Orienting to This Jhāna Retreat

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:29:48

Welcome, everybody—a really warm welcome to each and every one of you. I know some of you, and there are some I don't know and haven't met yet. I'm really looking forward to that, and especially welcome to you if you're new to Gaia House. So welcome to the retreat, welcome to Gaia House, to everyone.

I'm really happy to be here, happy to be able to do this. More than happy—I've actually been quite excited for a little while, so I'm really glad.

Let me please introduce Sari. Some of you will know her, but many of you might not. Sari is with us, and at the end, as you can see, is Kirsten, who some of you already know. You'll notice Robert is not here—I'll explain what's happening there in a moment.

I have wanted to teach a group jhāna retreat for, I think, about sixteen years. I've done a lot of teaching of jhānas individually, one-to-one, but finally some very strange conditions have come together to actually allow this to manifest. In a way, for many reasons, it's a kind of small miracle that this is happening.

So yes, many reasons make it a small real miracle that we have this time together and this opportunity and this chance for something that I think is such a beautiful realm of possibility for human beings and for meditation practice—such a treasure trove. So it's a really, really precious thing for me to be able to teach it, and I hope by the end you'll realize also how precious it really is.

It's partly a miracle because it's quite complicated for me health-wise at the moment. There's a lot I need to do just to be able to be here. I have many medical appointments over the time we have together, and there's a lot of practical stuff—just getting my medicines and gear. I don't need to go into all of that.

Originally, I asked Robert to come and assist us, and he said he'd love to but needed to check with his employers. They came back and said they wouldn't be able to tell him until—I can't remember when. So we said, let's just gamble; it'll be fine. It turned out they said no, he couldn't have that time off.

So Robert will join us later, and then Kirsten—who actually had this whole idea in the first place, so we have her to thank for the entire retreat—very kindly stepped in to take Robert's place. The retreat was her idea originally, arising from a strange set of circumstances. Kirsten had been planning to sit the retreat and have this time to nourish her practice, but she very kindly stepped in until Robert arrives in five or six days. At that point, Kirsten will be relieved of her teaching duties and be able to give herself to her practice, and Robert will step in. We'll obviously let you know, though you may not notice because you might be so deep in practice.

Another part of the small miracle is that Sari has a family and a lovely little baby boy, a toddler named Eliel. Because of his young age, she could only be here if he could be here, and that meant her partner, Hönger, needed to be here as well. So they are here as a family, and you will see them wandering in and out. You will probably see and hear Eliel playing in the Gaia House grounds—it's his playground, right? So that's part of the conditions that allowed this retreat, and I think it's actually a lovely, really delightful thing.

Please do ask the teachers—seriously. A lot about this practice is very individual. It can sound formulaic or technical, but there may be reasons why exactly that sort of approach at some point might be really helpful, and actually not so helpful for the same person at different times. But generally, he's going to be around. You'll see him, you'll hear him, and it's a delight.

Tonight I have quite a lot I want to get through, so I hope you all had a good rest and are feeling bright and refreshed. I want to say mostly things about orienting to this retreat and what that involves, and things to bear in mind during the retreat.

Originally, part of what allowed this retreat to come about—I can't remember exactly—was that Gaia House was going to shut down for a period for some major building renovation works. Somehow Kirsten had this idea, and then they asked me if I would do this while that was going on. Of course, I thought, "So Gaia House is going to be a building site, and you want me to teach a jhāna retreat?" And I said, "Sure."

Because, and I really want to emphasize this, it's okay to have noise. Right from the beginning, we approach this with a different attitude. We're not coming in here putting the blinkers on, putting the earplugs in, thinking everything is bothering us and we need to shut everything out. No, there's an attitude of openness and inclusivity. We do not want our jhānas, our samādhi, to be brittle. You know what brittle means? It means something that shatters very easily. We want our practice to be soft, pliant, open, open-hearted.

One of my teachers, Ajahn Jeff, some of you will know him, when he moved to Thailand to become a monk—he'd hardly meditated before—he was in a monastery that had just moved. In fact, they were building a new site for it. So where he learned to meditate initially was a building site. And it was just like, no one was like, "Oh, that's a terrible problem." It's fine. What's the problem? So we need a different attitude to all this that's much more about openness, not brittleness. And so Eliel, Sari's son, that's all part of it.

When someone asked the Buddha—or in the context of his teaching, I can't remember exactly, he said it a few times—what does jhāna depend on? What does samādhi depend on? He said, "It depends on happiness. Jhāna depends on happiness." Now he could have answered all kinds of things, and many of us would expect him to answer, "It depends on staying, really nailing your mind to something, and then you'll get to jhāna." That's the way most people think about it. Or "It depends on getting away from people who make noise and being in maybe a sensory deprivation tank," whatever the Pali for that is. But he

didn't say that. He said, "Dependent on happiness." So that's interesting. That's really interesting to reflect on.

I have a sense that many of the things I will say tonight—it's possible that you may not realize just how significant they are. I know I haven't met some of you yet and I'm already insulting you, but somehow we have to get the view right. We have to get the view right. The view is the platform and the whole relationship right. So if I say something like that, or the Buddha said, "Jhānas depend on happiness," that should set you thinking. I see some of you writing it down—it's important. Now I have to take that with me through the retreat because that has implications on a moment-to-moment level, on a micro-moment level, about your choices, about your attitude, about how you're relating to whatever it is you're paying attention to at the moment—the breath or whatever it is.

