Focusing on One Point (Intensity, Directionality, Subtlety) (Instructions)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 29:58

Teaching this retreat is a big stretch for me because of everything that's going on with my health and what that needs, what that requires. I had a meeting with a nurse this morning. As I said at the beginning, in a way that impacts the unfolding of the teaching. I have to be at the hospital at this time and all that stuff. Things are getting squashed together in one long session that otherwise I would have paced over morning, evening, and afternoon. So that's just part of the deal, which, it's not perfect, but it is what it is.

In my experience, retreats are often most fruitful for some weird reason when the conditions aren't perfect. The other thing about the teachings, and I said this again at the beginning, is that everyone needs different things at different times. So I feel quite concerned or anxious to make sure you all have what you need, but it's actually an impossible situation. We're just unfolding things. For some person, something that's said on day five, it would be like, "Well, I wish I'd heard that on day one." So I don't quite know how else to do a group retreat. That's part of the territory here, part of the challenge here. But hopefully it still works and is helpful.

I want to divide the teaching today into three sections, and maybe four depending on how we do for time: instructions, a guided meditation, and a shorter talk.

Let's start with some instructions. Again, a bit of context that I was going to say later, but I'll say it now. Jhānas, by definition—you could say all the jhānas, but certainly we can say the first four jhānas—include, or even I would say what's really primary in them, is that the whole body, as I said when I ran through those descriptions that the Buddha gave, really feels very, very nice. Different kinds of nice. In a way, that's what characterizes each jhāna: the kind of nice that the whole body space feels.

So by definition, axiomatically, a really pleasant feeling, nice, lovely energy body experience is part of where we're going. Actually, you could say this is true in any of the jhānas—even the eighth—because the absence of any sensation at all in the formless jhānas is actually very pleasant in its acquired taste kind of way. The first four jhānas all involve a really nice energy body experience.

All the practices that we're doing are going towards that. That's what they're aiming for, just by virtue of the fact that we're aiming for jhānas. Which base practice or springboard practice—whether it's working with the breath like this, whether it's working with the breath like that, whether it's mettā, whether it's something else—they're all intended in that direction. That's what we're trying to get them to do.

For most people, the first port of call in the niceness will be what we call pīti and this pleasantness that I'll talk about as we go on. But basically what you want at this point is to be narrowing down into one practice, one base or springboard practice that you feel is the one that feels best for you and the most reliable or easiest for well-being to arise from—physical well-being, mental well-being. We keep that practice all through, even after you've got eight jhānas, because even when you know eight jhānas, there are going to be times when you need to go right back to your base practice and use that. So that's your thing in terms of jhāna practice. Later we can add to it and have others, but basically at this point, a lot of you—unless you're already well into the jhānas and know what works and you already know your base practice—you're still trying to find that and narrow it down: "Okay, that's the one for me."

Now, within that, because jhānas are by definition different kinds of really lovely states of the energy body, different flavors of really lovely states of the energy body, we can think backwards from where we're going. We're going to some kind of lovely state in the energy body. I can get there in two ways. We're back to the whole Newtown Abbot thing, kind of.

Either I say, "Oh, if that's part of where I'm going, why don't I start with that anyway?" Start with the energy body experience and just help it in creative, responsive, sensitive ways to become nicer and nicer. I'm starting with something that's very close to where I'm headed anyway. That's one way of going about things.

Another way is, for instance, taking one spot like at the upper lip or the tip of the nose or the abdomen and just paying attention to the sensations there and really, really paying attention. In time, other factors develop, one of which is the pīti, which can then be spread into the whole body. So this spot that doesn't look much like where we're going at some point expands to a whole energy body experience.

Not better, not worse—they're just different. Different people find different things work better. That's what we're doing: either the direct route or the more indirect route. The more indirect route is more common, but that's just how it is.

And why do I spend so proportionately more time teaching about the energy body? It's probably partly because there are more possibilities there. It's more unusual, so people need to hear about it. Most of you have probably spent a long time paying attention to the breath at the nose or the upper lip or the abdomen. The energy body is more unusual and there are more possibilities there—probably an infinite amount of possibilities in terms of how creative it becomes, how playful it becomes, how imaginative it becomes.

I find over many years of teaching that for a lot of people who've had very little development or opening or joy from paying attention at one point, opening up to the whole body is often a revelation and things really start to move then. As I said though, it's not the case with everyone at all. So we really want to find what works for you. This is so, so important.

Now, for the first section of today's teaching, I want to talk about taking a narrower spot. Classic spots, rather than the whole body, are the upper lip—somewhere between the top of the lip and the beginning of the nose, so that whole area there—or the tip of the nose just inside the nostrils, anywhere around there. It really doesn't matter. The question is: when I pay attention to that location, where can I most clearly feel the sensations of the breath as they come in and out?

There will be sensations of the breath—the friction really of the breath moving across the skin or the tiny hairs there. There will be sensations of temperature: the in-breath is slightly cooler than the out-breath because the body has warmed the out-breath. You must have heard this a million times.

