Q & A

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 20:27

Yeah, so Karen's asking about the interpretation of piti being primary in the first jhana and sukha being primary in the second jhana, and also about the translation of those words.

As far as I know, that's not in the Pali Canon—that piti is primary and sukha is secondary. As far as I know, they're both factors of both the first and second jhana. I guess I'm just speaking from experience, also from how I was taught originally by one of my teachers. So I'm speaking from the way experience tends to mature. I think even for people who are not told what to wait for or don't even know what they're supposed to be looking for, it would just tend to mature that way.

As for the translations, yeah, it's interesting reading. Sometimes you get delight or pleasure or joy or all kinds of different translations. So I'm just speaking from experience about piti as predominantly felt physical pleasure, although it's a perception, and sukha is predominantly happiness, but it has a lot of wavelengths.

Boaz is asking, in terms of this word ekaggata, the way I translate it, what makes it special as a jhanic factor versus a factor that might be present in any insight practice?

Actually, in the Abhidhamma, which is very—I don't know what you call it—various sort of black and white definitions about factors of consciousness in Theravada Buddhism... Actually, Mahayana also has their own version. They say ekaggata is a factor that's present in every state of consciousness. So not even just in meditation or just in jhana. The mind always has one thing prominent to some degree.

So it's a question of how much is one thing prominent. Then you would tend to think, okay, well, the ekaggata of the eighth jhana must be better than the ekaggata of the first jhana, but not necessarily. It can vary. I would say it can vary, but basically it's just a factor. It's a fact of being conscious, of having a perception that there's one thing that's kind of more prominent in the perception.

So it's not particular to samadhi or jhana practice. It gets developed more in jhana practice. It becomes a kind of important... it becomes developed in a jhanic state or a samadhi state. But it's something that's there anyway, in any moment of consciousness. It means that it gets stronger and stronger or you make it stronger and stronger. So a jhanic state is very absorbed. There's really just one thing. It's like you're really into that thing more and more.

So the question is, I've been told to sort of stay in the first jhana as much as possible, but other states are coming up. And is it okay to go there? Should I go there and just trust them or not? And I want to go there. They're much nicer. Can you describe what they are? What's going on? What kind of?

Very settled. Okay. So you're describing a place where it is sort of like white velvet and very settled, and like the breath of God is there and very lovely.

Yeah. So, you know, again, it's about context. So you could, if we're looking at things from a jhana lens, of everything you just said, we sort of map that onto a jhana territory—which are the significant nimittas there and which are the less significant nimittas?

If we're doing imaginal practice, soul-making practice, then actually it's the breath of God that's the most significant thing there. And the fact that it's velvety is great and the fact that it's serene is great, but actually it's the breath of God that's most significant.

If you're doing jhana practice, then actually what's most significant is the serenity there. So it might be, from what you're saying—we'd have a longer conversation—it might be that the serenity there is something akin to something in the third jhana. It's much more kind of subtle and exquisite and lovely that way. It might be, we'd have to have a slightly longer conversation.

But if you want to go into that and explore it, it's almost like that needs to become the primary jhana factor—the serenity. And it might be that the sense of the breath of God and the white velvet support it for a while, but after a while, they'll become kind of secondary. You realize, oh, it's a territory that is characterized primarily by that kind of serenity. You recognize its particular bandwidths and those other factors become secondary.

But it depends what you want. If you want jhanas, then it depends what we emphasize, what we pull out of that mix of what's most important.

It's funny, I only know you really from imaginal practice, so I don't know what else you've done in terms of insight practice and all that. But it could be, like I said today, that for you, there has been a training where the mind goes a lot towards a kind of serenity, and doesn't really like all this bubbly stuff.

So again, either you decide, actually, I'm not really into the jhana practice—I want to make this an imaginal space. My request would be not on this retreat, but you can come back to that. You'll have plenty of access to all these kinds of things at other times.

If you do want it to be jhana, then the question becomes: which first? Which should I develop first? Or should I even develop these things in parallel? So demarcate, really get used to: okay, this state is definitely different than this one. I prefer that one, but I'm actually interested in mastering them both and being able to hang out with them both and finding them both lovely. Either you decide, I'm going to do this first and that second, or that first and this second, or I'm going to do them kind of in parallel.

Does that sound okay?

To me, there's nothing wrong with experiencing the breath of God there. It's just that if that becomes primary, technically speaking, it takes you in a slightly different direction, which is gorgeous and

beautiful, incredibly fruitful, but it's slightly different than what we're doing. So it can be there as a support for a while, but at some point, you have to hone in on what's the primary factor in any state.

This is one of the things—it's hard doing a retreat over Zoom. What you need to do is come to an interview and describe in a bit more detail, and we could map the jhanas onto those. That will tell you what to make more primary in each state if you want to develop the jhanas. And then exactly the order in which you develop your mastery of those, if that's what you want, is partly dependent on your history and things like that.

This is one of the situations where you would need to have a bit of a map because there's actually an infinite amount of lovely states that a human being can find themselves in—infinite. When you start including soul-making stuff, it becomes completely infinite. It really depends. Certain honings or certain magnetism to this, or priority of this, will direct you in certain ways. If you ask me, is it better or worse? It's not really about that. It's just, what do we want to do right now?

