

Dilemmas and Delineations: How did we get *here*?! (Part 1)

Eros Unfettered – Opening the Dharma of Desire

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This is really a retreat, a course, on the theme, on the subject, exploring the themes of eros and desire and the alchemy of desire. I want to take a little time now, over the next few talks, to begin to delineate what we mean when we use this word, ‘eros.’ So to begin to do that. As you’ll quickly see, the way we’re using that word is actually woven in with a whole web, if you like, a whole dynamic web of other words that we’re using quite specifically – related ideas, related notions, related experiences. So we’ll have to kind of gradually unfold all this, unpack it, if you like, or gradually (reverse analogy) build a framework, an architecture that will help us here, build our ship or our vehicle.

In the course of doing that, and explaining or unpacking a little bit – ‘elaborating’ is a better word – elaborating a bit on, gradually, what we mean by ‘eros,’ and what it involves, what it implies, etc., where it goes, in the course of delineating, the question comes up: why? Why delineate? We touched on that briefly already, but there’s actually more to say. Why make this extra delineation of something called eros? Because we have a lot of words, like we said. We have desire, craving, clinging, attachment, love, you know. So why make this extra delineation? I want to say a bit more about that. And I also want to weave into all this just some reflections on making delineations and definitions in general. So some general reflections on that, because actually it is very relevant to the whole project that we’re doing and where it can go.

So, you know, unless you teach in some way or other, in some subject or art or whatever it is, it may not be obvious to you, but it’s obvious to me that teaching is always, *always* contextual. In talking about eros now, there is the context. There’s a double context, at least. One is the context of: how did we get here? What is it that led up to these kind of delineations, and making the delineations and the justifications and the explanations that we’re about to go into slowly, gradually? That comes out of a whole trajectory, a whole progression of exploration and insight that, in a way, one thing led to the other, one thing unfolded another. So there’s the context of where we’re coming from. And, in a way – I’ll go into this later – I’m coming from a background in Insight Meditation, but a certain way of understanding and approaching what Insight Meditation is, and what the Dharma is, and how to think of that.

But there’s also the context of who one is talking to, who one is teaching, and the context in which one teaches. So that teaching about eros and desire, and shining a different light on them in a Buddhist context and in an Insight Meditation context, is a certain context. It’s not necessarily the easiest or most straightforward context to raise these issues and hope to bring some fresh illumination or fresh turning of the earth, if you like. There are other contexts, for instance in – I don’t know – psychotherapeutic contexts or philosophical contexts where, in a way, it would be much more straightforward. There would still be distinctions and things to make. But in some ways, the context that we’re in makes it more challenging, but also we’re lent certain advantages, I think, by our practice and by our understanding, that other disciplines and directions don’t have.

About the context: I remember an international meeting of Insight Meditation teachers in 2009, I think it was. It actually took place at Gaia House. It happens every, I don't know, three years? Something like that. Three or four years. It kind of rotates between three, maybe four centres – IMS, and Spirit Rock, and maybe Beatenberg; I can't remember – around the world. That year, it was at Gaia House, and maybe eighty Insight Meditation teachers. I can't remember. Very senior ones, all the way down to very, very new teachers. And they're from all over the world – well, actually, mostly Europe and America, USA. So part of that group, we had three or four days together, I think, and there were different discussion groups that were sort of offered. Periodically we would break, and certain themes would be offered, and then the people interested in *this* theme would go and make a little group and discuss it for a while, and people interested in another theme would go and make their little group and discuss it.

One day, one of the themes that was offered was eros. There are a couple of things to me that are interesting about what happened. One is that it was *by far* [laughs] the biggest discussion group. So there was enormous interest in that topic, so much so that actually I think the group of people, the subgroup of the larger group that were interested in eros and elected to go into *that* group, had to be divided into three to make them manageable discussions and interesting and worthwhile.

So I was in a group that I think had at least ten people in it, and there were maybe two others like that. That was the first thing: look how much interest there was in this topic in Buddhist practitioners, Buddhist teachers, Insight Meditation teachers, already in 2009. Partly it's because so little is said about it in our tradition. So that was the first thing that was interesting. The second thing to me that was interesting was, we gathered in our group of, let's say, ten people (I can't remember), ten teachers, and a few of us, several of us, said, "Hold on. Before we get into this, can we actually just kind of say or agree what we mean by 'eros'?" And immediately it became very apparent that there was no common [meaning]. We had come to this group with quite a large range of what people thought 'eros' meant, or what it meant to them. No one was particularly attached to "it means this" or anything like that, but there was really not a clarity or a common, shared meaning, even.

I remember one teacher just seemed to equate it with desire in general. If I understood her correctly, she was saying that her approach to this was – again, not very conventional Dharma, but it's more like, let the students have their desires. So if you want that chocolate cake, have the chocolate cake. If you want this or that, have it. And in having it, and feeling it, and exploring it, and going into that experience, over time (this was the theory) their desires would mature. And so instead of being caught up with superficial and kind of unhelpful desires, there would be this maturation through actually going into the desire, living it, experiencing, tasting, etc. Following the thread of desire, there would be this maturation until they would get clear and centred on their deepest heart's desires. So starting with the Mars bars, and eating them and whatever, eventually there would be this funnelling down, a natural maturation process that would happen. Now, that's probably not a fair summary of what she was saying, and I might have misunderstood. But anyway, she seemed to equate eros and desire.