Do you understand? So what I'm saying tonight—what does it have to do with the relationship with practice and how important that is, and the relationship with this practice, and the relationship with the goal, and the whole conceptual framework? This is absolutely key.

So how are we going to listen? How are you going to listen to Dharma talks? Can you listen on your toes? Do you know what I mean by that? I mean just what I said. If something comes out like "jhānas depend on happiness," I can kind of let that wash over me, or maybe it barely registers. Or actually, that sets me thinking—maybe I should reflect on that and recalibrate and do something about it. So that's what I mean by listening on your toes. Does it make sense? I mean, obviously sometimes I'm going to unpack things and elaborate and explain, but sometimes a bit more work from the listener, a bit more activeness from the listener, is really helpful.

Okay, let's start with just a couple of practical things. The daily schedule, as some of you might have noticed, is pretty open. There's not a lot on there. I don't know if you've seen it, but it sort of says breakfast, lunch, dinner, I think. So what we're going to do is—what that means is this hall is open twenty-four hours a day for the duration of the retreat, and you can sit in here at any time for as long as you want.

Generally speaking, once you get into the rhythm, you might, for instance, be doing a walking period, and then it's twenty minutes before lunch, and you know you have to have lunch at a certain time because you're on lunch wash-up. So you can still come in here for twenty minutes, just whenever it is. If you have the time, though, and I'll explain this more as we go on, you probably want to give a sitting a bit more time to see what happens—a bit more than twenty minutes, forty, forty-five minutes, an hour or something—see what happens. But the basic approach is an open schedule.

People will be coming and going whenever, okay? Except—if I get this right, where is the schedule? Ah, thank you, Kirsten—except 6:45 to breakfast, everyone needs to be in here. You can arrive early for that sitting—5:45, 6:00, whenever. But once we hit 6:45, you can't come in or leave. It's basically a group sit. We want everyone here at that time just to cohere together as a community.

And the other designated time is 9:00 p.m.—same principle. Again, you can arrive early, you can stay much later, well into the night if you want. But during that core period, let's say 9:00 to 9:30, you wouldn't arrive or leave. Does that make sense?

For the teachings, we're aiming to have a block from 4:00 to 5:30 every day. That's the plan. But we may need to adjust this—either just slightly, starting at 3:45 or 4:30, or we might change it quite drastically, shifting everything to the morning. So you need to keep your eye on the notice board and just see what's posted.

If nothing changes, it's 4:00 to 5:30 as scheduled. But this flexibility is partly dependent on some new medications I'm adjusting to, and I'm not sure yet how that will affect things. So we'll work with what arises. The key is to check the board—any changes won't be posted until after 2:30 for that day's schedule.

This open schedule means the onus of responsibility falls on you. It's on you to find a structure—both temporal and in your practice—that works for you. The responsibility is yours to be responsive and sensitive to your practice, to the needs and ebbs and flows, the ups and downs. What is needed right now? Do I need to go out and do some walking? Do I need to sit longer with whatever is happening? Do I need to actually go for a walk, open my mind, touch the beauty and be touched by beauty? Do I need a cup of tea? All of that awareness is yours to cultivate.

Having an open schedule also means that people will naturally be coming and leaving at various times. So there are two responsibilities here. The job of the person coming or going is to try and be relatively quiet as you set up your cushion or pack up and leave. And the job of the person who's already here, when someone arrives or departs, is to be spacious with that.

This is actually part of the practice. We're not cultivating brittle jhānas. We're not developing brittle samādhi, you understand? It's beautiful—someone's coming to practice. How wonderful, right?

This point is really, really important. Don't underestimate how easily jhāna practice can get derailed into a kind of narrow tunnel of irritation, especially when you start setting rigid goals around your meditation. So the person already here has the job of openness, warmth, welcoming, non-brittle jhānas. The person coming or going has the job of being relatively sensitive—people are practicing here.

When teachings are happening and I'm talking about something that's not quite where you're at yet, you can listen and take notes if you want, but don't feel like you have to rush to get there. Don't feel like you're missing out or behind. This is really important—there's no race here, no competition. The jhanas are not a ladder you need to climb as quickly as possible.

Instead, listen with curiosity and appreciation. Think of it as getting a preview of where your practice might naturally unfold over time. But keep most of your actual practice energy in your current playground. This approach prevents forcing, prevents that brittle quality I mentioned earlier, and allows for a much more organic and sustainable development.

Similarly, when I'm talking about territory you've already explored, don't dismiss it. There's always deeper understanding available. The jhanas aren't just checkboxes to tick off—they're rich, nuanced states with many layers of refinement possible. So even if you feel confident about the first jhana, when we spend time discussing it, see if you can discover something new, some subtlety you hadn't noticed before.

This approach requires a certain kind of patience and trust. Trust that your practice will unfold at exactly the right pace for you. Trust that spending quality time at your edge, really getting to know that territory intimately, is far more valuable than rushing through multiple states superficially.

I've seen too many practitioners get caught up in jhana collecting—trying to experience as many different states as possible as quickly as possible. This usually leads to frustration, forcing, and ultimately a less fulfilling practice. Instead, I want to encourage you to become connoisseurs of your current edge, to really savor and explore whatever territory is naturally available to you right now.

This patience and thoroughness will actually serve your overall development much better in the long run. When you really understand one jhana deeply—its qualities, how to enter it reliably, how to sustain it, how to emerge from it gracefully—that understanding creates a solid foundation for everything that follows.

