"I Sing The Body Electric": On Orientations in Practice

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:08:20

At the beginning of the retreat, for the first couple of days at least, our encouragement is for all of us to really emphasize the awareness of practicing with what we've been calling the energy body. You are asked to review and become familiar with that whole area of practice before the retreat. So I'm not going to repeat instructions much about that at all, or address the actually infinite range of possibilities that are there with that and are available with working with the energy body. Hopefully we'll have some Q&As so people can ask, or in the groups or individual meetings, you can ask about working with that in terms of what comes up.

But just to say right now, very briefly, a few general things in a short summary around that. Just to remind you: the energy body, when we use that term, we're talking about mindfulness of the body, but it's a different kind of mindfulness than, say, the usual mindfulness of sensations that we're mostly accustomed to hearing about and practicing within the insight meditation world and the mindfulness world. The mindfulness of how it feels—what are the sensations with the hands under the running water of the tap, what are the sensations of the breeze on the cheek, or when I lift and move and place the foot and the foot touches the ground in walking meditation or whatever—this is the more usual presentation of mindfulness of sensations. Very important, very lovely area of practice, direction of practice.

And in a way, when we talk about energy body as a mode of mindfulness of the body, it overlaps with that mindfulness. It's not really something completely different. It overlaps, but really there's a different tuning, if you like. We're tuning a different sensibility than the usual mindfulness of sensations. It's more subtle in a way. Generally speaking, it's more subtle.

And this tuning of the sensibility grows. The sensitivity to that kind of awareness grows. The more we practice feeling the body and sensing the body as energy body, the easier it becomes, the more familiar it becomes, the more established it becomes. So it grows with practice, like many things.

What we're really talking about is a sensitivity to, a tuning to, if you like, the space or the field of the body—a little bit bigger than the body even—and the energy or the feeling or the vibration of that whole space, maybe certain energy centers or points within that space, but really the awareness of the tuning to, the sensitivity and sensibility towards and with that whole field of vibration, energy, feeling.

And why is that important, or why are we emphasizing that? Well, for a lot of different reasons. I tend to view it as something so useful for almost every domain of practice.

So for samadhi practice, where we can use the energy body and develop what I'm calling samadhi—this kind of energization of the energy body, of the mind as well—deep nourishment can come in. So using the energy body as something we tune into in an orientation of practice that's aimed at nourishment, energization, rest, brightness, calmness—and all this is a huge resource to mind and body. This practice of samadhi or working with the energy body in the direction of samadhi.

Another area where the energy body is really, really, really a helpful resource and really useful is in navigating and responding to and caring for our whole emotional life. So the energy body reflects and expresses what's going on with our emotions very, very subtly—even very subtle emotions. Emotions that probably we don't even have words for in the English language. Shades, subtle movements of opening or contraction or turning away or whatever it is. Different kinds of love, all kinds of things. And the sensitivity, the attunement to the energy body can be a really, really skillful way of working with the emotions. Really helpful in developing sensitivity and developing skillful responses to the vicissitudes of our emotional life.

Thirdly, the sensitivity and awareness to the energy body, the tuning to that, actually proves to be really helpful in guidance and navigation for whatever practices we're doing—whether it's imaginal practices and one can feel the resonances or a dimension of the soul resonances, of the soul-making and the soulfulness of what's happening in relation to an image, for example. One feels that partly in the energy body. It's a way of gauging whether one is on track, whether an image is going to be fruitful or fertile or soul-making or helpful for the soul.

And also in terms of emptiness practice or much more broadly insight practices. Again, are we on the right track? Well, the energy body will reflect it when there's the release and the relief that should come with insight. We feel that in the energy body, not just in the mind. The energy body will reflect it much more subtly, much more palpably than the mind, much more accurately than the mind.

So the freeing, the release of contraction that should come with any insight, small or large, in the moment—this is felt in the energy body and can tell us: I may not even quite understand what just happened or how I'm looking right now, what the insight was, but something, the energy body is telling me, whatever you're doing, there was an insight there, it was helpful. Or not. Or this is leading to more contraction, in which case, what's going on? What's coming in as a thought or an assumption or a view that's actually causing more contraction—if you like, the opposite of insight, in a way?

But also with metta and, as I said, samadhi and other practices, the sensitivity to the energy body will help us know when we're on track. Whatever little experiment or play or shift we're working with in practice—ah, yeah, that feels right. I can feel it in the energy body. And with metta, sometimes the feeling in the energy body itself can become metta or be interpreted as metta and then radiated outwards or bathed in or wrapped in or whatever. All kinds of possibilities, but really for any, as I said, any direction of practice, any kind of practice, the energy body, for me, can be really helpful to make central.

