Attitude, Effort, Achievement, and View

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:10:01

I would like to talk now about effort and achievement, attitude and view. Much of what I'm going to say will maintain its relevance and should be applicable whatever level you're at, whatever stage of development you are through the jhānas. As I said, the effort aspect never goes away—it just becomes more subtle. But the attitude and the whole view are so important, and this should apply to any level we're discussing.

I meant to mention this the other night, but I'll include it now. It's interesting to look up the word samādhi in a Pali dictionary and then a Sanskrit dictionary, because it's actually a Sanskrit word, and see some of its historical uses.

Samādhi almost always gets translated as concentration, and I hope you can sense right now that I feel this is a rather impoverished translation. There are problems that come with that translation—a kind of implicit and then repeated and then entrenched indoctrination. We tend to think of it as meaning something quite rigid and forceful.

If you look up what the word actually means, it means agreement, or like a reconciliation—when a group of people agree on something or two people become reconciled. Or harmony, like harmony in a village or something like that. That's one of its principal meanings. What does that imply about that word? What does it imply about your view? What does it imply about your conception? What does it imply about what you emphasize? I won't elaborate further, but again, this is the invitation, the reminder to think on your feet, to listen actively.

Effort is a constant question. We can talk about it at a very gross level, at a macro level, a micro level, and at extremely subtle levels. I want to explore effort, attitude, and view together.

Sometimes what happens—often what happens—when a person loves the path and loves practice and really has a good desire and eros for all this, is that in the course of a retreat, in the course of practice, it becomes very easy to put too much pressure on ourselves. Too much pressure on the practice, too much pressure on ourselves. Sometimes there are people who would do better with a bit more pressure—they're just a bit casual, thinking "it's cool, things come and go, whatever"—and could actually benefit from turning the heat up a little bit, working harder, spending more time on the cushion. But very commonly, especially in this kind of retreat, somewhere along the line it gets a bit too pressured. We put too much pressure on, and a lot of that is unconscious.

So how can we take pressure off, if that's the case, in different ways?

One thing I want to reiterate: the body needs to be relatively comfortable, certainly at this point in your journey in jhāna practice for most of you. We don't want to put too much pressure on the body by thinking it's better to stay cross-legged for hours and hours, sitting through the pain, and so forth.

The first many years of my vipassanā practice were mostly spent looking at, being with, tolerating, and working with physical pain as best as I could. Sitting after sitting, hour after hour, month and year after year of retreat. I would say that developed a lot. I look back at that younger practitioner and think there was quite something to just putting up with all that and being willing to do all that. A lot got developed in terms of patience and will and resolve. I'm not sure how much insight—some insight, but I wouldn't say that was the primary thing.

At one point, my teacher Yanai Posner said—I can't remember the context, whether we were discussing this or a retreat I was attending—"It's great, and it's great that you're able to do that, but your practice might be getting a little narrow." Because if you asked me about the exploration of emotions and all kinds of other areas, or samādhi, it was mostly just being with the pain.

As I mentioned, Christina Feldman suggested, "Why don't you try alternating postures?" It was at that point that something opened. The pressure was taken off the body and the samādhi could really develop.

So first: pressure off the body. Another way is through the view of what we're doing and the idea of what we're doing. This is so much of what I want to talk about.

Sometimes, of course, we think, "I'm going to a jhāna retreat. I want to develop the jhānas. I want to develop my concentration." Sometimes we have to reflect—or maybe oftentimes we have to reflect—on the bigger picture of what we're developing here.

I mean, what you are developing just by trying to keep your attention at the tip of your nose—when you think "I'm failing because I got distracted in thought again"—this becomes a view that generates a whole cascade of emotion and papancha and dukkha. This arises from too narrow a view of what you're actually trying to develop.

So, as I said, if I include the fact that the hindrances and their arising hold all kinds of potential for insight, that becomes part of enlarging the scope of my view, my picture of what I'm trying to do. This makes a huge difference. When the hindrances are present, I'm not upset. It's not a failure. I don't judge myself as a failure as a meditator or whatever. I'm developing sensitivity and all this. And maybe that's more important than focus and concentration. I'm developing all these resources, as we said.

A lot of this is not black and white. Sometimes another problem with view is that we make everything so black and white. But where is the black and white when it comes to the resources we're developing—wellbeing, patience, or whatever it is? I am developing concentration, but even that's not black and white. Patience, as I said, resolve, responsiveness, discipline—all of this is in the big picture of what's being developed. When it's not going well in terms of how well I'm sticking to these sensations, I

need to open that view. Or at the beginning of a sitting, I really need to have a sense of the bigger picture of what I'm doing, what's being developed here. This makes a big difference.

I'm developing mindfulness, of course. Every time the mind wanders off, it's mindfulness that notices the mind has wandered off. So it's a moment of mindfulness, and I have to see that. That's also part of what I'm developing. Don't let the view get too narrow. Because like we said with the table analogy, too narrow is not enough base and things will capsize very, very easily. The wind blows a little bit, things get a little difficult, and we get very dejected if something falls over.

