An Introduction to the Jhānas

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So we're not too pushed for time, but I don't want to be too long. I want to talk about just an introduction to the jhanas and a little bit of an overview. Again, a sort of "What are we doing here? Why are we doing it? What are we talking about? What's the area we're talking about?"

To start with a bit of vocabulary, there's this word jhanas, and I'll talk about that of course, but there's also this word samadhi, which many of you will know. There's also a word samatha. Samatha tends to mean calm or tranquility. Samadhi is more of an umbrella term, at least that's how I use it. I think that's how it was originally used in the text. Jhanas are a kind of subset of samadhi, if you like.

Samadhi is actually quite hard to define, but it's something like a state of harmonious well-being of mind and body. Mind and body are gathered, coherent, harmonious in some state of well-being. Actually, even that's not quite accurate. You can think, oh, in the formless jhanas, is there bodily well-being? Well, there is kind of. You can still have pain somewhere, but it's not really overtaking. So it's hard to get an exact definition. But I use it as a kind of umbrella state.

There are lots of insight states we could talk about, for example, that are still states of samadhi. Because of the insight, because of the letting go, there's a kind of harmonization, a cohesion, a unification of mind and body and awareness and bodily experience. All that cohered, unified, harmonized in some sense of well-being. There are lots of different flavors of well-being as we'll talk about. That's what I mean by samadhi. The eight jhanas are a subset of that.

The Buddha described, he talked a lot about the jhanas—a lot, a lot, a lot. Way more than he talked about mindfulness, interestingly. So I'm going to read you quite briefly the Buddha's description. He's talking to a bunch of monks: "What, monks, is right concentration?" This is the Buddha talking.

"There is the case where a monk, quite withdrawn from sensuality, withdrawn from unskillful qualities—it's actually withdrawn from sensual desire, withdrawn from unskillful qualities, the Pali—enters and remains in the first jhana: rapture and happiness born from that withdrawal, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation, accompanied by thought. He permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the rapture and happiness born from withdrawal. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture and pleasure born from withdrawal."

So he describes it kind of technically, the jhana, then he gives a simile:

"Just as if a skilled bathman or bathman's apprentice would pour bath powder into a brass basin and knead it together..." So in those days they had bath houses, and that's where you would go to have a bath

and a wash. There would be someone there who mixes soap powder with water to make your personal bar of soap for your bath. This person, this bathman, has this soap powder and water, and it's kind of a skill to get it mixed right so that it's not just a liquid mess, but that it's got enough moisture in it that you can give it a good rubbing. So there's some skill in that.

"So this bathman, the bathman's apprentice, pour bath powder, soap powder, into a brass basin, knead it together, sprinkling it again and again with water so that his ball of bath powder, saturated, moisture-laden, permeated within and without, would nevertheless not drip. Even so, the monk permeates this very body with the rapture and happiness born of withdrawal. There's nothing, no part of the body untouched," et cetera.

So that's the first jhana. Basically you've got rapture—and we'll talk about this, piti—this really nice physical feeling that is not coming from sensual contact. I'll talk much more about this. And you've got happiness, and the mind is, that feeling is pervading the body, and the mind is really settling down there and feeding on it and getting into it and really alive to that. That's the first jhana.

Second jhana: "With the stilling of directed thought and evaluation, with the stilling of thought, he enters and remains in the second jhana: rapture and happiness born of tranquility, unification of awareness, free from directed thought and evaluation. And with confidence, with this internal assurance, he permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the rapture and happiness born of composure. Nothing in the body remains untouched."

Looking at this beautiful image of the lake with spring water, we must remember this comes from a hot country where such coolness is deeply appealing. The Buddha describes a lake with spring water welling up from within—having no inflow from east, west, north, or south. The skies periodically supply abundant showers, and the cool fountain of water rising from within permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills the entire lake with cool waters. No part remains untouched by these cool waters. Just so, the practitioner permeates this very body with the rapture and happiness born of composure, leaving nothing of the body untouched.

In the third jhana, with the fading of rapture—the fading of piti—the practitioner remains in equanimity, mindful and alert. This mindfulness differs from our usual understanding of the term. There's physical sensitivity to happiness as one enters and remains in the third jhana. The noble ones declare of such a practitioner: "Equanimous and mindful, he has a happy abiding"—a joyful abiding. The body becomes permeated and pervaded, suffused and filled with pleasure divested of rapture, divested of piti, so nothing of the entire body remains untouched by this happiness free from rapture.

The simile here speaks of a lotus pond containing blue, white, or red lotuses. Some of these lotuses, born and growing in water, remain completely immersed, their petals never rising above the surface. They flourish while staying submerged, permeated and pervaded, suffused and filled with cool water from roots to tips. Nothing of these lotuses remains untouched by cool water. Similarly, the practitioner

permeates the body with happiness divested of rapture, leaving no part untouched by this pleasure.