Does it mean you take notes about what might be relevant for you in four days or two weeks time? It's a little tricky. But basically you're going to get a lot of material, some of which is not relevant for you now. You can listen to the recordings later, or you could make notes. You can always ask, of course. But I don't know any other way of doing it, or any other way of doing it in a way that I would feel is fruitful. So everyone's going to have that issue at some point.

If you've done jhana practice before, as I know some of you have, and you think—or you have a sense—that your playground is second jhana, or sixth jhana, it doesn't matter, whatever it is—please, in the next few days, if you have a sense that you've really mastered all the rest and know where you're at, please check with one of us and get it confirmed. People mean very different things by jhanas and different things by mastery and where they're at. I will explain why I feel this is important, but just come and check.

We might say, "Great, okay, yeah, second jhana—about there. This is what you need to do now. This is your playground." Or it might work both ways. You might feel like you only know second jhana, or that your playground is sixth jhana, and actually we might think, "Well, actually in terms of the kind of level we're talking about, or mastery, I reckon around second is your playground." So just come and have that kind of dialogue with us.

Or it might be the other way around. You think one thing, we say, "Wow, no, that's cool. You've got that mastered. You can go on beyond where you think you are." Does that sound okay?

Just check, because this idea of playground is really important to how things are going to ferment in a way

that's going to be fruitful, how the seeds are going to get planted so that they really bear lovely, nourishing, lifelong nourishing fruit. So that's why I'm emphasizing this playground business, and I'll come back to it.

You're mostly in your playground until you get mastery of that level, and we'll explain what we mean by mastery. You might do—let's say it was the third—you'll still spend a little time in the first and the second, if the third is your playground. And occasionally the mind will just open to something beyond it, and great, have a little fun occasionally. But mostly this is your playground. This is where it's delineated.

We're not going to teach like, "Okay, let's say it's the fifth jhana. Then every time I sit down, I have to go breath, one, two, three, four, and then the fifth." You can just dive right in. So most of your time is in your playground. And even if you think you're at a certain level, there should still be really quite helpful teachings pertaining to what seem to pertain to levels that are below where you're at. So everything we have to say about really basic practice—working with the breath or metta, whatever it is—that should still be useful to you, even if you've gone beyond that.

The way I see jhanas is they're potentially lifelong explorations. There's so much gift available there, so much profundity of resource and beauty, so much subtlety to explore. So much to explore that you don't find written. It's not in the suttas. It's not in a lot of other material you find written. There are all kinds of possibilities here. So I'd like us—I want to invite you to have that really long view. And part of that long view is this playground business.

If you've been on retreat at Gaia House before or lived here, you might know that you can get to Newton Abbot that way, up towards Denbury on the lanes—it's south. You might also know that you can get to Newton Abbot that way, north. You can also get to Newton Abbot that way, east. And you can also get to Newton Abbot that way, west. It's just the way the lanes work around here.

Why am I saying that? Partly because I would say—first I thought, if you can get to the first jhana, then they're all open to you. But actually, I'd like to even modify that statement and say, if you can get pīti, if pīti can arise, if this well-being, this lovely well-being can arise, then the whole territory is open to you. The whole territory of the jhanas is open to you.

What that means, practically speaking, is what's really significant is how do we get that pīti to arise? Or how do we allow that pīti to arise—which is a better way of putting it.

The lovely news is that piti is just like Newton Abbot—though only in some respects. If you've been there, you might be relieved to hear that! What I mean is it doesn't really matter how that piti arises. Anything goes.

Any kind of concentration practice you might have heard of—or haven't heard of—could work. It might be an insight practice. It might be something else entirely. It might even be something that you describe to someone and they respond, "What the hell has that got to do with concentration?" If it gives rise to that

piti, if it allows that piti to open, it's wonderful.

We'll give more details about what I'm saying now. There are all these different possibilities, and in the first few days of the retreat, I'm going to put out quite a few different options for what I call a base practice or springboard practice. This might be breath or metta or insight practices, or different ways of working with the breath, energy body, and so on—practices to work toward getting into the jhanas or springboarding into piti.

This means that for the first five, six, seven days of the retreat, there's quite a lot of teaching. There'll still be one session a day, hopefully, but quite a lot of material because I want to make sure that if someone finds one route to Newton Abbot doesn't work, they have another way. If you're not sure—if you've tried different approaches and you're uncertain—then you can try a few things. This is really important.

Among all that, there will be all kinds of other helpful information and teaching, but it will be more dense in terms of content in the first week or so.

Insight ways of looking can also give rise to piti. By insight ways of looking, I mean very specifically the practices I've written about in my book, *Seeing That Frees*. If you don't know what that means or aren't familiar with it, just forget it for now. We won't be giving extensive teachings about that, but I'm mentioning it now.

Insight can be used as an occasional unblocker—something that unblocks the energy, that unblocks contraction and clinging and allows well-being and piti and samadhi. That's one way of using insight practice. Some people use it as their main approach, the primary thing that opens up samadhi and well-being and piti. Insight practices unfabricate—they lessen fabrication, and that's very key. We'll explain that more later. If you're not familiar with what insight and ways of looking mean, just leave it aside for now.

Here's something important: if you already know that practice X, whatever practice X is, reliably and easily takes you into jhana or gives rise to piti that's stable and workable, stick with it. There's no reason to change. You already have something that takes you to Newton Abbot, so you're good. If you're not sure, then try some of what we'll be gradually offering in the next few days. But really, we want to settle on one base practice, one springboard practice.

