Mettā Practice, and a few things about Pīti (Instructions)

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So, which is my particular style of neurosis—my preferred neurosis—but I really fret a lot about wanting you all to have exactly what you need, exactly when you need it. Each of you, rather. And of course that's completely impossible. So we'll just do the best we can.

Today I'd like to divide things into two parts. The first part consists of two pieces of instructions, and the second part is a talk about view, effort, attitude, and achievement.

Two Parts of Instructions

The first instruction concerns using mettā practice as your base practice for moving deeper into samādhi and jhāna, or as a foundation for karuṇā (compassion) practice, muditā, or similar practices.

The first thing to understand is that when you're doing mettā practice with the intention of jhāna, that's a different intention than doing mettā practice for the purpose of cultivating mettā itself. This sounds obvious and perhaps not so consequential, but it's actually quite significant.

Of course, when you use mettā as your base practice—as your springboard practice towards jhāna—and that's your intention, you're going to be cultivating mettā. How can you not be? Even if you're practicing with breath or some other method toward jhāna, the jhānas naturally have mettā in them. They are naturally filled, imbued, pervaded by mettā. I won't elaborate on that further.

But if mettā is your base practice, then at some point there will likely be a fork in the path. You'll need to ask: Is it the love that I'm primarily cultivating now, or is it the sense of well-being, pīti, and happiness? There are grey areas in the middle, and you can mix these two approaches. But there is a kind of fork, and right from the beginning—or at some point fairly early on—you probably want to clarify your actual intention. Does this make sense?

Since you're on this retreat, as I mentioned on the opening evening, your intention is jhāna practice. That's your primary intention, which means that simply bearing this in the back of your mind has all kinds of effects and navigates your practice without you even being conscious of it. This is powerful. Intentions are extremely powerful things. Intentions create our worlds, and that's not hyperbole. So you want to be conscious about this and firm and clear about what you're doing.

At a certain point, for example, let's say you're practicing mettā and there's love, there's feeling, there are

all kinds of shades of different feelings—which I'll discuss in a moment. But what you're looking for primarily is the pīti, the well-being. When that arises and comes up steadily and frequently, then that becomes your primary focus. The mettā is just a springboard.

Key Qualities in Practice

The way I teach mettā emphasizes the qualities and intentions of sensitivity, attunement, responsiveness, and receptiveness—these are all key. Why do I emphasize these qualities in jhāna practice? When we practice jhānas emphasizing these qualities and recognizing their importance, notice how much overlap and significance jhāna practice has for our emptiness practice, our soul-making practice, our emotional practice, and—I forgot to mention—our brahmavihāra practice. In the way I teach mettā, these are central qualities we're practicing.

There are different kinds of sensitivity and responsiveness. For example, with mettā practice using phrases like "may you be happy" or "may you be peaceful"—as we discussed before when talking about pegs—I might ask: Do I need more pegs here? Do I need to repeat that first phrase a second time, perhaps even a third time, before moving on? I'm being sensitive, attuned, and responsive to the situation, responding by adding more pegs. Sometimes this isn't necessary, but that's a relatively gross level of responsiveness to what I notice about my mind state and heart state.

Another aspect is how "loud," so to speak, I say the phrases internally. Sometimes the mind needs something really loud and clear.

"May you be happy," I might whisper, soft as a prayer. Other times the same phrase needs to boom through my being with crystalline clarity. I remain attuned: What does this moment require? Where should the volume be?

I also sense how sparse or dense the phrases need to be. Sometimes I find myself thinking, "May you be happy," and immediately needing another phrase because silence would invite distraction. The unsettled mind requires constant engagement, something to concentrate upon.

But once the mind has settled and the heart has opened, revealing those lovely heart frequencies, "May you be happy" can unfold into spacious silence. I rest in that resonance, feeling the heart vibrate with the emotional reverberations of the phrase itself. I cannot predict when the next phrase will arise—I simply remain sensitive to what the moment asks.

The whole practice becomes like riding thermals. When a warm updraft appears, I don't need to flap my wings. I glide, feeling how it supports me. When that thermal dissipates, I sense where to find the next one, perhaps flapping briefly to get there. But first I must learn to feel the thermal, to know what it means to ride it.

This sensitivity, receptivity, attunement, and responsiveness—this is what I'm pointing toward. I want to

be fully aware of the effects and feelings in the energy bodies. As we discussed yesterday, the entire energy body participates in metta practice.

When I say a particular phrase—"May you be happy"—I open to the whole energy body's response. Then I move to the next phrase: "May you be peaceful." Suddenly I notice this phrase carries a distinct flavor, a deeper effect. I've caught a thermal with these very words. The phrase generates its own updraft in the citta-body system.

Without sensitivity in the energy body and heart, I would miss this entirely. So much of meditation involves this quality of opportunism—sensing which door stands open, which thermal awaits, what carries juice in this moment. I feel it fully, then work skillfully with what arises.

Beyond recognizing that certain phrases feel more alive than others, I develop sensitivity to individual words. Do I need the complete phrase, or can I simply drop in the word "happy"? This responsiveness reveals itself through practice.