[10:00] Another teacher made the distinction saying, "This is all very well, eros" (this was a little later in the group), saying, "what *I'm* more interested in is in Thanatos," he said. 'Thanatos,' some of you will know, is another Greek word. 'Eros' is a Greek word. And in, I think it's Freudian psychoanalytic theory, Eros is sometimes equated with the life instinct (the instinct to want to live), and

contrasted with Thanatos (the drive towards death, the death instinct), which Freud introduced later into his psychoanalytic theory. This teacher was saying, interestingly, he came to the group to hold the other pole, if you like: “I’m interested in Thanatos, in the death instinct.” I don’t think he meant death, *per se*; more as in the Unfabricating that we were talking about, the movement towards a kind of dissolution, *nibbāna*, in the traditional sense.

Related, but very different to that (and I can’t remember what order this happened in) – there were quite a few senior teachers in this group, by the way – another teacher said that the Buddha’s primary interest, or he was trying to persuade people that the Buddha’s primary interest was in addressing Māra, the sort of primordial, if you like, archetypal villain in the Pali Canon, Māra. And *Māra* actually means ‘death.’ So the Buddha was interested in *amāra*, which is also a word that’s in the Pali Canon (less commonly, but it’s there). *Amāra*, this teacher was saying, is in contrast to Māra because it’s a negation. A- is *not*-death; therefore it means ‘life.’ So what the Buddha is really teaching is “life, live, be in your life,” etc., and the sort of elevation of – well, I actually pointed this out to him, but the elevation of this concept of Life, that it becomes a kind of substitute for an idea of God or divine, which this teacher was very much against. But there was this equation of eros with life, as opposed to death, and the Buddha was very interested in life, and the sort of praise of life, if you like.

It turned out that the person, I think, who even suggested the topic in general at first, when it came to her turn, what she meant by eros, she was actually quite unclear and sort of said she didn’t know. We sort of just tried to elicit from her a little bit, and it turned out that what she really meant was that when she was teaching, she found that she kind of got into a mode where there was very little humour and very little sort of joke-telling, etc. There was not the juiciness of humour. So that’s what *she* meant. This was a huge range, and I don’t think [laughs] we even came to a conclusion about what we were talking about, which is oftentimes a problem with these kind of groups. But that was another thing that was interesting to me: that there was no clarity even about what is meant.

This is why, a little bit, I want to go into this – partly because it’s a topic that people are interested in, and maybe especially people who have been practising a long time. Why? Because they recognize the lacuna there, the gap, presumably, in the teachings, around this subject. And secondly, we can’t really go into it until we kind of start to say, what are we talking about here? Or can we decide what we’re talking about, and see where that leads us?

So eros, as we are using it on this retreat, as *I* would want to conceive of it, certainly has a relationship with desire, with the notion of desire. The notion of eros and the notion of desire are clearly related. But let us say (and we can come back to this) that eros is a *kind* of desire. It’s still very wide, what it can mean, but it’s a specific kind of desire. So a subset of desires are erotic desires, if you like. And desire, if it’s not already clear to you or clear from the first few talks that we gave, desire is very interesting and not simple. Desire in the Dharma is also not simple. I don’t think we really went into this in the first three talks, but the Buddha lists, in these great lists that he comes up with (the factors of awakening, and this and that), there’s a list called the four bases – the four bases, sometimes of power, or success, or accomplishment.¹ And desire is one of those. It’s listed, and the Buddha talks about it a lot. If you want *samādhi*, if you want to develop the *jhānas*, if you want to develop the *brahmavihāras*, if you want awakening, desire is a basis for that. He lists it and points to it: “This is necessary. It’s important to develop this. It’s important to give some attention to this. It’s important to

be skilful with one's desire." He does not say, "Just let go. Do not cling. Drop your desires," etc.

Anyone just flicking through the Pali Canon, the collection of the original Buddha's teachings, how often words like 'striving' and 'exertion,' etc., come up. I've forgotten the exact Pali words, but he uses the language of 'striving,' of 'ardent desire,' etc., really, *really* frequently. If you take the example just of his life, he's a paradigm, a paramount example of someone *really* dedicated, *really* desiring, with what most people nowadays in our culture would regard as an extreme passion for, in his case, realization. He taught the Middle Way between – well, actually different kinds of Middle Way, but his Middle Way in terms of the passion for awakening was not really what most people these days would consider a Middle Way. It was quite extreme in terms of his dedication, his devotion, his passion, his hunger and desire for realization, for awakening.

So, as I said, all this, what we're talking about on this retreat, and the teachings about eros and desire, has a context. Now, there are also the contexts of areas and themes in the teachings that have interested me very much over the years, and that I have tried to share with others over the years as well. I've talked in the past – I think, if I remember, there's a talk called "Passion, Desire, and the Path"²; one was about "A Wise Relationship to Practice,"³ I think it's called; and "Wise Effort,"⁴ looking at more the micro-movement of effort and desire in, for example, *samatha* practice and *jhāna* practice and that kind of thing; and other talks I can't remember. I think I might try on this retreat and do something that might be a little annoying, but hopefully it's more helpful than annoying, and mention other places where you can find more about certain strands or elements of teaching that are involved in what we're talking about. I'm going to mention, but maybe not fill out more, so that if you want more you have a place to look.

I've talked about that before. Very interesting: the passion for the path, or passion on the path, the passion for awakening, the desire to unfold certain experiences and insights, and how that comes into *samādhi* practice and *mettā* practice and all that. On this retreat I also want to go into that, but specifically, also, *why*. Here's a question that, to me, is interesting, and I'm going to reflect on this, as it's wrapped up in what we're talking about: *why* is it that some people have a great passion and choose a path, or, if you say, a *version* of Buddhadharma, that allows a great passion for realization, for deep experiences, deep insight, deep openings of consciousness?