Hopefully I'm also developing—or over time letting go of—judgment. So every time the mind wanders, I judge less. And not only am I developing concentration, but maybe I'm taking care of working on that too, just as an integral woven-in factor. All of these things are really, really important.

For some people, the development of patience, the letting go of self-judgment, the development of discipline, the development of resolve—all this is actually going to be more important, more significant for your liberation, the healing of your heart and your life, than attaining some jhana. I really mean this. For some people, it's like, "Yeah, jhana, great, but what about this? What about that self-judgment? What about whatever it is?"

I mentioned yesterday this kind of micro habit. Remember this subtle pattern of "oh, it's not quite as good as it was" or "yes, it could be better." That's also in the bigger picture of what's being developed. The influence of that kind of subtle, micro-level aversion or negative viewing—its influence on our lives is huge. And so if that's part of our bigger picture of what we're developing, that also expands the container of what we're doing, the view of what we're doing, and hence the stability of our vessel.

So one more thing about that micro habit. Can I learn to let go of that micro habit of "it's not good enough" and still work and play in the moment? They're not contradictions. How can we have a direction that we're working or playing towards and yet not have that negative "not quite good enough" attitude, or not let that kind of thing run the show, cast its pallor and its flavor over the whole of the proceedings?

When is that a hindrance? When someone says, "it could be better"—when is that a hindrance? And when is it actually just a wise discernment that's part of this opportunism? When is letting go of this "it could be better" attitude a skillful shift in attitude? And when is it just laziness and inertia? "That's okay. I'm just putting up with something," but it's coming out of laziness and inertia. This is a really subtle question, really subtle inquiry.

Doing a jhana retreat or practicing jhana long-term, developing that—it's going to really develop our steadiness, our capacity to stay steady long-term with whatever we're committed to, whatever we care deeply about in life, the projects we want to see through, the service we want to give, because we have more capacity, more resource. We're also training this moment-to-moment steadiness, of course, but it takes a lot of steadiness to just keep showing up and keep intending to do samadhi practice.

So the steadiness you need to show up and to keep putting your mind in a certain direction—you're actually cultivating the kind of steadiness it takes to be there for your long-term intentions and stay steady with them, your goals and projects and what you really care about and want to manifest in your life in a way that works towards that.

And where does the tightness come in? Maybe that's a better way of approaching it—knowing that if you love this practice deeply, you will encounter suffering. If you don't care enough to suffer, you probably won't experience much difficulty at all. But when you truly care about this path, you're going to meet suffering. The Buddha spoke directly about this reality.

So steadiness—that capacity for unwavering presence—is certainly a fruit of jhana practice, but it's also a cause, part of the very conditions that support the cultivation itself. This understanding needs to be held within the larger picture, because when our view becomes too narrow, we find ourselves miserable far more often, caught in self-judgment and constriction.

Now, let's talk about taking the pressure off. The beginning moments of sitting often present interesting opportunities. Sometimes you settle right in, immediately engaging with the work or play of practice—just diving in with "let's go!" But sometimes there's value in simply arriving and hanging out for a while, just sitting with light mindfulness. What you're actually doing in these moments is relaxing, checking that you're not holding too much tension around the whole endeavor.

For some practitioners, especially dedicated meditators, simply adopting the meditation posture can automatically trigger a whole constellation of views and tightness. These associations—with entering the meditation hall, sitting on the cushion in a particular posture—can carry subtle or not-so-subtle psychological baggage. In these moments, it can be genuinely fruitful to simply hang out, relax, look around. This is taking the pressure off.

Often in this relaxed settling, the energy body is allowed to become more harmonious naturally, organically, because the pressure we bring—frequently unconscious pressure—actually constricts the energy body in ways that don't serve our practice. The squeezing effect of this tension works against the very ease and flow we're trying to cultivate.

As I mentioned in the opening, sometimes it's helpful to open our intention: Why am I here? Practice can become so centered on "me and my practice and my achievement and my progress," then spiraling into comparisons with others. Can I actually keep opening this up, so that I'm not doing this solely for myself—perhaps not even primarily for myself? This kind of shift can be extraordinarily significant, genuinely pivotal in terms of its effects on practice.

Consider this: whether you're on a three-week jhana retreat, a weeklong retreat, a month, or even a year-long practice period, we often—consciously or semi-consciously—develop timetables of achievement. "I figure by the end of the second week, I'll be accessing the jhanas." Or with longer retreats, "Surely by the

three-month mark..." These timetables are genuinely unhelpful. What they excel at producing is suffering.

If you want to suffer, give yourself a timetable for achieving what you hope to accomplish, what you're certain you'll accomplish, or even what you're intending to accomplish by specific deadlines. This becomes a form of hindrance. Let it go. Instead, simply work and play—whichever resonates more deeply with you.

But what does it mean to work toward something? So often in spiritual contexts, there's tremendous pain around the very idea of goals, achievement, or attaining this or that state. This becomes especially acute for Western practitioners, leading them to simply discard the whole framework. Then we receive teachings of "nowhere to go, nothing to do"—as if it's either rigid goal-orientation or complete aimlessness.