The talks on this retreat will focus mostly on technique in the broader sense—the art of jhana practice, the art of samadhi. I'll also speak about view, relationship, and framework—how we're seeing these practices, which is so crucial. I'm talking almost entirely about that.

There will be no big new philosophical conceptual frameworks that blow your sense of existence. Unless some of you don't already know how I would put the jhanas into a framework and how I would see insight—in which case it might be surprising because it's quite different. But generally speaking, I'm not going to bring up really radical questions that get you agitated and turn everything upside down. This is

mostly about the art of jhana practice.

What does that mean? It partly means that, in relation to what I've said earlier, you're responsible for your inspiration on this retreat. You're responsible for your sense of inspiration.

Because I'm not going to be telling any stories, there's no poems, there's none of all that. The Buddha said jhanas are dependent on happiness. Jhanas are dependent on happiness. Of course, jhanas give rise to happiness—tremendous happiness. Really, if you've not experienced the jhanic realms, happiness, I think we can safely say that you will not have tasted something like that before. It's really, really extraordinary, something really remarkable that opens for a human being.

Jhanas bring happiness, but they also depend on happiness. You're responsible for your inspiration. You're responsible for your happiness as the basis of your jhana practice, without stories, without poems, without interesting philosophy. So how are we going to do that? Where does that kind of base happiness come from? I'll say a little bit now, I'll say a little bit later.

Appreciation. So much about this practice is really about taking care of your heart at every level and every direction. What does it mean to take care of your heart? And again, you may not realize just how significant some of this is. If you haven't practiced this way before, if you're used to very different ways of thinking of retreat, thinking what it means to be practicing, you may not realize just how significant this is.

What does it mean to be here in these days together in community in a beautiful place in the countryside and to make sure every day that the heart is encouraged to feel appreciation and to reverberate with appreciation? For your fellow meditators, for the Dharma, for the Buddha, for the beautiful nature, for the coordinators at Gaia House who set this up, for other helpers—I'll introduce them later—all the conditions that came together.

What does it mean to take care of appreciation, to be on retreat, orienting and supporting the heart to be in an appreciative mode? This is way more significant than most people would realize.

Gratitude is all part of the same thing. Taking care of inclining the mind and the heart to gratitude, to seeing what there is to be grateful for and to feeling that gratitude every day. You can do it formally, you can do it informally, it could just be woven into your natural way of being. It becomes that beautiful.

Beauty is so important. The heart, the eyes, the senses are open to beauty. Connection with each other, with nature. Openness—generally openness of being, openness of heart, love of the Dharma. These are the kind of things that nourish, that will allow that base level of happiness on which the jhanas can then be built or opened, whatever metaphor we want to use.

In a word, mudita is the Pali word. Oftentimes it gets translated as sympathetic joy. I would prefer the translation appreciative joy or spiritual joy. It's not just the joy in someone else's happiness. It is that, and

it's all those things I just talked about as well. That's what mudita means in its broader sense, and that's, I think, how the Buddha meant it.

All that while at the same time your primary focus and your primary intention is spending most of your time doing jhana practice, working on that in formal practice. So yes, connection with nature, but if you then feel moved by the great Devon God of mud and rain to create a great mud sculpture outside to express your connection—no, not on this retreat. Another time, great. It might be really soul making. It's another time. Most of your time is in formal practice doing work toward the jhanas. But the heart is open and you're taking care of that nourishment. You understand?

Similarly with connection with each other—it's a silent retreat, as I'll speak about. So most of the time it's formal practice. Can I feel, can I have that openness? Can I have that connection with nature, with each other without having to act on it disruptively?

Openheartedness in a nutshell—the openness of heart, of soul, of being—easily outweighs, easily trumps focus or concentration in terms of its significance for jhana practice. Openness of heart, openness of being.

And it's not to say focus and concentration aren't important, but just their relative importance. If you're familiar with soul-making dharma practice, one way of adding to what we just said is that part of what makes you happy here, while you're on retreat, is that you have a fantasy of the retreat. If you're not familiar with soul-making, just forget about this. It doesn't matter. I'm not going to explain. I'm just throwing it out very briefly. Just don't worry about it.

You need a fantasy in the good sense of the retreat. You need a fantasy of yourself as a practitioner - juicy, soul-making, beautiful image, fantasy of yourself. Something that's operating in the background. A fantasy of the tradition. These teachings, these jhana teachings have been going for thousands of years, passed on from teacher to student. Thousands of years. There's a tradition of these arts, these beauties, these treasures being passed on. Fantasy of all that. Fantasy of the whole tradition. It's all part of it. That's part of your happiness and nourishment.

But on this retreat it doesn't become so dominant that you then go into a whole big imaginal practice about all that. Maybe occasionally if you need to recalibrate your whole practice - if you've gotten into a real rut or whatever it is, or you've gotten really tight - but generally not. So these fantasies operate in the background. They're almost subliminal. That's what I mean when I use the word fantasy as opposed to image. They're almost subliminal. They're just kind of really nourishing and supporting our whole being, lubricating our whole sense of what we're doing, giving moisture there, giving beauty and depth.

So if you don't know what that means because you're not familiar with it, just forget about it. It doesn't matter.

But you're going to have to, because of the schedule, because of the teachings, because we're not going to

be at the front a lot, we're not going to be doing every twenty minutes piping up and saying, "Can you feel your body?" or whatever - you have to generate and sustain the energy without the teachers leading a lot of meditations and with the open schedule. You have to generate the energy and sustain it.