Why is it that some people have that passion and choose a version, among the different versions that are sort of on the spiritual supermarket shelf even within Insight Meditation, choose a version of it that allows their passion, and even allows the pain that can come with that passion? It's a pain the Buddha talked about. I can't remember his word for it, but the pain of the contemplative, I think he called it, in a sutta somewhere in the Pali Canon about equanimity.⁵ He doesn't say, in regard to the meditator, the contemplative, who hears about other people awakening, who wants awakening but is not there yet, he doesn't say, "Just relax. Let go. Don't desire. Drop it. Too much passion." He doesn't say that. He said, "Yeah, that's how it is until you realize. What you need to do is keep going until you realize. Then your passion will be quenched."⁶ So it's oftentimes quite a different message that we're getting, or interpretation that we're putting on the teachings.

[21:25] Why is it that some have this passion, and some choose a version that allows that passion even when it's painful, and some don't? Some don't seem either to have that passion, or move away, choose a version where it just bypasses, if you like, or tranquillizes or deflates that passion. Some

choose a path or a version of the Dharma where actually not a lot of passion is needed – the vision, the notion or idea or fantasy of awakening involved is actually not that remarkable. It's almost something for your spare time, if you like. It's not really a big deal. It's quite a small vision of awakening. And some people don't seem to have an interest or a desire, there's not much libido, if you like, towards awakening in general. They don't talk about it. They don't listen to talks that mention it. When it's talked about, they'll just lose interest. They'll actually say – I've heard many people say to me, "I'm just not interested." So that's interesting, too, to me. Why? What's going on there? What's going on, either in relation to those notions, or in relation to the self, or in relation to desire, etc., to the notion of desire?

Some have, on the contrary, a very high bar for what awakening means. And when I place myself in a more traditional sort of interpretation of Dharma, I would say where I set the bar for what awakening means is really quite high in relationship to where others set it, in terms of what stream-entry is and all that stuff, if you know those terms. And some people (and again, I would also include myself) sort of at the edge of Dharma would even conceive of an endlessly expanding – not quite receding, but endlessly expanding – notion of awakening. So in talks like "In Praise of Restlessness"⁷ I've talked about this, and "Questioning Awakening,"⁸ and other talks.⁹ So the desire is always there. The flame of desire never goes out, because there's always more. There's always a greater expansion. There's always more depth and diversity and range to what awakening is and can be. There are always new horizons of awakening opening up.

So why? Why all these differences in people? Is it just differences of personality? Soul-differences, if you like? Is it conditioning, whether that's in terms of personality, or education, or what people have been exposed to, the kinds of teachings, or the kind of culture, or the kind of family? Is it early childhood wounding, for example – that in how one expressed one's passion and one's love and one's desire, the nakedness of that that the infant has, often that comes out quite uninhibited in infancy? Is it that there was a wounding there, in school, or with the family, or whatever it is, that caused one to block and inhibit one's desire, one's libido, one's passion? All of this, actually, we're going to talk about more. To me, these are interesting questions, the psychology involved in all of this: why some people are like that, why others different, why people go for this kind of path, or that kind of path, or that kind of notion of awakening, or whatever it is. I want to include it over the course of this retreat very much. We'll return to that periodically.

In the past (I think a few years ago), I gave a couple of talks called "The Beauty of Desire," Part 1 and 2, I think.¹⁰ And if I remember, in the second part of that, I introduced something that I discovered in practice, where there's a certain way of practising with desire – even if it's a desire not for awakening, for something else – where it might at first be uncomfortable and bring *dukkha*, but there's a way of practising that doesn't dissolve it, that respects it, opens it up more. Practising in that way, actually respecting the desire and, if you like, empowering it – without necessarily acting on it; we're talking about a meditation here – practising this way leads to an experience where the desire does not bring *dukkha*. Quite the opposite: it brings a kind of fulfilment and opening of the being. So again, the whole way we tend to think about desire, and even if it's a good thing, it inherently brings some degree of suffering because there's tension – not so simple, not so simple. We'll be revisiting and actually elaborating more on that material as part of this retreat, as part of what we're calling 'the alchemy of

desire.’

In the first three talks, hopefully it was clear that the whole idea of trying to live a life of non-clinging, trying to live without craving and clinging, “just let go of everything,” etc., in that simplistically understood way, has several problems, which I’m not going to repeat now. So that, too, is part of the context. And also, again, what we’re talking about on this retreat is very much in the context of the exploration, the elaboration, and the expansion of what I’ve been calling imaginal practice (related to tantric practice, but different). I’ve talked a fair amount already about eros in the context of imaginal practice. One set of talks I remember – what’s it called? – “An Ecology of Love,” in I think three or four parts¹¹ – talked about this dynamic which we’re really, really going to elaborate on a lot in *this* retreat, because it’s so central, such a powerful conceptual framework, and it opens up all kinds of things, allows and gives a basis to all kinds of avenues, what I’m calling the soulmaking dynamic or the eros-psyche-logos dynamic. I will explain more about that on this retreat, and bring everything back to that quite a bit, but it’s already been explored. So again, that’s part of the context through imaginal practice.