But our lives aren't actually like that. There are places to go in life, meaningful work to accomplish, things we genuinely care about. We need goals and direction. We need to engage and manifest what matters to our souls. The question becomes: How do I relate to working toward what I love, what feels genuinely important, playing in that creative space, while simultaneously releasing timetables and not becoming tight around the process?

This is an art—having a goal and working toward it while remaining aware of where tightness arises. Perhaps that's the more skillful way to frame it: the tightness will come if you truly love this practice. You will encounter suffering on this retreat in precisely this way, if you care deeply enough. If you don't care sufficiently, you probably won't suffer much. But authentic caring inevitably meets suffering—and the Buddha spoke directly to this truth.

It's the distress of the contemplative, he calls it. If you're not experiencing this distress, something is wrong. Something, I would say, is wrong in your larger view and your attitude.

So this suffering will come. Then part of the art is recognizing—ah, there it is. And noticing, even at really subtle levels, what's feeding it? What view is feeding it? What way of going about things is feeding it? This awareness is part of the art.

Related to this achievement orientation is another familiar question: "Is this it? Have I got it? Is this the first jhana? Am I in it? Have I achieved it? Have I got it?" This is, of course, connected to the question I've discussed several times: What qualifies as a jhana? Have I got it? Is this it? The answer depends on how I define it, right?

So again, this question of what actually qualifies as the first jhana, what qualifies as any particular jhana, what qualifies as jhana at all—it's often posed in ways that could be more intelligent, more fruitful. Oftentimes it's not.

What is important? What's important? Don't lose sight of this. Let your questions and your emphases and your attitudes and your practices—let everything come from what is important. What do I want? Where

am I actually trying to get to?

It's interesting when you think about the tension and tizzy and fuss around what is and what isn't a jhana, either internally for a person or in terms of polemic and argument. If you consider something like mindfulness or another factor on the Eightfold Path, do we have the same kind of fuss about that? Or the seven factors of awakening? Most people, with all those other practices, don't get caught up this way.

What is mindfulness? Is this mindfulness? Is it not mindfulness? It's not so black and white. Metta is an even better example because we were talking about it before. Yes, we have to acknowledge it's helpful to define metta. What are we talking about? We're not talking about conditional love—"if you don't love me back, I'm going to jump out the window." That's not metta.

So it's good to define what metta is: it's unconditional, it's non-attached, it's universal, it's wishing for well-being. This is helpful. But the practice of metta—sometimes it's stronger, sometimes it's weaker. As we were just saying, it has all kinds of sub-emotions or flavors. It's a complex of many differences. Sometimes there's no emotion there; it's just an intention. All that is metta.

Sometimes, at different times, it's more or less purified of its near enemy, attached love. It's a spectrum, and all of that is included, and all of it counts as metta. It should.

Why are we thinking about jhana—first jhana, third jhana, whatever it is—as something fundamentally different? Why has this one word become so charged? As I said, I simply put this question: is it possible to think and relate to all this with a little more intelligence?

Sometimes it's better to just drop that question if you find yourself fretting about it. This fretting can be completely non-verbal—you might be anxious about whether you're "in" or "out" without even thinking those words. Just get into the practice. Just enjoy it. Work with it, play with it, seek to maximize your enjoyment.

Again, regarding view and attitude and emphasis: did I say yesterday "quality over quantity"? Yes, I did. So oftentimes—mostly, I would say—it helps to prioritize the quality of attention over the quantity of attention. By quantity I mean how long you can sustain attention before getting distracted. Duration is still important, this ability to sustain and hold attention on something. But I would say most people do much better putting that secondary in importance to quality.

What do we mean by quality? Wholeheartedness is part of quality. How wholeheartedly, in this moment, can I open to and give myself to whatever I'm paying attention to? Can I become intimate with it, interested in it? This is one of those things—it's really important on a micro level in practice, and it's also really important in life. The capacity, the ability, the willingness to be wholehearted—sometimes that's what's missing in a person, not just in their concentration practice, but in their life as well.

How wholehearted can I be in this moment with this thing, with this person, with this passion, with this

issue, with whatever it is? This is crucial.

Quality means wholeheartedness, but also some of the things we talked about yesterday—this modulation of intensity. Quality doesn't just mean keeping the intensity at eleven all the time. It means responsive tuning of the attention's intensity. I'm actually not sure I can explain what I mean by intensity, but I can feel it.

I encourage you to experiment with this, play with it. Get a sense of shifting gears, of turning the dial up and down on the intensity of attention. Because again, back to this issue of inertia—sometimes I'm paying attention, I'm paying attention. "Okay, there's nothing to talk about. I'm paying attention." Are you with your breath? "Yeah, I'm paying attention to my breath." But the inertia there lies in not taking the trouble to actually play with this, to explore what it feels like when attention is intense versus when you back off the intensity. Sometimes we just haven't explored this because of inertia. We think of attention, of mindfulness, as just one thing.