Another classic spot is somewhere down in the abdomen. What you're paying attention to then is naturally when we breathe in, there's the expansion—really the rising of the abdomen as you inhale—and the falling back of the abdomen as you breathe out. It's that sensation of the movement of the abdomen, those sensations that go with that movement, rising and falling, that you're paying attention to. People feel it in different places or it could be a slightly larger area. It doesn't matter. But what you're really paying attention to is more gross physical sensations at first than what we're talking about with the energy body.

So those are the two classic places. Instead of primarily having this wider space of the whole energy body, we've got a narrower space—a narrower spot.

If I think of the word concentration and automatically think of a narrow focus, this is just prejudice and indoctrination. It does not necessarily mean that at all. It cannot possibly mean that in Buddha Dharma. Fifth jhāna is infinite space—I'm concentrating on infinite space. That's the exact opposite of a precise point. So concentration cannot mean narrowness. It might be helpful for some people at some time to choose a small point, and then it goes through a whole process. But that's not what concentration can mean. It's not like concentrated laundry detergent where I've got this much in this amount of space—it's a complete misconstrual. So maybe helpful to work with a small focus, maybe not helpful, but it does not mean what samādhi means at all.

So there's a small focus and it may be very helpful, but you've heard so much about working with the breath this way, I just want to throw out three or four things.

Even though we have a narrow spatial focus, I would suggest it will be very helpful to have a background awareness of the whole body. Some of you are far away—can you see my hand? Can you focus on my hand, even if it's not that clear? Can you focus on my hand and still have a background awareness of the whole room behind me, what's also in your visual field? Can you switch those so what's in the background is more in your foreground psychologically? That's all I'm talking about.

When there's a small focus, it's really helpful to have the whole body sense just lightly in the background. Not fifty-fifty, maybe ten percent or five percent. So primarily I'm really getting into this one spot wherever it is, but I'm always maintaining this whole body background awareness.

Why? Partly because when I have a bigger space that way, it's a bit like a table. If a table has one leg and it's a narrow leg, it's hard for it to balance. With three or four legs spread out, it's much easier. So something spread out helps to balance the concentration. That's one of the reasons why sometimes the energy body works better.

Rather than thinking of developing concentration, samadhi, or jhana as simply staring really hard at something with unwavering intensity—believing that enough force and steadiness will bring jhana—we need to understand that this approach falls short. Without openness of heart, even excellent stability with an object won't lead to jhana. You might develop strong concentration skills, which is helpful, but jhana requires something more.

Instead of this forceful approach, I want to emphasize three qualities of attention. You could summarize this as prioritizing quality of attention over quantity. By quantity, I mean how long you've stayed with the breath without getting lost in thoughts, sounds, or other distractions. Often we fall into this quantitative mindset, with part of our mind constantly checking: "Have I had a thought yet? How long has it been? Have I been distracted?" We might find ourselves counting breaths and monitoring our performance.

While duration isn't unimportant, can we reorder our priorities? I believe quality of attention matters far more. This means asking: "In this moment, with this particular part of this breath, what's the quality of my attention?" What do we mean by quality? Many things are involved, but today I'll focus on three: intensity, directionality, and subtlety. Let me explore these in reverse order.

As I mentioned yesterday, we tend to think about jhanas and samadhi in certain ways. But undeniably, deepening in samadhi—and certainly progressing through the eight jhanas—represents a movement toward increasing subtlety.

I cannot get away from that. Each jhana is more subtle than the last one. Each jhana is more refined than the last one. The whole deepening of samadhi, even before you reach jhana, needs to be a deepening into more and more subtlety.

It's not the case—and you might sometimes hear this—that each jhana finds the mind more unwavering than the last one, as if that were the primary thing happening. This simply isn't true. You could have fifth jhana where you're not quite used to it yet and you're wobbling out of it, while having a second jhana that's much more stable for you. Or perhaps the breath is much more stable and you're just learning the second jhana, and it wobbles out.

Again, let's clarify our conceptual framework. What's actually happening here? What's important? Therefore, what do I need to emphasize, work with, and pay attention to?

So subtlety is a key element. As you practice with the breath—whatever way of working with the breath or wherever you're paying attention—as practice continues and the mind settles down and the body settles down, the breath becomes more subtle. It should become more subtle.

This applies to other practices as well. If you're practicing metta or compassion, sometimes when you start practicing compassion, there are all these tears and it's up and down and you feel the world's suffering intensely. This expansive opening of the heart is important and necessary. But as the practice settles down and deepens, actually the compassion gets more subtle, and the metta gets more subtle—less fiery or intense in its emotional quality. The whole thing becomes more refined. Likewise with the breath or whatever object you're working with.

So there's this natural movement into subtlety. The object is actually perceived more and more subtly. As I mentioned, we can interfere with this process either by holding certain ideas or by doing something physically, like repeatedly doing ujjayi breathing. There are many ways we can block this natural process of subtilization.

