Insight Ways of Looking, Other Energy Body Possibilities, and Summarized Instructions

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 49:33

I want to start today with what's really the last section about base or springboard practices—two pieces around base or springboard practices. You're certainly welcome to ask more and bring these topics to interviews, of course, but this will be the final bit about that from me at the front, so to speak.

There are two parts to it. The first part has to do with insight ways of looking. In a way, I mentioned this right at the beginning in the opening talk, and Marco also brought this up in his question yesterday. So what do I mean by this? I'm going to be very brief here, because this won't be really relevant for many of you.

Insight Ways of Looking

What does "insight ways of looking" mean? Usually we have—or perhaps a very common way of thinking about insight practice or insight meditation is—basically, one is mindful, paying attention, and paying attention as carefully as one can and as continuously as one can. In that careful and continuous mindful attention of watching one's experience, at some point one realizes something, one has an insight, one gets something. So that's one way of understanding what insight meditation is, and also what insight is. That's great.

There's a second way, which is perhaps less common but that I tend to emphasize quite a lot, which is more about taking an insight and using it as a lens—looking in certain ways, a way of looking. For example, if one realizes that body sensations are not self—maybe one has had that experience, maybe one hasn't—one takes that understanding and then starts looking at experience, at body sensations, and seeing them deliberately, over and over again, as not self. They're just happening, they're not me, they're not mine.

So it's more active, it's more deliberate. I'm not being mindful, waiting for insight to come. I'm looking at something in a certain way. There are lots of these possibilities.

What's key about them is that what I would call an insight way of looking brings letting go. And it brings letting go now, in this moment. In other words, here's this pain in my back, my knee, whatever it is. When I look at it with an insight way of looking, it's not just "Oh, that's interesting, it's not self." It makes a difference to the experience. The suffering begins to lessen or dissolve. The actual experience itself of the pain, or whatever it is, begins to change.

What defines an insight way of looking, then, is that there is letting go—it brings letting go in the moment. Another way of saying letting go is that it releases clinging in the moment. So this painful sensation—there's clinging in the sense of aversion, I want to get rid of it. There's also clinging in the sense that it's me or mine; I'm assuming this unconsciously without even thinking it. The insight way of looking dissolves those right in the moment. It lessens clinging, it attenuates clinging. So there's letting go and attenuation of clinging—two ways of saying the same thing.

Energy Body and Fabrication

Now we could say that when we cling as human beings, our energy body contracts. How do we know we're clinging to something? One of the ways is you can feel it in the energy body. There's some kind of contraction somewhere in the space of the energy body.

When we look with an insight way of looking—which organically, by definition, has in it the capacity and the mode of letting go of clinging—then one of the things that happens is that the energy body undoes. There is an undoing of a certain amount of contraction in the energy body. That's what happens, that's one of the things that happen when we look with an insight way of looking, sustainedly, deliberately.

What also happens with an insight way of looking, as I said, is that the phenomenon itself begins to change. As I get skillful in a certain insight way of looking, the phenomenon that I'm looking at with this insight way of looking begins to fade. Here's this pain, it's very intense. I keep looking at it—to follow the example—I keep looking at it as not self, not me, not mine, it's just happening.

If I slowly do that, the pain, the unpleasantness starts to get less unpleasant and even less unpleasant, until it becomes neutral sensation. If I keep looking at it that way, in the insight way of looking, actually the sensation begins to fade. There's no sensation there anymore. There's a space there, for example. Maybe it even goes via some pleasant sensation. In other words, what was unpleasant turns pleasant, then maybe turns neutral, or the other way around. But eventually there will just be a space. There will be the fading of that perception, the fading of that phenomenon, the fading of that experience, appearance, phenomenon, perception.

We say it's less fabricated, because what's central to an insight way of looking is that it fabricates less.

Less dukkha, less self, less object. Whether we look at it like we're undoing contractions in the energy body, or whether we say we're fabricating less solidity in the body—in the perception of the body—an insight way of looking does either of those, whichever way we're looking at it, and pīti will arise.

