# Developing Pīti, Developing Focus, Developing Wellbeing

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:28:59

What I want to talk about now is pīti. Broadly speaking, we could say there are two approaches or two avenues by which a practitioner works and plays so that eventually pīti arises. These two are not so black and white—the distinction between them is not so clear-cut, and neither are they mutually exclusive. A person usually has predominantly one way or predominantly another.

The first approach involves working with the energy body and finding and encouraging any sense of wellbeing in the energy body space. As I said, coaxing it, tending to it. If it's an ember and I'm trying to get a campfire going, what do I need to do to nurture this ember? What do I need to put around it? Do I need to blow on it? Do I need to shelter it from the wind? Whatever it is, what do I need to do to get this ember to turn into a fire, a campfire? In a way, what we're starting with is the energy body experience, and in any way I can, I get that experience and massage it, support it, shape it, encourage it, ignite it to move towards more and more pleasantness until there's pīti.

The second way is to choose something—choose an object—and just concentrate repeatedly on that object. If the concentration gets more steady and the energy accumulates there, then at some point pīti evolves in the experience, in the energy body.

What is pīti? I define it as pleasant feeling that's felt physically, but whose origin is non-sensual. For a meditator, this can come up in all kinds of ways. There are all kinds of flavors and manifestations of pīti. The whole body can feel like it's tingling, or parts of the body can feel like tingling. It can actually feel like an orgasm—some people say it feels just like that. It can feel like something much more subtle, like a kind of pleasant warmth or a pleasant lightness, as if one's almost floating. It can feel like waves of pleasant bliss or rapture or ecstasy going through the body. There are many, many manifestations it can have.

One of the interesting things about how pīti manifests is that it evolves over time, and it evolves in a couple of ways. One way is that as you get into, let's say, the third jhāna, the repeated experience of the third jhāna affects the way pīti comes up for you from then on. The third jhāna is very peaceful, incredibly beautifully serene and tranquil. It's almost like that does something to the whole energy body, or it does something to the whole citta. Thereafter, usually, a person's pīti is much calmer than it might have been in the beginning. So there's a kind of retroactive effect that deeper jhānas can have on the experience of the first jhāna, which is characterized by pīti.

What can also happen—and it's very individual—is this: one's meditating, let's say concentrating on the

upper lip at the tip of the nose, concentrating, concentrating. Then I notice at times when concentration seems to develop, I notice what are almost like lightning bolts through the body of extreme pleasure. But it's gone—gone in two seconds or a second. Or it might be like a wave of bliss or ecstasy, or just a wave of pleasant feeling washing through the body. But again, it's gone in a couple of seconds.

This is, in a way, good. It's pīti. It's definitely pīti. It's great. Things are happening. Wonderful. When that happens, open to it, enjoy it. If you're still really working with the object and you're not ready to leave the main object, then you still stay with—if I follow my example—the breath. This pleasant experience remains in your background awareness. You're certainly opening to it and enjoying it, but you're not going, "Oh, let's focus on that." It's not ready yet.

It's not steady enough. It's just a passing thing. What we want, and what might happen from the beginning or might happen more with time, is a more steady pīti—something that's around for at least two or three minutes without disappearing. Once it's steady, and if you're sure this is definitely pleasant, then you're ready to work with it. I'll talk more about how to work with it as this retreat progresses, building on what we covered yesterday.

So we need to wait until it's relatively steady, temporarily steady. We want it to be steady, but actually, to be really clear, we want pīti and sukha. I remember, countless times over the years in interviews here, someone has come in and, in the course of whatever we were talking about during their retreat, reported that they were practicing—usually in Asia somewhere—and had experienced pīti and sukha, which means happiness from meditation. They reported it in the interview and were asked if it was pleasant and if they enjoyed it, and they said yes. Then they were actually shamed for having it.

The teacher, from what they told me, was quite severe, and somehow they felt shamed and quite hurt and traumatized by that interaction years later. Something in their practice and their whole relationship with practice had gotten quite twisted because of that. There was often, and this might be quite surprising, quite a lot of grief around it. Something that had touched their being quite deeply, that they were open about sharing—a lovely thing, not just difficult dukkha—was dismissed, and they ended up feeling ashamed about it.

So just to be really clear: we want pīti, we want sukha. It's a good thing.

How does it arise? How can we think of its arising? One way we can think of it is through two broad approaches.

If we're thinking about concentration—keeping the mind steady on the upper lip, the lower nostrils, and so on—as the mind keeps staying there, what's not happening is the mind squandering and dissipating energy through thought, through distraction. The mind is collecting its energy. In electronics, there's something called a capacitor—an electronic component that gathers electric charge. One way you can think about what pīti is, from the concentration point of view, is that you're simply not squandering

energy. You're not dissipating it, and it begins to gather.

But it's not just nailing your mind to an object. You're also going to need the refinement, the subtilizing of the object if you're using the concentration approach. So pīti won't arise just from staring at something. It also needs this quality of attention and the subtlety of the object and attention in order for pīti to arise through the concentration route.

Pīti can also arise just from gathering energy, as in practices like qigong. You're actually gathering energy, and the qi and the pīti are very close—they're very close. Are they separate? Are they different things? Are they not different things? I'd say it's on a spectrum. As we gather the qi and begin to feel it more positively, we can call it pīti. It becomes pīti.

With insight ways of looking, there's a letting go, a release of clinging, and in that release, we fabricate less. There's less fabrication of the bodily perception.

Samādhi—I'll come back to this; it's such an important point that I'm going to return to as the retreat goes on. What samādhi really is, or perhaps the most fruitful, most helpful way of conceiving what samādhi is: as we deepen in samādhi, there is less fabrication of perception, less fabrication of self, less fabrication of dukkha definitely, less fabrication of self, less fabrication of bodily perception, and less fabrication of any perception at all. That's what the whole spectrum of the jhānas is—you can understand it in one framework. And that's the most important way of understanding it. This way of understanding will unlock all kinds of other doors in terms of the whole of Dharma practice and liberation.