When the object becomes naturally more subtle—and for the samadhi to develop (which already means some samadhi is developing, as this cannot happen without it)—then the attention, the quality of the attention, has to get correspondingly subtle. If the object—whether breath or metta—is going down in subtlety, then the attention has to match it in subtlety. The attention needs to become more delicate.

This process of matching, of following the subtlety down, where the attention quality matches the object quality—this process is one of the most central things happening as samadhi develops. And as I said, the jhanas themselves, the eight jhanas, are a spectrum of increasing subtlety and increasing refinement.

Let me address directionality—I'm not sure if that's the right word, but something like this. Let's say you're working with the breath at the upper lip and nose. Very easily as human beings, we can construe the attention in a particular way—having a sense of the attention here somewhere, oftentimes in the head, going toward the object. Whether it's a visual object or these sensations, there's this sense of attention moving toward them, probing them in an investigative way—not attacking them, but going toward them.

But we can also construe—and by construe I don't mean just as an idea, but as an actual sense, a perception—we can sense ourselves receiving the breath. In one way, of course, the body is receiving the breath as air comes in. But the mind can also feel like the sensations are being received.

This is something we can play with—the directionality of attention. And this is something you can actually experiment with. All this boils down to what's helpful right now. It's not the case that one of these directions is always going to be better than another. The whole thing is a dance. The whole thing is like riding a bicycle. You wouldn't say it's always good to lean to the left on a bicycle.

No, it's good in certain situations to lean to the left. In other situations, it's good to lean the other way or right in the middle or whatever it is.

So all this, again, it's stuff for you to play with moment to moment, to have this sense of—you're the artist, you're the improviser, you're the person with your hands on the clay, on the wheel. You understand?

So we have subtlety, directionality. The other one is intensity. This is kind of a hard one, but I think it's really important. It's like, can you get a sense—let's say pay attention to X—but can you get a sense of actually dialing up or down the intensity, the energy of your attention?

You might think of it like that probing gets more. That's one way of thinking about it. But it might also be just like a lamp going up or a sense of energy. It's dialing up. There's more energy. I'm really present. I'm really alive there.

But again, you might think, oh, well, more is better. Not always. It's an interesting thing.

If we take all these factors together and you think about subtlety—what allows a subtle attention? Sometimes it's a delicacy of attention that allows us to go into subtlety and not so much intensity.

So if you think about—and I know there are some fantastic chefs in the room—let's say someone's cooked this amazing meal and it's exquisite and you're tasting it. Each mouthful kind of reveals—you know, sometimes when you put food into your mouth, the flavors reveal themselves not all at the same time. Have you had that? Sometimes some of them are mixed at the same time.

What kind of mode of attention do you go into if it's really exquisite? And especially the chefs there want to know what you think. There's a kind of delicate poise in relation to the taste attention, to the gustatory attention. This is delicacy. I can't go in there ramming. You understand? It's not the right kind of attention that will reveal those subtle, exquisite qualities, if it's one of those really subtle dishes.

Or listening, when you listen for something, a sound that's faint amid background noise. There's a quality there. You're not squeezing something. You're not squinting. You're not pressuring something. It's more like there's a kind of poise and you're attentive in a way that your antennae pick up something.

If you just pay attention to how you pay attention in these kinds of situations, we might learn something about what I'm talking about here.

What's also interesting is that when the breath becomes, for example, if the breath is the object or the metta is the object—as the object becomes more delicate and subtle, it can actually become more delightful. The delightfulness of the object often goes with the delicacy. But I would certainly say that the delightfulness of the attention increases with the delicacy of the attention.

In other words, I think as human beings, we like paying attention in a delicate way. We actually like that. It feels good. As that begins to happen more and more, part of the job here is to enjoy that. It might be very, very not a big deal, but that's part of—can I get intimate also with this delight? Can I include it? Can I enjoy it?

Which is, again, a very different thing. Am I still thinking? How long have I gone since my last distraction?

Okay, that's the first block of today's teachings. A smaller point. When you're using a smaller point like

that, there are a few things to bear in mind. There are a few things you can play with.

Continue beautifying this talk (part 6/6). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

There's more to explore, but this foundation is sufficient for now. I mentioned earlier that we're moving toward making this whole body space pleasant in different ways. Yet we can still work skillfully with something that doesn't initially appear to match that description—we can use a small point. For some practitioners, this focused approach works best.

As you settle into this one small point, you'll notice it tends to expand naturally. This expansion is actually one of the signs that the practice is deepening. You might find that this upper lip area begins to feel as large as your entire head. This is completely normal—it's part of the natural progression. The point grows organically, and in many ways, this expansion is part of the whole process moving toward awareness of the entire energy body.

I wanted to mention this natural evolution so you know what to expect and can work with these changes rather than being surprised by them.

I think that covers what I wanted to share about this particular aspect of the practice. Let me pause here and move on to the next teaching.

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