In the fourth jhana, with the abandoning of both happiness and stress—this refined happiness and any remaining stress—one enters and remains in the fourth jhana: purity of equanimity and mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. The practitioner sits permeating the body with pure, bright awareness so nothing of the entire body remains untouched by this pure, bright awareness.

The simile describes someone sitting wrapped from head to foot in white cloth, with no part of the body left uncovered. Just so, the practitioner sits permeating the body with pure, bright awareness, leaving nothing untouched by this luminous consciousness.

These constitute the four form jhanas. Beyond these lie four formless jhanas, which we'll explore in much greater detail later. For now, I'll briefly share the Buddha's descriptions.

After the fourth jhana comes complete transcendence of perceptions of physical form, the disappearance of perceptions of resistance—of solidity—and the ceasing to heed perceptions of diversity, of manifoldness. One enters and remains in the sphere of infinite space: the fifth jhana.

In the sixth jhana, with complete transcendence of infinite space, consciousness becomes the focus as one enters the realm of infinite consciousness. The instruction emphasizes sticking with this theme, developing it, pursuing it, establishing oneself firmly within it.

The seventh jhana brings the realm of nothingness. Here, space itself has collapsed, leaving not emptiness within space, but pure nothingness itself.

The eighth jhana is called the sphere, realm, or base of neither perception nor non-perception. Here, there's not even nothing—we reach the very limit of perception's possibilities. This state transcends even the perception of nothingness itself.

These are the eight jhanas as the Buddha described them. Some descriptions remain quite brief, and we'll need to fill them out as we proceed.

Teaching, I find, is deeply contextual. What I emphasize depends on who sits before me, what I sense you need, your background, and what you may have encountered elsewhere. When discussing jhanas, I address assumptions you might carry from other teachings—assumptions that may not prove helpful.

I'll be teaching from my direct experience with jhanas and years of guiding others through them. I'll focus on what seems most significant: what opens this treasure? What treasures lie here? What makes a truly liberating difference?

I'll contradict myself frequently. I might say these eight jhanas must be very clear and discrete, with quantum jumps between them. Later, I might describe the whole journey as one continuous spectrum without sharp divisions.

So don't get too hung up on that. I might say that some of us—some of you, maybe most of you, and maybe most people—really need to forget the whole question that goes on: "Do I have it now? Is this it? Am I in a jhana or am I out of a jhana?" Focus rather on enjoying, on just really maximizing your enjoyment and getting the most enjoyment in the moment, developing what needs to develop to enable you to enjoy it more. Just drop that whole question: "Is this it? Where's the edge here? Do I have it?" Don't dwell on where that sharp definition is.

So I might say that. And then I might—and I will—also say something like: when we talk about jhanas as we're teaching it, we really mean something breathtakingly nice, breathtakingly beautiful, really a revelation. If you've not experienced the second jhana or even the third jhana, it's really a revelation. You might have had all kinds of happiness in your life, been very content, all kinds of wonderful things that you rejoiced in, lots of peaceful times and nice holidays and relaxing moments. We're talking about something of a whole different order. We're really talking about "wow, wow"—something very, very beautiful, something really exciting. And you should be excited. I like people to be excited about practice. It's a good sign, a healthy sign.

I can think of quite a few instances over the years where someone's come to me—they've been exposed to jhana teachings elsewhere or whatever—and they come into an interview and say, "I think I broke through to the sixth jhana yesterday." And I thought, "Oh, how was it?" And they say, "Yeah, it was nice." And I'm like, "No, that can't be. It absolutely can't be."

Now, either they're kind of faking a Buddhist equanimity—"I'm not supposed to be attached, so I'll just say it's nice," but secretly thinking "wow." But in this person's case, I genuinely think it just wasn't that big a deal. That's not what we're talking about.

So actually those definitions do become quite important. We're really talking about something—yes, it's really something else, you know? When there isn't the excitement, when there isn't that sense of "wow," it's not going to make a difference to your life. This person was describing something that might have been a relatively new experience, but there was nothing in that experience—or having that experience—that was going to make much difference to her ability to let go, to her life, to her sense of existence, to her sense of herself and world. It was just, "Oh okay, that was the sixth jhana, tick."

I'm really interested in all this making a difference.

So I might say, "Look, it's important that we're talking about this territory," and I might say, "Forget about all that and don't worry about the definitions."

I'm going to contradict myself a lot, and I reserve that right. I might also say, on the one hand, "It's not about just focusing more intensely or nailing your mind, your attention to something for hours and then expecting something to happen. It's not about prioritizing the intensity or the steadiness of focus." And I might also say to the same person at a different time, or to another person, "More intensity—just more

intensity to the focus. Energize that focus."