So how does pīti arise? It arises through insight, through ways of looking that let go of clinging, therefore fabricating less, therefore less fabrication of body. Pīti—perceiving the body as pīti—is a less fabricated perception of the body. Or we could say another way is through the energy body, working with the energy body to shape it, to fabricate it so that there's pleasure and pīti there. Or, as I said before, it's just an openness of being, an openness of heart, and that allows pīti to flow. It's like pīti wants to be there, wants to come, and it's just the openness.

Once it's there, then we have work and play to do: I need to consolidate this, stabilize it, and absorb into it so that it can become the first jhāna—if pīti is what we're talking about, as opposed to happiness or something else that's central to other jhānas.

It's interesting—and none of this is again without exceptions—but it tends to be the case that when I'm using the concentration method and PT comes, it tends to erupt very suddenly and quite intensely. I'm concentrating, concentrating, and okay, I can definitely feel like I'm in a deeper state of concentration. But when the PT comes, it kind of bursts through into the body, into consciousness. Or one might even find oneself already in a jhāna with everything there, not just the PT.

The other way—working with what I described as this ember that we try to kindle like a fire, working with the energy body—that tends to be, though not always, more gradual. The PT builds more steadily. So

there's a more gradual movement into the full PT experience.

How many people have heard the term "access concentration"? Quite a lot of you. I don't use that term myself. The Buddha never used it—it's not a phrase the Buddha ever used. It comes, I think, from the Visuddhimagga, which is a commentarial text from about five hundred years after the Buddha, a text we may or may not come back to. I don't tend to use it because the Buddha never used it.

What does it mean? Well, it's kind of like when you can feel sometimes, if you're concentrating—let's say on the breath—there's a sort of quantum shift where you just feel like, "Oh, now the mind is really settled and really getting to settle on its object." Usually the breath is subtler at that point, for example. Usually things feel more harmonized. So you're not in jhāna yet—there's probably no pīti if you're using the concentration method—but it's just a kind of marking point of "Yeah, okay, we've settled a little bit."

You can use it if you like. I don't tend to find it that helpful really, but it's fine. Sometimes I think it's more the case that each jhāna has its own particular access concentration once you do a lot of jhāna practice, but it really doesn't matter. If it's helpful for you in terms of getting a sense of where you're at, go for it. But I don't tend to use it. It doesn't matter. I'm happy to talk about it with you though.

With the breath at one point, if it's that method, there can be these kind of quantum shifts at different points. So for example, I think I mentioned it already—let's say again, just to follow my example, the breath at the nose, at the upper lip. At some point, as it starts to go well, that area starts to feel larger and begins to feel like it's actually about the size of my whole head, or about the size of my whole body. This is a good development. This is a good thing. And that movement there is part of—it's on its way. It's, let's say, part of or an element of the whole movement towards whole-body PT, or paralleling that, or something like that.

Another analogy you could use instead of the capacitor analogy is like when you hold a magnifying glass and catch the sun's rays, focusing them on some dry leaves or something—it's going to make those leaves ignite, right? It's gathering the energy of the mind. That's a way we can think of it. It's gathering the energy of the mind until it ignites in PT.

But as I said, it needs not just that—it needs part of the gathering, part of the energizing to be the quality of the attention, more important than the quantity. We've talked about this now three times. Quality more important than quantity. Quantity is still important, but secondary. And quality, as we've already said, includes lots of different factors.

Andy asked a question yesterday. I want to see—I think I lost the piece of paper—but let me see if I answer it now in the flow of what I'm saying. And if not, we can come back to it.

So I talked about subtilizing—the sort of encouraging of making things subtle or allowing things to get subtle. When we're talking about concentration at one point, then the object—in this case the breath sensations at that one point—needs to get, or will get as part of the deepening concentration, more and

more subtle. The attention needs to become correspondingly subtle. If I can even encourage all that to become more and more subtle, that's great. I certainly need to encourage the attention to get more and more subtle. So the object itself becomes more subtle and the attention becomes more subtle. I encourage that.

If I'm going by the other way—the sort of coaxing of the whole energy body experience gradually—then my experience of the different frequencies in the energy body will maybe include both subtle and gross frequencies. We want to be open to all of that. I want to be sensitive to both subtle and gross experiences.

But the experience of the energy body as a whole on its way to the first jhāna—unlike the experience of the breath which gets more and more subtle at one point—the experience of the energy body doesn't get more subtle on its way to the first jhāna. You're actually building more, so it's less subtle. You understand? There might be lots of different frequencies at first, but I'm actually building—it's getting less subtle. So don't confuse this.

However, as you go through all the jhānas, there is, as I said, a spectrum of subtlety over eight jhānas. The third jhāna is way more subtle than the first. The second jhāna is actually more subtle than the first, the third jhāna is more subtle than the second, the fourth is more subtle, et cetera. It's a spectrum of increasing subtlety.

So as I said, the eighth jhana is almost unspeakably subtle, unspeakably refined. There are different kinds of ways this word "subtle" applies. Does that answer your question, Andy?

So let's stay with this idea of subtle just for a moment. Sometimes I remember very early in my practice, in a very different tradition, hearing about the subtle breath and thinking, "What's that? That sounds interesting."

Partly what it means is simply this subtilized breath—this breath that has become subtle through the calming, or that one encourages to become subtle. In the Anapanasati Sutta, the discourse on mindfulness of breathing, the first instruction is that the practitioner breathes long and knows they're breathing long, just as a turner—probably some kind of woodworker—turns something deliberately because someone is paying them to do that, and they know what they're doing.

This is oftentimes read passively, like "I know I'm doing a long one," as opposed to "No, now I need to do a long one, therefore I will do a long one, and I know I'm doing a long one." To me, it's more active: I will deliberately breathe long. Then the second instruction is I will deliberately breathe short. The shorter breath is already a calming, a subtilizing, generally speaking. So there's this natural movement toward the subtilizing of the breath, the calming of the breath, and the encouragement of that.

However, there's another possible meaning of this phrase "subtle breath." Sometimes you can notice that the breath can feel quite gross or stuck somewhere—you're sort of yanking it or heaving it to smooth through a constriction in the throat or something. Sometimes finding a way of breathing that's helpful and

smooths it out is really beneficial, but sometimes, if I don't get too obsessed—and I'm using that word "obsessed" in a very subtle way, because we can get very subtly obsessed in meditation—then here's this breath that's actually a bit stuck somewhere, a bit rough, a bit gross, a bit uneven.

