

Dilemmas and Delineations: How did we get *here*?! (Part 4)

Eros Unfettered – Opening the Dharma of Desire

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Now, I'm aware that these – well, many of these, at least – are quite unfamiliar ideas for many people, maybe even many Dharma people, and maybe in the culture. So I want to just say something about that. It's a lot easier to teach Dharma, or rather there's no *objection*, which makes it easier when we teach Dharma or present something as Dharma, in the cases where we mix in all kinds of assumptions, or frames of reference, or conceptual bases, or conceptual biases as well, as long as they're well-established in Western modernist culture and assumed to be true by that culture. So when you mix those kind of ideas in and assumptions in, and package it all as (quote) 'Dharma' – for instance, neuroscience or some of the ideas from modern psychotherapy – and you introduce them, and they become absorbed or blended into (quote) 'Dharma,' that's a lot easier. Rarely does anyone's eyebrows get raised or anyone have a problem with that.

When one tries to introduce or open up more unfamiliar ideas, ideas that are not popular or populist in the culture, that's more difficult. And more than that, when one, if you like, adds something, so to speak, 'foreign' or new to what we might call 'Dharma,' when it's foreign or new, that addition is much more conspicuous as an addition than when they're sort of ideas that people are familiar with from their culture. It's still happening; it's still an addition. There is still an addition, even when it's not obvious when we add ideas about neuroscience, or modern psychotherapy ideas, or whatever. It's still happening, nevertheless. Something is being added. It's just not so *obvious*.

Add to that this other idea, that the ideas we are using are not truth claims, they don't refer to realities, and *that* is very difficult sometimes for people to get their heads around, as well, because we're used to hearing, "It's like this," or "It's like that," or thinking that Dharma concepts refer to realities, etc. Certainly when we think about neuroscience or modern psychotherapy ideas, almost always, almost without exception, there's the assumption and the message that these are realities. So it's quite difficult sometimes to hear something or to try and present something as, "These ideas don't have truth claims in the way that we usually operate with truth claims and truth assumptions."

So, unfamiliar. I'm aware of that, and I'm certainly aware of the difficulties in trying to present all this. But still, I insist, absolutely insist, that in our Dharma – in other words, in *your* Dharma, in *your* practice, and in *your* life – fantasy and image is already involved. It's already involved in Dharma, in practice, and life. I absolutely insist on that. And I also insist that this is not a bad thing. Not at all a bad thing. It's inevitable, and it's important, and it may well, I would say, be necessary. It's certainly necessary to galvanize in relation to practice and Dharma, and to be inspired in life, and to have meaningfulness. All that's necessary. So it's not a bad thing. We need to recognize both the general fact that it's operating, and also the particular ways that it's operating for us, that fantasy and image operate for us, and the kinds and directions in which fantasy and image operate, and mix in with our life, and impel our life. We need a double level of recognition: general, and a more individual, particular.

Out of that, we need to kind of expand a psychology that can talk about that and include all that, recognize it and be sensitive to it and be wise in relationship to it, instead of just not admitting it, not

seeing it, or trying to cut it because it's *papañca*. We need to include, then, in this psychology, in this conceptual framework, we need to include ideas such as soulmaking or eros that are not yet articulated in what we call 'Dharma.' To me, that seems a necessity, you know, something that's called for. When we look at our life and the movements of our life with a psychology that's too simplistic, it doesn't serve us. It doesn't serve the totality of our being.

A person says, "Well, that's just *vedanā* leading." So when you talk about eros or that kind of thing, "That's just *vedanā* leading. You're just chasing the pleasant or running away from the unpleasant," or "That's just *papañca*," when we talk about the imaginal or fantasy; what motivates us is either this movement governed by *vedanā* towards pleasant and unpleasant, or some people teach that basically we get attached to things like views because we're trying to shore up this self that somehow, deep down, we know is not real – therefore we attach, we cling to this and this, to try and shore up my views and my habits and all that. But that kind of psychology, this self shoring up, or the *vedanā* leading, that *that's* what's going on, or it's just *mettā* – I've touched on this before – this is, in a way, not sophisticated enough. It's a little bit poor as a psychology. Valuable as it is (we've talked about this), we need something richer, deeper, wider: a psychology that can accommodate and delineate between the kinds of things that we're talking about.