Most people, I think it's the first one—too hung up. I'll explain this as we go along today and other days. It's too much thinking in the wrong way about what we're trying to do. We're prioritizing the wrong things. The priorities we're making may not be that helpful, not that fruitful.

So why all this contradiction? Well, because the nature of all things is that we can look at them in different ways. That's partly what it means to say they're empty. You can look at it like this and it's true, and you can look at it like that and it's true, and those can sometimes even be opposites.

But partly also just because different people at different times—or the same person at different times—sometimes need to hear this, and sometimes need to hear that, regarding the same issue. It might be opposite. It's always the case with teaching. Always the case.

That's partly why it's interesting teaching a group. In a Q&A I might say something, but someone sitting next to that person might need to hear exactly the opposite.

Yesterday I used this word "mastery."

Yesterday I used this word "mastery." I just sort of threw it out there. It's a traditional word—I can't remember what the Pali means—but let me say what I mean by it. I said we're aiming, or I would like us to aim or to think about, kind of mastering each jhana.

What I mean by that has several different components. I mean a really thorough familiarity with all the jhanas, but if we're talking about any particular jhana—to say I mastered the second jhana or whatever—it means a really thorough familiarity and intimacy with all of its aspects.

A jhana actually can manifest differently. It has different aspects, different flavors and tones within it, which if I just dip in and dip out, I don't get to see. Oh, sometimes it's like this and it has that quality and that quality, and these different ranges of depths. So different levels within each jhana. You can divide certain jhanas into different levels, and they're almost discrete manifestations as well. I mean a thorough familiarity with all that.

I mean also by mastery—I'm including in that meaning—really a whole set of skills, a whole kind of artistry that's involved with regard to that jhana in terms of working with it.

I mean also, thirdly, that one can enter it at will. One doesn't need to go—let's say it's the third jhana we're talking about—you don't need to go number one, number two, number three, or breath, number one, number two, number three. You can actually just remember it. The cells and the citta just remember it, and you just have a subtle intention, and it comes back—or a second jhana, whatever it is. I'm just intending for it to come up, and there it comes.

So with a lot of practice, that's what I mean by mastery—that's included. You can go directly from nothing

to any jhana, just with a subtle intention. It's not so much—it doesn't need to be so much like a big effort. It's probably more like a fader switch, more like a dimmer switch. But that's partly what I mean.

It doesn't need to be preceded by its preceding jhanas, doesn't need to be preceded by its base practice, whatever base practice, springboard practice of metta or breath or whatever you're doing.

I also mean that you can access and sustain that jhana pretty much in any posture and when you're going for a walk. It means you're doing a loop around here for an hour in the lanes and you can be doing that pretty much in the fourth jhana or whatever it is, if we're talking about mastery of the fourth jhana.

I also mean that a jhana—as part of mastery again—that you can really sustain it and remain in it. I'm going to come back to this. There's a word I want to use: marinate. You need to marinate. I'm going to come back to this. This is really, really important.

We need to sit in a jhana a long time. It's doing a lot of work on the cells, on the being, on the citta. It's fine to go through for two seconds onto the next one. That's all fine. But the real work happens when we really just get in and sit there for a long time and really let that change our habits—our mental habits and our energetic habits. It's doing something different to mind and body, and that takes time, and it takes putting myself in it and staying there for a while.

Mastery also means navigating. I can move from that jhana to any of the other jhanas that I already know, and I don't have to go sequentially. So let's say I'm working on my mastery of the third—then I can go from the third to the first, or from the first to the third, or whatever. So that includes what I call leapfrogging. I can leapfrog. This is partly what I mean.

Mastery might also mean that I can modulate. So again, if you go back to this idea that a jhana isn't really one thing, it's a territory, it's a realm. And like a lot of realms, it has different, as I said, flavors, aspects, regions, levels. And I can modulate, move between those different levels and actually eventually also bring in other qualities to mix with—like mixing cocktails. I can add a bit of this and a bit of that and get an even nicer cocktail or a different cocktail.

In that process of learning to master it, it probably will be the case that what I originally thought was, say, the first jhana—after I've gone through all that mastery process, by the time I've finished, the first jhana actually feels quite a bit different and I understand something different.

Ajahn Geoff used to say to me, "Stick Post-it labels on them at first." You know those sticky labels? They just come off. Don't erect a whole sign that says "that's the first jhana." Okay, I think this is the first jhana, but let's just put a Post-it label now and we'll go through this process and then they'll change over time as you work on them. They also change retrospectively.

Once I get used to the third jhana, the first jhana is transformed indirectly by my repeated experience in the third jhana. So we have to be somewhat easy and loose with the labels.

This mastery applies to all eight jhanas. As I said yesterday, we are where we are. Each person is where you are. What we're really interested in is your playground at your edge—because that's the big picture. Eventually I want mastery of all that. But we are where we are, and the way I'm going to get mastery is by playing in that playground that's on my edge. That's what's going to give me mastery of that playground. At a certain point, when I get that mastery, the playground just shifts—either by itself or I just have to shift it slightly—and then I'm in a new playground. That's my work, that's my play, that's my digestion. This is the way I would like you to think about this approach.