And actually, at the same time somehow, it's almost like there's another breath or another level of breath that's way more subtle and is already smooth—very, very subtle. But I need to be not so obsessed and a bit more spacious, a bit more receptive, my antennae a bit more receptive and subtle to even notice it.

I can sometimes find that breath and forget about the one that feels rough. It's almost like they're going on at the same time in some kind of way. As I concentrate on the subtler one, as I find it and attune to it—as we said yesterday, what happens when I attune to it? It amplifies it. It gets amplified. The other one just kind of fades away. I'm not worried about it anymore. It amplifies the subtle breath in my consciousness. That becomes what I'm concentrating on.

Again: sensitivity, receptivity, and opportunistic attunement. "Oh, there's something here that I hadn't realized." And then opportunistically, the door opens—let's just gently go with that. Find that. Go with that.

Sometimes this relates to another level of something I've already mentioned, which is in a way even more subtle and applies probably much more usually when you've already experienced quite a lot of jhanas. Again, the mind won't settle down. The energy body doesn't feel right. It's just not quite happening. But if I don't get too sucked into that problem—just spacious, gentle attunement—there's a level of the mind, let's call it, there's a dimension of the being, better to say, that's actually already peaceful, already imbued with a certain jhanic quality.

This is probably much more obvious once you're very familiar with that jhanic quality. The mind just won't settle down in this sitting or today or whatever it is, but with just a little spaciousness, opportunistically, my antennae are up and then there's something akin to the beginnings of the peace, the kind of peace that's characteristic of the third jhana. I'm just going to dive there. And in diving there, I attune to it, and in attuning to it, it amplifies, and the other stuff just kind of dissolves.

That becomes, that takes over my experience.

So this business of finding the second kind of subtle breath is akin to that. It's just the same thing at a different scale perhaps. And then we also mentioned that if you're going to use the imaginal poetic sense of the object, that that's really quite a subtle thing. It's really just a couple of drops of this magic essential oil or whatever it is that you're dropping in. Really quite subtle.

Okay, so there are two emphases, as I said, broadly speaking: concentration versus this kind of tending to, coaxing sensitivity to the energy body and developing that. Whichever way... how do I say this? At some point, whichever way you've gone into your jhāna or pīti or happiness or whatever it is, sometimes the emphasis is more needed—more concentration, more focus needed, more effort needed. For some people that's often the case: more effort, more concentration. For other people or other times, or even once pīti

has arisen—and I'll go into this today and tomorrow—what do I need to do now that pīti has arisen? It might be more focus, more concentration, maybe on the original object, but then on the pīti itself. And that's what I'm doing.

Other times it's actually, as I said yesterday—don't underestimate the significance of this or the importance or how crucial it can be—other times the emphasis and the intention needs to be more on more surrender, more opening, more abandoning. So you can move emphasis, and you will, and I'll come back to this. It's not that you get locked into one emphasis, but what's needed right now. And then generally, as I said, as a practitioner, as a human being over time, what do I need? Sometimes, as I said yesterday, sometimes a person needs more focus, more focus, more focus. It's not what you need. You need a bit more of the other, or maybe really to experience that, to gently develop in opening, surrendering, abandoning. Through that there's the deepening, the sort of progression, the consolidating of all that through this balance, this play.

I don't know if you've noticed already on this retreat or other retreats, but if your intention is focus, concentration—if that's your emphasis and if that's your conceptual framework of what you're doing, if that's your view of what we're doing here, focusing, concentrating—that very intention or emphasis has obviously a lot of good results, but it also has some negative results. So when there's noise or some disturbance—birds or whoever it is, someone in the meditation hall—with that intention and that emphasis, it's much more likely that the noise creates aversion. Has anyone noticed this? The intention—intentions set up the flavor of perceptions. If that wasn't my intention, I would not have aversion at that point. The aversion scuppers the possibility of jhāna. It takes away the possibility of jhāna.

So that's quite interesting. It's not that one shouldn't practice that way. It's just something to know. If I'm practicing this way, or rather, more broadly speaking, if I have this intention, it will have these consequences on my perception. It will likely have these consequences, whatever that intention is. We could speak lots on that.

So it's not that one shouldn't, but one should realize, oh, that's going to be part of my territory if I'm going for the concentration thing. Is it a little less likely that there's aversion if one's going the other way with the whole body and the coaxing of the well-being? If that's the conceptual framework, if that's the intention, if that's the emphasis? Because then really, as we played earlier today, any approach is available. So here's aversion—we can just put into the energy body some mettā. Whereas if I go to mettā once I'm focusing on the breath, I'm actually doing a whole different practice. Or I can relax the aversion with an insight way of looking, different insight ways of looking. And the whole thing becomes much more workable. And with the subsidence of aversion, there is the arising of happiness. With the subsidence of aversion there is the arising of happiness.

So it's not to say choose this one or that one, but it's to be wise to causes and conditions. And intentions are causes and conditions and they have effects, all kinds of effects—effects that we don't often anticipate or

realize.

So focus and concentration are really important. Another way of considering those terms or what's happening with samādhi is words like collectedness or integrity. Remember that—I think I said it yesterday—the meaning of samādhi originally in Sanskrit was, maybe it still had that meaning for hundreds of years later, but it was more like agreement and harmony. Samādhi as integrity, meaning the elements of my being are in agreement, in harmony. There's an integrity to my being and a collectedness of energy, mind and desire. A collectedness and integrity of energy, mind and desire.

Now when I put it like that, that to me has a lot more implications for my life and my work and my personality and how I am in relationship.

Countless people in our culture struggle with concentration—ADHD is supposedly epidemic, and mobile phones, screen time, too many WhatsApps and Facebooks certainly contribute to this fragmentation. But I know countless people who are perfectly capable of concentrating very well on their work, in relationship with someone, in a creative project. They've never spent ten seconds on meditation because they don't know the first thing about it.

When we conceive samadhi differently—as collectedness, integrity of energy, mind and desire—these qualities become broadly relevant to life, to how I'm living, how I manifest my personhood. When there's that collectedness, integrity of mind, energy, desire, body, there's power. I don't mean power over—I mean power. The being has power. The person has power.

