tension of the attraction. The attraction doesn't lead to oneness, either at all, or as a final resting place in which that oneness – there's no more tension of the desire. So always, to say it again, there's the preservation of otherness, or the creation of more otherness, so to speak – more of this object, more dimensions of this object and therefore more otherness, or the discovery, if you like, of more to the object, and more to move into with this attraction, with the directionality of the desire.

[29:50] You can already see, it's simple, but it's already quite complex. We're going to go into this thing about twoness and oneness, and preserving otherness and all that. We're going to go into that more, as I said. But recognizing eros. Again, eros often has a certain (what we might call) juiciness to it. Now, that's quite interesting too. The word 'libido,' which some people use interchangeably with 'eros,' the word 'libido' is related to the word 'lips,' and the moisture of lips, the drippings of pleasure. I'm taking this etymology both from James Hillman,<sup>1</sup> and also from Onians, who wrote a book about the history of Western thought and certain concepts, and traces them through history.<sup>2</sup> 'Libido' is drippings of pleasure, juices, libation, our word libation, drink, the excitations of lust, the pouring of liquid, as in libation, as I said. *Deliquare* is to make liquid, to make something a liquid or to melt. It's also related to the Latin word *laetus*, which is moistness, or fatness, or fruitfulness – that's very key to our definition of eros, fruitfulness – and gladness. And also related to the German *lieben*, which is love, as well as to the word *liber* in Latin, which means free. And the god Liber was a fertility god, a procreative figure.

It's also related to something you may have heard me say in other talks, about the necessity to make all things liquid. The alchemical maxim, "Don't proceed until all things have been made liquid" – in other words, not reified. Eros and its connection with the word libido, all this is wrapped up. Actually, we will be using the word libido – when we even use it – as meaning more something like psychic energy in general, the energy of the psyche. But anyway, it's related. And juiciness seems to be a part of the erotic experience, a part of the experience of eros. Part of that, part of the reason for juiciness is that (and this is something we're going to have to explain in more detail later) eros always invokes, stimulates, or involves, or is involved with, the imaginal and soulmaking. Eros always invokes, is involved with or involves, and stimulates the imaginal and the soulmaking. I'll explain more about this later. That process of soulmaking and the imaginal is, in itself, rich, and so eros brings more richness. This whole process of soulmaking is a rich process and a juicy process.

So attraction, tension, juiciness. The imaginal (I'll come back to that) or image is part of eros or involved with eros. It's part of how we recognize it. All this implies a kind of dynamism. There's the dynamism of the attraction towards the object. That's also recognizable as a feature of eros. There's this dynamism of attraction towards the erotic beloved. But there's also the dynamism of what I just

referred to and I'll elaborate much more as the retreat goes on: this dynamism of the stimulation of the soulmaking process, which is a dynamic process. It involves movement, expansion, complication, enrichment, widening, deepening of image, of what we might call psyche, and also of conceptuality. So there's a dynamism involved in eros that has to do with that dynamic. It's not always obvious at first. It's the dynamism of the attraction to the object that's more obvious. But actually, what it turns out is the object that we're attracted to is more the complex of image, idea, eros itself. That becomes the object. Much more about this later.

But there, as I said, if we're talking about recognizing eros, there's attraction, juiciness, tension, dynamism. Arousal is also a part of the erotic experience. Now, I don't necessarily mean *sexual* arousal – although of course that's a part of it, can be – or perhaps even measurable or observable psychophysical arousal that a person might measure with electrodes or something or other (may or may not, I don't know). But really the arousal involved with eros is an arousal of *interest*. So we talk about the spark as well. There's an arousal of interest. We're really interested in this beloved. Something engages us, compelling in the best sense of the word. It's really captivating, again in the best sense of the word. The interest is aroused. And also the energy body is aroused, by which I mean the energy body is energized. It will feel energized, it will feel open, and it will probably feel aligned. I've talked about this on past retreats when we talked about the energy body, working in imaginal practice. But it's also a feature of when there is eros, the energy body is also aroused. Now, that arousal, again, can be very intense, very, very intense, or really quite subtle. And it may be relatively unagitated. There's quite a peaceful feeling with it, often – not always, but often.