Delicacy and lightness of attention are all related—we talked about this yesterday. The relative spaciousness is also part of quality. What kind of spaciousness of attention helps? Back to when we talked about peripheral awareness earlier today—which mode works best? This is all part of quality, being willing to play with the relative spaciousness of attention.

Just to throw out another element: sometimes, at certain points, there's really a place for a kind of poetic or even imaginal sensibility in relation to whatever you're paying attention to—the breath, for example. We tend to have most beginners on most retreats pay attention to bare sensations: "Don't imagine, don't think anything." Then when we introduce the energy body, we say it's okay to imagine—it's not really about sensation, or it's a different kind of sensation.

But what if it's neither just sensation nor just energy body work? What would it be like sometimes on this kind of retreat? It's like adding a spice to the meal. What is it to breathe the breath of the All-Merciful?

Allah. What is it to breathe God's breath? Now I just hold that view lightly in relation to the breath. What happens?

Of course, that might not work for you at all—there's no formula here. The point is about the ways of sensing whatever it is you're sensing, whatever it is you're concentrating on, and sensing it with more poetic or imaginal sensibility. The breath of the beloved, the breath of the divine, the breath of Buddha nature. These are just examples. Or the breath tinged somehow with breathing mercy, breathing in and out compassion—whatever it is.

For some of you familiar with imaginal practice—I'm not going to explain it here—it may be that the whole sense of self becomes imaginal at that point. That may be okay. Again, we return to intention. What's my primary intention here on this retreat?

We don't really want to get into a whole imaginal exploration, but it's almost like titrating how much of that imaginal sense or poetic sensibility is in the mix of what's going on. Just a little bit of this spice can ignite something. There's a humdrum quality, nothing's really happening—and a little bit of that can change the whole relationship.

Why? Go back to what I said before. What's most primary in pīti arising? Openheartedness. Openness of being. That's actually what makes the most difference.

Years ago, Kirsten and I went to visit a friend who's a scholar in Berlin. He was teaching me Sanskrit, and he gave me these texts from caves in Afghanistan—Buddhist caves containing Sanskrit versions of the Ānāpānasati Sutta, the Buddha's mindfulness of breathing. But they had all kinds of things like imagining breathing a blue breath, with color and imagery woven throughout. I lost them, unfortunately—they weren't the originals—but that sort of thing is in the tradition.

So a little bit of this, a little titration, a drop of this essential oil can spark something—a dash of spice in the meal. But it's all very delicate, very subtle. Sometimes when people talk about tonglen, breathing in and out compassion, their practice becomes very heavy, very clunky and gross. I'm talking about something much more subtle here. It's really like a little drop of something into a mixture.

Okay, back to this—I probably won't belabor it much after this talk. But again, so easily we come from our past, from our indoctrination, thinking about what we're doing here: developing focus, developing concentration, or somehow trying to be in a state where there isn't thought. Then we measure the whole thing by how long we've been on this object, how much thought is arising, and so forth.

Could that view be part of our inertia? Could we have inertia around that very view?

As I said, some of those things that get emphasized are actually, if you look at the whole totality of what the Buddha said about all this, just a phrase here and there. Somehow they've gotten extracted, repeated, emphasized, indoctrinated.

What would it be to emphasize at times—or instead, or even primarily—this idea of actually seeking to cultivate and maximize pleasure and enjoyment? The exploration of subtlety. The exploration of these whole territories—just exploration and love of exploration, love of what opens. What would it be if those were the primary intentions and emphases, rather than focus, concentration, being thought-free?

Earlier I said that some people might do really well to drop the whole jhāna framework—if you've done enough, depending on your experience. Some people at certain points in their practice might benefit from dropping the whole jhāna framework, the whole conceptual structure of jhānas, for a while.

Maybe just think about insight practice and samādhi practice. And the intention with samādhi practice is not so much focus and concentration, but as I said, this well-being—cultivation of well-being, pleasure, enjoyment.

Go back to what samādhi means: harmonization, agreement, reconciliation. What does that suggest? What does it feel like?

In dropping the whole jhana framework, we're also letting go of this persistent question that can plague practitioners: "Is this it now? Have I got it?" Sometimes that very question creates a subtle overexcitement in the moment, or a grasping, or a snatching. The Buddha actually says in the suttas when he describes the jhanas: "without snatching at the first jhana, without snatching at the pīti." But this snatching arises from a certain attitude, from a certain view, from a certain mind state. It's something that happens in the moment that emerges from our view. Do you see how important view is?

In dropping all that systematic framework of the jhanas, we encounter less self-judgment because the self doesn't have this whole scale, this ladder by which to grade itself and measure its progress. We release the entire achievement mentality. Many of these views actually work against the samadhi deepening and against the jhana coming together or opening.

So sometimes, for some people at certain stages of their practice, it's beneficial to drop the whole framework of eight jhanas and simply split the practice in two: insight practice and samadhi practice. Samadhi is about having a really good time. Actually, insight is as well—the way I teach it—it's just slightly different how you go about it.