You can sense it in a person. You can see it over their life. Does this person have soul power—the power you sense in them, the power they feel or don't even recognize? Is it growing? Is it lessening? These questions become much more relevant than "How can I keep my concentration on something?" which for most people, beyond a certain point of basic human ability to focus, is hardly relevant.

But collectedness, integrity, soul power—these are important things. Then you start to relate that to daily life: yes, that little bit of alcohol affects concentration temporarily, but more significantly, it affects something about my personhood and my capacity to really cohere and show up with soul power, with the integrity of my being—body, mind, energy, desire—as a habit of showing up coherently, with energy collected and integrity intact.

Or consider people who have the radio just on, or the TV on, consuming a lot of television or radio. It's doing something to your soul. That's far more significant than how concentrated you can be in meditation.

Think of samadhi in these broader ways. I've talked about wholeheartedness and how significant that is for my life, personhood, relationships, work, the service I want to do. When there's not this capacity and practice of being really wholehearted, really gathered like that, one dissipates energy, dissipates mind, dissipates one's being habitually, probably in very small ways.

Over time, you get a sense that something in the being has gotten flaccid. The very personality is different. There's something flabby and flaccid in the soul, in the being. Sometimes you can sense this in people—there's just not much sensitivity there.

From this perspective, focus and concentration take on different significance. If we think about collectedness, integrity—this is very, very significant for the being.

Let's return to the energy body way of working. What's extremely common—it will happen every day to some degree, many times a day—is that something in the energy body doesn't feel comfortable. There's some constriction or block somewhere that feels located in the energy body. This is a really normal part of human experience.

The energy body isn't static. It blocks, unblocks, constricts. Yes, we can have very habitual constrictions, but even without these, there's a coming and going of constriction in the energy body in different places.

In meditation, what do we do with this? The constriction, the blockage won't feel good—it's the opposite of pīti. One approach: don't forget to open up the awareness, stretch it over that whole body space, a little bigger than the anatomical body. When there's constriction or something we don't like, attention shrinks. Opening it out again does something. There's mutual dependence here—constriction somewhere actually shrinks the awareness. Opening up the awareness can sometimes open up the constriction. That's the first thing.

Second: if you're working with the energy body through the breath, imagine the breath energy going right through, flowing smoothly right through that constriction. Just imagine that.

Or imagine a current of energy just flowing right through. So it could be with the breath, could be not with the breath. Use your imagination. It might want to flow through that. Let's say the constriction is in my throat. It might want to flow through the throat and up out the top of my head, or right down through the bottom of my body. Does it want to flow up? Does it want to flow down? Feel what feels like it's helpful.

Again, you're just using the imagination to shape, to fabricate, to open the energy body experience. Let's say I have a constriction in my throat. I can imagine the breath coming in and out, not from the mouth and the nose, but coming in and out directly from the throat or the back of the throat, the back of the neck. And I just imagine that. Does that help? Maybe it wants to go out the sides this way. That imagination can unlock something.

If you're practicing metta and you've got this constriction in the throat or anywhere where there's a constriction, what if you play with imagining the very place where there's the constriction as the center of the radiation of the metta? The metta is radiating from the last place you would think of, because it feels the worst and the tightest and the least like love. But just imagine it's coming from there and see what that does.

Another possibility—let's say, for example, I feel a constriction in my mid-belly somewhere. Let's say I feel a constriction around my heart, but my lower belly feels actually quite nice, or has some well-being there, or the other way around—doesn't matter. There's a place where it feels good, relatively good, and there's a place where it doesn't feel good. One of the things you can do is just imagine those places as connected. There's some kind of energy tube or something that just connects them. I'm not moving anything around. I'm not yanking. I'm just connecting them in my imagination—the place that feels good and the place that doesn't feel so good. And just see what happens. I'm just connecting two places in my imagination very, very lightly.

There's also the possibility of bringing an insight way of looking that you are already familiar with and looking at that very sense of constriction, that very sense of blockage, with that insight way of looking. In the context of samatha practice, jhana practice, maybe that's—unless the insight way of looking is your primary way of working—maybe that would be a kind of last resort. But those are extremely powerful practices. And so to look at this blockage that way, through that lens of that way of looking, will basically dissolve it, as long as you're not pushing it too much with "come on, dissolve, dissolve, dissolve."

Another thing to say, which is really important in the context of jhana and samatha practice, is: okay, here's this constriction, here's this block. I don't always have to focus on it. I can work to keep my attention where it's pleasant, where it feels pleasant, where there's pīti perhaps, or where it even feels just okay.

This is crucial. The tendency will be to get dragged into—either get dragged into where there's a difficult feeling, constriction or blockage, or to get dragged completely outside and start daydreaming. But if I can keep my attention—let's say in that example, my belly feels good and my heart area doesn't—keep it in the belly. Don't get sucked into the difficult area. Or my knees are aching—don't get sucked into that. Just stay with where it's pleasant and focus there and enjoy that.

When I say "where," that might be a bodily location. It might be that the body has dissolved a bit and it's just a kind of spatial location—somewhere around there in space. But it also might be—I don't know if "where" is obviously the right word—but it also might be a frequency. This is similar to what I said before. Here's this discomfort, here's this constriction, this blockage. In energetic terms, it's a certain kind of frequency. Can I find another frequency that's not so much a spatial location as a kind of mental location, and then get into that, find it, dive underneath, get into that? Again, with more experience of different frequencies, certainly with more jhana experience, that becomes just a more and more common possibility. It's much more accessible.

Most insight meditators, most vipassana meditators, are trained either deliberately or just by default that when there's something difficult in the body, when there's dukkha, when there's constriction, when something doesn't feel good, when there's a contraction, the attention goes there. And we're encouraged to do that mostly in the way we teach insight meditation. It can become a kind of default: well, that's what

we do. As soon as something's difficult, that's where the mind goes. It's not even a choice I make.

One realizes, oh, it's just a habit. I pay attention to what's difficult, where there's constriction, where there's contraction, where there's dukkha. It might also be the case that insight meditation attracts certain psychological types and inclinations. It might be, but it's also a kind of training that happens both directly and indirectly.