I can't see who that is at the back. Is it Sabra? Is there a reason I haven't listed out the eight jhanas? I did in one of the first two talks, but very quickly. The way I'm thinking about it is, we're focusing mostly on pīti in the first jhana, and then I'll give more detail about each jhana. That's just one way of going about it. Probably because that's where most people will be.

I read them very quickly. Why would you want that? To give you a sense of whether you're slipping into something else right now?

It's interesting. I guess we could have done it that way. I would usually do that in an interview with someone, like I described, but it might be that it would take quite a lot of description from me for you to really get an accurate sense of is that it, or where is it? I'm not sure. Maybe one time—well, I probably won't get the chance—but that would be another way of doing it. But I think it would take really quite a lot of description because there's a lot of states.

When I talked about some people who have done a lot of insight meditation getting into a state of equanimity, I said I actually have to explain a few things about equanimity, because the Buddha talked about...

These different shades of equanimity require considerable explanation. The Buddha spoke of equanimity based on singleness, equanimity based on multiplicity, and equanimity in relation to the eight worldly conditions. Then there's equanimity as an almost jhanic state—sometimes based on multiplicity, sometimes on singleness. Without extensive description, it would be difficult for you to accurately locate yourself on this map of states.

In individual teaching, this approach is quite common for me. I listen carefully, pick up the signals, and ask clarifying questions. But teaching a group to practice jhana this way—with this whole emphasis on mastery and marinating—presents unique challenges. The subtle distinctions require careful explanation:

"It's something like what you may have experienced, but actually it's quite different." Without that precision, I'm not sure what the purpose would be in simply listing states.

This whole practice demands tremendous energy—much more than you might expect. Even when you've established the pleasant feeling and are doing this subtle work of sustaining it, the practice simultaneously delivers enormous energy while requiring great energetic investment. It's a fascinating paradox.

When you find yourself getting tired, the question becomes: Do I need to return to the base practice, or is there a way to minutely adjust how I'm working that makes it more sustainable? There isn't always a black-and-white answer. Generally, if fatigue arises, it's either time to rest or perhaps time for the base practice.

But as your practice develops, you discover more options. You might be playing in the second jhana and feel tiredness arising, so you shift to the seventh jhana and return refreshed with abundant energy. Or you might be working in the fourth jhana, feel your energy flagging, and return to the first jhana to restore vitality—or even go back to simple breath awareness.

This practice isn't formulaic in that way. That's part of what I mean by the improvisational quality. Sometimes you can stay exactly where you are—with whatever pleasant feeling you're working with—and find a way to access more energy right there. Sometimes you need to shift to something different. The key is learning to feel your way into what's needed in each moment.

Nicole raises an excellent question about images that sometimes accompany different types of pleasant feelings—perhaps a snowflake or other visual forms that seem to support and even trigger specific pleasant feelings. Can we work with these images, or should we drop them as quickly as possible?

This phenomenon is actually quite common, and I'd say it's entirely a matter of intention. Images can remain present in the background, and as long as they're helpful—supporting the pleasant feeling and helping you access it more readily—they're perfectly fine. You can play with the balance: how much to emphasize the pleasant feeling versus how much to let the image fade. Sometimes an image might be quite primary initially, serving as a kind of launching pad, but the pleasant feeling must ultimately become the primary focus.

Eventually, you won't need these visual supports as much. As I mentioned, the pleasant feeling will simply arise when you remember it. What you're all discovering is an arsenal of little techniques for navigating these different stages. You'll learn various tricks for moving from first to second jhana, some from instruction and many through your own exploration.

After some time, you may find you no longer need these transitional supports. Other images might accompany your jhana practice for extended periods, providing ongoing support while remaining mostly in the background—occasionally moving more into the foreground when you need to amplify the

experience.

Does that clarity help with your practice?

As we deepen our practice and progress through the jhanas, we learn to pay attention to increasingly subtle objects. We develop the capacity to sustain our attention on these more refined states. This is part of the art—at every level, your attention must be trained anew for each new degree of subtlety.

There's an art to remaining truly awake with something that becomes subtler and calmer. When the pīti becomes more relaxing and soft, your attention needs to change accordingly. Perhaps it requires a more subtle quality of awareness—a gentler way of enjoying that smoothness. You must discover the right stance to take with these refined states.

This might also signal that another state is beginning to emerge, where pīti is no longer the primary object. A different kind of body energy may be presenting itself. The question becomes: what does it mean to stay present with that? How can you remain fully alert with something so subtle?

All the principles we've discussed about subtle work and play apply here. When we talked about the hindrances, we noted that sleepiness represents a kind of closing down—comfortable, yes, but ultimately a shutting off of awareness. You might need to open yourself more fully, asking: "How can I enjoy this to the maximum?"

The key questions become: Is it more sustaining that's needed? More opening? More maximizing of enjoyment? Again, this returns to our fundamental inquiry of what needs emphasizing in this moment—finding what actually helps among all the possibilities.

It might be less about the drowsiness itself and more about opening and discovering the full enjoyment available. The state may be enjoyable, but perhaps you're not maximizing that enjoyment or opening to it in quite the right way. This incomplete opening is what tends to tip the experience toward sleepiness rather than deeper absorption.

Let's take just a little quiet time together now.

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