In insight practice, it should be really nice. It should open up into a really good time, because in insight practice what we're doing is letting go of clinging in the moment. It's clinging that causes dukkha. An insight way of looking—in my definition—is something that releases clinging. It therefore should bring relief and release, and it feels nice.

But what we're primarily interested in when we're doing insight practice is that whole process: Where's the clinging? How do I let go of it? What ways of looking work to release clinging? And what happens to my sense of self, world, dukkha, and reality when I let go of the clinging? All of that—it's definitely a good time, but it's a certain kind of good time.

Samadhi practice is more about this: here's this lovely quality that's arisen—and there can be many different ones. Let me really nuzzle into it, or open myself into it. Let me really get into that. And I'm less concerned with these other questions, primarily about clinging and reality and all that. So they're both—you understand—they're both nice.

If a person lets go of the jhana framework for a while, they can begin to notice gradually the different shades in their experience. Just thinking about samadhi and these lovely qualities and enjoying them, slowly, slowly I begin to discern between these different shades and qualities and frequencies. Then at some point you can reintroduce the jhana framework in relation to that—with post-it notes.

Other people, as I said, really need to discern more. It's the time in their practice where they need to make more discriminations, more discernments between "this is this kind of pleasure, this is this kind of realm,

and this is that." How is it different? What are the different territories? What are the sub-territories there?

Let's return to this question: What's my playground? What does it mean to develop mastery? If we don't discern among all these territories, the fruit we get out of it will be much, much less. I know meditators who can get well-being and they can sit in that well-being for hours—and they've been sitting in the same well-being for about twenty years. Not without interruption, you know, but twenty years of their practice, because they didn't want to discern when they could have discerned, when it first came up, between say pīti and happiness, or the different shades of happiness.

What happened was that over time, all these qualities got mixed together. It was a nice soup, but it was just a soup. Here at Gaia House years ago—I don't know if it was during your time as a coordinator—but they used to have leftover soups. Basically, all the leftover lunches at the end of the week would get mixed into a pot, heated up, and that would be the meal. Of course, it didn't taste of anything. It just tasted of nothing, really. People would still be very appreciative, but it was nice without being able to differentiate any flavors in there.

If we don't discriminate, the real danger is you're left with a soup of niceness that never really develops. It never develops and brings the liberation and the opening of certain territories.

So again, I contradict myself. Different people have different needs at different times.

With regard to effort as well, in relation to everything we're saying, sometimes less effort is more productive. I'm actually backing off—that's implicit in much of what I've said. Sometimes even a slight over-efforting can disturb things in different ways. Sometimes that disturbance can be extremely gross when the effort is too much. We'll maybe talk about that sometime soon. And sometimes the disturbance can be just really, really subtle. But over-effort has an impact.

If we go back to this analogy of a potter crafting a vase or a pot on a wheel—sometimes with the hands, you're going to press with more pressure and sometimes with less pressure. That's what's appropriate to what I'm trying to shape right then. In a way, the hands are always pressing. If the hands on the clay is the analogy of attention, the attention is always there, but how it's pressing affects what arises. How much pressure affects the shape that's created. And that's responsive and variable and improvised.

It might also be that—again, stretching the analogy a little bit—the size could vary. I could have my whole span of hands shaping this big vase, or focus on this particular area where it curves, or maybe there's a certain area where I just want a little place where it narrows and I just put my fingers there. So again, the size, the pressure—all of this is going to shape what arises, and all of it's improvised, responsive, sensitive, variable.

The Buddha gives several images. He talks a lot about right effort, balanced effort. You probably know these similes, but I'll mention them again. He talks about trying to hold a quail, which is a very small bird, in your hands. Too loose, it flies away. Too tight, and you're going to crush it. Or another analogy he gave

to a musician, a lute player: it's like tuning the strings. Too tight, you snap the string. Too loose, you can't play anything—you can, but it's going to sound not very good.

So there's always this question, and it's not a fight. I've said this before. It's always a kind of sensitive, responsive question: what's the effort?

If we talk about effort, as I mentioned a while ago, we can talk about a kind of micro level of effort, which means in this moment, what does the intensity need? What does the delicacy need? All that. But also the view in this moment.

So let's talk about view. What I really want to communicate is that whatever view you have about the big picture of practice and where you're going inevitably filters down—or its implications filter down—to your micro moment-to-moment decisions in practice and navigations and what you do. We want to see this and understand this and understand the power of views.

So part of the micro level effort thing is also the sensitivity and the playing with: what view am I having right now about what I'm doing, what I'm emphasizing? My attitudes.

And there's a macro level—the question of effort on a macro level. That means: do I get up and just go for a walk now? Is it enough? Do I need a rest? How many hours a day am I engaging in formal practice? Is it too much? Am I squeezing too much? Or actually, could I do more?

The halls are open really 24-7, and the walking room as well. So you might have—everyone else is on breakfast wash-up, and you could do a number of things there, but you could come and either sit or walk. Sometimes we just get into habit: I'm used to being on retreat and I sit this much. Actually, it might be that more would be helpful.

So this whole macro level of effort: do I need to back off?

Do I need to do more?