The Buddha has a sutta—I can't remember what it's called, but it might be called the Stupid Cow Sutta or something like that, the Foolish Cow. Very briefly, he describes a foolish, inexperienced mountain cow who's happily eating pasture in a field and looks up and sees another field over there. The cow thinks, "Oh, I bet the grass is nice over there. Let me go down there and eat some of that nice-looking grass." But because this cow is foolish and inexperienced, it tries to do that without being very sure of its footing, even where it's standing. The cow gets stuck in some ditch between the fields, can't get to where it was planning to go—that other nicer-looking pasture—and can't get back to where it was happily eating before. It's just stuck in this ditch. "Just so, monks," the idea is: wait until you master a place before moving on.

And now a contradiction. Sometimes there's really a kind of magic involved in all this. Sometimes you'll find—just try it. Just try something. You think, "I couldn't possibly get..." Just try it. Sometimes the mind will just do something that you think, "Wow, that's amazing." So yes, mostly this idea about mastery and playgrounds. And sometimes, for some people at different times, it's like: just try something that feels beyond you.

Once you really get into all this—if you have the patience, and really what it boils down to is the love and the desire, the eros—and you do develop this kind of mastery, then it really begins to feel like the jhanas are almost like dimensions of being. They're beautiful, amazing dimensions of being. Treasures, treasure realms, enchanted realms. They're there and they're available for us.

This becomes part of one's life and part of one's sense of what existence is and what the cosmos includes. They certainly give a sense of dimensionality to our own being, but they also become almost cosmic in a way. One gets to feel that there are realms that are already there. They already exist.

They really feel like realms that are already there, as if they just exist, like a realm exists. This begins to become obvious around the third jhana. It's much less obvious in the first or second jhana, but after the third jhana, you really feel this is like an enchanted, paradisiacal realm that's just there. I get the blessedness of being able to enter that and hang out in that and come out of that. It's only that we need to find them. They're there.

Or they're like radio stations—like frequencies. You get these presets, right? You can put in Radio 1 or whatever it is. It's just like that. Or the old style where you actually tune with the big knob and the little

knob that was the fine tuner.

They're like radio stations. They're in the air anyway.

So it begins to be something like, I'm huffing and puffing to make this jhana happen. It's like they're there. And what we're doing is tuning to something that's already there. So we can have this sense of them, is what I'm saying.

Or I used to feel like it was a bit like a wardrobe. So it's like you've got your wardrobe of clothes and they're all just lined up there. And you can reach in, okay, today I want to wear my pink glitter onesie outfit. And it's right there. And I can just pull it and use it. They're all kind of just available. So we begin to have this sense of them.

If you come to me at the end of a retreat and say, oh, it's fantastic, I never had any jhana before, and I got to the eighth jhana, I'll say, oh, what a shame. Because, I mean, it would be good, obviously, but actually, there would be no way that you would have gotten into the way we're talking about with this playground and this kind of mastery.

And this is my opinion, my emphasis. This is what's really going to make a difference. This is what's really going to be a treasure that affects the being. Going too quickly through, we're not actually getting that treasure in the maximum value. It's a bit like a tourist going on holiday and you go and on your mobile phone you take the photo of whatever it is and then you send it on Facebook to your friends and they like and you like what they sent you. It's all like, okay, been there, done that, but it's not the same as really being there and living it.

So they're not kind of achievement badges. We really want something such a profound treasure. We want it to work on the being. So we have to linger. We have to live there. We have to, as I say, marinate. Absorb, not just get absorbed, but almost absorb the jhana itself into our being. Get to know it intimately so that the cells, the mind, the habit patterns of mind, and energy are affected.

In that way, it makes a really long-term difference to one's life, a long-term difference. I remember talking to someone reporting after another jhana retreat that they did, and it was their first time, and they say I had a great time and they just whipped through all of them. But it won't be—and this is a while later now and I can tell—this person, it hasn't become a profound resource. So they had a good time those ten days or whatever it was. Nothing has altered in their sense of existence. Nothing has altered from that jhana practice in their sense of existence of self and world.

Maybe they didn't want anything to be altered in their sense, because sometimes we get quite attached to our sense of how we think the world and the self. We're attached to a certain view, philosophy, whatever it is. This person had a good time, but so what?

So marinate means a long time and many times in one jhana. It's part of the mastery.

Some of you may not be aware of this. Some of you will be very aware of it or a little less so. There's all kinds of opinions and arguments out there in the Dharma world about how to demarcate. Is this jhana? Is that jhana? What did the Buddha mean? How do we define it? Some of you will be oblivious to all that. Some of you will be exposed to that. All kinds of opinions. Do I have it? Is this it? Different teachers saying different things, writing different things.