The willingness to do that—the willingness to go where it's difficult and to feel it and to open to it and to work with it—this is invaluable. It's such a precious thing. But willingness is not enough. I need to also recognize that the kind of mindfulness I bring matters. Because I can bring an attention there, I can bring a kind of mindfulness there, and it just makes it worse. I'm being a good meditator and I'm having the willingness, which is great, and a good intention, but my mindfulness has just a bit of aversion in it and it's making it worse. Or I can be with it in a way that just doesn't do anything to it. Or I can be with it where the attention, the mindfulness, has skillful qualities in it.

Mindfulness is never one thing. There's no such thing as pure mindfulness. Mindfulness always has views, conceptions, some kind of relationship with the object—a little bit of aversion, a lot of aversion, a little bit of greed. If we're talking really, really subtle, there's no such thing as pure mindfulness. What makes or breaks, what determines what happens, is what's with the mindfulness.

So it's great that we're willing to do that as insight meditators. We're all practiced in that, hopefully. Great that we're willing, but it also really matters: can I have the skill to bring what's actually a helpful mindfulness there, a helpful attention?

So that's all great. But now we also want—as I said to you, what we want is range. Range, range, range. Choice, freedom of choice. So sure, I can go where it's difficult. I'm willing to do that. I'm not afraid to do that. If it's a very little bit difficult, if it's difficult in this way or that way, if it's really, really difficult, I'm willing to go there. I'm able to work with it as time goes on and I get more practice. I'm able to work with it all kinds of ways, lots of ways.

But also I'm willing and able not to go there. I put the mind here where it's pleasant. I won't go there. I'm training the mind to stay with the pleasant. So when we open up to jhana practice, this actually becomes quite an important skill and quite something that one's working against the grain if one has done a lot of insight practice.

With training, we can have much more range and much more freedom of choice about what we do in regard to the difficulty. Remember when I first taught this here twelve, thirteen years ago—a summer retreat—and there were people that said, "But that's not proper meditation. That's not proper meditation. The best meditation is to be with what is. And so if it hurts, then I need to be with what is. And even if it doesn't hurt here, somehow the hurt is more what is than the place that doesn't hurt."

But despite that, or as well as that, again we have to ask about ontology, about reality here. Is it really

what is? What am I believing about what is? Or is it a fabricated perception? The answer is yes. And I have to understand that not just intellectually—I have to actually get in there and work with things and play with things until I know in my heart, deep down in my mind, in my life, I know this is a fabricated perception and I know how to fabricate it differently. At least at times I have that capacity.

So we want to train to open up that range. And we want to understand there's so much about the nature of reality that's involved in all this jhana work. What does that have to do with insight? It has everything to do with insight. Is it really as real as you think it is? What is real? What is reality?

These are fundamentally important questions, and we get locked into certain views—sometimes views that emerge from our very Dharma listening and training and thinking.

So there will be times of discomfort and pain. As we said at the beginning of the retreat, you really want to not go there too much. I'll talk more about this tomorrow, in fact. But it's also possible to deliberately perceive the unpleasant as pleasant. Here's this pain in my knee, sitting in meditation, and I can deliberately play with the perception.

There's that key phrase: play with perception.

I can play with perception and perceive the unpleasant as pleasant. I might perceive this pain in the knee as pīti, with training. That's totally possible. I decide to perceive it as happiness. So the texture of my knee becomes happiness. My knee becomes happiness. I decide to see it with training as stillness, as a luminous stillness. My knee becomes—the pain has gone, the knee has gone, and what is there is a luminous, beautiful stillness.

Training, training through playing with perception.

So one way of doing that is you just spread the pīti and the pīti spreads over the difficult area—there's one option. Another is this more direct way where I'm actually looking at something and because I have enough familiarity with pīti and because I'm not locked into a view of the reality of this thing as "it's a painful knee." So there's familiarity with pīti and there's the absence of a locked-in view about reality, and then one just sees it as pīti and one therefore experiences it as pīti or happiness or stillness or whatever.

What did the Buddha say? Perception attainments. The jhānas are perception attainments.

What's the best way of thinking about this? Playing with perception. We're playing with perception. This is, as I said already, way more significant than the whole question of, "Is this a jhāna or is this not a jhāna? Did I achieve the third jhāna or the third jhāna?" So-and-so defines it. And that seems so relevant and so important...

What I'm just talking about now, this ability—not just the ability, the possibility, the recognition and the experience of the possibility of doing this with, for example, a pain in the knee—that's way more significant than whether I have achieved correctly the first jhāna or the third jhāna. It's way more

significant.

Magic. We use that word: magic.

So this whole business about the question of reality, about emptiness—which has to do with what is the reality of things—about ways of looking, about fabrication, about perception. Again, that's the key word: about playing with perception. This is absolutely fundamental to liberating insight. It's fundamental to the whole Dharma. It's fundamental to liberating insight. And it's way more important, as I said, than third jhāna, fourth—you know, whatever it is. Did I get it? Did I not?

So, pīti arises, and the Buddha says, don't snatch at it, and don't snatch at the first jhāna. So what does that mean? I've already said it in the insight ways of looking. Here it's arising, however it's arising, and I'm just letting it arise. And if I've got another object, like the nose sensations that I'm concentrating on, I'm just letting it arise, kind of at the side of my awareness. I'm aware that it's arising, because I've got that whole body background, right? I'm aware it's arising. Part of me is enjoying it and opening to it, but I'm still focused on my one thing. And then when it's ready—it means when it's kind of strong enough that it's definitely pleasant, let's just say that. But when it's sustained enough, then very gently, as described with insight ways of looking, very gently I can make that my primary object: the pīti.

And then we go back to what I said yesterday, these modes of attention where I really nuzzle into it, really go penetrate into it or really, really open myself to it, for example.

And I also said yesterday, so another job that we have to do, another work or play mission that we have to do is spreading the pīti. As the Buddha said in the first jhāna, it's spread. No spot of the body untouched, completely suffused, saturated, etc.

So how do we get it to spread? I mean, sometimes it will be spread already and that's great and then you don't have to do anything. But let me run through a list of possibilities.