And again, the larger view is part of the macro level as well. In my description of what mastery involves, I mentioned that at a certain point it also involves being able to walk around in a jhāna—or at least practicing doing that.

This is an interesting practice because when you reach that point, you might decide to walk around for twenty minutes or an hour while maintaining the jhāna. You might find yourself thinking, "Wow, that was great. I was really there, present in this state of wellbeing, right with the energy body. That was my primary focus, and the feet were able to just find their way."

Then you come back with the expectation: "This sitting is going to be amazing now." And it might be—it really might. I'm not speaking cautiously about this in the way you usually hear on insight retreats. I'm not saying "be careful of that." Rather, I'm pointing out that we don't always know, because it's an energy

question.

The fact that you've been in jhāna might indeed create a different kind of springboard for your next sitting or formal walking period. But it also might be that having done that actually takes a lot of energy. You might come back and realize, "Oh, I'm a bit tired now," or find that the mind doesn't quite have the energy.

It's still worth experimenting with when you reach that point—being able to do that and practice it. But it's fascinating: jhānas bring energy unquestionably, but they also take energy. It's a lot of work. You're putting in tremendous effort again and again, working and playing in these ways.

This is part of the whole art of being on retreat and the whole art of practice—getting wise and sensitive to energy levels. It's not always possible to predict when there's going to be a dip or when you're actually tired from the work you've done and need rest. Sometimes the mind truly needs to rest from these kinds of efforts.

Here's another interesting phenomenon you might encounter once you've had considerable experience with different jhānas. Sometimes you're in a jhāna and lose it a little, or space out for just a few moments. When you bring the mind back after those moments of spacing out, it returns at a deeper level.

This offers two conclusions or ponderings. First, maybe spacing out isn't necessarily always a disaster. If I'm too quick with self-judgment, perhaps I should pause and see what unfolds rather than immediately assuming the worst.

Second, if this deepening happens, might it indicate that I was subtly over-efforting in the first place without realizing it? When I spaced out, perhaps what actually happened was a loosening—the effort relaxed, and it was that relaxation that allowed the deepening. I don't know for certain, but this seems very worth contemplating.

It might be an indication that should inform my practice. Perhaps I should try going back in with a little more looseness in terms of effort, a little less pressure on the effort pedal.

This probably applies more once you've had different experiences with jhāna, though it might also apply to working with energy body experiences. Sometimes what can creep in is an expectation to be able to access this or that experience, jhāna, or quality of energy. In a way, this expectation is actually good—it's fine and beneficial. It's part of practice maturing when one can have reasonable expectations of certain experiences arising and being able to enter them.

But easily this expectation can become a kind of subtle demand for this or that to arise, or to be as good as usual, or as wonderful as yesterday. There's a subtle stance that might not involve any thought—just a quiet demand or expectation.

Again, this calls for a slight, subtle shift of view. Rather than operating from demand, why not think about

picking up on, noticing, becoming sensitive to, and then attuning to whatever frequencies are actually present in the mix—in the energy body, in the emotional landscape, in whatever loveliness is there? This creates an entirely different orientation.

So it might be a slightly different mix today than yesterday. But the question becomes: what is actually here? What can I attune to, rather than making a demand?

The very tuning to frequencies in the energy body mix, the very tuning to frequencies in the mix of the citta, will amplify that frequency. I have to notice it first, which takes sensitivity. I have to be willing to tune into it—that's the responsiveness—and then I have to attune to it. The attuning itself will amplify. This is fundamentally different. I'm not demanding; I'm seeing what's here, what's possible here, what actually is here, and then attuning. This differs entirely from demanding something. That demand, as I said, can be exceedingly subtle.

Returning to what I said about piti, which actually applies to the different factors among the primary factors in the first four jhanas—perhaps all the jhanas—in the meditation, part of this work and play we've discussed, part of this maximizing pleasure, this licking the honey out of the cup, you could say in soul-making terms, there's actually an eros for that quality. But it's eros in the small definition—this wanting more contact, wanting more intimacy, wanting to penetrate, wanting to open. For those familiar with soul-making dharma, you recognize this as eros, but eros in the small definition because we're not yet letting it expand into too much image or into the whole bigger dynamic where it expands to psyche and logos and everything.

Outside the meditation, you can have eros with the fantasy, with the image—eros in the bigger definition, eros that is allowed to stimulate psyche and logos and the whole soul-making dynamic. If that doesn't make sense, forget about it. It doesn't matter. What matters is right now, in the moment-to-moment meditation, it's the seeking of the pleasure, the enjoying it, the getting into it. Get into it.

In the larger view, outside of the meditation and actually in meditation both, the view of the self on the path is absolutely crucial. What's my view of myself as a practitioner, as someone walking the path? I've known people over the years with all kinds of actually deep experiences in meditation, and something's not right in their view of the self on the path, their view of self as practitioner. Very little liberation comes from it. The whole way their psychology is construing or holding the self as meditator and this experience, that experience—understanding ideas about emptiness, having even experienced certain fadings. Something's not working. Some connection is jammed the wrong way.