From our perspective, the movement to seek to increase pleasure or decrease unpleasant sensations, when that is the prime intention of a movement of body or mind, when that's the prime driver, to maximize or increase pleasant sensations and decrease unpleasant ones, when that's the prime driver, and there isn't this richness of what we call imaginal perception, then that is axiomatically (in the way that *we're* talking about it) not soulmaking. That's not creating soulfulness. It will not do that. It's not eros. It's what we might call craving, as I said. But to think too much that way, or to really regard as if that's the thing that mostly moves us as human beings, it's a really, really poor psychology. But it's interesting. This kind of need to expand the psychology a little bit and enrich the psychology a little bit, it's not just in the Dharma transmission, in the Dharma circles. It's in the wider culture too.

I had an oncologist until recently, and he prescribed me the standard course of chemotherapy for my condition, but I think he basically thought it wouldn't work, because of the disease I had, and the stage it was at and all that. It wouldn't work, so there was no point trying to do any more chemotherapy. Plus, it was also potentially dangerous, and it wasn't a risk that he was prepared to take for different reasons – that it might do more harm than good, I think is what he thought. But in trying to persuade me to sort of give up wanting to experiment a little bit with longer and more chemotherapy, etc., he would often say something like, "It's about quality of life. Come off the chemo, and just enjoy the duration of the rest of your life with a better quality of life."

He would often say this, and I often had the feeling that he and I understood very different things about what constituted a good quality of life. But then he would also often say "quality of life," and then say a bit more, and often he would say, "go on holiday." He would often say that as part of his sort of package of what 'quality of life' meant, and what I could do if I was off chemo, as I could go on holiday. That is probably partly reflecting just – as an NHS oncologist, he was probably grossly overworked and overstretched, and probably was desperately needing a break and craving a holiday. But he didn't say, "Quality of life, so you can go on pilgrimage." A medieval peasant in Christendom, or Tibetan Buddhists even nowadays, or a Muslim nowadays, if they were told, "You probably only

have some months to live,” one of the responses might be, from the doctor saying that, “You know, take the time off the medication. You might be able to make a pilgrimage.”

Very different mindset. What’s the difference? Well, one typically – I mean, this isn’t black and white, but – one desires or seeks a reduction in stress, an increase in pleasure, perhaps seeking out novel or exciting experiences, whereas the pilgrimage, in contrast to holiday, pilgrimage is a movement of soulmaking, an actual movement that is soulmaking; an embodiment of eros, something we do with our bodies that is an erotic movement that brings soulmaking. It’s interesting. Different cultures, ancient and contemporary, religious and secular, tend to assume a universality of wants – that people want this or that, or most people want this. In the modern secular West, the choice we have of what we seek is actually wider, and perhaps wider than at any point in the whole history of humanity. That’s one of the things that actually characterizes modernism – well, secularity, particularly, and also consumerism. So the choice is wider. And also individuality has a certain premium in modern secular Western culture, so it’s acknowledged that the individual, the person, has a choice that needs to be respected, to a certain extent, in what’s important to them. But still, there’s usually a presumption that most people will conform to what’s, we could say, popular, secular values, and that what you’ll want is a holiday, as opposed to something like a pilgrimage.

[13:34] With all this, and all this talk about eros and exploration of eros, I really want to emphasize again something you’ve heard in relation to the Dharma before, I’m sure. Don’t *believe*; these teachings, the Buddha said, are *ehipassiko*, to be *seen*. *Ehipassiko* means ‘to come and see,’ for one to come and see, for oneself, through practice. Find out. It’s not a matter of belief. Find out, regarding to Dharma teachings. You’ve heard that before, I’m sure, if you’ve been practising for a while. For a lot of people, that’s the attraction of the Dharma over, say, other religions, that message. But what often happens for practitioners is we see something a few times – for example, that craving leads to suffering – and we hear these teachings about desire, etc., and something generalizes quite quickly, because it’s a message we get a lot, and we actually stop questioning. We stop the breadth and the depth and the radicality of our questioning. We stop looking further.