What's really helpful also is to open your intention. Open your intention. Why are you here? What's it serving? Who are you serving? You're sitting, you're walking, you're standing, you're showing up consistently in the hall. People see you out there doing the walking meditation in the walking room. That's a tremendous gift to each other. It's so supportive when someone sees you showing up again and again and again. Inspiration. It communicates commitment. It helps. You're helping each other by doing that.

What's my intention? Open the intention beyond just me and my practice and how I feel. Why am I here? What am I serving? Who am I serving?

Don't assume you are irrelevant. How common it is - one of the pathologies in Western culture, mixed with its opposites often - is to just not realize how relevant we are, how we make a difference. Yes, you as an individual, your presence, your character, your soul, your vibe. Don't assume you're irrelevant. Don't assume you don't make a difference. Don't assume that in silence you don't make a difference.

So open up the intention. This is really important.

And again, it could be just a natural part. It could be something very brief. It could be something you do formally again and again. And then of course the intention for all beings. Why are you here? Who are you doing this for? Who are you serving? What are you serving?

Again, your happiness and your equanimity. You set a goal. I heard about these jhanas. I want to get them. And then it doesn't go so well. And then we need equanimity with that. That's the whole thing. We're going to talk about it. Part of what gives us equanimity is I'm not just doing this for myself. I'm showing up when it is going really not well and it sucks and it's raining again in Devon and whatever it is. And I'm doing this for other people. That's part of what keeps you steady through the ups and downs. You understand? Open up the intention.

Does everyone know what the word inertia means? Watch out for inertia. How often, especially for many of you who have been practicing for years, if not decades, how easily we can kind of just do what we usually do. And we kind of avoid the effort or the discomfort or the disturbance of trying something new in practice sometimes.

So there's even a default way of working with the breath. I just always do it this way. Or a default way of breathing. It's unconscious. I just always breathe. I don't really pay attention to how I breathe. And it's a bit uncomfortable to try and play with the breath and make it different. Or which practice we do. I tend to stay away from metta or whatever it is. Or as I mentioned earlier, there can be inertia about how we listen to Dharma talks. So I maybe always go into this kind of letting it just wash right through.

So maybe if you're used to that, it might be to ask: what would it be to listen on your toes and really listen with a discerning mind? What does that imply? And what's the exact difference?

How is that different from what I've just heard compared to what I'm used to hearing or what I think I know?

So, jhanas—one of the fruits of jhanas is malleability of mind. Malleability, everyone knows what that means? It means shapeability. Actually, one of the most significant fruits of jhana practice—we'll talk about this—is malleability. Malleability of consciousness, perception, mind.

Like so many things, jhanas lead to malleability, and guess what? Malleability leads to jhanas. In other words, it's a condition for jhanas. So malleability is the opposite of inertia. You've got to get in there and try different things. In your playground: "Oh, I've never played on that whirly swing before." Well, get on it and give it a go. That might mean something very subtle about what you're doing, or it might mean a different practice, or whatever it is. Jhanas lead to malleability; malleability leads to jhanas. You won't access jhanas unless you're willing to be malleable and you play and you play and get into trying different things. You've got to be, in a way, practicing on your toes—ready, responsive. We talk a lot about this.

So malleability on one hand. At the same time with it, we want firm, clear, simple intention or resolve. So it's a kind of complement to malleability. In other words, we are here to do jhana practice. I'm very clear. That's my priority. That's what I'm here for. And that's clear. It's very simple. It's complex what it involves, but the intention is simple and it's a resolve and it's firm. It's clear, simple, and firm.

Again, this is immensely significant. It doesn't sound like a big deal. It will make or break your practice depending on this intention, if you're not taking care of that.

When I say jhana practice—again, I'll elaborate on a lot of what I'm talking about here—I mean including the hindrances, including working with the difficulties. So when I say jhana practice, I mean also working with the difficulties, the yucky stuff, the sludge and slogging your way through it. I mean also, when I say jhana practice, the whole relationship with practice, the whole view of the self doing the practice and trying to do the practice. I mean the whole relationship with goals and effort, the whole conceptual framework of all that, the self as meditator. All that is included in what I call jhana practice, not just the lovely bits about how to move from the second to the third jhana.

So malleability and clear, simple, firm resolve in doing jhana practice. What that means, practically speaking, is it's too much to then add, "Oh great, three weeks at Gaia House. Metta has always been easy and familiar to me. And when I've tried breath practice, I always get this kind of constriction in my throat. So maybe I'll use this retreat to see if I can clear up that constriction." No. I mean, it may happen, it may not happen, but don't make it an intention.

Go with—as I said before, or to say what I said before in a different way—go with whatever practice is easiest for the well-being, the pīti, to arise. Listen to what I'm saying. I'm not saying go with whatever

practice you feel you can stick with the object the longest. Go with whatever practice is the easiest for the well-being to arise.

So I'm not trying to fix this constriction in my neck. I'm also not going to... "Oh, three weeks, I can also develop my yoga practice and get into that, or perfect my lotus pose, or kick my caffeine habit." All of these may be really good things, but once we start expanding the intention that way, it actually, in a subtle way, starts to fray something.

Okay. So I mentioned the hindrances. And I really want to stress this point—I'll say it over and over. I am including that in jhana practice. By jhana practice, I mean a very big picture, including the times when it's really not going well and those particular difficulties and how we relate to them and how we work with them. They are—sometimes I call them—they are the dark, rich underbelly of jhana practice. The hindrances, the stuff we really don't like. They have their own gold. They deliver their own gold if I work with them the right way.