Sometimes in relation to jhana—and I don't know if I've said this in a talk before, though I've certainly said it in interviews—we can get so tight around the achievement-oriented aspects and then self-judging. One way I take the pressure off is to say something like this: What we're doing here with the jhana business and the piti and the pleasure and all these different wavelengths of pleasure is something akin to this—you're tired and your back hurts, and at home there's a sofa with lots of cushions on it. You're just

arranging these cushions so that they feel as good as they can feel. "Oh no, if I shift this one, that's better. That's better." That's what you're doing. Are you going to get into a big self-judgment thing about that?

That's essentially what we're doing. This is one way of thinking about it, taking the pressure off in the view. It's something we're just like, "Okay, here's this body experience. Here's this mind experience. Here's this energy body. What will help make it feel good?" It's just not a big deal. You play with that until it feels good, or to maximize how good it feels.

At another level, coming back to the eros dimension, the view of the self on the path—we do want that, or it's possible that it can become a real sense of blessedness, of gift, humility, desire, love. Image of the tradition, image of the Buddha, image of teachers, image of self on path—all this becomes imaginal in the fully soul-making sense of the word. It will still, as the Buddha said, have pain at times. There will still be distress, frustration, disappointment, tightness—the distress of the contemplative, he calls it. But that can be there, and it's part of the cut of eros. It's part of the bigger soul-making fantasy.

But for those of you who know about soul-making fantasy, I'm not going to explain all that now. We need to have a sense of the self on the path, an image, a construal of the self as practitioner on the path in a way that's nourishing, in a way that really makes sense, that holds us well through all the ups and downs.

So all this that we're touching on today, all this is relevant to and even causes the different and various difficulties we encounter in practice. Again, we tend to have such a narrow view of what we need to do, but all this business is oftentimes actually causal of the difficulties and more causal than what we tend to think of as the problem.

Take inability to access jhāna. Again, I can think of one meditator—there's actually a few—meditating for decades, decades, decades, decades, lots of retreats, etc. She wants to develop her samādhi, which means for her concentration and focus. "My concentration is so bad," which almost everyone says. "My mind wanders and my thoughts come." Again, she's measuring in terms of exactly what he said. Maybe not put those things as priority. How much thought comes? Is my mind wandering? But she is measuring that way.

She says, "I need to really get into this before I can do any other kind of practice. I really need to develop my focus. I really need to develop my concentration." Now actually knowing her fairly well as a student, she actually needs, I would say, much more important than she needs to develop her focus and keep her mind steady on something and all that. Actually what needs to happen is an inquiry and exploration or a development in practice of being able to give herself fully to something. That's a very different thing.

What is it to really show up? I give myself, now there's a kind of—I give myself, I really care about this. There's a kind of macro and there's this micro level, like when I did the sunbathing thing. Opening, surrendering. The issue, I would say, is more with that. It's not about keeping the mind steady and her ability to do that. The reason she can't do that is because there's something in her that is holding back

energetically, heartfully, in terms of her soul, in her life as well, in terms of opening and surrendering.

And so there's very rarely any kind of buildup of energy in the being. Something's just blocking it. Something won't open to it. Energy is not permitted to gather. And actually those are the primary issues. Those are the primary causes of inability to deepen in samādhi, access that. But just seeing in a very different way, so it's a different view.

But you can also see, one can also see, and we've talked about it, you see some of these very same issues manifesting in her life. It's not like, "Oh, that's just a problem of focus and concentration." It's this kind of issue about allowing energy to gather, about being wholehearted, about really giving herself, getting behind something, about really opening, actually manifest in her life too and cause all kinds of, let's say, limitations. So a shift in view, a shift in understanding, then a shift in emphasis of what am I actually practicing in? What would make a difference? What's important?

Again, sometimes, oftentimes human beings, it's the body isn't open. The energy body as a sort of habit is not so open. Most people wouldn't—it's not obvious when you look, I mean, you get people with really hunched over kind of contracted postures. I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about something much more subtle that's just palpable, but not obvious to, let's say, most people.

And sometimes this has to do with trust. Sometimes it has to do with, and it's related to just also, sometimes you see, oh, the person might also, for instance, it's very hard for them to feel something like devotion. All these things are related. And it's about the concentration—it's maybe not about the concentration. It's about something else, about the heart and the soul and how the heart and the soul over time shapes or limits a certain kind of typical stance or typical way that the energy body is.

Energy body always moves. It's always opening, closing. But there can be sort of—typically it's just a little bit closed. So certain things just are not possible. And again, maybe to learn to practice trusting in the opening. Trusting and surrendering. Just slowly, slowly learning how to do that.

Practice with the energy, cultivating this capacity. Or, as I mentioned earlier, sometimes what occurs is that people develop quite a tightness or overexcitement, which might be very subtle, that creeps in right when there's actually tremendous focus, deep concentration, and plenty of pīti that may be right on the edge of the first jhāna—if we even speak of edges.