On this retreat, in a way it’s similar material to what I’ve explored before in imaginal practice, but now I want to expand that piece about eros, elaborate more regarding eros and its place and its potential – both in imaginal practice, what we’ve been calling imaginal practice, but also *in* the path and *for* the path as a whole, and what that might mean for the path, and what kind of paths that opens up. So that’s a little bit of the context. But there’s more, even, because we could say, why bother? Why introduce this other word, eros, when we have lots of words, as we elaborated in part one of the first talk? Why bother? Well, that’s a good question. It’s really a good question. Do we really need another concept here?

[30:15] Let me read you something. Someone I didn’t know sent me an email sometime in 2015. It was a little while before I got ill. This arrived, forwarded from Gaia House, out of the blue to me, by a man who lives in the Yukon in Canada. It’s the Arctic Circle, I think. I’ll read you all the email, just because there’s so much insight here in what he’s saying. He captures a lot of the themes that we’re going to touch on, and highlights their necessity, and in a way, answers this question of “Why bother?” So I’ll read it all. If you can, listen quite carefully, because it’s very well-articulated, very beautifully written and, as I said, a lot of insight packed into what he’s saying in all kinds of ways.

“Dear Rob, my name is X” – you don’t need to know his name – “and we’ve never met.” By the way, I asked his permission to use this email in teaching, and he was really fine with that. I’ll say this now, and I hope you can remember this, because I won’t say it every time: when I use examples from other people, in the past if you have heard me do that, or in this retreat, or in the future, generally speaking, almost without exception, I’ve asked the person involved if I could, and they have said yes. Almost without exception. Okay?

My name is X, and we’ve never met. I have recently been reading your book and listening to some of your talks as recommended by my current teacher, Y. Interesting stuff. I found myself being challenged and derailed by some of your approaches to the Dharma, often in a quite uncomfortable manner.

This isn't really the bit that I want to read to you [laughs], but this is actually relevant, so I'm going to read it anyway. It's just short.

This made me realize how easily I tend to align my whole perspective with certain specific sets of ideas and points of view without daring to shake it up. But you woke up the rebel in me, the iconoclast, and I'm grateful for this.

That's not so – well, it *is* relevant, but not the main part. It's really this. He continues:

I'm quite new to the Buddhist path, having only been formally practising for about three years now, but I dived straight into it. I've spent most of the last year as a monk, both in Myanmar and France, before disrobing with the idea of closing my worldly life and ordaining again this upcoming fall. I was quite committed to the idea, until I fell in love with a girl who came out of nowhere and dishevelled my whole world. Classic story, apparently.

Now, obviously, from the monk's perspective, this is the worst thing I could have done. But somehow I can't really buy into that. Not just because romance is so sweet and compelling, but mostly because of my intuition that there is something deeper running underneath lust and love, something wider than her and me, something so beautifully alive that maybe it shouldn't be renounced so quickly. It's that same intuition that flared up every time I have fallen in love: the feeling that I'm playing a game that is beyond us; that the torrent in my chest is just running through me unaffected by matter or time, untamed by anybody; that I'm just here as a temporary vehicle for a desire that has never begun nor ceased stretching out towards the beloved, so my specific love stories become just some personified renditions of a myth essentially unspoken and inexhaustible.

There's so much insight and beauty in what he writes, and so relevant to the themes that we're going to be unravelling, unpacking, elaborating on. He continues:

This is why I wanted to write you, because I have never heard anyone else attempting to reconcile romantic love with the Dharma, and I would like to explore this possibility in order to avoid fragmenting my life into discrete arenas. I can't honestly bring myself to set up desire and freedom against each other as mutually exclusive principles, however much this seems to be insisted upon in the Dharma, and this has been a huge difficulty in my recent attempts to engage fully with practice. I would like to start imagining an experience of desire or lust that would exceed the lack and the compulsion to fill it in, that would be unconditioned by pain, without having to impose an artificial stance of dispassion and sacrifice a dynamic force of the human heart for a peace maybe too sterile ...

[He continues,] Unfortunately, I feel ill-equipped for such an undertaking, my heart just dramatically bouncing from an inclination towards disenchantment, tranquillity, to one of stormy passion and unreasonable attachments, constantly throwing myself off balance, completely invested into one configuration or the other. I don't really know where to start. As of now, I have recently let myself be overwhelmed by a crazy and beautiful romance [this is ... I find this really moving, all of it] to the point of neediness and jealousy. I want to open this up, to let it breathe, to bring some freedom within the tension of desire itself. So I'd like to ask you if you would have any advice, any lead into how I could directly practise with this explosive heart of mine ... Thank you kindly, and please accept my best regards.

So, beautiful, beautiful email. I was struck by this, of course, and moved, busy as I was at the time, moved to write back and suggest we arrange a time to speak. We spoke, but just for about an hour. That was actually all we had the chance to do before I got ill quite out of the blue, as well, and had to cut down on most of my teaching. He said while we were talking that, before falling in love this time, he thought he had left all that behind him, and was now travelling a different path. I asked: "What's the image of that path?", and he mentioned the hermit in solitude, in the peace of the woods or the mountains. I asked him, "Is it *peace* you're after?" And he said, "Freedom from ruts and from the fear of engaging." There's a lot here. And we talked about imaginal sensibility, imaginal practice; what this meant about self-view, the possible plurality within self-view; the possibility of regarding desire as not just restlessness (as we touched on in the first talks). What else was there? Yes, we really touched on the possibilities of imaginal practice, and also on working with the energy of desire, as I was talking about in the "Beauty of Desire" talks.