One approach is when the pīti is localized—perhaps just in my face or head region—awareness sometimes actually shrinks because the pīti can be quite captivating. To help it spread, simply open up the awareness again, expanding it to encompass the whole energy body. Just this opening of attention to the whole energy body naturally allows the pīti to spread, like gas filling a space. Think of it like expanding a balloon—when you make the balloon of attention bigger, the gas will naturally fill that larger space.

Another possibility is mixing the breath with the pīti. You can imagine and begin to feel like you're breathing pīti, or that the breath energy is massaging and moving the pīti through the body. When you breathe in through the heart center, for instance, these currents of energy flow down through your body. The breath can massage the pīti through the rest of the body if it's concentrated just around your chest or elsewhere. This is all very playful and experimental—mixing the breath with pīti or getting the breath energy to help move the pīti to different places in the body.

Thirdly, you can simply imagine that it's spread. The power of imagination can be quite amazing. Just imagine the pīti filling the whole body, and you might find that this becomes your actual experience. Feel it and enjoy it.

You can also imagine the pīti mixed with white golden light, as if the pīti is white golden light itself. You can both feel it and see it. Imagine that white golden light filling the whole energy body space, and as you visualize this, it brings the pīti with it.

Another approach involves connecting different areas. If the pīti is around your face, head and throat—which is very common—but you don't feel anything in your belly, simply maintain awareness of both places: where there is pīti and where there isn't. Connect them with an imaginary tube. You're not forcing anything or imagining movement, just putting two places in the body space in connection with each other. See what happens.

Moving lightly and playfully between those two modes of attention—the penetrating narrow focus and the more receptive openness—might itself work the pīti and allow it to spread through the body space. This relatively slow movement between attention modes can be quite effective.

Eventually, every time you experience pīti, it becomes automatically spread throughout the whole body. There's so much in jhāna practice about the citta and the bodily experience simply getting used to something until it becomes completely normal. After a while, every time you have pīti, it's just automatic—never confined to one place, but always spread. While there are exceptions, this tends to become quite common.

Finally, sometimes the pīti simply won't spread despite all these approaches. Don't worry about it. Just enjoy it where it is and fully engage with it there. If it's just around your throat and head, and you've tried these various methods without success, simply get into it and enjoy it. Don't trouble yourself about it. This is actually really important.

Also, don't become overly concerned with the Buddha's description of "not one spot of the body" untouched. You don't need to mentally check each body part—"How's my little toe on the left side?" You don't need to get so consumed with anatomical precision. It's really more about sensing this whole space. Even if you still have a sense of separate toes, that doesn't matter, but you certainly don't have to. It's more like sensing the whole energy body space and allowing or gently encouraging the pīti to fill that entire space through these different approaches.

There is a movement in jhana anyway for the kind of dissolving of the form of the body. Now, people are different. For some people it happens—maybe this is, I'm not sure, percentage-wise—but for me, certainly it happens in the first jhana. That's part of the characteristic of the first jhana, that the sense of the body just becomes a bit like what we said in those little games we played. It just becomes a sort of amorphous body of white light filled with piti. There's not such a sense of, "I could kind of find my toes and all the rest

of it in there," but people are different though.

But anyway, there's a movement towards the dissolving of the bodily form, which means we don't have to worry too much about whether the piti is in my foot or whatever like that. It's more just a sense of, yes, it's really filling this whole space, this whole experience, the experience of the body.

Again, back to this perception thing. Really, one way of conceiving what happens in the jhanas is: in the first jhana, the bodily experience, the bodily perception becomes piti. My experience of my body is a body of piti, is a space of piti. In the second jhana, the body becomes sukha. The first four jhanas are called rupa jhanas, which means form or body jhanas. The body becomes happiness. And if you're still working with the breath, which is in a way an element of the body, the breath becomes happiness—breathing happiness into a body of happiness. In the third jhana, it becomes this kind of peacefulness. In the fourth, this kind of luminous stillness, and so on.

So the energetic space, the energy body space becomes that. The body becomes that. So there's a gradual—at some point, it's different—there's a gradual dissolving of the detailed sense of the form of the body. The body dissolves, we could say.

Okay, sometimes what happens for people—and again, individuals have a lot of different conditions and things over time—but sometimes what happens is there's too much, there feels like there's too much piti, or the piti feels too intense to bear. It's so strong or so pleasant.

There's one thing that's more important than anything else here: usually when that's the case, what needs to happen is more opening. It's the opposite. If I feel this is too much to bear, it's too strong, I can't handle this, then actually there's some contraction of the being, some aversion, some slight holding or pushing away, like I'm trying to push back the waters a little bit. It could be very, very subtle.

The thing, the primary thing we need to do when it feels or when you think this is too strong is: open. Open the space of the energy body, open to the flow of the piti. Oftentimes piti has a flow to it. Oftentimes it's an upward flow up the body. More opening, open even more, put your opening dial on eleven, one hundred and fifty percent—more opening, more surrender, more abandoning. It's the opposite of what you feel like doing when it feels like too much. You have to go to the counterintuitive energetic response.

Sometimes talking to people in interviews, piti can be a bit like—an analogy can be like water flowing down a mountainside, like making a river down a mountainside. And where it starts initially, sometimes it can be really fast, and then it encounters rocks as it goes down. And where it encounters rocks, you get all this whitewater, right? Rapids and froth and stuff.

Two things here. If I then put more rocks in the way, because I don't like it, because I don't want it to be quite so intense, what am I going to get? I mean, unless I actually put a dam there, but let's say you can't, and you just put some more rocks—what am I going to get? I'm getting more whitewater, right? I'm going to get more froth. I need to do the opposite. I don't put rocks—I open, surrender, abandon. Really like,

okay, how much can I really open my body? It's almost like just opening up the chest, opening up, just completely letting it flow through.

And oftentimes it wants to flow right through, right up out the top of the head. Just open, open, open. There's usually at that point a subtle, or sometimes not so subtle, some degree of aversion and contraction, and that's causing the problem.

What it's also doing is slowing down the progress of this river, because this mountain river, as it goes down the mountain, as it winds its way, it's naturally going to find its way to calmer waters. As piti evolves—I've already said this in a way indirectly—as piti evolves, it naturally gets calmer.

