Q & A

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 12:28

Danny asked about expanding on the different words: sensitivity, attunement, responsiveness, and refinement.

Let me use the example we were discussing with Jason. Here's metta practice: I'm practicing metta and noticing the different flavors emotionally and in the energy body at different times. Here's happiness, here's peace, here's something that I don't even have a word for, but it just has a certain kind of emotional quality.

Sensitivity is noticing all that and feeling it.

Refinement is the recognition that these are probably quite subtle things. They're not big or in your face—I mean, they can be, but as the whole thing deepens, things tend to get more refined, meaning more subtle. They're not big explosions necessarily. Part of what I would want to include in pretty much all practices is that willingness to pay attention, an ability to pay attention and be sensitive to what is refined, and also knowing the possibility that things can get more and more refined—not necessarily more intense, though they can also get more intense.

Responsiveness really is just that. For instance, going back to Jason's example: I'm saying "may you be happy," then I say "may you be peaceful." I notice that when I say "may you be peaceful," there's a little something there—maybe happy was just okay, nothing particularly happened, but when I said "may you be peaceful," there was a little response. Maybe it was a feeling of peace or something, and I actually felt that in the energy body and in the heart. So I'm sensitive to it. It's maybe quite refined, but I'm responding to it by noticing it. Then maybe my response is to repeat that phrase a few times, and then I'm riding the thermals, as I mentioned.

That's responsiveness. But there are all kinds of responsiveness. Even at a macro level—I've been sitting, working with this hindrance, and it's just time for a cup of tea. That's responsive. I'm making a responsive decision. In terms of how gross or refined responsiveness can be, it goes over the whole range.

Attunement would be this: going back to the example, I've just said "peaceful" and there's that energy or emotional feeling to it. I'm kind of listening to that and feeling it. Of everything that's going on, I'm singling in on that. I'm not losing the whole background of my whole body sense, but I'm tuning my receiver to that particular wavelength. I'm just kind of resonating with the vibe and feeling it.

That's attunement. And as I do that, as I said today, the very activity of attuning amplifies that particular wavelength, or tends to. It's like when you tune a receiver—there's all this static or other radio stations,

and you're just finding that one. You're dialing in, and there's that one. I'm tuning. It's literally like that. I'm tuning to it. And then it's like, okay, now I'm enjoying this radio station. I'm really feeling it. The feeling it and the enjoying it is part of the attuning, as well as the focusing on. It's all part of the attuning.

A question came up about subtle objects. What happens when an object gets subtle? Let's say the breath gets subtle. It's very common on retreats for people to say, after a while, "The breath just gets—I can't feel it anymore," or "I'm paying attention to the rise and fall, but I can't feel it anymore." It's become a subtle object.

And in a way, we could say yes, it's inviting the attention to become more subtle. But sometimes what happens is the object becomes so subtle and we don't let the attention become correspondingly subtle. We just say, "I can't feel it," and then we space out or lose it or get frustrated and declare that it doesn't work.

But what we can do instead is recognize: "Ah, the object is getting more subtle. Great. How interesting." And then comes the art of just letting the attention correspondingly match the subtlety level of the object.

This process—I would say this subtilizing, if we make it a verb—is more central to what's really going on as samadhi deepens than something like counting breaths. This process of subtilizing is what allows things to open up moment to moment in a sitting.

But if we look at the whole scale of what the jhanas are, they are movements into more and more subtlety. The nothingness of the seventh jhana is an incredibly subtle state. The neither-perception-nor-non-perception of the eighth is unbelievably refined. Even the peacefulness of the third jhana is less subtle than the seventh, and so on—the whole spectrum is actually a movement into greater subtlety. Understanding this has a lot to do with what we're discussing about perception attainments and the whole view of practice.

But at a moment-to-moment meditative level, when the object gets more subtle, it's like asking: "How can I let the attention get more subtle? How can I let it settle down like that? What do I need to do?"

Let me address Marco's question about dealing with pain when pīti arises. There are unfortunately several different options here, and I'll talk more about this later, but let me say something now.

It might be that you're sitting, pīti arises, and then at some point pain arises somewhere in the body. What you can do is get more into the pīti and keep the pain at bay. I would really recommend that as the first thing you do. It's almost like your priority is the pīti—enjoying it, absorbing into it, getting more into it.

Sometimes what helps is not just concentrating on where there's pīti, but seeing if you can spread the pīti into where there's pain. Sometimes what was painful actually becomes pleasurable as you spread it. What I think you're still working on is really learning the absorption into the pīti, so we don't want to get too distracted by getting into the whole pain situation at this point.

But there's also perception at play here. What was unpleasant can be perceived as pleasant—something

quite amazing. Sometimes see if you can spread the pīti there, just imagine it going there, or decide to see the pain as pīti. There are several things you can play with.

At some point this might work once or twice for some minutes, but then you can't do it anymore. On this retreat, at this point, that's the time to get up. You're out of batteries, and it's time to get up and have a cup of tea, go for a walk, or do some walking meditation. You could stand up and continue meditating if that's pain-free.

Marco is asking about something from his experience on the last retreat—sometimes he sat with real firm resolve, adhiṭṭhāna, sitting through the pain, being there. It was difficult, but when he came back after taking a break, that's when the most pīti built up and broke through. So he's wondering if maybe he should do that for the sake of the pīti breaking through later.

This brings up something I want to talk about, maybe starting tomorrow. Pīti arises in two ways. One is this kind of just keep showing up with intensity and working until it erupts through.

And the other way is, no, here's a little bit of *pīti* and we're coaxing it, we're building it, we're adding to it more. So they're just different ways of working, really.

But I'm partly wanting to ask you, what were you doing in those times when you were really just with your firm resolve? What actually were you doing with the mind at that point? Because you could sit with pain and actually just end up a contracted, miserable, crumpled mess if the relationship is wrong with it. So you were probably doing something. You must have been in some mode of way of looking or relationship with that then that was part of the effect. The resolve will build energy and energy is related to *pīti* so it can erupt that way. But there need to be other factors there as well that have to do with the way of looking and relating. So do you remember what they were?

Very good. So when I asked him that, Marco says it's a combination of the allowing, letting be practice—insight way of looking—and the *anattā*, not-self practice, both of which I would regard as insight ways of looking. And what they do is when you're doing those, so you're not just building *adhiṭṭhāna* and energy by staying still, you're actually opening the energy body and opening and letting go of clinging, and that's having a big effect as well. When I say openness of heart, openness of being, I also mean just openness from release of clinging. So all this.

Pīti also comes from release of clinging. But a lot of factors, a lot of things need to come together for the moment of *pīti* to arise. But can you see how that would be significant? Because if you'd sat there just gritting your teeth, it wouldn't have given rise to *pīti* later. Does it make sense?

So as to what to do, in your case here, do both. I don't think it matters. But again, know what your playground is in terms of what exactly you're trying to achieve at this point. What are you trying to learn? What are you trying to gain mastery of? And that might be—I'm not sure—but it might be really absorbing into the first jhāna. And so if that is, what do I need to do? How do I need to relate right now and practice

right now? But I have a sense that's what I'm trying to, that's my playground. Does that make sense? Does that sound relevant?

I think we probably need to stop now. Let's have some quiet together.

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