As the energy body and heart become more sensitive, I notice that "happy" creates a different effect than "peaceful." These aren't static responses—the word "happy" doesn't always produce identical results. I attune to the precise emotional tones, subtleties, and frequencies arising in each moment.

The entire practice becomes an attunement to different frequencies, colors, vibrations in the energy body and heart. As I grow sensitive to these qualities—riding them, appreciating them, enjoying them all—despite their differences, I naturally begin radiating them outward. Here, I offer silently, you have some of this lovely happiness and peace.

Metta deepens through this process because metta isn't a single emotion—it's a complex of emotions, a symphony of the heart. As I radiate these qualities to others, I simultaneously bathe in them myself. I must ensure I'm truly enjoying this gift, not losing it in the act of giving it away.

If my intention remains focused on samadhi, all of this unfolds beautifully. But as I mentioned earlier, what truly captures my interest is the arising of piti.

So sometimes it's hard to distinguish what's happening—it gets a little mixed up—but actually we're interested in discrimination. I should qualify this, and this is one of those places where I'm going to contradict myself: some of us need to be really interested in discrimination, and some of us need to let go of discrimination for a while. But basically we're interested in discrimination.

If my priority is toward jhana, then I'm actually more interested in the piti—this real pleasure feeling, this well-being. I'll come back and talk about that in a moment. That's what I want to allow to dominate, more than the metta feelings. And that's what I'm writing about. Of course, it might be happiness and you're going for the second jhana, but that's it for metta for now. Is that enough to be going with?

The second thing I want to talk about—and I wasn't going to address it today—but from what I hear and

from people I've spoken to in notes and conversations, saying a little bit now feels necessary. For many of you, you will need something like this. And in a way, what I'm going to say now will make what I say later today make sense over a larger area.

What I want to talk about now is piti, very briefly. I will say much more in the next few days.

So what is piti? The Pali word, P-I-T-I. Ecstasy, rapture, pleasant feeling, well-being. Technically, I would define it as pleasant physical sensations or pleasant physical feeling that arise from a non-sensual source. In other words, it's not like a pleasant taste in the mouth or someone touching you nicely. These are pleasant sensations arising from a non-sensual source.

I will talk more about this, as I said, but there are many manifestations. There's a big range in terms of how that can manifest—how intensely, what kind of experiences are involved, what kind of flavors. It can be a kind of tingling all through the body as rapture or ecstasy, a kind of almost electric-like vibration that's very pleasant. It could be just a sense of lightness. It can be a mixture of all these, and there can be a kind of warmth with it. But the key thing is that it's pleasant. The range of that pleasantness, both in terms of types of manifestation and also how pleasant it is, is quite extraordinary. I'll come back to all this—I'm just touching on this now to put a few things in place that some of you will need.

So piti was like Newton Abbot, remember? Or Newton Abbot is like piti. It arises anyhow—it can arise any which way. The important thing is for you to really learn how it arises for you. Is it going to be one way? Is it going to be many ways? Eventually it's just an intention.

So it may arise from really just sticking the attention at the tip of the nose or the upper lip and keeping it there, working with these other elements we talked about yesterday—the effort and the delicacy and the intensity. It may well arise. It may erupt into the body at some point from basically the focus and concentration, the intensity of energy.

It may arise from playing with the energy body, as we've done with the breath, and as we will touch on, you can also do it without the breath. So it arises from coaxing the energy body to be as nice, as comfortable, to have as much well-being as possible, and slowly, slowly, that just shapes and warms up into more and more piti.

It might arise from an insight way of looking. It might arise—someone was saying yesterday, and it's quite common for some people—from the nada sound. I'm not even going to explain that meditation. If you don't know what it is, it doesn't matter.

It may arise just from open-heartedness. Again, how often do we think of all this as arising from something called concentration, which means an intense focus and keeping my mind on something? People say to me so commonly: "I was standing outside, looking at a tree, appreciating, opening myself to the beauty of something in nature, and piti arose right there. I wasn't really concentrating on the tree—let me look at the bark."

Then you think, "Oh, but isn't that sense contact? The tree's sense contact?" Actually, your nostrils are sensation, sense contact. It's not the pleasantness of that sense contact of the tree.

So we have openness of being as the fundamental ground from which pīti arises most naturally. The person is simply present in nature or with whatever arises. The heart is open, the being is open, and the energy body is open, allowing pīti to emerge organically. In fact, with this quality of openness, pīti becomes something that is simply there—a natural condition you can tune into rather than something you must manufacture through effort.

Once pīti does arise, however, then we have what I could call work to do. I know some people resist the word "work," so perhaps we could say we have play to do. Though some don't like that word either. If neither appeals to you, then we simply have doing to do. And if you're uncomfortable with doing in meditation, you might want to examine whether this is the right retreat for you, as there may be some conceptual issues that need investigation.

Let me share just a small portion of what this work-play involves. I'll elaborate more later, but I want to give you a taste now.

Again, you're all in different places in your practice. The primary question right now is: where is my playground? Some of you might be exploring the fourth jhāna, others are still working with the energy body, and still others are developing concentration. It doesn't matter where you are. What matters is that you can discern your particular playground—what we've been calling your playground at your edge.