Pīti will arise as a less fabricated perception, or other jhānas. So an insight way of looking can open up the jhānic sense. Does this make sense? That was a very brief explanation.

When I go back to what I said in the opening talk, what I mean by insight ways of looking is insight practices—and sorry for this awkward phrasing—but I mean something quite specific. I describe them, for

instance, in my book *Seeing That Frees*. So you might have done lots of insight practice retreats or whatever, you might have had insights into impermanence, but I really mean something quite particular.

If you're not familiar with all that, just leave all this. It's just an option that you can save for another time. If you are familiar with it though, what you can do is take one of those practices that you feel comfortable with, one of these insight ways of looking, and start using it. Start using it sustainably, just as sustainably as you would use concentration on the breath or whatever.

What you will notice is that as you engage with that way of practice, the energy body starts to feel good for the reasons I've just outlined. Either you can conceive it as getting its knots unknotted, getting uncontracted, or—more accurately and sophisticatedly conceived—the whole bodily perception is being fabricated less.

As you keep practicing the insight way of looking, the body starts to feel good, the energy body starts to feel good, with some kind, some flavor of well-being there. As the Buddha said, you don't snatch at that. So you're doing your insight way of looking, staying in touch with the energy body, noticing how it feels. Then at a certain point, yes, it's nice now.

You don't just snatch at that nice feeling—the pīti, or it could be a different flavor of nice feeling—but you keep doing your insight way of looking, letting the nice feeling build, noticing it as well. Maybe then your attention is balanced between continuing the insight way of looking and the nice feeling. At a certain point, just gently, you can maneuver your emphasis and attention so that the primary thing you're engaged with, the primary thing you're doing, is enjoying the well-being in the energy body, enjoying the pīti.

Is this making sense? So you may keep with the way of looking for a bit, but then at some point, if you're switching to samatha practice—and again, samatha is about the intention. That's what differentiates practice: the background intention. The samatha intention has this quality: "I really want to get into this enjoyment. I really just want to absorb and bathe and enjoy to the max." That's a samatha intention.

So at some point, what really shifts is your intention there—to focus on maximizing the enjoyment, getting really intimate with it, playing with those two modes of attention that we talked about yesterday, spreading it as well.

These kinds of practices are immensely powerful. They may take you well beyond pīti, in fact, and well beyond the first jhāna. They may take you into different formless jhānas, the last four jhānas. Where they take you depends partly on which insight way of looking you're practicing, partly on your previous experience. If there are certain realms that you've visited a lot, you've kind of got a groove in the mind and it might tend there. But it's partly dependent on which insight way of looking.

Again, what is your playground? What is your learning edge playground? If your learning edge playground is the first jhāna and you play with insight ways of looking and it takes you into the fifth or

sixth jhāna, okay, that's maybe not what we want at this point because you've decided that the first jhāna or the third jhāna or whatever it is your playground, and that's shooting you way beyond it.

But it might be that as you do the insight way of looking, as things fade, you can kind of pick up on the point where actually it's just well-being now. It hasn't overshot into this huge empty space or whatever it is. Does that make sense?

Okay, so that's one other possibility for a springboard or base practice: insight ways of looking. It's probably quite rare as a way of doing samatha, but so what? It might be your main thing. There's a second way I want to come back to using it—not so much as a main practice—and I'll return to that a little later today.

The second possibility or group of possibilities I want to talk about today involves working a little bit more with the energy body. So again, responding to that question, I would view the energy body as a whole collection of possibilities. I'm just throwing out a bunch of possibilities. I'd count it as one sort of base practice.

But what I want to emphasize today is that so far we've mostly explored the energy body with the breath—the breath as something that stimulates, opens, energizes, massages, and shapes the energy body. What I want to do today is practice with the energy body without the breath, because that's also a possibility. We could make that a separate category, or you could simply include it within the broader energy body practice—it's neither here nor there.

So let's play a game, a meditative game. I'll review everything at the end so you can take notes then. For now, let's just take a few minutes to explore together.

Take that time—it's so worth it to just take a little time to settle into the posture. This posture has openness in it, so you need to be able to feel the openness in the posture. What do you need to do? It might be a micro-change in the posture. What do you need to do to actually feel it as open? To feel it as receptive? To feel it as soft?