And so, in a way, we kind of program our perception, and we only see *this*. So I’ve asked sometimes a crowd, an audience, “Are you sure that desire leads to suffering?” And people just nod, “Yeah, absolutely, I’m sure, because I’ve checked it out and everything.” And it *doesn’t* always lead to suffering, as I showed in the “Beauty of Desire” talks.¹ But there can be this belief that we’re finding out for ourself, not believing anything, but actually something gets a little stuck, and we stop the *ehipassiko*. We stop the movement to come find out, to look further, to keep exploring. What I want to say with all this, I really want to ask and encourage open-mindedness, exploration, practice, that kind of boldness and experimentation, and playing, and willingness to investigate, to question.

Eros, also, despite all these definitions and how unfamiliar it all might sound, etc., eros is already in imaginal practice. It already, I would say, is an element mixed in with any imaginal practice. I’ve said to people, “Notice the love with the imaginal figures.” This is really important. Imaginal figures always involve love. Sometimes it’s really not obvious at all. Sometimes it can *look* like the opposite, but there is love there. And there are many different kinds of love, many flavours, characters, expressions of love. This is to be noticed in imaginal practice. And it’s both ways. The love is both ways. We’ll return to this. But wrapped up with the love, related to the love – not the same as, but related – is a kind of

eros. It's not the same as sex, although there might be sexuality in the imaginal practice, but there's eros. When we talk, with images and in relation to imaginal figures, about opening to them, about feeling that you are somehow in service to this imaginal figure, or that you surrender to this *yidam* or deity or imaginal figure, these words (opening to, service, surrender) either lead to eros, they deepen the eros, or they already imply that eros is there in the relationship. Actually, I would say eros is inherent in imaginal relationship, the relationship with imaginal figures. I'm talking about something to notice, to see there.

Eros is not craving. We've said that. We mean different things by that. We'll expand on that. But also in relation to more kind of conventional Dharma teachings, it's also the case that, with a little experimentation, you will discover that eros *can* lead, at times – or it can be steered to lead, definitely – to *samādhi*, to quite deep states of *samādhi*. For a lot of people, this is really surprising, because they consider eros, sexuality, that kind of thing, as distraction, as defilement. We've talked about this. But I've lost count of how many examples I could give, and I've talked about them on other retreats, etc., where some kind of often very unexpected or guided erotic interaction with an imaginal figure in the imaginal practice brings about *samādhi*, and the person is surprised by that consequence, that *samādhi* comes out of this actually sexual [interaction]. Oftentimes it's very sexual, not even just erotic; it's actually really sexual. And very different kinds of sexuality. Some are very sort of soft and loving, and others darker versions or stronger versions, if you like. It may or may not even be your usual gender or sexual orientation, all that that you're used to identifying with.

Many possibilities. I'll return to these. But *samādhi* can often come out of this. So there's something that's a very standard Dharma concept coming out of something that looks like it doesn't have anything to do with it. And similarly, the *brahmavihāras*. Hopefully there will be time on this retreat to talk about the link and the relationship between eros and the *brahmavihāras*, but I think I gave at least one example in that series of talks, *An Ecology of Love*, where actually quite a dark, lusty, and quite strange (or by most people's standards, strange) kind of sexual image actually deepened and opened the flow of compassion, the second *brahmavihāra*, very, very potently. Maybe we'll return to that later, the relationship between eros and the *brahmavihāras*.

Continuing our sort of delineations here, and standard Dharma, etc., and eros. Eros, we've already said, is much more than sexuality and sexual energy, attraction. We're not equating them. But it is, or it *may* be the case, let's put it that way, that exploring eros and the imaginal in practice, in meditation, may bring with it or lead to an opening up of a level and a breadth of questioning regarding sexuality in general – one's own sexuality, and one's attitudes, etc. It may well just open up that whole field, and also the experience of sexual energies too. We'll return to that later.

Just making a few more little delineations. I think I've said this before: I'm not equating eros with love. 'Love' is one of those poor words nowadays; it's come to have to mean so much, this poor word, to do so much work, to span so much territory, and we still use it. It's a lovely word! [laughs] But oftentimes there are problems with just how much it has come to mean or include. There's too much for one word. Oftentimes people, two people, are using that same word in relation to each other, and saying it to each other, and they actually mean quite different things. What they're referring to entails different experiences for them, different perceptions of the other, different feelings, different sense of obligations that come out of it: "I love you, therefore I am obliged" *what?* Guarantees are different. The

commitments are different.