So helpful in so many ways. And so on this retreat, whatever we're doing, whatever you're doing at any time in meditation practice, can it be done in touch with, sensitive to, open to, aware of, attuned to the energy body?

Now, anyway, when we talk about working with the imaginal and cosmic oasis and things like that, we can't do that all day long, working with an image or with a cosmos. These things come and go.

Right now, at the beginning of the retreat, as I said, we want to have more emphasis on the energy body, perhaps more on cultivating samadhi or tuning to the emotional movements coming and going, ebbing and flowing—just at the beginning, a little more leaning that way. As the retreat goes on, as you get more skillful with all that, even off-retreat over months, there can be much more fluidity and flux in the emphasis between the different practices, between the intentions and orientations, whether toward samadhi, toward working with the emotions, toward feeling guidance, toward feeling the energy body in relation to an image or cosmopoiesis or whatever.

But all of them, as I said, include all these orientations, all these intentions for practice at any time, include, never lose touch with the energy body awareness.

This fluidity or flexibility of emphasis allows any of these practices to move via the energy body from one to another. So for example—and all this should be repeat for you if you listen to those other talks—one's working with an image, and as one's working with the image and noticing all kinds of things in terms of the soul-making and the energy body, one realizes, for example, often, that with this image, a harmonization has come into the energy body, an opening, a lightness, a beauty in the texture there of the space of the energy body.

And if one wants, one can then lean more the emphasis of the attention into that loveliness of the feeling in the energy body with the intention of entering into it, bathing in it, basking in it, wrapping oneself in it, enjoying it. And then the intention has moved from the imaginal work into more the intention of samadhi, of that as a resource, of staying in that. Really valid, really fine, very useful at times.

And of course, things can work the other way around, from samadhi to an image that comes out of samadhi or is made available because of the depth of the samadhi and the harmonization there. Or, for example, one's working with a certain emotion and again in touch with the energy body, and from that emotion—maybe it's a difficult emotion perhaps—and out of the vortex of energy there that's wrapped up in the emotion an image comes and then one works with the image and that feeds back into the emotion. Maybe it unlocks something, helps it, transforms it, all kinds of possibilities. Again, all this should be reviewed.

But this growing fluidity and flexibility to move between these different emphases in practice—and even now at the beginning of the retreat, many of you are familiar with these kinds of ways of working, or you might even find that this fluidity is available, even if a lot of this is relatively new. So some degree of

fluidity between these emphases and orientations, intentions of practice is really valid. But at the beginning, let's a little bit more lean into really emphasizing staying close with the energy body, developing the samadhi, or the metta, or the sensitivity to the emotional flux there, and the attuning to the emotions.

But really, in a way with the energy body, especially in relation to samadhi, anything goes. It's very creative. So how we can play with the energy body and the image or images, potential images of the energy body, for instance, visual or with colors or lights or lines or other images that work into the energy body and give it harmony—as I said before—and a nice feeling. The possibilities are actually infinite. The potential for creativity is open and infinite.

But what's really important then, however way one is working, whichever way one is working from—say, for example, from an image or something visual—what we're prioritizing is the felt sense, the kinesthetic sense of that space, the texture, the feeling of it. So as far as the energy body is concerned, that's the primary thing—the feeling, the texture of that space.

In a way, we talk about this energy body, maybe it's for some people a slightly strange phrase or whatever, but in a way we could say that the energy body is as much or maybe even more about an awareness, a sensibility, a subtlety of attention than it is about the body per se. So when we talk about energy body, we're really talking about a way of paying attention, a sensibility, a subtlety of awareness to that space of the body, rather than something about the body per se, or rather than a certain experience of the body. So you feel a certain flow of energy or whatever. Energy body is, if you like, a way of feeling, a way of experiencing, a way of attending to and attuning to the space of and around the body.

Walt Whitman, I can't remember what poem it's from, whether it's "Leaves of Grass" or "Song of Myself," I can't remember, but he has a lovely line: "I sing the body electric, I sing the body electric."

And in a way, we can hear that line as "I sing of, I sing about the body electric, the energy body, the beauty that's there in this sensibility and feeling the body this way." The body alive as a field, if you like, of electricity, of harmony, of that kind of more subtle energy. And I sing also of the well-being that's available in that mode of paying attention to the body.

And some of you will know that well-being has a huge spectrum. It can be very subtle and unremarkable. And it can also be extremely intense or very blissful. All kinds of gradations and shades of well-being, of bliss, of pleasure, of comfort, really opening up the range of possible experiences of the body, this electric body, this energy body. So "I sing the body electric" means I sing about that, I sing of that energy body.