And I would dare to say, if you spent a whole three weeks and you never made it to any jhana at all, but you got wise in relation to the hindrances—and I'll explain what I mean by that—this retreat would still be worth its weight in gold.

These hindrances are not confined to our meditation cushions—they are life afflictions that permeate our entire existence. To truly understand how to work with them, to develop wisdom in relationship to them, offers tremendous benefit that extends far beyond our formal practice.

This difficult side of practice, these hindrances, carries just as much value as the loveliness of the jhanas. I am not speaking lightly when I say this—I mean it with complete conviction. When we can open up wisdom in relationship to the hindrances, when we can relate to them with skill, the transformation is profound.

Let me clarify what I mean by wisdom in this context, and I will return to this point repeatedly. Wisdom means, first, that we stop believing the hindrances. We no longer accept as truth the stories they weave. Second, it means we become comfortable with the arising of hindrances without taking them as commentary on our worth, our value as practitioners, or our spiritual capacity. We learn not to believe them and not to take them personally.

If you can move toward these two stances—not believing the hindrances and not taking them personally—this represents an absolutely magnificent transformation. It may not sound glamorous or spectacular, but in terms of what it delivers for your life, the impact is enormous.

All of this forms part of our framework here. And everything I am sharing implies something specific about your practice—about your intention, your view, your attitude. This understanding must translate into moment-to-moment differences in how you hold your stances, perspectives, relationships, attitudes, and heart qualities.

Do not let this remain mere conceptual understanding. Stay alert, stay engaged. You must translate these teachings into lived experience. What does it mean in this very moment to transform your entire view of what we are doing here?

Who among you has not heard teachings on the hindrances before? Who has not heard ten such talks? A hundred? What we seek is actual change, genuine transformation. And we will explore the hindrances more deeply as we proceed.

Now let me broaden our discussion beyond the hindrances to address emotions generally, particularly difficult emotions, within the context of this jhana retreat. Context is crucial here—I want to establish the larger framework of the entire spiritual path and locate this retreat within that expansive view.

I feel this is fundamentally important, and I hold this conviction strongly: Our entire spiritual journey—the movement, opening, learning, and development we cultivate throughout the path—must include a deepening of psychological awareness. Certainly in relationship to ourselves, but equally in relationship to others. This represents a vast subject, and to me, this psychological dimension constitutes an essential aspect of the path.

This is particularly true in our contemporary context, much more so than during the Buddha's lifetime. We inhabit different psychological landscapes. Our entire sense of self has evolved. This implies that liberation itself takes on different meanings in our time. While I will not pursue this tangent now, we can explore it further another time.

The implication for us today is that liberation must encompass a certain depth, breadth, capacity, sophistication, and sensitivity regarding what we might call psychological awareness of self and other.

The path as I understand and teach it must include emotional discernment as a fundamental component. This means developing emotional capacity—a heart that is vast and capable of holding immense range and variety. The awakened being possesses tremendous subtlety in emotional discernment and skillfulness in working with emotions.

The path must also include emotional healing. We are engaged in healing, we have experienced healing, we understand this process, and we develop capacity for working with healing in ourselves and others.

In our emotional work, we cultivate flexibility of view. We become perfectly comfortable regarding emotions as real entities with genuine causes, relating to them and caring for them as substantial realities. Simultaneously, we are equally comfortable understanding them as thoroughly empty, unreal, uncaused by anything ultimately real. This represents a range of skillful perspectives.

We develop proficiency in many different approaches and viewpoints regarding emotions. This, to me, forms the larger context for understanding emotions within the entirety of the spiritual path.

Now we're on a three-week, twenty-three day jhāna retreat. We're setting this retreat in context within

that much larger framework where we want all of that range I just described regarding emotions.

For these three weeks, our first choice with regard to difficult emotions—with regard to joy and peace we'll discuss more as we continue, but with regard to difficult emotions—our first choice is simplifying, psychologically simplifying and letting them quieten, or encouraging them to quieten.

If someone did only this, if this were their sole relationship with emotions for their entire spiritual path, I wouldn't be okay with that. I really wouldn't. But if someone doesn't know how to do this and cannot move into this capacity, I'm also not comfortable with that.

When we allow difficult emotions to quiet, when we simplify all their complexity—and that complexity can be beautiful and very important at times—but on this retreat, this is what we're doing. This is our primary, our first-choice way of working, of relating.

When we simplify and quieten them this way, there's still care present. We're not being harsh or dismissive or brutal in any way. There's still care there.

So it's the first choice, not always the only choice. There are other options and second choices. It's a temporary preference set within a much bigger context. Do you understand?

Some of you, I know, have been working very hard recently as activists in different areas. Some of you in regard to climate change and all kinds of issues—Extinction Rebellion and such—climate change, species extinction, whatever it may be. And you may be, I don't know where you're at now. It's all very recent, all very much alive and in our faces. You may still be feeling that passion and that burning. And there may be grief. I don't know. There may be some grief around all that. It's present, affecting many people. I certainly feel it.

That passion and that grief are really important.

Some of you, certainly in this country and maybe in others, might be feeling grief, maybe even upset at the recent election here. You may or may not.

Some of you, and again I don't know, some of you may be feeling grief in relation to me and my situation—my health and probably dying, and so forth.

And of course there may be other things affecting your heart right now that feel difficult to bear—this sense of loss, of things falling apart, whatever it might be.