[39:05] But we only could speak for an hour, and it's such a huge subject that all I could do was kind of give a few pointers, really, and suggest, I think, that we have some more contact at some point. There was another piece, actually, that this woman that he was involved with – this is part of the problem that initially instigated – this woman that he was involved with was wanting the relationship to be an open one (in other words, to be able to have sex with other people, etc.), that they both were okay with that. She wanted that, and he was very unsure about that, and very ambivalent about that. But I just pointed out to him that actually, although that's certainly an issue to explore and to ponder, whether it ended up being an open relationship or not, and even whether the relationship continued or ended, is actually *not* the most deeply relevant thing.

The more fundamental and universal questions he was asking in all this, they won't go away whether or not the relationship's open, or whether or not it continued. So when we say "why bother with all this?", well, that email articulates really, really well one of the reasons. It wasn't enough; the contact we had was not enough to really allow those kind of questions and the wrestling that he's talking about to really be opened up and supported. And hence this retreat, and hence the teachings on this retreat, and the attempt here, because usually in Insight Meditation – that's the tradition he's coming from – in terms of sexual images and energies that arise, you know, as we talked about, either they're just regarded essentially as *kilesa*, defilement, or distraction in meditation. Or there's a sort of

slightly more charitable and open, softer view that just says: notice them, allow them, certainly don't encourage them. So notice, allow, in this spirit of openness, but not the encouragement. Sexual and erotic-images and energies are *not* regarded as having any real positive place on the path; only so much in the context that *anything* has a place on the path because we're attempting, in a certain framing or vision of what Dharma is, to be open to all things. Still, underneath that (this is the subtext), we can be open to all things, but it's *better* if these things don't arise. It's easier, and basically just kind of let go of them. Maybe there's a kind of view of equality: "They're just like anything else to be opened to, to be let go of." But essentially it's like everything else: don't cling, don't get involved, don't create anything there.

So Insight Meditation, one of its strengths is how much emphasis it puts on the feet. How many times have you heard *that* on retreat? Walking meditation, the feet on the ground, standing meditation, groundedness, "Can you feel your bum on the cushion?", etc. Really, really important. And how much emphasis also in Insight Meditation – again, one of its beauties, one of its strengths – on the heart: the openness of the heart, the capacities of the heart, the cultivation and the centrality of the heart. And more and more in Insight Meditation circles there's an emphasis on what we could call the head, in the sense of – slowly, a few strands within the broader Insight Meditation tradition – really emphasizing study of the texts, etc. So feet, heart, and head. Other bits might be missing. [laughs] Can it involve our hips? Feet, heart, head, hips?

So again, there's a kind of lacuna there, certainly around sexuality and that kind of erotics. But I really want to say, when we use the word eros, it *includes* sexuality in what we're meaning by eros. So we include sexuality. We include sexual attraction, sexual energy, etc. But it's actually much, much more than that. We're talking about something much more fundamental, and also that can be both very intense and very subtle. Well, sexual energy and sexual attraction can also be very subtle, but even more subtle than that. We're talking about something, as a notion, that's actually more basic and often more subtle.

But again, you know, not to over-labour the point, but why introduce this concept of eros? Why distinguish something called 'eros' from craving or greed or desire in general? Well, it's there already. Eros, as we're meaning that term, what we mean by eros, is already functioning every day in our lives. It's already part of our experience, as we'll explain. Making the distinction draws out something that otherwise might not be so clear to us. And, as I said, that might shut doors if it's not so clear, if we don't draw it out. Making a distinction, or any kind of distinction, amplifies something. By distinguishing this from that, A from B, A and B get amplified, or one of A and B gets amplified, gets magnified. It's like you get to put it under a magnifying glass. It gets clearer. Setting it apart allows us to investigate it, to take it as a theme of investigation. If I don't delineate it in the first place, I can't take it as a theme of investigation.

The delineation is the beginning of opening something up, like a – what would an image be? I'm not sure if this would work as an image, but like a tear, or like getting your foot in the door, you can begin then to pry open the door, or tearing a fabric, a veil, to reveal something. Setting it apart allows us to investigate it, to become interested in it, and then we can see how it works. What is this thing? How does it work? And where does it lead, this thing that we're going to call eros? Because, and this is one of our central contentions, eros will lead to different experiences, to different ends, than craving

leads to. It leads to ends and experiences other than the ones craving leads to. It opens up, if you like, regions of soul, to use a certain language. Eros is very connected with soulfulness, with what we're going to call 'soulmaking.' I'll explain more what we mean by that, but for now, let's just say the widening and deepening of a sense of sacredness, the widening and deepening and diversification of our sense of sacredness. But also this word, soulmaking, has much to do with meaningfulness, and resonance, and depth, and dimensionality, beauty, and all kinds of things. Eros is connected with a sense of divinity, and with what we've been calling in past retreats cosmopoesis: the very sense we have, the vision, the perception, of the world, the cosmos we live in, the cosmos about us, our very sense of existence. We're going to go into these terms, divinity, cosmopoesis, soulmaking, etc., later in much more detail, because they're very woven into this whole theme of eros.

[48:19] So that's one reason. It's in our life already, eros. We already experience it. We just need to draw it out and investigate it and see where it leads, because it *does* lead to somewhere other than where what we might call 'craving' leads to. A second reason why, why make this delineation, is to hopefully establish, or at least highlight the potential of, opening to a recognition of the sacredness of eros itself. Again, this is something we're going to come back to a lot: the sacredness of eros itself. We can see that, and it's very different to see eros as sacred rather than as a defilement. And that includes also the sacredness, or at least the potential sacredness, of sexuality. Sacredness never resides in this or that object or thing; we sacralize. We make something or other sacred through our relationship with it. So there's the possibility of sacralizing sexuality, rather than just viewing eros or sexuality as a defilement, or as leading inevitably to defilement.