And in a way, you could also hear "I sing the body electric" another way. "I sing the body electric" means I, through my singing, through my enchanting—and the word enchant is, you know, *enchanté*, in French, *en chant*, to chant, to sing, actually. So through my enchanting, through my conjuring, if you like, to borrow a phrase from the Buddha, the conjuring of consciousness of perception, through the spell, the magic spell

that I'm playing with in my awareness, through that I sing the body electric. Through my singing the body becomes electric, the body becomes this energy body, the experience of the body becomes that. So I sing that metaphorically. I sing that through the way that I'm paying attention, through the way that I'm conceiving of the body in the moment. I sing, I enchant, I cast a spell, and the sense and the image of the energy body comes into being. I sing it into being.

The emphasis here is on the *sing*, on the enchantment, not on the I. I sing the body electric.

This experience of an energy body, this kind of awareness, is something we create. We're fully acknowledging the dependent arising of this sense of the body, of the energy body, and the dependent arising of that perception and how it feels.

As you practice more with the energy body, you recognize and become skillful in noticing how when you look at it this way versus that way, when there's this quality with awareness as opposed to another quality, it changes the actual experience and perception of the energy body. The lightness, the contractedness, the flows, the openness—all of this changes in dependent arising with the ways you're looking at it. All of this becomes beautiful territory to explore, with so much potential for learning, play, and creativity.

Because of dependent arising, we acknowledge that this experience of the energy body is something created. It's created by and with the mind. Some systems of chakras have four chakras, some have seven, some have nine or more. Which is the truth? Well, the experience of the energy body is not separate from the mind. So you can experience four chakras, seven chakras, nine chakras. It's not different from the conception—subtle or gross—that's operating in the mind and the way of looking. The energy body itself is formed, fashioned, fabricated.

Yes, it's created and it's discovered. This raises the edge of what is created and discovered at the same time—both created and discovered. This is something we'll return to as a theme in this retreat. I'm just mentioning it now in relation to the energy body.

When you do walking meditation today, can you again emphasize the energy body? Just for now, for today—or if you're doing this course elsewhere, take your time with this, perhaps more than a day—can you walk, so to speak, in the energy body or in that awareness? Walk in this bubble or region or space that is this kind of sensitivity to the texture, the feeling, the vibration, the energy in that field.

How fast do you need to walk to allow that fullness of sensitivity, to tune in? Maybe you need to walk very slowly, maybe at normal pace, maybe actually quite fast helps. Perhaps this varies over the course of a walking session. Play with that. At times it will feel more helpful to just stop and stand, either at the end of the walking path or in the middle, because stopping and being still allows you to more fully inhabit and feel the energy body. Be sensitive to what's helpful moment to moment in terms of pace, stillness, movement, whatever.

There's the formal walking practice—can you do it in the energy body, sensitive to the energy body? And there's also informal walking around the house or going for a walk. This too, at times at least, experiment with what it is to just move around in informal movement throughout your day, but in the energy body, sensitive to that. Is that possible, walking down the corridor, whatever it is?

Most people, certainly if you're new or newer to energy body practice—which might be even months or a couple of years, still new perhaps—will be helped by slowing down. As you're walking around inside the house especially, slow down a little bit. The slowing down is not for the sake of microscopic attention—something I'll return to. You can divide the lifting, moving, and placing of your feet not just into three parts but into nine or more. This microscopic division of attention is not a priority or reason why we're slowing down. We're slowing down to allow that different sensitivity, that different kind of mindfulness of the body—this mindfulness of the energy body. We want to encourage this and give ourselves the best opportunity for it to establish itself and become more and more accessible.

Now I'd like to say some quite general things about practice. Because we're emphasizing the energy body and have given all those instructions in other retreats and talks, asking you to be familiar with them, I want to speak generally about practice now. The danger in saying these things at the beginning, and the danger of talking generally, is that these insights easily get forgotten. So if you're taking notes, remind yourself of them periodically.

What I want to talk about right now are five attitudes or orientations or inclinations or emphases or assumptions that are quite prevalent across much modern Dharma. They tend to dominate, underpin, and direct practice and thoughts about practice, constraining and limiting practice. They limit the range of unfolding experience that's possible and also limit the range and depth of insight available. On this retreat, with this way of practicing and conceiving of the Dharma that we're offering, we want to unseat them from their dominance, question them, and replace them with other priorities.

The first is concentration, which so often gets emphasized.