At the same time, the posture expresses and manifests the citta qualities—the heart qualities, the mind qualities—of uprightness, wakefulness, alertness, resolve, energization. There's this complement there. Find a posture that expresses this coincidentia oppositorum, this amalgam of opposites. Find that.

Settle into the posture, which really means not just settle down, but open out. Open out the awareness. Settle out into the posture. Fill out the posture with that awareness. Fill it out.

Opening the awareness to the space of the whole body, the whole body space, opening to the sense of the energy body, the feel of the energy body right now. Doesn't matter what your breath is doing—just opening, opening to that whole space. Keep opening it.

You're just there, alive with the presence that's sensitive to the vibration, the texture, the feel, the energy,

the tone or tones of that whole space. Keep opening. It's not that you open further and further; it's that you open again and again.

Just a little bit bigger than the physical body. That whole space, the whole energy body filled with bright awareness, bright presence, bright sensitivity. See if you can turn up the brightness right now—the brightness of your attention. How does it feel? How does that whole space feel right now?

Sometimes, as we just open to that whole space, we begin to notice that actually it's already a little bit pleasant. Maybe it's a lot pleasant, maybe it's just a little bit pleasant. There's some well-being somewhere or lightly pervading the whole space.

If that's the case, notice it, enjoy it, open to it—without snatching at it. Let it fill the space if it can. Just opening up the awareness to that space of the energy body again and again, and tuning to any sense of well-being or pleasantness that's there. Opening yourself to it. Opening your body to it. Feeling it.

That was game number one. No problem if there wasn't pleasantness there. Sometimes there might be. If there isn't, and you're working with the energy body, it's just a matter of staying with it, noticing what is there, maybe introducing some breathing or the metta or whatever it is.

Game number two has four little parts to it. Same thing—whole body awareness, stretch it out again. Get so used to opening up again and again; you're going to do that a gazillion times in your life. Again and again, open. Let that bright presence fill the whole space.

Within that whole space, let two points—while you're still aware of the feeling, the tone of the whole space—let two points in particular become more prominent, or focus on them while maintaining awareness of the whole space as well.

One point somewhere in the middle of your head, or the area where your head used to be. Another point somewhere either down in the middle of the body around the solar plexus, or even a little lower, just below the belly button, somewhere around there. You've just got these two points.

And simultaneously, you're kind of prioritizing a focus on both of them with the whole body. What does that do, this bi-focus, this double focus, with the background attention to the whole body?

What does it do if you imagine a line of energy or a line of light, say white golden light, between those two points with the whole body awareness included, but that becomes prominent—this line of energy connecting these two points. How does that feel?

Let that go. Find again, stretching out the awareness again and again, fill that whole space with presence, with sensitivity.

How about imagining three lines of energy? So these three lines meet somewhere in the lower belly, right in the middle of that kind of area. It really doesn't matter if your anatomy is not at all clear to you right

now. It's fine if it isn't.

Three lines of golden white light energy or just a kinesthetic imagination of energy. One of them goes from that point in the lower belly around there right up the center of the body and out through the top of the head. Right out through the top of the head. And the other two go down, one goes down each leg and either out your knees or out your feet.

The important thing is the kinesthetic imagination. It's fine if it helps to be visual as well, but really what does it feel like to imagine lines of energy constituting, constellating the body—the body shaped around these lines of energy. How does that feel? What do you notice?

Open the whole space, open the awareness to the whole space. And within that, these three lines of energy.

You can let that go. And again, opening up the awareness, stretching it over the whole body space, inhabiting, really filling that whole body space with this bright presence, bright awareness, bright attention.

And now two lines—imagine two lines. Again, one down the vertical center of the body. And another perpendicular to it, at right angles, ninety degrees, across it, across, say, perhaps a little lower than the shoulders, like where the nipples are. It really doesn't have to be exact. It's not about that. Nor is it about seeing clearly what these lines of energy look like. It's just a way of shaping the energy. Just a light imagination. Two lines there.