Who are you going to trust? And why? How are you going to, if you are exposed to that difference of opinion, who are you going to trust and why are you going to trust or which version, which definition are you going to trust? And more importantly, why?

Or if I change that question: what matters here?

What's important?

So we come to all this charged opinion about this stuff. What actually matters here?

One could say, well, if your experience matches the Buddha's descriptions—as I just very briefly rushed through and read out—if there is an extraordinary opening to well-being or different kinds of well-being, if there's a really deep sense of different kinds of beauty, if there's a really profound sense of resource that's coming from that, if the practice of whatever it is you're doing brings in an integrated way insight and freedom and it makes sense as part of the path in an integrated way, then if we need to make definitions and demarcations, that would seem pretty good to call that a jhāna, right? If it's all that. And I can still improve its quality. I can still say, okay, that's a jhāna, but I can still work on improving it.

So sometimes with all these opinions and what we bring to these questions, I have another question, which is: can I be more intelligent than I am being in relation to these questions? Some of you have not even been exposed to all this stuff yet, so why is he going on about that? But some of you will be. Can I bring more intelligence to these questions? I'll say what I mean by intelligence in a moment, but I mean more than scholarship.

So we're here, I'm teaching this, I'm giving a certain emphasis and a certain range. I would say, as I already said, I teach jhānas—or the jhānas that we're talking about here—as really breathtakingly extraordinary experiences. They lead naturally onwards. There's a way organically that one jhāna will just ripen and mature into the next, just like what the Buddha described. And one has that sense as one's going: oh, wow. Here I am two and a half thousand years later, 2500 years later, and my experience—I can really get the sense of what he's talking about there.

If there is a kind of strong and deep building of confidence through these practices and love of the path, if those are fruits too that you can feel, if freedom comes out of it and a capacity more and more to let go, to be okay with more and more, if transformation comes, if insight that liberates comes and the insight that comes is congruent and integrated into the path—all that, it's like that's the package that I want to encourage.

But also that there is, and again, here's that word again, responsiveness and intelligence. That's part of the deal too. Some jhānas, when some people describe them, are completely unresponsive states, where it's supposed to be so deeply absorbed one actually doesn't know where one's been and one can't make any changes or responsiveness within that state. I'm going to come back to this. Why would I want something like that? It might sound better—because it sounds better, doesn't it? Is it? Can we bring intelligence and boldness to our questioning? Something sounds better. A lot of people are saying maybe it's better. Is it better?

So by intelligence, I mean a certain boldness. I also mean—I don't mean, I mean much more than scholarship. Well, I go back to the Buddha and this Pali word means that. That's all good, but I mean more than that. I mean a wisdom to discern what is essential. Right now we're talking about jhānas, but this actually applies to the whole of the path. Can I develop a wisdom to discern what is essential? What is important? What's important to know? What's important to understand? What's important to develop? What is secondary?

Oftentimes this faculty is not very developed in meditators. People get emphasized, or in my opinion, I find a lot of students emphasizing what's kind of mistaking what's secondary for what's primary, emphasizing what's not so important.

Then what I said yesterday about listening on your toes—do you remember that? Everything that I'm saying, this should set you recalibrating, rethinking, reorienting. What does that mean? Please don't just be passive about it. This is actually quite a big deal. Do I have that wisdom to discern what's essential? What's secondary?

Do I have a nose for it? Do I have a nose, an intuition and intelligence? Can I develop a nose for it? Because sometimes these arguments I've encountered feel like quibbling over what's insignificant, what's secondary.

In the Anapanasati Sutta, it says parimukham. The meditator sits down at the base of the tree with the breath and puts their attention parimukham—around the mouth. The Buddha indicates this is the place to pay attention. Yet people argue about this. Does it really matter? Is it really important? Does it make a difference?

Does it make a difference if I keep the breath as my primary object? Some people say absolutely—you can't let go of the primary object. If you're doing jhana, you need to keep the breath, the primary object. We'll see actually that you can do it both ways. We'll come back to that.

Some people say it's only jhana if the senses close, if you can't hear anything. Well, the Buddha didn't say that. And does it matter? It sounds better, perhaps. If I make the definition "it's only jhana when the senses close," that sounds like a superior attainment. Most people would say it sounds better. I don't know if it actually is.

What I want to say is this: can we bring discernment and intelligence to these questions? Which are important and which are not? What's important? What's secondary? What fruits will I get from pursuing questions that are actually not that significant? I want to taste the fruit, be nourished by the juicy flesh of the fruit, and not worry about the pips and the pith of the apple.

These questions relate to our conception and emphasis. What is the main point of jhana practice? If you read certain texts or listen to different teachers, either explicitly or implicitly, you'll hear various views about what the main point is.