And in two aspects that I want to draw attention to. One is actually as continuity. The first way that concentration gets emphasized is continuity. So I'm not talking about jhanas or anything like that. I'm talking about even a continuity of mindfulness.

Actually, before I get into this, again, I hope you can hear this as a response to the context, to a leaning that to me has sometimes gotten too much or overemphasized and comes at a cost. Not that it's not important, but just leaning the other way to balance things out or open things out in ways that perhaps they don't open because of the habitual leaning.

So in our way of thinking about it, or going about practice, it's not the continuity of mindfulness or attention that liberates. Unlike, say, Mahasi-style practice or Goenka practice, where it really is the continuity that's emphasized—that's the golden key, as much as anything, or the idea is that's the golden

key to liberation—instead, in our way of approaching things, it's rather the deliberate and flexible exploration of a range of ways of looking, noticing the different effects of each of these ways of looking on dukkha, on contraction, on self-sense, on perception. And with that, the question: what can we understand from seeing all this? When I look this way, this is the perception. When I look that way, that's the perception. So that deliberate flexibility of exploration—that is more important than continuity of mindfulness.

I might ask, why is it that continuity of mindfulness is regarded so often as so important? To me it's an interesting question. Either it's because mindfulness gets presented, whether it's in Insight Meditation circles or mindfulness teachings or whatever, mindfulness gets presented actually as a way to live—recognizing that it's actually impossible to sustain it, but still it's presented as an optimal. If you could live and be mindful all the time or as much of the time as possible, that is the way to live. So it's a way to live rather than a way of looking. There's a big difference there.

Or sometimes even mindfulness itself is taught as equivalent with awakening. A moment of mindfulness is a moment of enlightenment or something like that. Or, again, the emphasis on continuity is tied up with seeing anicca, seeing impermanence, more and more continuously and intensely, and seeing anicca as reality. This impermanence is the ultimate truth. And then the other two characteristics—anatta, no-self, and dukkha, unsatisfactoriness—they come from the perception of anicca. Things are unsatisfactory because they're impermanent, and there is anatta because things are impermanent. But this impermanence is taken as the reality, the primary reality. And there's a whole metaphysics of reality and a whole conception of what insight is that's tied in with and tied into this emphasis on continuity.

This is quite different from the approach of a flexibility of ways of looking.

So we're not emphasizing on this retreat, in this approach, concentration either as continuity, or in a second aspect, as a kind of prioritizing of focusing, of prioritizing of trying to keep the attention on one thing, whether that's the breath, or the body, or whatever it is.

Samadhi, in the way that I use the word, and I would say in the way that the Buddha used the word, is not actually that well translated by the word concentration, but more—what gives a better, fuller, to my mind, more attractive meaning, translation—is it's a well-being in the energy body and a harmonization of the energy body, which the mind then much more easily settles into and fills out. Yes, steadiness is part of that, but it's only a part of the picture.

So the first of these five is concentration in two aspects: continuity and this prioritizing of focusing, prioritizing of trying to keep the attention on one thing. These are so often emphasized, and we're saying, no, we're not going to emphasize them.

The second is something we could call atomism. So the first concentration, the second is atomism, by which I mean either aiming exclusively for a narrow focus, a narrow area of concentration—maybe the

tip of the nose if you're staying with the breath or this moment of taste or this area of sensation in the body or whatever—a narrowness of the area of focus or concentration.

But more importantly, there's an atomism as a kind of prioritizing or elevating or an exclusivity of not just microscopic attention more generally, but also understanding of the view of reality. Again, wrapped up in that is an idea that true reality is atomic—moments of this, these small sensations put together in a process very, very fast, and that's a kind of ultimate reality.

So this kind of atomism, again, is something we want to, on this retreat—really we're not steering towards that at all. We have different priorities, different orientations, inclinations, and intentions.

So concentration in its two aspects and atomism, second one.

The third one we've touched on already: reification or realism. In contrast to what I was talking about—emptiness, ways of looking, fabrication of perception as a basis, as a basic understanding, present at even the most basic level of practice, even the most, right from the beginning. We can teach the Dharma and explain the Dharma in those terms of emptiness. It's not necessarily an advanced thing. But emptiness as present at the beginning and also as the goal of understanding, the goal of practice.

We've touched on this. I'm not going to go into it again. But this is a very different approach to Dharma through ways of looking and the idea of ways of looking and fabrication. And it can embrace, it can hold anything in the Dharma—any teaching, generosity, metta, whatever, ethics—it can all come actually under the umbrella, understanding the rubric of emptiness.