Now you tell me, or rather don't tell me, but just see—what feels better? If these lines of energy go out of the body, out, let's say, through the bottom, through the perineum, and out through the top of the head, and out through the sides, or if they stay within the body. Bright, white, golden lines of energy, but more important, the kinesthetic sense, the kinesthetic imaginations. Whole body awareness. What do you notice?

Last one of this—let that go. Again, whole body spreaded, and imagine your energy body, your whole body in other words, that whole space, your energy body, is a golden white cloud of golden white light. So its edges are not particularly defined, it's more cloud-like. It's filled with this bright, bright luminous light, gold and white. Again, stretch out the awareness. How does that feel? What do you notice?

You can let that go.

The third little game or exercise is, again, whole body, whole space. And if I say to you, imagine your body—imagine your whole body as radiant and empty. Empty in the Dharma sense, whatever that means to you. In other words, whatever level of understanding you have of emptiness or what that means to you, just plug that in. Imagine your body, your whole body as radiant and empty. Whole body awareness, whole space. Your body radiant and empty, luminous but empty. Whatever that word means to you,

dharmically.

You can let that one go.

Last one, just for fun.

Same thing, whole body awareness, whole body space, whole energy body, filling out that space. This time we actually want to keep some sense of the shape of your body, of your anatomy. So you really want to stay, in this game, you really want to stay sensitive to how that whole body space feels, like where you're sitting right now.

But if I add this, can you imagine an energy body, colored blue, a lovely blue, in the shape of your body, that flies out from your body? Flying, it can fly. You remain sensitive to everything you're feeling in that space. But imagine this lovely light, luminous blue energy body flying out. Maybe it does these very free flying maneuvers somewhere in front of your body.

How does that feel in the energy body space? Does it loop the loops? What does it want to do? How does it feel? Really stay connected with the feeling in your space, your energy body space.

When you're ready, connected to your energy body space, you can open your eyes.

So, what have we got here in this little group? We've got just a few little games but really essentially what we're doing is going to the energy body experience and sometimes, without doing anything with the breath or metta or anything else, we notice there's already some pleasantness there and it might already be enough pleasantness to work with, enough to kind of coax and gather it into piti and well-being and focus on it. Don't need anything.

But it also might be we just play a little bit with the imagination and that starts to shape and fabricate the experience in certain ways. If it is already pleasant, then, like I said, maybe you can get into that. Definitely as you get more and more experienced...

Let me run through what I did. The first one is just open to the energy body. Forget about your breath, forget about metta, just open to the energy body, the whole space. See how it feels, without putting any pressure on it. There might be more there already than you commonly realize.

The second one is primarily a kinesthetic imagination. If the visuals help it, great. But primarily it's kinesthetic, in other words, the sort of inner tactile sense, energetic sense. What I actually started with was giving two points, two separate, spatially separate points within the energy body. It's almost like your mind is paying attention to two things at once, predominantly and equally, rather than just one point. Sometimes, if something does, it just opens things up. And it can also allow things to become more stable, because again, there's more of a base, a wider base.

Then there's also the possibility of using the kinesthetic imagination which may be helped by the visual

imagination and imagining certain lines of energy. Really you can just play with whatever. So it might be a vertical line. It might be this vertical line with lines going down the legs. It might be other lines intersecting in different ways. It might just be this kind of slightly amorphous luminous cloud of energy. But the imagination shapes the energy. And then that becomes an experience. It's no longer imagination. I'm actually experiencing this thing. And for samadhi, that can become useful.

The other two are probably less common. You can imagine your body as radiant and empty, even if you're not quite sure what empty means, or you're using it as fairly fundamental. When you tried that, was that interesting?

Partly this is the point. Look, all this stuff is not necessarily so far away. You just do this little game for thirty seconds or something, and stuff starts to happen. And how much the whole thing is conditioned, the whole thing is fabricated.

The experience of the body is fabricated by the mind, and that's fabricated by what I put in the mind, or what ideas, or what views, or what ways of looking, or what imagination. And even when I don't quite know exactly what I'm talking about, or thinking, or what it means, there's a magic in all this. There can be.