All this, as I said, is not really so adequately addressed in the Dharma at present, for the most part. We talk about sexuality and desire. We talk a lot about desire, but in a negative way mostly. We talk about sexuality, but very little, except in terms of ethical prohibitions – for example, the precepts – or it's admitted, within sort of typically assumed limits, that it's an aspect of life (predominately lay life, but still there for monastics). But there isn't really this exploration, inquiry. It's not really opened up, as I said, as part of the path. As we mentioned already at least once, you know, most people have a desire for romantic love, or most people are involved in relationships, or in marriages, perhaps, and a finer discrimination is needed there. This is not *mettā*. I cannot reduce a romantic love relationship or a marriage to *mettā*. There's something more involved, or that needs to be involved. Part of that 'more' is what we're going to call eros, what we're calling eros. If I'm interested in that, if I'm really interested in bringing a fullness of investigation, and if I'm really interested in romantic love and romantic partnerships being really integrally part of the practice, then this brings all kinds of inquiries. For example, in a long-term relationship, what keeps the eros alive? What stifles it? What kills it? What erodes it? What just allows it to fritter away? And what keeps the eros alive in a long-term relationship?

So there's that second reason, the re-sacralizing of sexuality, love, but also of eros, and making it more part of the path, integrally, fully, richly. Really, with all this, a third reason why, what are we doing, why make this discrimination of something called eros, is related to what I said before: I'm interested in creating or opening an area or a direction of investigation. I certainly don't want to just sort of, for instance, *assert* something like the sacredness of eros: "I am telling you eros is sacred," and then, you know, so what? Some people will agree, some people will disagree. It's pointless. What I'm much more interested in is a domain and a dimension for a much freer, more open and penetrating

inquiry, Dharma inquiry. And always in Dharma inquiry, always, there's something really fundamental to see: there's a principle that how we view something – always we see that how we view something affects the perception of that 'something.' The ideas that I have, the preconceptions, the conceptions, the relationship with the 'something' that I'm investigating, the area of inquiry, affects my perception of that 'something,' and affects the related experiences that unfold, that can unfold, or that will unfold. All that's to do with dependent arising. The view, the way of looking, affects. It shapes the perception, fabrication. We've talked about that. It's part of what we talked about before.

We really have to see this dependent arising. How I view something affects my perception of that thing, so that must be part of the way that I'm inquiring. And a part of that, a part of the investigation, is perhaps this question: what happens, how does it affect this whole thing called eros, if I view it as sacred? Even if I just *try* and view it, even just a little, just entertain the idea that it might be sacred? So that's a sort of subset of a subset of the investigation: what happens *if*? I'm not asserting anything here. This is all really in the spirit of investigation.

And I'll say it one more time [laughs]: we mean by 'eros' something including, but much more than, sexuality, much more than sexual attraction or energy, or sexual interactions between people. You can have, there exists, there arises for us, an erotic connection or erotic connections (plural) with the earth; with a tree, or a piece of land; with the stars; with the cosmos; erotic connection with the divine; erotic connection/relationship with the senses; an erotic sensibility, an erotic connection with materiality; certainly with another human being, but not only humans – with other living beings. Certainly also not just with others, but we can have – and hopefully we *do* have, and we're going to elaborate on this – an erotic connection with oneself, or erotic connections (plural) with oneself and aspects of oneself, faces of oneself, or the selves' faces, or self faces, whatever. There can be and hopefully is an erotic view, an erotic connection, with the path, and with the idea, or the vision, the fantasy, the notion, the concept of awakening. Certainly always there's an erotic connection with imaginal figures, even when it seems like there isn't. And there's even the possibility of erotic connection with ideas and concepts.

So eros pervades very broadly. We mean much more than 'sexuality' here. Eros can also be or can seem to be, at different times, primarily energetic, or primarily physical, embodied, if you like, or primarily imaginal, or primarily intellectual. It can, at different times, be or seem to be primarily all those things. Actually, I would say it always involves all of these aspects. Eros always involves energy, what we're going to call the 'energy body,' and the energetics; it involves some kind of embodiment, or relationship with body and views of the body and sense of the body; it always involves the imaginal; and it always involves ideation, intellect, concept, what we're going to call 'logos.' It always involves all that. So it's already something multidimensional, and we're going to go into this more. As I said, whenever there is a sense of soulfulness, that kind of richness, resonance, depth, dimensionality, beauty, meaningfulness, in our existence, in the being, whenever there is soulmaking, sacredness in our existence, eros is involved. Eros is involved whenever there is soulmaking.

[58:06] Now, I think it's fair to say, I think it's obvious and maybe important to say as well, that different people at different times will find these investigations that we're going into around eros and soulmaking more or less interesting. So this, to me, is interesting in itself. It seems to me, it does seem to me, that people differ in the flavours or the characters, if you like, of the ways eros, or libido, or if

we say life force, expresses in their lives. They differ in the flavours, the characters, the ways eros expresses in their lives. The fire, if you like, if eros is a kind of fire, the fire of eros looks and burns differently. People's soul-fire burns and looks differently, one to another. There's quite a range there, you know – the flaming passion. And also at different times, a flaming passion, a very steady, quiet, small, but unquenchable flame; or the raging fire, whatever, leaping from one thing to another, the flames. It looks and burns differently.