So concentration, atomism, reification or realism.

Fourth one is what I might call solitude or self-sufficiency. Again, there's a tendency in the Dharma to view solitary practice and self-sufficiency in one's process as somehow superior to relational practice. This perspective elevates the solo path above collaborative spiritual work, though we'll only touch lightly on relational practice during this retreat. It remains important to acknowledge this tendency.

By solitude, I also mean a predominantly inward-looking orientation. Insight meditation naturally tends toward silence—silent retreats, silent retreat centers. Eyes typically close during meditation. But more significantly, returning to the Pali Canon teachings, the Buddha speaks repeatedly about escape from the world. Nibbana represents an escape from the world, the unfabricated goal of practice. He uses this exact phrase, this word: escape.

The entire thrust, direction, and intentionality of Pali Canon Buddhism moves toward this escape from the world—to never be reborn again. Wrapped within this orientation lies a disenchantment with the world itself. The Buddha discusses kaya viveka and citta viveka—isolation or removal of the body from crowds, embracing solitariness, and withdrawal of the mind in various ways. This movement always tends away from engagement.

This stands in stark contrast to engaged practice—political, environmental engagement that I've explored in other talks. But it also contrasts with re-enchanting, which forms the very theme of this retreat: opening the eyes, opening our knowing to the world, sensing the cosmos as enchanted. Consider the classic Tantric teaching that sees the nature of all things as bliss, or the recognition of divine beauty everywhere, in all things, expanding through this cosmopoiesis. This path involves seeing or knowing all appearances as divine—to borrow another Tantric phrase—expanding, deepening, enriching, widening our senses of the sacred.

The fifth emphasis I call sanity, or perhaps more precisely, sanitization. This proves even more insidious—a narrow conformity, often unconscious, to conventionally prescribed modes of expression and views. We conform in how we express ourselves across different domains of being, and conform to certain prescribed views typically absorbed from the various cultures we inhabit.

This includes secularism—the sanitization and so-called sanity of secular culture. Most of us move within that dominant cultural framework. But it equally includes Dharma and Buddhist cultures. How often we witness conformity to uninvestigated, biased attempts at dispassion—a complex area requiring tremendous sensitivity, openness of questioning, and balanced approach.

Often there's this pervasive suspicion of desire, suspicion of passion, suspicion of eros that permeates Dharma culture, profoundly affecting how we practice and relate to life, ourselves, and others. All of this sanity, this sanitization, remains safe and secure. Yet sometimes it creates what we might call—staying with our S's—a soggy serenity that becomes the tenor, the ethos of practice and life, rather than fire.

These five emphases, attitudes, orientations, inclinations, and assumptions prove remarkably prevalent across modern insight meditation and other areas of spiritual practice. Can we orient differently? Can we assume differently? Can we cultivate different inclinations?

These five actually form an interesting pattern. If you wish to remember them, they create the anagram CRASS: Concentration, Reification, Atomism, Solitude, and Sanity. In many ways, when these five inclinations and assumptions dominate, practice becomes crass. It remains gross, unable to deepen into subtlety.

This dimension of subtlety calls for our return attention. I see it as absolutely central and vital to the possibilities of practice—subtlety of awareness, so integral to Dharma possibilities. For our purposes here, subtlety represents an element we seek to open and move into, this refined awareness that transforms everything.

Another anagram that we've come out of this to remember is SCARS, S-C-A-R-S, just rearranging the order there. I've heard from people that when these orientations are dominant, or they don't realize what it is that's made them feel this way, when these factors, these assumptions, these intentions and orientations are dominant too long, they can, in a way, scar our soul and scar our potential in various ways.

Maybe all this sounds quite polemical, and probably is. But just to qualify it a little, again, none of these attitudes is wrong. Absolutely, they're not wrong at all. It's just that they can easily become, and probably they have become in the dharma world, over-dominant and even exclusive. A person doesn't realize how practice has closed around these concepts, orientations, assumptions. And as I said, that will have all kinds of limiting effects in all kinds of directions in our practice, in our path, in our life.

So in contrast to all that, we're emphasizing the flexibility of ways of looking, moving in and out of different ways of looking. Through that flexibility, that moving in and out, we reveal, because of the effects on perception, dependent origination of things—dependent origination, fabrication of perception. And with that, or another way of saying that, is the emptiness of all things. So it reveals insight.

But we're also developing a flexibility in ways of looking and the availability of different beautiful, beauty-making, sacred-making, soul-making, skillful ways of looking. Through the moving in and out, we're developing the flexibility and availability as well as the insight into dependent origination.