And how about the flying one? Yeah, some people like that. Good. You know, these are just little trigger practices, stimuli. That's how I'm using this—to get a sense of how sensitive a system the energy body is. And by energy body I mean the experience. It's so sensitive, so conditioned and fabricated by the littlest thing, by the smallest thing, by the subtlest thing.

So basically what I'm saying is you can either go to the energy body directly, and it might already be ready to work with, or you can play with the energy body in ways that don't really include metta or breath. But metta or breath, of course, will also shape the energy body.

I've never taught a group jhāna retreat before. All the jhāna retreat teaching I did was one-to-one. In a one-to-one interview, the person comes in and they report an experience. And out of everything from my experience and my teaching that I know about jhānas, I just select exactly what I feel they need right now to frame what just happened to them and give them the next thing to work on. And they take that away and usually I see them either three days later or a week later or whatever it is. Then again they come in with something and I'll give them a piece. In that way they don't get overwhelmed at all in terms of information overload.

When it comes to teaching a group retreat, I have to think differently, and I do, actually. Almost every group, a little different for some retreats, but in these kinds of retreats, I think very differently.

I remember being very young and being invited to birthday parties in the neighborhood. This must have been a very alien sort of ritual to both of my parents, but for me it just became a thing. You would go, you would get birthday cake with the candles and all that, and you'd have a slice of birthday cake. Then when

you went home—I don't know, do they have this in the States?—you'd get a going home present, which is usually another piece of cake.

I think of this as like there's a big slab of birthday cake that's a going home present for you. So I'm inviting you to think of it that way if you're feeling like, ah, this is way too much.

I'm sitting here teaching to you now. I'm giving you something that I hope will be useful for you now. And certainly in interviews, that's exactly what I'm doing. But I'm also speaking to you—I'm also speaking to another you, the you that's alive and still wants to practice in a year's time. And another you, the you that's still alive and wants to practice jhānas in five years' time or ten years' time. So I'm actually speaking to multiple yous. And between you, you can eat all that birthday cake.

I'm also—and for me this is actually really important—I'm speaking to people who are not in this room. All this is being recorded, if Nathan's doing his job right. And I've been very conscious of that for years. So I feel like I'm speaking to people I will probably never meet. I'll never know them, I'll never even know that they listened.

They may be somewhere, for all kinds of reasons, they're not able to come. It's not even just a matter of timing. Maybe they can't afford to come on retreat. Maybe they have a health situation that prevents something like that. Maybe they have family obligations or work, whatever it is. So when I teach most group retreats, I'm actually thinking of other people that neither you nor I—I mean you might meet some of them, I might meet a few of them—but there's people that we will never meet and they matter to me a lot. Not more than you of course, but they matter to me a lot, especially the people who would not be able to come and who are out there really nowadays with the Dharma and the internet in the middle of nowhere. They have very little sangha and they have very little direct teacher access and they can listen to this stuff on the web.

So I'm also, in a way, speaking to you, your future selves and these people. Maybe when you have more time and when you can take more time with this material. When actually a little later on, however later on, things will make more sense, some things will make more sense, when you will actually be able to realize—because of what's come in between, partly you've understood emptiness more, or something else, you've done other practices, or something in your conception has opened, or your practice has deepened—when actually you'll be able to realize more of the significance of some of the things that are being talked about.

You'll also maybe realize how it fits together. Sometimes it might just be, that and that and this, and what the hell's that got to do with other Dharma I've heard, and emptiness and all the rest of it. And also maybe sometimes where you will literally hear things that you're not hearing now. You think, well, I was in the room when they said that and I've just heard it now on the sixth time I'm listening or whatever.

So it could be you in the future with your daily home practice, off retreat and just giving yourself a period

of time when you're really getting into jhāna practice. It could be you in some time when you've decided to do a three-year jhāna retreat just on jhānas. And why not if you want to? That would be a beautiful thing to do. And my hope is that the material in this retreat will serve you all through those three years.