But if we say, for now, if we use the word ‘love’ to just mean something like care, care for someone’s well-being on every level, then it’s clear, if we just look at some distinctions now between different terms, it’s clear, of course, that we can have sex, even pleasurable sex, enjoyable sex, without love and without eros. I would say – hopefully there’s some respect, at least, but sex is possible, and for a lot of people maybe it’s common without love or without eros. It’s also possible that you can have sex with love, with care, but without eros. In other words, there’s sexual arousal, sexual pleasure, etc., and care for this person, maybe sometimes even a lifetime of care in partnership, but actually this person is, or maybe never was, or is no longer – there’s no longer a soulmaking in the sex. There’s no longer the aliveness of the erotic and the imaginal in bed. So then there’s sex with love, but without eros. And of course you can have love, care, without sex or eros. You can care deeply for someone with *mettā*, etc., but this other that I give my *mettā* to, wish well, etc., care deeply about their well-being, is not alive for me as a soulmaking image. They don’t constitute that for my psyche. And if it’s not clear by now (hopefully it is), we can have eros and an erotic connection with someone with or without sex or sexual contact.

So, all those permutations. But I would say it’s *not* possible to have eros without love. That’s quite interesting. It’s not possible to have eros without love, because eros leads, brings, stimulates, opens a perception of – more and more so, in fact, as it goes on – a perception of the beauty and the divinity. More and more, as I said, this grows, the divinity of the object, of the erotic object. Eros opens the perception of beauty and divinity, and we can’t help but love what appears to us deeply beautiful and divine. So I would say it’s actually not possible to have eros, in the way that *we’re* talking about it, without love.

[25:33] Implicit in all that we just said is that, in a way, eros is actually *always* involved with and involves the imaginal and psyche, in the way that I used that word before. Where there’s eros, the imaginal is instigated, invoked, inflamed, deepened, widened, etc., brought alive. Psyche is expanded, enriched, deepened, complicated. And vice versa: where there’s the imaginal, where that’s operating, where something is an image, eros already is inherently wrapped up in the relationship with that image. And also logos too. There’s an ideation. There’s some kind of idea that’s wrapped up with an erotic perception of someone or something. Conceptuality, logos, supports – to whatever extent it can – it supports that eros.

I mentioned this eros-psyche-logos dynamic as one of our list of things that we talked about. I’m going to talk much more about this. But what it means, as I said, is that the eros, wanting more, it deepens and creates/discovers more to the image, gives more imaginal dimensions, imaginal complexity, imaginal facets and faces to this beloved other, and in that, the idea, the logos, also, of this other expands. That eros-psyche-logos, that soulmaking dynamic, then comes back, because the object then is more beautiful, more deep, more rich, more juicy, more enticing, more complex. It offers me more. It offers more for the psyche, so to speak, to move into, to expand, but also for the eros to find attractive and to want more of. So there’s this way that it kind of, potentially infinitely, in a way, just expands. We’re going to talk a lot more about that. There’s this mutual insemination, mutual fertilization, growth, expansion, deepening, widening, complexifying, complicating, enriching of eros-psyche-logos. They all help each other, if you like. They’re all involved with and involve each

other. That's the eros-psyche-logos dynamic.

The fact of that, as a fact of our soul, of the way the soul works, implies several things. One is that – to say another way what we've already said – eros is liberating in different ways. Let's unpack that just a little bit now. When there is craving or clinging or greed or aversion, in our phenomenological approach, we can see, when there's clinging towards something, or pushing away, or craving, grasping, aversion, it tends to solidify the perception of that object that we're clinging to. There's a solidification of that object, and also a kind of stagnation, a stagnation of the perception: we only see it this one way. Or rather, the perception gets *more* solid, or *more* one way, often in a negative way, or a particular flatly enticing way. Now, we know all that from dependent origination, and the study of that in practice, through ways of looking, etc. The reverse is also true, that when a certain perception is solidified, it tends to stimulate the clinging. So these two go together, the solidification and stagnation, if you like, of perception, and clinging.