Within that, as I said, it's not continuity. Sometimes one is fine just not deliberately practicing. There's maybe a minimal level of mindfulness and sensitivity to the body and what's going on around, etc. And that's fine. Right now one is not practicing. One's not striving for this continuity. That's fine as long as one plays enough in the course of the days and in one's life with this deliberate moving in and out of different ways of looking. Because it's that which, as I said, gives us the insight, the flexibility and the availability of different ways of looking, rather than just trying to be mindful as continuously as possible.

With all that, sometimes someone gets a bit confused and says, "Well, what about precision?" Because, for example, in Mahasi style practice or these other more atomistic practices, precision means a microscopic kind of attention. But for us, the precision is really in the subtlety and the clarity of differentiating or discerning between different ways of looking.

So what exactly is involved in this way of looking that's going on for me right now? What exactly constitutes that way of looking? What ideas, what images, what energetics, inclinations of mind, view—all that. There's a lot of subtlety and precision in understanding what exactly is involved in the way of looking right now. And what exactly are the effects of this way of looking right now? On the freedom, on the emotions, on the energy body, on the soul making, on the perceptions of self, of other, of world, et cetera. What exactly are the effects and why?

So the precision is in this area. How is this way of looking right now subtly different from one that a person might describe that sounds pretty similar or that is pretty similar? This one right now is subtly different. How is it different? So that's where the precision comes in. It's in the subtlety, the clarity of differentiation between different ways of looking, discerning and understanding what's involved.

To touch on this point about subtlety that I mentioned some minutes ago, I would say that deepening in meditation generally involves and generally corresponds to an increase of subtlety of the awareness and

the attention. Deepening in meditation involves, generally, and corresponds to a greater degree of subtlety of awareness and attention.

So subtlety, in this way of thinking about it, does not—again, I've said this three or four times now—does not mean a microscopicness of points of attention, microscopic points of attention, in whatever sense door, or microscopicness of moments of attention. I can divide the second into however many moments. It doesn't mean that.

By increased subtlety, I mean increased sensitivity to more subtle vibrations, tones, wavelengths, resonances, emotional shades. And more subtle, more refined perceptions. This is what I mean by more subtle.

The movement, as I said, the movement of deepening practice, either in insight or in samādhi or in mettā, is actually into more and more refinement. So the jhānas, the eight jhānas, again, people don't really realize this—they think of it as increasing concentration or this and that—but actually they are increasingly refined perceptions. They're more and more subtle perceptions, what the Buddha calls perception attainments.

Similarly, as insight goes deeper and there's more and more letting go, there's less and less fabrication of perceptions, less and less solidity and coarseness and density to perception. So whether through the spectrum of the jhānas or through deepening insight, perception is fabricated less and so necessarily becomes more and more refined.

This refined attention needed to inhabit such subtle worlds becomes correspondingly delicate and nuanced. The movement into increasing subtlety is intrinsically woven into the fabric of deepening meditation—whether we follow the jhanic path, develop insight, or cultivate the heart qualities. This understanding proves particularly relevant to our work with images, soul-making, and the cultivation of cosmic resonance.

While some of these experiences can manifest as powerful eruptions—moments of profound beauty or overwhelming love—the deeper currents tend toward ever-greater refinement. Even qualities like metta and compassion, as they mature, reveal increasingly subtle textures and flavors. This is something we want to emphasize and cultivate deliberately.

Related to this understanding, we need to remain flexible about what takes priority in our meditation at any given moment. Even within a single sitting, our primary intention might shift appropriately. Let's say we've established a current of samatha practice—that lovely, harmonized field where the mind settles into the energized presence of the body. Within this overarching intention, our moment-to-moment priorities might vary skillfully.

Sometimes our priority becomes staying with the chosen object—the breath, the body's field of energy, or whatever we're working with. This represents the more familiar emphasis on sustained attention and

focus. At other times, our priority shifts to tending the sense of well-being itself—gently encouraging and allowing the comfort and pleasure in the energy body to flourish and deepen. This constitutes quite a different orientation than mere focusing.

A third possibility involves tuning toward what feels more energetically subtle and refined within our field of experience. Through this attunement to subtlety—whether in the body space, the mental space, or our perceptions themselves—our attention naturally becomes more refined and delicate.

These three priorities—sustaining attention, cultivating well-being, and tuning toward subtlety—remain interconnected and mutually supportive rather than completely separate. Yet what happens for many practitioners is an overemphasis on the first priority: staying with the object, maintaining focus. The second and third priorities—tending to well-being and attuning to subtlety—get missed, overlooked, or insufficiently nourished.