I want for you—related to what I said before—I want for you that you have a really very wide and deep range of approaches for your soul. I want that for your souls. So that you're able to open to grief and really open, but you're able to hold it and hold it well, hold it in a way that heals. I want that for you.

And I also want that you can decide sometimes not to pick it up and instead go for the positive, the joyful, the jhānic direction—the quietening of emotions, which happens in jhāna via joy anyway. You go through

the bubbliness and the joy, and then things start to quiet.

So here on this retreat, although I want all this for you, here on this retreat, as I said, the latter approach is primary—the quieting.

This is a big deal.

There's no danger—I think if you're not sure—there's no danger of not being able to find the grief later. It's important to say this. If you have three weeks where you make a certain direction of choice, tend to make a certain direction of choice—not pushing it away, not shutting it down, just not so much going there—there's no danger that you won't be able to find it later on, if it's authentic grief or whatever, after the retreat.

There's no danger that you're going to get locked into some kind of mode of relationship with your emotions or your heart, locked into this mode of not feeling certain emotions. No danger at all. For three weeks you can practice this malleability. There's no danger of those things.

Again, we want the gift of flexibility, of range.

I don't know right now. Let's take a few minutes, shall we? I want to follow this up just for a few moments.

If there is something affecting your heart, something to do with loss—anything, it could be in relation to nature, it could be in relation to social situations, could be a personal relationship or whatever, a loss or impending loss—if there's some sense that something is falling apart or potentially falling apart, some grief, some overwhelm, if there's something like that, let's take a moment. Maybe come into a meditation posture just for a few moments together. I want to do something.

So it doesn't matter what it is. It also doesn't matter if there's nothing in particular, but it may be, as I said, that your heart is impacted, finding it hard to bear what human beings are doing to the earth, to our ecosystem, the planet that keeps us alive and sustains our civilization, what we are doing to the other species.

It may be there's a personal loss or the possibility of a personal loss—some relationship, someone you care about or love. There has been that loss. It may be that you're feeling grief or dismay or anger at some of what's going on, or what goes under the heading of political, but it's not really political—it's ethical. The rise of nationalism, racism, seeming corporate stranglehold on democracy, simply the prevalence of stupidity.

Just in your meditation posture, let the uprightness and the firmness of your posture help you. These are big deals. Big movements, big changes, asking a lot of us. Let your posture help you. Open, grounded, upright.

Bring whatever it is or whichever ones of those, bring them to mind, just bring them lightly to mind. You

don't need to get into the whole story, just get a sense of what is happening, what might be happening and how it affects your heart, how it affects your soul.

Let your attention and awareness include your whole body, the whole space of your whole body. That's your base, that whole space. Open up the awareness. You're letting that whole space be in touch with these challenges, these difficulties, these happenings, these developments—upright, open.

Just notice how your heart is right now. Whole body. Keep that whole body space open. Keep opening the whole body. Don't let it shrink. It will shrink. Keep opening it. And feel your heart in response, or how it responds to these situations, whatever it is. Let there be a little spaciousness, a little softness around your heart's response, whole body.

But then, not so much emphasizing the spaciousness or the softness. Let that be there. But rather, how do I want to work? How do I want to live in response to this loss, this falling apart, whatever it is? How do I want to manifest in relationship to it?

I'm not talking about the practical details—I'm going to do this, I'm going to sign up for that, I'm going to get a job doing this. I mean just the quality of being, the stance of being, the relationship, the resolve. Heart, soul, being. Whole body.

What am I devoted to? With all this that I'm potentially facing, that we are potentially facing, what am I devoted to? It doesn't matter about the details. Can I get a sense of it in a way that makes a difference to my sense right now?

It might be the Buddha. It might be the Dharma. Maybe you use the rupa at the front of the hall of the Buddha there. It might be a certain image that you've worked with. That's what you're devoted to. It might be something a bit more abstract, like goodness or beauty or love. Get a sense of what you're devoted to.

So you're holding your body, your heart, the difficulty, and the sense of devotion. Can you sense that devotion in the body and in the way it shapes the body, in the way it energizes the body, in the way the body forms itself around it, in the way the body aligns with that devotion? Connecting body, devotion, heart, soul, body.

Can you get a sense of how the sense of devotion actually energizes the body right now in a stillness? There's a sense of resolve there. Can you feel it in the body space? We're not going into practical details. I resolve to do this every day.

I resolve.

More the energetic sense of resolve, of devotion. Can you feel in the sense of devotion, in the body, in the sense of resolve, can you feel that there's strength there? Can you feel it in the body? There's uprightness there.

I'm not suppressing anything here, but in this alignment of the heart and the mind, the soul, the being, the body, with what we're devoted to in relation to what is difficult, the resolve and the devotion, the energization, the uprightness—this becomes a kind of minimum base of happiness, a minimum base.

There's well-being in this state. There's equanimity here, well-being, uprightness, energy. In relation to what we said, certainly with regard to jhāna work, this kind of basis of strength, of stability, of very base level of happiness. And it transfers to our life, for our work, whatever we're doing. It expands our capacity to serve. Of course, the jhānas do as well.

You can just gently come out of that now. Do you get a sense of what I'm talking about here? Does it make energetic sense?

So that was very quick. There's one possibility with difficult emotions and so many other skills. But this kind of thing is important, given that some of you have come from a lot of busyness in activism or whatever it is right now and other things that are going on.