For some teachers, the emphasis is really changing the habit of papañca—mental proliferation. The primary purpose of jhana practice is to change and actually eradicate that habit of papañca. The whole thing is a movement to simplicity, developing a mind that's simple, that doesn't get complicated and embroiled in papañca. That's one view, sometimes explicitly stated, sometimes you discern it by listening to the totality of someone's teaching.

Another perspective: the point of jhana practice is developing a kind of power in the mind that, like a laser beam, allows attention to dissect phenomena. In dissecting them, that's what insight is—I examine things with incredible precision, seeing down to the finest details. The point of jhana practice is to develop this laser-like attention.

There might be combinations here as well.

Someone might say no. What we're developing in jhana is the ability to sustain unwaveringly the focus on something—to hold the mind or attention on something without wavering. The assumption there is that automatically holding the attention on something will reveal the reality of that thing, will reveal the way things are. If I can just stare at this thing long enough, it will reveal its nature, reveal the way it really is.

Sometimes this isn't explicitly said. You have to hang out with the whole totality of a person's teaching or a certain drift of teaching. That's the assumption. That's how it fits in with the whole path.

But is that true? If I stare at an atom—or let's say an electron—long enough, just staring at it will not reveal the nature of the electron or anything else, any more than if I stare at an egg long enough. I have to do stuff with something. And certainly in quantum physics, it's only when I start doing different things that I start to encounter what's most interesting about the true nature of the electron. I start to realize, oh, it's actually dependent on how I look—whether I look and what I do and what's around it. So it's not just staring at something.

Again, why am I saying all this? Because so much we arrive at situations like this with the idea that it's really about how long can I stay steady with my attention on something. I don't want to say that's unimportant, but I just want to shake up the sense of what we're doing and what's priority here and what may be important and may be less.

Another context might be someone saying very rarely, stage by stage, you go through eight jhanas and then you go to the next stage, which is the experience of the unfabricated. That's quite rare, but it's there.

For me, I would say, as I said last night, there are resources that come with the practice of jhanas that really enable, really help us to let go. We say let go, let go, let go. But once I'm this rich in this beauty, once I have these treasures available to me, it becomes much easier to let go. I don't need the food to be nice. I don't need this or that. I have—who cares? I have so much abundant well-being, oh my cup runneth over, so much overflowing delight and pleasure and happiness. I can let go of all kinds of things then. So that's one of the functions, this deep resource as I would see it. I can let go of clinging to things.

I also secondly begin to understand the whole process of fabrication of perception—how the mind can fabricate less and fabricate more. And in moving through the jhanas I begin to understand that. That's also one of the reasons, one of the points.

And a third reason is the mystical openings, the kiss of the mystic. For me, that's a really important point and reason. I want my sense of existence, my sense of world, of self, of other to open up. And it will be in the impress and the opening of these beautiful realms and experience. That's a point for me. That's one of the main points.

Jhanas alone will not liberate one totally. They won't bring you to the end of dukkha. And I think probably most Dharma teachers would agree on that. There may be someone who disagrees, but I don't know. But I definitely say most people agree on that. Jhanas alone will not liberate totally.

But I want to say, nor will insight alone. Nor will insight alone. Nor will both jhanas and insight, the combination...

Okay, let's end there. No, we need the combination. We need the combination. If we're really talking about big, wide, deep liberation, we need the combination of insight and samadhi. And as I said last night, we need the psychological work. We're a whole different species now than we were in the Buddha's day.

Yes, of course, there's much that remains the same, but the whole way we feel ourselves, our aspirations and what we consider normal in human relationship—with ourselves and others—and what we want from life has fundamentally shifted. I won't elaborate on this now, but there's an entire range of psychological work that, if we're speaking of liberation in our current context—for you and me—needs to include all of this.

So yes, samadhi; yes, insight; yes, psychological work; and yes, the cultivation of virtues and beautiful qualities—metta, generosity, compassion, all of that. Those four together, let's say.

So why the jhanas and why the mastery? Because it's part of that mix. That's one reason. And the jhanas, when they're mastered, will give more insight in relation to fabrication. They'll provide more resources. We open ourselves more to the mystic impress and the kiss of the mystic.

But there's something I really want to emphasize—perhaps a style or approach that I want to highlight. When I reflect on what I truly emphasize when I teach jhanas, apart from what I've just said, I would emphasize sensitivity: subtle discernment of different qualities of being, different qualities of heart, of energy, different frequencies of vibration and energy. Sensitivity, subtle discernment, refinement, attunement. These are the qualities I would really like to emphasize, to bring into the picture of how I would like to teach and what I would like to communicate and transmit.

All those qualities—sensitivity, attunement, subtle discernment, refinement—are beautiful, beautiful capacities of the soul. These, combined with this framework I would like to offer about the jhanas, allow jhana practice to fit very easily and congruently, in a very natural and integrated way, into emptiness practices. They simply work together. We're speaking of the same thing.