This imbalance keeps the practice coarse and prevents natural deepening. Practitioners might sit breathing steadily, perhaps even achieving a sense of being "locked onto" the breath, yet nothing truly develops because everything remains at a gross level. They inadvertently block the movement into subtlety through their attitude, their priorities, or by maintaining the breath object itself in too coarse a form.

Most people carry too much emphasis on staying with the object and focusing. When they inevitably don't succeed perfectly, they become upset: "My concentration is terrible. I really need to work on my focus." The whole notion of meditative success becomes tied to how continuously one can maintain attention on a single object, leading to self-judgment and the neglect of those other essential priorities.

Consider the Buddha's instructions in the Anapanasati Sutta, his discourse on mindfulness of breathing. The very first two steps involve breathing long deliberately, then breathing short deliberately—like a skilled craftsperson who turns their wheel with conscious intention, knowing exactly what kind of turn they're making. The distinction here isn't primarily about breath length but about subtlety: shorter breaths tend to be more refined than longer ones. So we see a deliberate movement from the initial longer breath into the more subtle territory of the shorter breath.

The Anapanasati Sutta also includes what I've called the second priority—tending to well-being. The Buddha specifically mentions calming the bodily formations and attending to the pleasure and piti that arise as samadhi deepens. Right there in these fundamental instructions on mindfulness of breathing, we find guidance covering all these priorities and more. Yet so often they get overlooked in favor of simple focusing.

Let me offer some general guidance about the practices we'll explore during this retreat. We'll be presenting many suggestions, ideas, and instructions—perhaps more than you can actively hold simultaneously. You probably won't need to keep twenty pots bubbling on the stove at once, and it may

not even be necessary to try everything we offer.

Some approaches will feel more workable than others; some may not seem to connect immediately. Don't become too concerned about this. Everything is being recorded, so you can revisit material later, try again what didn't seem to work initially, or pick up what you missed. Please don't get overwhelmed if it feels like too much or if something isn't clicking immediately.

If you find yourself distracted or daydreaming during instructions, obviously try to stay present and engaged—your aliveness, interest, and openness contribute to the collective field that supports everyone's practice. But don't get caught in overwhelm or self-judgment. The teachings will be there for you to return to when you're ready.

Another point worth addressing: there can be a lot—I've written about this and talked about it elsewhere—one common way of practicing insight meditation is simply being with experience. Whatever experience arises in the moment, one generally tries to just be with that or allow it. For some people, that's the entirety of their practice. That's what they do. That's what insight meditation is for them. And they feel very suspicious of deliberately trying to do anything, deliberately directing the attention or playing with the way of looking.

What I want to say is both are available. They're different modes of practicing. Just allowing—so-called "just being with experience"—I actually think that's a bit of a myth. There's no such thing. But let's say at least for a beginner, that's a fine thing, versus deliberately directing the way of looking. But they're just modes. And I would say they're both really important. We really miss a lot if we're never deliberate. We miss huge, huge potential in practice and what the Dharma can be.

One yogi wrote to me describing that for many years, her practice was more like this first approach—not deliberately really doing anything, just kind of letting what comes, come. She said, "For many years, my meditation practice resembled a chicken running over a minefield," which I thought was a great picture. This disaster and then that disaster, just trying to open to it all and be with it all because it all seems so real. Not realizing that I can change the ways of looking. And that actually, through playing with that, it changes what arises. That's not "not being with what's real" because I realize that there isn't—as I said before—any independent reality here.

So they're both modes. But in regard to imaginal practice and enchantment and cosmopoiesis, for most people nowadays, because of the disenchantment that's pervasive in modernist culture, in modernist Western culture, working with the imaginal, the enchanted perceptions, the cosmopoiesis, are not usually habitual. The mind doesn't tend to go there that much, tends rather to see according to the flatness and the one-dimensional. So we actually need to encourage them, which means being a bit more deliberate.

But you will find over the week, and as you practice more with these kinds of ways, that images, cosmopoiesis, cosmopoetic images—perceptions, if you like, or openings—will happen spontaneously, as I

said, out of samadhi or out of being sensitive to an emotion in the energy body, giving birth to images. Both spontaneously and deliberately, images and cosmic voices can arise.

But what I really want to encourage is to return to what I started with: letting the sense of soulfulness and soul-making guide you. And part of that is the sensitivity to the energy body. Let that guide you.