To a certain extent, even when we see something as impermanent or flowing, there can still be a kind of stagnation of the perception, a kind of one-dimensionality, and a certain unidirectionality of the perception. It's stagnated, this perception, in a certain way. The solidification and stagnation of perception are the exact opposites of what happens with this eros-psyche-logos dynamic, or they're, if you like, an arresting of that dynamic, of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic and the way that opens out the perception, the imaginal perception, the sense of, the knowing of, the intimacy with, and the idea of the object, the erotic object. As I said, there's an infinite potential there for this mutual insemination, fertilization, expansion, enriching, deepening, to create/discover more of the beauty, more of the dimensionality, more of, more faces of, more dimensions of this beloved, this erotic object.

So it's the opposite of stagnating or solidifying the perception. We're going to talk a lot about this, but that kind of infinite potential, just infinitely increasing, or expanding, or complexifying, or complicating, or enriching the object. There's much more to say about that, and it certainly doesn't happen as a smooth process. It happens (A) in stages, and (B) often with hiccups and obstacles that need to be addressed or negotiated or made aware of, etc. But what that means is that eros, in its capacity to open perception and see also image as image, is very different than grasping, aversion, clinging, craving. It has the opposite effect. It doesn't solidify. It doesn't stagnate. Actually, it *liberates* the object. Its effect is to liberate the perception, in a certain sense.

Last thing for now. I can't remember now if I've said it, but it may be dawning on you that – I did say it, didn't I? – that there's a small definition of eros, as we said, that eros is this wanting more contact, connection, intimacy, experience, knowing, penetration, opening to of the erotic other, the erotic-imaginal object, of something, and that's what we're calling the small definition. There's also, because of the way that psyche, and logos, and image, and the imaginal, and soulmaking, and that whole soulmaking dynamic, the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, are actually implicated, or the natural tendency of what eros does – it *will* start to involve them, and it *will* start to expand, unless it's inhibited. We can also kind of talk about eros and imply all that, really imply that whole dynamic, that whole constellation, so that in the small definition we're really talking about eros as one element of that eros-psyche-logos, that soulmaking dynamic. Or sometimes when I use the word 'eros' I'll actually be using it in a way that implies that whole erotic-imaginal constellation, implying that whole dynamic, that whole expansion of that dynamic, and everything that's involved in the erotic-imaginal – aliveness,

activation, that process, the way it constellates self, other, world, etc., which we'll come back to.

This is just one of those things. Again, I probably apologize in advance: I predict that I'll be going back and forth between these two meanings, the more small meaning, and sort of saying something like, "When eros gets blocked it becomes craving," or something like that, or "When the logos doesn't expand enough, then there are problems." But it should probably be pretty clear in that. Another implication there is that eros in itself, so to speak – the small definition – is neither inherently, intrinsically positive or negative, good or bad. It's just this wanting, as I said, more contact, more opening, more penetration, more intimacy, more experience, more knowing of, all that, with the erotic object. So in itself, it's neither here nor there. Of course, there *is* no 'in itself.' We can't extricate it as something that *doesn't* stimulate this whole movement of eros-psyche-logos, this whole dynamic, interwoven dynamic, or as something that is trying to stimulate that dynamic but is blocked in different ways. So there really is no 'in itself.' Whether eros is fertilizing for the soul, is soulmaking, is enriching, is beautiful, is opening and opening up the sense of existence or not, and therefore desirable or not, is really dependent on what happens in relationship to that whole dynamic, or how that whole dynamic is able to unfold. We'll talk a lot about this.

So in itself, it's neither. If there is an 'in itself,' eros is neither actually good or bad, positive or negative. It's just this thing. But oftentimes we'll be talking in the bigger definition, bigger implication. When a realism comes in, and I really don't see this image as an image, I really take it as literal or a truth, or this idea that's wrapped up in the imaginal and the erotic object, and I take that logos as really being true, then problems come in, and eros becomes craving. When there's realism, eros leads to craving, related to what I said before about the solidification, etc. We'll come back to this. There are other kind of problems that can come in. There can be a cramping, or a blocking, or a limiting in different ways, either of the eros, of the libido, if you like, or of the psyche, of the imaginal function, or of the logos. So when any of these elements is cramped, blocked, limited, then it gives rise to problems in the relationship with the other, with the erotic object. We're going to look at this in much more detail as we go on.

¹ Rob Burbea, "The Beauty of Desire" [Parts 1 and 2] (19 and 26 Nov. 2011), <https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/210/?search=beauty+of+desire>, accessed 29 July 2020.