Sensitivity, attunement, refinement, subtle discernment—we need all of this in emptiness practices and the way they deepen. In soul-making dharma practices, we need sensitivity, subtle discernment, refinement, attunement, all of that. In emotional work, whether with ourselves or with another person, again we need sensitivity, refinement, attunement, subtle discernment. In healing as well—healing the emotions, healing the heart—those capacities are very much part of what I would regard as integral to healing. In relational skill: sensitivity, subtle discernment, refinement.

You see how these same developments are actually part of jhana, emptiness, soul-making, emotional work, healing, and relational understanding. There's something very integrated here.

But more than that, all this opens the jhanas themselves—in this approach and what I'd like to emphasize—to something concerning the beauty of existence. If you ask me what's the point of jhanas, it's something about opening more and more to the beauties of existence, inner and outer. There's something, as I mentioned earlier, of magic here. And that's what I would encourage: you start to feel yourself as something of a magician, a magician in these realms, a magician who can conjure these realms or who has access to these realms.

There's something of magic in the whole endeavor, and there's certainly something of art. This is the kind of flavor, orientation, scope, feeling, attitude, view that I would really encourage.

Those are some of the reasons why. Related to all this, you can see that a person's emphasis or definition of jhana practice depends on their idea of what insight is. If I have the idea that insight is a kind of drilling down through the strata or layers of rock of illusion or construction, then what do I need? I need a sharp tool, a laser beam. Then my conception of jhana practice aligns with that idea of what insight is doing—I view jhana practice as the development of super intense, super sustained focus. What I tend to emphasize then in teaching jhanas is intensity, sharpness, concentration, focus.

If I think of insight as seeing clearly—meaning seeing in more detail—then again I tend to emphasize something similar in teaching jhanas. Maybe I need to see in detail, for my insight, the process of

aggregates in time. Perhaps that's what I regard insight as: if I can see the momentary arising and passing of the five aggregates in time, that's insight. And so my jhana practice needs to set me up like a magnifying glass, very fine, so I can see that.

If that's what I think insight is, if that's what I think ultimate reality is, you see, we're working backwards here and it makes an implication on what we think a jhana is and then what we tend to emphasize within the jhana practice.

Or again, as I said before, if I think I can just stare at something long enough, the truth of it will be seen because I'm just staring at it plainly. If I think plain staring reveals reality, if that's what I think reality is—something that is revealed through plain staring, plain looking. Or I'm sharpening my mind, so I just zip through eight jhanas back and forth and then do some insight practice. I've sharpened my sword so I can kind of atomize things.

There's a relationship here between the way the goal is seen, the way insight is conceived of, the way jhana is conceived of, and then what we come to emphasize within jhana practice. That's why I said, but if I want a liberation that actually does have sensitivity in it and attunement and relational skill and psychological awareness and wants to understand something about emptiness as something very different to do with ways of looking and fabrication, then I'm going to have to think about jhanas in a very different way. Or rather, it's better, it's more congruent to think about them in a certain way.

I'm rushing through a bit, but this makes sense, right?

So it's true. You can pick up certain phrases where the Buddha says in suttas, "with his mind imperturbable" or "with the jhanas you can cut through a mountain" and all that. They're not that common. But they get extracted and then repeated over and over. And dependent on what you've been exposed to, you come to believe that's what's important—imperturbability, the unwaveringness.

Do you understand? And actually, the Buddha just said it in a little phrase once or twice in the whole Pali Canon. And somehow over history, it comes to get repeated by teachers. And that's what we think. Or no thought. We tend to think that's the most important thing.

I remember after I'd finished a year retreat and I went for a dharma yatra in France and they said, "Well, will you come and tell the people about your year retreat." And I said, "Sure." I think I just answered questions or something. I can't remember. But the first question was, "A year. Wow. Did you ever experience a time when the mind stopped thinking?" It was the first question. As if that was the most important thing.

And how much we, in our meditation, measure it by how much thinking there is. Is it going well, is it not? So these things are insidious, these meta-level views, and they get into the nuts and bolts of how I'm regarding this moment in the meditation. This moment, I'm thinking. Who cares if you're thinking? Does it really matter? Is the thinking making you miserable or is it the view about the thinking that's making you

miserable? Is that thinking even getting in the way of samadhi and well-being and bliss and ecstasy?

These things are really, really important and insidious. Again, what does it mean to be bold? What does it mean to be intelligent? What does it mean to question these things?

So what happens if we start with the goal, start with the idea—now people will construe that differently—where we're going, what awakening is, but start with the idea: insight. Insight means understanding something about the emptiness of things. I'm rushing through this now, but there are only ways of looking. There's no way independently of a way of looking that something really is. There's no privileged way of looking. There's just ways of looking. Things are empty. Insight is the practice of ways of looking that liberate and ways of looking that fabricate less. I'm intending to talk about this in a lot more detail. I'm just going quickly now because I'm rushed.