I also want to say a very warm welcome. It's really lovely to sit with you here. I'm so delighted that after nearly two years, this can happen. I'm really very touched and grateful and appreciative that Rob, after sixteen years wanting to teach this, finally has three weeks to do so. Really delighted to be here with you.

So here we are, landing together. What I would really like to speak about is how we create this container together. It's so lovely for me to sit in this hall and already have a sense of being welcomed in this vessel of Gaia House. The support it gives—something feels really welcomed. Can you sense this? I'm just arriving here.

I'm also really appreciating what Rob alluded to—that we all are participating in this. We are all contributing, we are all participating to enhance, to make this vessel even more beautiful. We all need, we are all needed in this. We are all active ingredients, important ingredients, needed ingredients, welcomed and appreciated ingredients. I really want to welcome you all into this.

I think one very beautiful ingredient is all those shared intentions of non-harming, this shared celebration of our moral sensibility, our ethical consideration. I think this is something uniquely human. This is something that makes us human. So really inviting the exploration, the examination of this territory of moral sensibility is a way to celebrate our humanness. It's a way to celebrate what is precious in the human heart.

Traditionally, of course, as you all know, these moral sensibilities, this intention of non-harming, is expressed in the five precepts. I want to just name them, to bring them into the room, to make them part of our mandala here.

And of course, you all are aware that these precepts are somehow just headlines or gateways to actually

very powerful, very, very unfathomable explorations of what it may mean to be alive. And as Rob said before, when we were speaking shortly in the teacher wing, they are a great foundation for samādhi. Where we can appreciate our heart, we can appreciate each other, and where we give this precious gift of safety—safety to each other.

And thus they are. Listen. Step into it. Really see if you can step into this beautiful intention, or this beautiful pathway of the intention they actually evoke.

We together undertake the training to not intentionally harm or kill another human being. Let it resonate with the beauty of this intention, this point of reverence.

We together here undertake the training to not take what has not been freely given, and to respect each other's property and respect all that is given to us.

We undertake the training to not harm another with expressions of our sexuality. This doesn't mean make my sexuality wrong—it's not a moral statement. But we give each other the freedom not to look at each other in this way, so that we can be at ease with each other.

We undertake the training to not intentionally hurt ourselves and others with our words. And of course this might be mostly internal speaking. We pay attention—how do we speak in our practice to ourselves and to each other?

And we undertake the training—or no, we actually make the resolve. It's not a training so much. We take the resolve to not take any substances that cloud our mind, because we really want to explore the depth of what is possible for this human consciousness. We want to explore, we want to inhabit, we want to really know it deeply—what is possible here. And of course, this doesn't mean that you stop taking any medication. Of course, look after yourself.

So how does this ring with you? And when Rob was speaking, and I was just sitting here a little bit, first of all, to see already this appreciation in your faces. I don't think it's a project. Rob came in just with so much appreciation to be here with us and with him. And then also maybe having this sense for a moment to appreciate each other in our intention, in our precious gift that people can actually feel safe around us. This precious gift of the intention of non-harming.

And delighting to be welcomed in a community where this is a shared intention. But also I think really, really important to delight in the goodness of your own intention. To delight that your heart actually feels really moved to incline itself in this way.

Thank you. I'm really looking forward to practice with you. May you all have a wonderful retreat with delight and joy.

Hi, everyone. It's really lovely to sit here together, and I felt so much appreciation listening to Rob and being here together, starting and embarking on this journey together. A really warm welcome from my side as well.

And at the same time, with appreciation, I can feel a sense of little bit of wobbliness sitting for the first time on this side in the hall of Gaia House instead of that side with you. But seeing all your friendly faces brings so much encouragement, and I feel a sense of support and friendliness and heartfulness in the hall. So I'm very much looking forward to our time together, journeying through the territory of jhānas and all the exploration and sharing and learning together.

And I was just wishing to say a few words about silence. Silence that is such an essential part of this retreat container, and also so much supporting what we are doing here together as we are exploring the mind. And as we are creating conditions for the samādhi, for the silence of the mind also to deepen.

And hopefully the silence can be also at the same time a resource for us that is really deeply nourishing our heart and mind—can be almost like a companion on the journey for us, hopefully. And this is also something that we are cultivating and creating and nourishing together, the kind of part of the container, that we can be offering ourselves the silence and offering each other the silence, the gift of silence.

This can really help ourselves and each other in becoming more sensitive. It's really so supportive. And hopefully, we can still enjoy each other and feel each other's support as it was talked about. That we can support each other in the silence and feel a sense of community.

It would be so much more difficult to do this retreat by ourselves at home. So we were thinking there would be a practical way to support our exploration, a practice of supporting silence.

We are offering this possibility and very much encouraging you to hopefully make use of it. We will be bringing here a basket where you are invited and encouraged to bring and leave your mobile phones for the duration of the retreat. You can bring your phone, mark it with your name, and we will take care of it—you will surely get it back at the end of the retreat. This can actually be part of this ritual of simplifying and renunciation and letting go, and also contribute to creating the conditions that can support ourselves and each other to make the most of this journey.

This basket will be available right after this session, and certainly until tomorrow morning. You are very welcome to bring your little technological friends there and leave them with us.

I am really, really happy and grateful to be sharing this journey together and to meet you in the interviews. I wish you all a very fruitful retreat.

We have already been sitting for a little while. I would like to do a guided meditation, but I think we probably need to move a little bit. So why don't we take two minutes and just move your body however you feel like you need—whatever's going to be good, because we will probably be sitting a little bit longer.

Just shake, wiggle, stretch—whatever your body needs.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.