So there are phases of practice when it just feels like this really is a bit much. It's too intense. But it's on its way. It's just a phase. What we want is: okay, well, how can I just help that phase do its thing? Aversion, contraction is not helping it do its thing. It's the opposite. I need to open, open, let it flow.

You might have to put up with what feels super intense. Again, someone else would give their right and left arms for this kind of level of pleasure. But that's why we have to open, open, open. Then it can just go through its process and naturally calm down.

Sometimes even the very opening in that moment makes it actually feel better, because the contraction is what starts to make us wonder, "I'm not even sure this is pleasant anymore." It's partly the aversion that's coloring the experience. So open, surrender, abandon. Really, what does it mean to do that? Find ways to embody this letting go.

And then look—find the pleasure in it, find the pleasure in it, find the pleasure in it. So two things: open, abandon, surrender, and find the pleasure. This will usually take care of it. It should help in that moment, absolutely, and it should also help the process unfold more freely without getting stuck in a particular place.

Sometimes a person finds that either the pīti is so strong that they're thinking, "I'm not sure it's actually pleasant," or it's not quite strong enough. When someone says, "I'm not sure it's pleasant," again we can play with perception. You can actually just decide to see it as pleasant. Just decide to see it as pleasant. Play with that perception.

We're back to this idea of malleability again, of playing with perception. In samādhi, in jhāna, the whole system becomes so sensitive, so responsive to these micro-shifts in ways of looking, in view, in effort levels.

Sometimes again, pīti is very strong, perhaps even over several days, or sukha, happiness, is strong. And the person might wonder: "Should I move the body? There's so much energy. Should I move it somehow? Should I dance? I just feel like dancing. There's joy and there's pīti and I want to dance."

The question is: Should I do that? Or when there's a lot of sukha and they find themselves just laughing

and laughing and laughing out loud—should I not dance and not laugh so much and actually let something gather?

Generally speaking, I would probably lean toward no, let it gather. Let it gather. Because again, going back to what I said earlier, most of us as human beings actually haven't really allowed energy to gather, haven't really allowed happiness to gather. We don't know what it is to have the energy body filled this way with happiness and allow that to gather and intensify and do its alchemical work.

However, sometimes it is really helpful for someone to dance or move, for a number of reasons. Sometimes if you look at their life and their character, there's actually a habit of holding the body. The body's a little rigid or there's a certain inhibition around movement. Or regarding laughing, there's a person who actually doesn't laugh much. You'll never find them giggling. Something might be funny and they'll respond a little bit, but they don't really give themselves to laughter.

Why is that? Maybe sometimes it's a slight emotional holding, a personality thing. There's a slight rigidity or lack of fluidity. And so sometimes for a person, even if it's not the greatest weather, they need to go out into the fields and dance in the rain—if it needs to move wild, do that.

The danger, though, is that we squander the energy that's building. We squander the pīti and we squander the happiness that's building, and then it can never really mature into jhāna. So it can be a tricky question, but you can experiment with both if you feel this is relevant. For many people, it won't be relevant.

In the analogy I used before, if the capacitor doesn't gather enough energy, it never really allows you to access jhāna. We want to learn to allow and tolerate these energies to expand, to flow, to fill the being and do their work inside.

Again, staying with the theme of sometimes really strong pīti—what can happen for some people, a minority, is that the pīti becomes very strong or the energy gets very strong and the physical body starts shaking, tremoring, jerking, or moving involuntarily. This is quite an important point.

Now, some people hold the view, "Oh, that's catharsis, you're releasing something," and so on. Speaking as someone who got trapped in all that for quite some years, I feel this is really important. It's crucial to have the right view here and the right approach.

When the energy is properly allowed to move without encountering blocks or constrictions, then the physical body does not need to move so much or at all. This energy might want to fly upward, sideways, or in any direction - whatever feels right. What does it want to do? Simply let it do that. Imagine it doing what it wants to do, and it will naturally follow that movement. When the inner energy flows freely, the physical body doesn't need to compensate with outer movement.

Often this kind of physical agitation happens when there's even slight over-efforting. It's certainly more likely to occur if there's too much force applied. For certain energy body types, over-effort is quite likely to

trigger these movements, while other people have different constitutions and can exert considerable effort without experiencing anything similar. But with particular types, as I mentioned, slight over-efforting can have massive impacts.

This slight over-efforting can create subtle effects in meditation - all kinds of delicate influences - but it can also produce quite dramatic manifestations. Sometimes this whole phenomenon of involuntary movement isn't catharsis or purification at all; it's simply that the effort is excessive. Nothing is being cleansed or released. The effort is too much and creates too much energetic pressure on the entire system, creating these effects.

What does this imply? Perhaps I need to experiment with the intensity. What does it mean to ease back on the intensity pedal? What does it mean to be slightly less tight in my approach, or to allow my energy body to be less constricted in meditation? This might involve cultivating a slightly more spacious attention, moving into a more receptive mode rather than a probing one. All these adjustments affect the quality of effort and involve subtly reducing the force applied.

And they will have an effect on all that shaking business.

Sometimes someone who's done a lot of insight meditation may have experienced other states of deep equanimity or vastness of awareness and then comes to jhana practice. They hear about piti and first jhana and second jhana with all this bubbly happiness and kind of think, "Well, why should I bother with piti? If equanimity is possible, as I know equanimity, why should I bother with piti?" They might think, "Well, equanimity is the point of practice, right? Why would I bother with piti and with sukha, the first or second jhana or whatever, because equanimity is where we're going."

Equanimity is not the goal. It's absolutely not the goal, nor should equanimity be mistaken for awakening. It's really, really important. Equanimity is not the goal. It's an important part of the mix of the range of what's available to a being, but it's not the goal and certainly not equivalent to awakening. Awakening does not equate to equanimity.

Awakening is, if we want to sum it up, realizing emptiness—realizing the emptiness of everything. And the implication from that is that we can then look at things in very different ways. Why? Because a thing is empty of existing independently of the way the mind looks at it. Therefore, one realizes that, and it liberates the possibility of a whole flexibility of ways of looking, which one can also train in and develop—that playing. You can play all these different ways, play all these perceptions. That's what awakening is. Awakening is not equanimity.