You basically have what you need. That's how I'm thinking about it. I know that some of you are finding this no problem, but I also know that some of you are struggling with all this material. The way I get my head around it is to open the view—open it time-wise, people-wise, in every direction.

Someone said to me once, a year or two ago: "I hate it when you talk about sensitivity, Rob. And that word 'subtle'—it really winds me up!" *[Laughter]* With this person, I think the Pali was pushing against a self-view they held, that they weren't sensitive and couldn't access subtlety. I'll come back to that in a moment.

But first, let's get clear about the simplest big picture understanding you need. We've talked about a base practice or springboard practice, right? The criterion—the most preferable criterion we're adopting—for what should be my base or springboard practice is whatever makes pīti easiest to arise and most reliably. That's it. I choose my base practice based on whatever practice gives rise most reliably and most easily to pīti. Actually, let's not even say pīti—to feeling good in this space, to the body feeling good. Let's just say that. That's one large principle if you're feeling a bit lost.

The second large principle regarding the instructions—a simple global take on them—involves this idea of a learning edge playground. What is that? I want to find what my learning edge playground is and marinate in it. I want to hang out there. That's the place where I spend ninety percent of my time, if I can.

This marinating includes working, playing, and tweaking. It doesn't mean just hanging out there in some kind of stupor or non-responsive, non-attuned, non-active way. So what's my learning edge playground? I need to marinate there, which includes working, playing, and tweaking. I need to work, play, and tweak until I have mastered all the... what do you call the things in a playground—the slide and all those... the collective word? Equipment. All the equipment. That's somehow not a very romantic word, but I've mastered all the equipment in that particular playground.

I want to marinate there and master it, both of which require working, playing, and tweaking. If, as you're listening to this, you can already do A, B, and C of what I've listed regarding mastery—what's involved in mastery—but you can't do D, whatever that is, then D is exactly what you need to be working and playing with. That's where you want to fill out your sense of what mastery involves at that level.

If you can already do all the elements involved in mastery at a certain level—let's say with the first jhāna—then either it should be the case that naturally, organically, by that point, the second jhāna has already appeared just naturally, inevitably. That's usually what happens. It's already evolved to the next jhāna organically—the second jhāna from the first.

If that's not the case, if you've really developed all the mastery but it's still not happening, then it needs a

little bit of wizardry, trickery—subtle little things you can try that just nudge and encourage it, that encourage that sapling, that sprout to come, the bud to unfold and show itself. That's what you need to bring to interviews, or if not, we'll obviously address it in the teachings.

When we talk about playground, it could be any jhāna. But your playground could also still be the base springboard practice. It doesn't matter. What matters is understanding these basic orienting principles.

Does that make sense? That's the big picture for orienting to these instructions.

I started to say before—if very little of this energy business makes sense, or this talk about sensitivity and subtlety feels foreign, or perhaps like that person I mentioned who said, "I really don't like all this talk about energy and attunement and subtlety and sensitivity"—if that's the case, and if you're not even sure which base practice, which springboard practice actually feels best, then just choose one.

Actually, I don't think this applies to anyone at this point in this room, but I'll say it anyway: just choose one. For example, just choose the breath at the nostrils or in the abdomen.

And if you don't like all this talk about sensitivity and energy, then just concentrate on that point. Concentrate on the feelings and sensations at that point. When the mind gets distracted, come back to it and concentrate on it again. And when the mind gets distracted again, return and concentrate without judging, without any to-do—just come back again and again and again. Return a googolplex times. You know what a googolplex is? It's ten to the ten to the ten—anyway, it's a lot. Just over and over and over. It's really basic instruction. Just do that.

To which we'll add two more pieces of instruction. One is: when a hindrance arises, do not sit there putting up with it. Do something about it. From that list we gave, just do something about the hindrance.

The second piece of instruction: can I learn to refine my concentration a little bit? This means playing with those three things I mentioned—intensity, delicacy, and directionality. In other words, play with those, learn to move the sliders up and down, turn the dials up and down.

So if you don't like any of this other stuff, just do that. Do that and trust in it, and it will deliver its fruit.

Okay, so maybe we'll stop there. Thank you for listening.

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