What that means is that what we practice and what we're left with at the end of practice is malleability. Malleability of perception, malleability of view, malleability of way of looking. This is a goal and a starting point in practice.

More than agility, more than the ability to move quickly between the jhanas, we're actually learning to shape the view and let the view and the experience of things be shaped through a whole range, feeling the impact on perception.

The Buddha called the jhanas perception attainements. But we very rarely hear that because what historically gets emphasized is no thought, imperturbability, laser-like focus. Actually, just as commonly, he called them perception attainments. And what on earth is a perception attainment?

This I would like to emphasize: perception attainment. We're training certain perceptions, and to think of it that way more than "I'm training my concentration." Again, I'm going to contradict myself and say train your concentration, but what if we think about it as we're training certain perceptions? That has a significance regarding emptiness that I will come to.

So we're developing these resources. We're cultivating virtues. We're developing our psychological and emotional skills. And we're training certain perception attainments.

If I want my awakening, my liberation to include—and some people don't care, but if you want it to include—the beauties of sensitivity, attunement, deep intelligence, responsiveness, pliability, malleability, discernment, subtlety, how do we need to think about the jhanas and what we emphasize and how we practice them? If you decide that you don't care about all that, then that's fine. You can think about them differently.

Yes, definitely, we do want to increase and develop our focus and our concentration. But we also, and oftentimes more importantly, are interested in this development of deep, profound resources of training the perceptions, the relation of that with emptiness understanding, and the development of all these

lovely capacities and capabilities of attunement, sensitivity, subtlety of awareness, beauty, magic, art.

We haven't talked about walking meditation yet. Again, I'll be very brief because you're all in different places with different histories.

If you're familiar with energy body, walking meditation is with energy body awareness. If you're already familiar with jhana, then you can start here: I'm at one end of my walking meditation path. I stand as long as it takes to get whatever it is—the piti or the well-being, the happiness. And I just hang out there. If it's nice, I'll hang out. I won't even walk. I'm just standing and I'm in that. That's quite an advanced stage already, if you can just get there.

If I do that, then I walk and I'm concentrating in the whole body space on the piti, on the pleasure. I don't care about my feet. I don't care about the sensations. I'm walking back and forth with the pleasure. That's what I'm concentrating on. If you're there already—most of you won't be—this is the approach.

If you know energy body already, same thing. I stand, feel my contact, and then open the space and just feel—what's the texture, what's the vibration of the energy body? Then I walk back and forth with that. I have to find the pace of walking that enables me to sustain that and get into that experience. So it might be really fast. It might be really slow. It might be in between. It might change as I'm doing the practice.

If at any point I want to stop and stand and just get it back again, I stop and stand and get it back again. I might spend five minutes at the end of the path. It doesn't matter. What helps me get that energy body awareness and helps me get into it and in touch with it?

Do you understand? If you're still not quite sure what the energy body is, then see if you can just walk up and down with a whole body awareness—just the sensations in the whole body.

In other words, in terms of our choices, the least preferable is focusing just on the sensations in your feet. It's fine, it's good, and if that's what you want to do or can do, that's great. But there's a kind of movement here with maturation. Does this make sense?

Now, one last thing: the rhythm in the day of formal practice—sitting, walking, standing. We're going to say much more about this later, but basically, again, it's up to you. What feels like it's helpful right now?

So if you're sitting and it feels good and you feel into it, sit longer. You don't have to sit for forty-five minutes. You could sit just as long as it feels like it's productive and fruitful and you're having a good time. If then you begin to not have such a good time, see if you can just work with it, play your edges, see if you can expand it. Basically, you're following what feels fruitful.

If you're out walking and you're just really into it and it's going really well, just stay walking longer—or standing, or whatever. There's a kind of rhythm that's individual and variable, and you're responsive to it. You have to be sensitive and responsive.

And then there's this—we talked about going for walks, and if you do yoga or qigong or whatever—there's also time to just chill out, have a cup of tea. The day needs to breathe. In this kind of practice, the day needs to breathe. So when we do sit, walk, sit, walk, sit, walk, it may not be that helpful. It might be helpful for other practices, but in this kind of practice, the day needs to breathe. We need to be responsive to different rhythms at different times. What's really working right now? What's supporting right now?

If this is the first time you've not had a fixed schedule, then set yourself a fixed schedule if you're really feeling at sea. Just go with that. But as time goes by, you'll begin to be more fluid and more responsive.

Let's just sit for one minute together.

Thank you, everyone. Enjoy tea. There's no need to rush because it's only you or whoever is doing the clearing up, so take whatever time you need. The whole thing just rolls—we're on an open schedule. The hall is open all the time, so enjoy tea.

See you tomorrow.

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