But people also differ, it seems to me at least, in the amount, strength, and depth, if you like, of eros, of the eros or the libido that flows through them in their life or into them. Differ in the amount, strength, or depth. So this also is complex. Some people are like this, and some people are like that. There's a range. But it's also a fact (we touched on this before) that, for all kinds of reasons which also are interesting, eros and libido or life force *can* be and often *is* blocked in our lives in different ways, inhibited at times or in certain situations, or certain expressions or along certain lines are blocked, whereas others are free. Or there can be a more chronic and more pervasive blocking or inhibition of the eros and the libido. It's not so much that person really, so to speak, *is* just a certain character or style; something is blocking or inhibited, or crushed or whatever, there.

Still, despite all that, and despite the varying differences of interest between different people at different times and all that, I'd say that eros is a necessary, an integral aspect or element of what we're going to be calling 'soulmaking,' what we have in the past called 'soulmaking.' And therefore, an inquiry into eros is important for anyone interested, at all interested or devoted to soulmaking. It's just part of what one needs to consider, and explore, and open up, and go into, and allow, and understand, and support, and nourish, question.

On this retreat, on this course, the intention of the teachings is really, if you like, to open a door, or open doors. I mentioned that it's possible that certain doors are actually shut or even locked shut in the way that we're conceiving – not just of Dharma, but of life, of existence, and of who we are, and what the world is, and what existence is. So the aim, broadly speaking, of these teachings, this set of teachings, is to open doors, and to sketch – at least sketch, begin to sketch – a path for those who would move through these doors and move into new territory, for those who would like to travel certain paths, and to offer a map – at least the beginnings of a map, loosely speaking – a frame of reference, and light certain beacons for navigation for those also who already find themselves in uncharted territory around eros, around desire. They're already there, and they need some kind of orientation, some kind of way of thinking and ways of practising, practical tools, subtleties of practical differentiations and navigation and steering, as all practices need.

Some, as we mentioned, already see that maybe the more usual or narrow sort of ways we can interpret the Dharma, or understandings of Dharma, or frameworks, may not be enough, or *are* not enough, to open up this territory. Some people already sense – as in the beautiful email I read earlier – already sense a holiness in desire, the holiness of desire in life or in certain areas or directions of desire. And also in imaginal practice, this is very common. They sense that holiness, but it's tricky. It's tricky, and not easy, and it's complex, and it's rich, and help is needed, and a conceptual framework is needed, and tools are needed, and distinctions, and practice instructions are needed, etc. – both on the cushion, and in life, and in relationship.

Again, back to context: these teachings sit within a larger context of wanting to open a path that

integrates a lot of elements that we've already talked about over the last few years – imaginal practice, soulmaking, cosmopoesis, this re-enchantment of the cosmos, the poetry of perception, the experiences and the senses of sacredness, of divinity, eros. All this we touched before, and in fact, I'm going to – probably in the next talk – attempt a kind of brief glossary of all these terms. Hopefully that's helpful too. This retreat, as I said, is a slightly different angle. It's coming from the angle of eros, emphasizing more the eros, and expanding on more what that means. But all this, hopefully you can see how it is integrated with, it sits fitted into, tessellated with, our usual – maybe the more typical – Dharma teachings about craving, and letting go of craving, and how craving leads to *dukkha*.

It sits with that, alongside, mixed with that, in complement to that, and also the much more radical teachings about investigating clinging and the whole spectrum of what that notion, that word, means, 'clinging,' and all the subtleties and the beauties of working with that in practice: letting go of clinging, moving up and down the spectrum of clinging, and seeing what it does to the fabrication of the perception of self, other, world, time, etc., really going deeply in practice and in the understanding, in the realization, the insight, into the teachings of dependent origination at a very deep level – not the more common level; the very deep level – and unfolding, if you like, the experience of the Unfabricated and the emptiness of all things, so that existence is opened, and radical freedom, radical opening of the sense of existence. And also (I've talked about this before) that understanding of emptiness ... well, let's say this: it can provide a non-realist basis for all these other explanations and explorations that we're going into.

So that to the degree, to the depth that we kind of have taken to heart, understood the teachings of emptiness, how much they've penetrated the heart and the understanding, to that degree we can really practise a flexibility of ways of looking, and also of conceptual frameworks. We can entertain different ideas and conceptual frameworks without having to believe in the reality of any of it, that any of these ways of looking are revealing a reality of, "This is how the world is. This is how I am. This is what the nature of things is," or "This idea, this conceptual framework, is the truth of things." So there's a real facility and flexibility of just moving between ways of looking, all kinds of ways of looking, a really broad range, and all kinds of conceptual frameworks. It's woven into, integrated – these teachings are integrated into the usual Dharma teachings about craving and letting go and releasing *dukkha*, and the much deeper teachings about dependent arising and emptiness, and that forms a non-realist basis. All that is partly what allows us to open up teachings of imaginal practice and, if you like, tantric teachings – although I make a distinction there, but tantra is based on that understanding of emptiness, absolutely. It's *supposed* to be, at least, as I've mentioned before.

So all this is integrated together, and as I mentioned, there are other possibilities through imaginal practice, and through the understanding of eros, of having what I would call a fuller, more adequate concept and perceptions of self, other, world, etc., existence – ways of relating and seeing and experiencing all that that are more soulful, more soulmaking, conducive to soulmaking, that widen and diversify our sense of sacredness, open our senses of beauty and sacredness, divinity.