Therefore, practicing the malleability of the mind, the malleability of mind state, the malleability of perception, playing with perception—when we're doing that, we're actually practicing a path that resembles the goal, that resembles what awakening is. Because an awakened person knows the emptiness of absolutely everything, and all they're left with—and they know—all there is, is the possibility and the

flexibility of different ways of looking. So by practicing that, you're actually practicing a way of conceiving of the path and practicing the path that looks like what awakening looks like, as opposed to just trying to practice equanimity—trying to be equanimous in relation to everything all the time. That's not what awakening is. And that's not even a healthy psychology, I would say.

There are also some who say, "Why should I bother with piti? Why should I bother with sukha?" Sometimes there are psychological tendencies, patterns, habits. Piti and sukha are quite—in a way they're agitating. In a way they're disturbing. They're not that peaceful. They open up things. They're exciting. They move around and they do stuff. Sometimes it's not even a particular dharma thought or one uses a dharma thought, but the reason one's using it is just because one's psychology doesn't want to be disturbed. "I just want everything to be calm. I want the emotions to be controlled and within a certain limit. I want to either present or feel only a certain range." And that can become—or it can be—a habit or a pattern. That's all that my being knows. It's all my being allows is that range. And therefore all this kind of welling up of stuff—don't like it.

What's actually going on there? We can conceive piti as energy, so that when the energy body is unblocked—either through just the openness of heart, the openness of being, or when the energy body is unblocked because of the insight way of looking that is releasing clinging, and clinging causes contraction. So with the release of clinging, there's a release of contraction. So the energy body is naturally unblocked. When the energy body is unblocked, then naturally a human energy body system—because when it's unblocked—will naturally experience a pleasant flow of energy. We'll naturally experience piti.

So we can also conceive of piti as energy in the sense that, in a concentration mode, I'm not dissipating energy through distraction. The mind is not going here and there, thinking about this or that, getting caught up in this and that, this sound, that sound. Therefore the energy naturally gathers, like an electronic capacitor.

So we can conceive of piti as energy, but as I've said several times now, a better, more fruitful, truer, much more helpful way—and a way that's much more integrated with the rest of the Dharma—is to conceive of piti as a way of perceiving the body. It's not energy really. It's not to do with unblocking your chakras or energy channels. It's not to do with gathering energy. Piti is a way of perceiving the body. It's a perception of body. It's a perceptual skill. It's a perception attainment, as the Buddha might say. It's a magician's art. Piti is a way of perceiving the body.

Again, you may or may not quite realize just how significant this is, but I want to at least plant the seeds.

Last couple of things. Piti is central to the first jhana. It's the most important factor in the first jhana. The first jhana has five factors—I'm going to talk about this tomorrow. The first jhana has five factors: vitakka vicara, which when I read through the Buddha's list, I translated as thinking. We'll come back to that; it's a slightly controversial translation. But anyway, it has five factors: vitakka vicara—some of you have probably heard "initial and sustained application"—ekagata, a kind of one-pointedness (also a misleading

translation), and the two other factors, piti and sukha. Piti we've talked about, and sukha means happiness. Those are the five factors of the first jhana.

Usually these are conceived, either consciously or unconsciously, with a causal direction through them. In other words, you work at your vitakka and vicara, you work at your initial and sustained application to the meditation object. Over time you get one-pointed or absorbed, ekagata, and piti and sukha arise as a result. So there's a movement from concentration factors to the arising of piti and sukha.

That's great. Sometimes we can work backwards. Here are these five factors—what's available right now? Sometimes people say, "Every time I think of this person, happiness arises." It's one of the factors of the first jhana. It's not even the primary factor—piti is the primary factor. But every time I think of this person, happiness arises. If you're skillful, if you don't snatch at it, you just linger with the happiness, and lo and behold piti is right there with it. Then you don't snatch at that, and the piti builds.

There are five factors. What's available? I can go in starting on any one really. I'm working backwards. This principle of working backwards—where am I trying to get to rather than deciding in advance what needs to be emphasized and therefore what's relevant? Which factor do I emphasize right now as a way into the first jhana? I can conceive forwardly in terms of causal connections there, or I can conceive backwards. I've got five factors. Let's see which of those I can access, ignite a little bit, stimulate, and from that, the rest of the five factors ignite.

In a way, working with the whole energy body from the beginning is an example of working backwards to a certain extent, because all four of the first four jhanas—what's called the rupa jhanas, rupa means body or form—all four of them involve, as we said with the Buddha's examples, leaving no spot of the body untouched by happiness or delight or pleasure, suffusing, saturating, drenching, steeping the whole body. All four of the first four jhanas involve the whole body, energy body awareness.

Each jhana simply carries a different flavor, a different predominant quality to that energy body awareness. When we begin with energy body awareness, we're also applying this backward-working principle—starting with the whole rather than a single point, since the practice will eventually encompass the whole anyway. Do you understand?

Let me return to something I mentioned at the very beginning: there are broadly speaking two approaches. Either you choose a small point, a specific object, and concentrate on it with intensity, delicacy, and directionality—essentially practicing steady focus on something stable—or you begin with the whole energy body and gather the pleasantness there.

But let me interject something important. Even if you're new to the second jhana, happiness is actually quite a subtle object. It can be intensely bubbly and energetic, but as things settle, it becomes quite refined and delicate. Even if your primary mode has been working with the energy body without thinking of it as concentration, you'll still need to practice concentration at times. Sometimes you'll need to learn how to

remain steady and focused on this subtle object of happiness.

Your intention and emphasis will shift naturally. Sometimes you'll emphasize concentration; other times you'll focus more on spreading and enjoying, or on perception play as we discussed. At any point in jhana practice, your emphasis can appropriately shift. Sometimes when you say "I'm just practicing concentration now," it's not all you're doing—you're seeing concentration as one possible emphasis within a whole mandala of possibilities.

Does this make sense? The two broad approaches—concentration versus coaxing well-being through perception play—appear separate but aren't really. We move between them, and there are gray areas. We should move fluidly between them, recognizing that at any point in jhana practice, both will be relevant. They're not mutually exclusive.

I think we should stop here rather than take questions today. Let's have a bit of quiet together.

Thank you, everyone. Time for tea—enjoy it. There are some interviews tonight, so please check the board if you haven't today. Otherwise, enjoy your tea.

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