But what I want to emphasize is they're thinking too much about edges. This very view is creating problems—there's a black and white "over there." If I can just get over there, even if "over there" is metaphorically two inches away, that will be the jhāna. But it's not. Again, this could be a verbal thought or a non-verbal thought. This black and white view is allowing tension to creep in, an impulse to snatch and grasp, which causes problems, creates tightness.

What about instead just getting into it? Getting into what is there that is lovely and enjoying that, not worrying about where the boundary is. Relishing, really relishing what's here versus the idea of attaining

something and then measuring whether I've attained it. What I'm interested in is simply relishing that honey.

Last thing—we're doing well for time today. The Buddha sometimes talked about or described the jhānas as perception attainments. What we are doing, I would say, in the most fruitful, the truest, the most ontologically valid and most liberating way of conceiving this, is that we're playing with perception. In that playing with perception, certain perception attainments will be opened.

This way of viewing, I would say, is much more significant than thinking we're practicing unwavering attention, or practicing an intensity of laser beam intention that dissects or magnifies things—like looking at things through a magnifying glass—or that we're simplifying, or even that we're playing with energy.

I do talk a lot about energy when I teach. Sometimes, as I said, it seems helpful for many people. Some people really don't resonate with it at all—they don't get a sense of it. We can relate all this to qigong and such; it makes sense to talk about energy. But very often we can get locked into a certain view that we're really doing something here with the energy or with the energy body or with the body or with the chakras or whatever it is. We think we're getting the energy body to this or that state, and that becomes locked as a view: "I'm working on this contraction, I'm opening the energy here."

Sometimes that's really helpful as a view. We can talk in energetic terms about some of these examples of difficulties and how they relate to life. But sometimes a person has had enough of that kind of thinking, and it's not the final truth of what's going on. It's just a certain way of conceiving it, a way of construing it, a way of perceiving it.

This idea of perception attainment and the idea of playing with perception—that's the most radical shift of conceptual framework and the most important shift of conceptual framework you could make. Really understand what that means and use that in a way that's actually fruitful rather than just a casual "yeah, yeah, yeah." It has everything to do with a radical and deep understanding of emptiness.

The jhānas, what we're doing in the jhānas—I didn't explain this; I rushed through it at that point in the talk, but I'll come back to it. If I start to understand the jhānas as playing with perception, and perception attainments are opened through our playing with perception, this integrates completely into our understanding of the deep emptiness of all things.

That's the most important thing in the Dharma, I would say. The most important thing in the Dharma is perception—understanding perception and playing with perception. You can construe the whole Dharma as actually being primarily interested in that: playing with perception. Everything, even things that sound like they have nothing to do with that, you can understand the whole Dharma as basically an exploration of playing with perception and then taking certain conclusions and certain liberations from that.

What do I mean by perception? Perception—saññā is the Pali word, and often it gets translated as something like labeling. That's not at all what I mean when I say perception. By perception, I do not mean

labeling: "green," "Sarah," "cushion"—which is not a cushion, it's a bench.

By perception, I mean it's an equivalent term for experience, or better, appearance. So I use these three terms interchangeably—phenomenon, experience, perception, appearance. Perception attainment is not a labeling attainment.

If I were to label Sari "banana" and Kirsten "pomegranate" and Julian "kiwi," I'm not playing with labels here. I'm playing with the fabrication of experience, the fabrication of appearance. Energy is a fabricated perception, fabricated appearance. It's not energy. It's a certain fabrication of appearance, experience. This kind of energy is this kind of fabrication, this kind of conjuring, this kind of weaving and sculpting of appearance and experience.

The first jhana is this kind of weaving, conjuring, fabricating of experience, appearance, perception. The eighth jhana is—actually, that's a bad example. We'll come back to that later. Papañca involves certain fabricating of experience. Just the normal everyday consciousness is a certain fabrication of perception, experience, appearance.

Life is the fabrication of perception, experience, appearance. Meditation is the exploration of the fabrication of perception, experience, appearance. Skill and art in meditation is skill and art in the fabrication and the various fabrications and what they lead to. And do they lead where we want to go? If I want it to lead to unfabricating or skillful fabricating or this kind of liberation or this kind of state or that kind of quality or that kind of energy or that kind of jhana—perception attainments.

And that has everything to do with emptiness, which basically is the fabrication of experience, the fabrication of the sense of existence at different times. So the jhanas are completely woven into the whole sense of what's most important in the path. It's most a way of conceiving the whole of the Dharma.

Seeing it that way with that kind of view is very different than other ways we can conceive of what we're trying to do here. And as I said, for some of you—I do talk a lot about energy and some of you are very happy with that language, but some can sometimes get too attached, as if it's a real thing.

What would happen if you're one of these people—what would happen to just rethink the whole thing? Rethink your practice, rethink energy, rethink jhana, rethink dharma in terms of perception? Which, as I said, doesn't mean labeling.

It's 5:45. Would you like to end now, or are there some questions that it might feel helpful to ask? Does it feel like there might be—just get a sense of who might feel like they might want to ask. Why don't we take just a few questions? This will be part three, and then yeah, let's see how that goes.

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