[1:09:40] So I hope you can see in all of this, and if not right now, at least at some point, you can see that this isn't really an eclecticism. I'm not sort of interested in just drawing different things together, tossing them in a pot for the sake of being interesting, or just being restless in a more superficial way. I hope you can see at some point how integrated, as I said, all these teachings are and,

if you like, how necessary, how inevitable many of these teachings are, because, as I said, one way of understanding the Dharma unfolds a certain depth and a certain possibility, and that just keeps unfolding in a kind of very necessary way. So they're necessary to what's gone before, but also necessary to our existence and to our practice and for the future.

Maybe more typical Dharma psychologies – let's say just the teaching of the links of dependent origination; we talked a bit about that. One of the immense strengths of the Buddha's teaching and Dharma teaching is that he kind of gives us a set of concepts, and in a way, they become ways of looking. That's what these concepts are; they become ways of looking. But they serve to simplify. So Dharma concepts serve to simplify, simplify because they fabricate less. When I use a certain set of concepts, for instance, there's less *papañca*. There's less of this crazy complexifying and nonsense-making, if you like, entanglement. But at a deeper level, too, they simplify in the sense that the Dharma concepts become ways of looking that move towards less and less fabrication, and less and less fabrication is a state of simplicity. He's saying, "Don't think about *this*. Don't think about *that*. Think in this way, and look in this way. Adopt these ways of looking," and there's a disentangling, a certain amount of simplifying – both of the ways of looking (by constraining the ways of looking to certain concepts), but also then in what is seen, of course. There's a simplifying in the perception of things. And that simplifying just goes deeper and deeper. So not just the simplicity of the 'is-ness,' the so-called 'suchness' of things and the vividness of that, but the simplicity of our life, and then the simplicity of perception *beyond* the thing-ness of things, as we go deeper and deeper into unfabricating, and eventually into something that is, in effect, so simple that even 'is' or 'is not' doesn't apply to it: the Unfabricated.

So again, if I use a certain language, the soul, the psyche, wants and needs, obviously, a kind of disentangling. It certainly wants that journey into perceiving less fabrication. But there are, so to speak, other dimensions or strata of the soul (we could use that language), of the psyche, that want something else. And so other distinctions and delineations become necessary, rather than just simplicity, simplicity, simplicity, unfabricating, unfabricating, unfabricating, unfabricating, Unfabricated. Rather than just the simplifying of that direction, which is so much the power of Dharma practice and Dharma concepts, other distinctions, other delineations, become necessary. What is the difference between *papañca* and fantasy or image in the way *we're* using it? Difference between daydreaming and fantasy and image? What's the difference between soulmaking and the kind of simplicity of freedom that I've just talked about? What's the difference between eros and craving, or desire and eros? What's the difference between eros and love, or the *brahmavihāras*?

I'm going to make this contention (it's something I'm really going to come back to a lot on this retreat): something in us, something in the soul, wants to know, wants to experience, not just oneness, not just transcendence or the Unfabricated, nor just (quote) 'life as it is,' as if there really even *is* a 'life as it is,' as if such a thing exists, such a thing is possible to behold. We don't *just* want oneness, transcendence, or that freshness of bare attention, certainly. We want more, even, than all that – certainly more than the bare attention, I hope, but also more than a dissolution in oneness, and also more than transcendence or the Unfabricated, even that.

So we need a kind of more elaborate, you could say, or a slightly more sophisticated psychology. We need a Dharma psychology that both recognizes that which is already present, but which needs to

be, as I said, drawn out, amplified a little more, recognized – the fact, for example, that eros is more than *mettā*; it’s not the same as craving; it’s not even just wholesome desire, *hitacchanda*, or desire that leads to less suffering. We need to recognize something that’s already present in our life, that hasn’t been drawn attention to yet, highlighted, drawn out, investigated. And we need a slightly more elaborate Dharma psychology because of the different kinds of sacredness and the different realms of experience which are slightly more involved. A psychology that involves concepts like eros can open up for us, without which either these realms don’t open up, these directions don’t open up, or they just get dismissed.

¹ SN 51:20.

² Rob Burbea, “Passion, Desire, and the Path” (16 March 2007), <https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/210/talk/12343/>, accessed 23 July 2020.

³ Rob Burbea, “A Wise Relationship to Practice” (28 Jan. 2010), <https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/210/talk/9538/>, accessed 23 July 2020.

⁴ Rob Burbea, “Talk Three: Wise Effort and Wise Attachment” (10 Aug. 2008), <https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/210/talk/11516/>, accessed 23 July 2020.

⁵ E.g. MN 137.

⁶ SN 51:15.

⁷ Rob Burbea, “In Praise of Restlessness” (25 Nov. 2014), <https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/210/talk/26009/>, accessed 23 July 2020.

⁸ Rob Burbea, “Questioning Awakening” (12 Nov. 2014), <https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/210/talk/26010/>, accessed 23 July 2020.

⁹ E.g. Rob Burbea, “What is Awakening?” [Parts 1–4] (5–8 Jan. 2018), <https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/210/?search=what+is+awakening+mirrored+gates>, accessed 23 July 2020.

¹⁰ Rob Burbea, “The Beauty of Desire” [Parts 1 and 2] (19 and 26 Nov. 2011), <https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/210/?search=the+beauty+of+desire>, accessed 23 July 2020.

¹¹ Rob Burbea, “An Ecology of Love” [Parts 1–4] (21 Dec. 2015), <https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/210/?search=an+ecology+of+love+sense+of+the+Earth>, accessed 23 July 2020.