So sometimes we try out something deliberately, some image or cosmopoiesis, either because it's a classical Tantra prescription, a classical Tantra meditation, or as a suggestion from one of us or from someone else, and we might deliberately try that out or deliberately return to it. But what I want to emphasize again is please pursue and stick with and try again only those images and cosmopoieses that have resonance for you in the soul. This is so important to recognize, to be sensitive to.

Even if some of them feel that they were initiated, or they seem to have been initiated in a kind of contrived way or an external way, what guides you is the sense of soulfulness and soul-making and the energy body. Let that guide you into what you return to and pursue and stick with and try again and work at.

Because if we don't use that soulfulness, then actually the practice—the practice that we're doing—will be kind of lifeless, soulless, pointless, really, except as exercises. An exercise in visualization or an exercise in concentration—how much can I stay focused? How long can I stay focused on a certain image? But nothing deep or significant for or in the soul is touched. Nothing is moved for or in the soul. I mean that word "moved" as in to be moving, to be touched, but also moved as in it starts to be dynamic, starts to form a dynamism in the soul. Nothing is vivified, brought alive. Nothing is really getting enriched or deepened.

But if there is, with a practice or a cosmic basis or a way of looking or an image, this sense of soulfulness, then we can be sure that all that is happening.

So really then, the encouragement was spontaneous, deliberate, lots of suggestions in everything that we're offering. Really the encouragement to play with it, to experiment, to let yourself be creative. It's like here is an artist's studio and we're just opening the door and it's got all these materials and all these different kinds of canvas and different kinds of things that you can make sculptures with and a whole bunch of different paints and watercolors and oils and all these materials and video stuff you can play with—in a way what we're doing is just opening the door to an artist's studio and you can come in and just play. Feel that way about it: playful, experimenting, creative.

Some people, their personality or their style of going about—whether it's this kind of thing or whether it's emptiness practice, whatever—is very systematic and sort of working through in order, kind of comprehensively. And that's fine. If that suits you, go for that if you want to. Or other people are more fluid and a bit more what looks like haphazard or whatever, intuitive. Let yourself work in the way that feels good for you and feels right for you.

So, for example, I think I mentioned in another talk, we're going to be working with re-enchantment, if you like, or exploring re-enchantment and cosmopoiesis through all six senses—sight, sound, taste, smell, touch, and mind. This doesn't mean—and this should be obvious by now—it doesn't mean mindfulness as bare attention to the experience in the six senses, to the sensations there. It doesn't mean arriving at those senses or exploring them with the typical modernist concepts of matter. We're opening them up in different ways.

Some people move through the six senses very comprehensively and thoroughly in order, separating them all out. Other people skip around a little bit more. Whatever works. Find the way of working that suits you, that serves you.

Last thing, for now. What is the point of all these practices? We'll be offering all these suggestions and guided meditations. This, to me, is quite important. The point is not to believe this or that about the self, about the world, about life. I've said that before. We're not trying to move you to a place where you believe X or Y about anything. Nor is the point actually trying to achieve any particular perception of a red etheric light body or a blue body or whatever. I don't see the point of all this as achieving any particular perception.

Rather, it's through all these practices, through the exercise of this flexibility in ways of looking—in and out and trying different things—and through the exploration of what we call the attitude of art or poetry in relation to perception, through the exploration of that attitude, through all of that, that a loosening happens. Or actually, rather, many loosenings happen. And this loosening is of fundamental importance, or these loosenings are of fundamental importance. Loosening, liberation, unfettering, being set free from all kinds of prisons.

But more even than that, through all this—through all the practice, through the exercise of flexibility and ways of looking, through this exploration of the attitude of art, if you like, in relation to perception, or poetry of perception—through all that, a sense, a perception, a knowing comes. However vague, however undefined, however unarticulated or seemingly unarticulatable, and however diverse the range appears to be of these experiences or senses or perceptions or knowings—they're plural—however diverse the range, however varied, through the flexibility we just alluded to.

But a sense, a perception, a knowing, or senses, perceptions, knowings come of eternity, we might say—of timelessness, as a better way of putting it—of beauty, different kinds and levels and ranges of beauty, and this opening up of the sense of sacredness.

This knowing, perception, sense of sacredness. And actually, we're talking about a plurality here, so it's not one sense. Even of timelessness, there are different perceptions of timelessness, of eternity, of beauty, of sacredness. And these perceptions, these knowings, these senses, they themselves open, they deepen, they widen. They become, through all these practices and these attitudes and this way of approaching things, more accessible in our life. They become more available to us. And they actually become more

frequent. They become regular visitors, regular aspects of our existence.

And that—it's that—that is the main point of all this. That is the main point of all the practices. At least that's how I would see it. That's the main point.

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