This is how we're teaching jhāna on this retreat, and there's a specific reason for this approach. I don't have time to repeat everything we've covered, but the essential question is: Can you identify your playground and spend most of your time there? Can you really marinate in it—whether it's the second jhāna or whatever level you're working with? This means spending substantial time there: hours, again and again, as much as possible.

Can you develop mastery? And what does mastery involve? The shorthand is simply: why bother? Because I believe this is how we extract the most fruit from this practice—more than any other approach. This is just my opinion, drawn from having worked through all of this myself.

So what does this work-play actually involve? Let me offer just a glimpse for now—three activities to explore.

First, see if you can spread that pīti or sense of well-being. As the Buddha described in his teachings, can the whole body be suffused, saturated, drenched, steeped with this quality? If you're in the second jhāna, it's happiness. If the third jhāna, it's a beautiful peacefulness. If the first jhāna, it's pīti.

So when pīti arises and sustains for more than a few minutes—if it doesn't sustain that long, it's not quite ready for this kind of work yet—then one exploration is to see if it can spread. Can the entire body space

be contained within the pīti, touched by it, pervaded by it?

For now, I'll say it's perfectly fine if this doesn't happen. It's okay if the spreading doesn't occur. I'll add to and refine all of this as we continue. I just want to give you a small taste right now.

So the first element is seeing if the pīti can spread, if you can get your whole body involved, touched, and delighting in it.

The second and third elements involve what I call two modes of attention.

Let's say the pīti comes up and has spread throughout the body. I can then ask myself, "Where is it strongest?" Perhaps it's strongest around my throat. I might not even have a clear sense or image of my throat at that point, but it's somewhere in that region. I can kind of get that. I may have a sense of my throat, I might not, but somewhere around there.

So the first mode is like an arrow going into a bullseye. Right in the center of where it's most pleasant, I want to probe it with my attention, with a narrow focus. I really want to penetrate it, get inside it. Dive into it. You understand? Very spatially one-pointed.

But as I'm doing that, yes, I'm concentrating on it. Yes, I'm focusing on it. But I want to relish it. I want to maximize my enjoyment moment after moment. Where's the enjoyment here? Am I letting myself enjoy it? Can I enjoy it? Like nuzzling into it. Or putting your tongue in a little cup of honey and just wanting to lick every last bit of honey out of it.

I'm not kidding. Don't underestimate how much we prevent ourselves from enjoying at all kinds of levels through all kinds of indoctrination and psychological conditioning. But concentrate, yes—probe and really enjoy. Enjoy again and again and again. Find the enjoyment there.

The second mode of attention is complementary. Rather than being narrow and probing, it's open and receptive. It's more like—oh yes, just like you're sunbathing and your body is soaking up the sun, and you're opening, you're opening yourself, you're abandoning yourself. Or like you're in a really perfect temperature shower with the perfect water flow and just... yes.

So opening, receiving, surrendering. "Abandoning" is even not too strong a word. Abandon yourself to it. Surrender. Open your body to it. Open your being to it. Again, with the intention and emphasis to enjoy it to the maximum. How can I really drink the most enjoyment from this?

So there are two modes of attention, and we can alternate in a very relaxed, improvised way between this more probing narrow approach and the open surrendered sunbathing quality. There's no formula. Just move back and forth. The very moving back and forth is a bit like the bathman with the soap in the Buddha's analogy—you're working something. Part of how it works is through this going back and forth with the attention.

Not really fast, though. Not all nervous. And don't worry about, "Oh, is now the right moment?" It's hard to tell in advance. "If I move now, is that going to help?" Just be relaxed and play and move. In time, sometimes you do get a sense of these things. But the movement itself is shaping something. It's forming something. It's allowing something to coalesce and build.

So you could do any of these three things: spreading it or seeing if it will spread, and then these two modes of attention. You could do the "see if it will spread" first. I'm not going to talk much about that now other than to say it's fine if it doesn't. Just see if it will spread, imagine it spreading.

If it doesn't spread, no big deal—I'll return to that topic later. For now, let's say it's perfectly okay if it doesn't expand beyond its initial location. Even if the *pīti* remains localized—perhaps just around your heart area while your legs feel completely normal—you can still practice both the probing and the sunbathing with this smaller area of sensation. There's absolutely no problem with working in a more confined space.

You can alternate between these approaches, or you could try the alternating method first and then see if the *pīti* spreads afterward. The sequence doesn't really matter—follow what feels natural to you in the moment.

Does this make enough sense? I wanted to offer these possibilities because I suspect this will be relevant for some of you right now in your practice.

So that brings us to the end of part one of tonight's instructions. We've covered the fundamental approaches to working with *pīti*: the probing attention that investigates and plays with the energy, and the sunbathing attention that simply receives and allows. We've also touched on the possibility of encouraging the *pīti* to spread, though without any pressure or expectation.

These are the basic tools. In the remaining parts, we'll explore how to deepen and refine this work, how to navigate challenges that might arise, and how to integrate these experiences into the broader path of awakening. But for now, you have enough to begin this beautiful exploration of *pīti* as a doorway into deeper states of consciousness.

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