There's also an aspect, which I think I will leave this to later when we've explained more what I mean by this soulmaking dynamic, eros-psyche-logos, but I'll just mention it now, of autoeroticism. What becomes for us an erotic object also involves ourselves and involves our eros, so the eros itself becomes erotically beautiful to us, our own eros and our selves also. This is what I'm calling 'autoeroticism.' I'll come back to that, hopefully in the next talk.

Now, let's invent another slight delineation here in relation to some of what we just said. I'm going to make up a delineation between two words: delight and bliss. Again, no at all claim that this would be a correct dictionary definition or 'the right definition' or anything like that. Let's say, let's use the term 'delight,' and say that eros usually is accompanied by or involves delight. Delight is involved with erotic experience. By delight, I mean a sense of fullness, of richness, of aliveness, of interest, as we just said. The delight of soulmaking, of this enriching process, this expanding process that soulmaking is. We can say axiomatically: the soul loves soulmaking. It's almost a circular definition of the soul. What's the soul? The soul is what loves soulmaking. It loves this (what I'll explain more) dynamic, this process of soulmaking, of eros-psyche-logos and their mutual fertilization, expansion, deepening, enriching, widening, so that soulmaking is intrinsically delightful, if you like. And eros, because it goes with all that, it's almost always got a sense of delight with it. You could say that's part of juiciness, but let's just say that's specific to the soulmaking quality.

Now, eros may involve bliss. Again, I'm just making up a definition here, just for our purposes, and defining 'bliss' as an experience of the energy body, of great pleasantness in the energy body, of rapture or joy in the energy body, and that kind of openness, etc., sometimes very intense, sometimes much more subtle. But that energy body experience of bliss, I would say, accompanies *any* lightening or

unfabricating, to whatever degree, of the self-sense, up to a certain point, at least. When we get really deep unfabricating, I'm not sure you can really use the word 'bliss' at all, when you get into the deeper *jhānas*, etc. You can have a bliss without eros, or without delight, or without soulmaking. For example (and I'll come back to this too), the bliss of the first *jhāna* or the third *jhāna* may or may not be soulmaking. In itself, in some ways, it's not, for reasons I'll explain. It's just bliss without eros and without soulmaking delight, the delight of soulmaking. And, of course, sometimes you can have a delight in soulmaking without bliss, quite often, without that sort of strong feeling in the energy body. But basically, eros usually involves delight, or is accompanied by delight, and it may involve bliss.

[40:35] Okay, so, recognizing eros. Again, just to run through those – big spectrum of intensity and subtlety. It involves attraction; that's implicit in it. It includes some kind of felt tension; juiciness certainly, a richness of experience; dynamism of different kinds; arousal of interest, of the energy body; autoeroticism, which I'll come back to; delight usually accompanies it; and it may involve bliss, this pleasantness, rapturous or joyful, peaceful, beautiful feelings in the energy body, in the experience of the energy body. This is a start into defining eros in a very simple way, with some caveats. And actually, we're going to see what that does, and expand it, and enrich the very definition or the delineation of eros, and really fill it out over the retreat, put it in relationship to other concepts. But these are some of the elements of recognizing the experience.

You already see in some of what we're talking about, it's hard to go too far into this without bringing in other elements, or part of this web or this architecture of ideas and experiences and delineations that we're going to try to unfold as part of this wider, integrated, more far-reaching conceptual framework or path. And so that's what we're going to begin to do: start to draw it together, and draw in some of these ideas, and involve them in each other.

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<sup>1</sup> James Hillman, *Alchemical Psychology: Uniform Edition, Volume 5* (Thompson, CT: Spring Publications, 2009), 259.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Broxton Onians, *The Origins of European Thought: About the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time and Fate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951).