Q & A

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:22:01

Rather than give you more material today, we'll have some questions and responses. You've got enough to work with and work on for a while, and I don't want to overwhelm you further.

Before we open it up, let me offer just a couple of reminders. First, remember what I said about the hindrances—they're going to come, in case you hadn't noticed. They're going to come and go. The whole thing is like this.

What do we want in relation to the hindrances? We want to be working on them—antidotes, what can I try? The same creativity, the same responsiveness, the same awareness and sensitivity, working on them when they come. But we also want, in terms of wisdom, not to take them personally. It doesn't mean your practice has now forever fallen through the floor into the hell realms and you'll be stuck there forever. It doesn't mean you can't do this. It doesn't mean you're a failure. It doesn't mean any of that.

This is really, really important because when the hindrance is around, they're like little poisons and they poison the mind. The mind starts believing all kinds of things, particularly about the self, about one's practice. So we really need to keep the view screwed on right with them.

Recognize that this is a hindrance. Self-doubt is a hindrance. "I can't do this"—it's doubt. It's a hindrance. When they come, they make us prone to believing all kinds of things about someone else, about Gaia House, about ourselves, about the retreat, about life. They really are like a poison dart, and then it spreads in the bloodstream and everything gets caught up and toxified through that and the whole way we look at things. So not to take them personally and not to believe the stories they spin.

The hindrance in itself is more at a very base level—it's not at a complex level of the mind. It's a very basic level. When we're not careful, the complex story-making, world-building levels of the mind get infected by the hindrances. That's papañca. Then we go bonkers.

Over time, we learn to wean the papañca off, to refine it off the hindrances. The hindrance just becomes more and more like just a bit antsy or whatever it is—the basic energy of it without it proliferating, which is what papañca means, proliferating to these other levels. But they will come and go.

On the scale of things, how you feel right now—some of you will be flying and some of you will be really not flying—it's just part of the up and down. If you're up, guess what? And if you're down, guess what? And if you're in the middle, guess what? It takes a while to get used to this.

If you were to do a really long jhāna retreat, it becomes so obvious that our whole relationship to it

becomes different—we have a much more spacious perspective. Of course we prefer the hindrances not to be there. Of course. But the whole added sense of "Oh, this is terrible, I'm terrible"—all that stuff goes more and more. That's what we're aiming for with the hindrances.

Let's open it up to some questions. Questions that feel relevant to your practice, wherever that is right now. Whatever you're working on, whatever you're learning—your edge, your playground—or something I've said about the bigger picture that maybe needs clarification or integration.

Now I can't see. Is that Lauren? It is Lauren. Okay.

Let me just repeat, if I understand it, that Lauren's noticing a sort of cyclic pattern of over-efforting, and when that pattern is there, it's very convincing to believe that you have a really major problem with getting stuck in over-efforting and that you need to back way off. What's the question then?

Okay, so needing some moral support and some skillful ways of working with it. Yeah.

For moral support—I don't know if it helps you, but it's certainly a pattern I can relate to. I can look back over the last thirty-six years and say, yeah, I've really been in that in different ways, in different modalities of practice and at all kinds of levels. I felt like I was stuck there or felt like it was a real personality problem and all that. So I don't know if that makes you feel better or worse.

I look back at all that and I feel like for myself there was a lot of cost to it in different ways, but there's been more blessing than cost. I'm glad that over-efforting may come from a really deep love and a really deep desire and a really deep yearning for something. These are all really beautiful qualities.

If you have something like that, then you have—sometimes I say to someone, I'm actually saying it to someone else who's here—it's like you've been given a really powerful horse to ride. And you have to learn how to handle that horse. You could have been given a little—I don't know if you've been to Dartmoor and seen those little ponies. They're very different kinds of animals, and handling one and handling the other requires different skills. So there's a tremendous gift here, but it takes longer to learn how to handle it. Does that make sense?

It really can be learned—how to harness the power of that and how to let that willingness to really give yourself an effort and apply yourself and bring your intensity and bring this cohesion of mind and energy and desire, letting that really gather power when we're talking about soul power and all that. It's a really great gift, and it takes time to learn how to let those things come together in a way that they're actually balanced and it works. So it's not a small deal, it's a big deal.

As I've said, the whole question of effort is going to be around in everyone's practice for the rest of their lives. For any serious practitioner, you bump into it. And I would say any really serious practitioner is also going to find it really painful at times. It's not just the effort, it's also the wanting.

So there's an energetic side to over-effort. If I think back to the late '80s, I had a really long period of being

stuck in that shaking movement stuff, and it got incredibly wacky. It looked bonkers, and I was twenty-one or twenty-two. Of course, I was just really trying really hard. The teachers at that time had no idea what it was. It got really intense and very weird in terms of its manifestations. It went on for a long time.

Looking back now, I see that the principal causal factor there was slight over-efforting. So there's an energetic side of this and we really need to learn how to handle that. It can have very gross effects—you can just feel like something completely locks. Or it can look like you're a complete raving lunatic. But it can also have very subtle effects. As I said, it's just a little bit too much effort and it actually stimulates the mind to think more and to get slightly distracted more. It's a relatively subtle effect.

But anyway, everyone's going to have to deal with the question of effort. I remember being on long retreats here and just wanting something so badly and not being able to find the answers and finding that so difficult—in tears. I felt like I didn't have anyone to ask or anyone who would give me answers that would satisfy. So it can be intense when we really give ourselves to something.

To me, it's still a good sign.

So it's just saying, okay, you've got a powerful horse you've been given. Let's learn to ride this, you know.

I would have to hear a bit more, Lauren, about what's going on, what ways you're feeling stuck and what you mean by backing way off. When we talk about working with effort, we've got a huge range. One is backing way off, which means just stop meditating—stop whatever it is, sometimes it's fretting about questions, sometimes it's energetic. Just take half a day off and go for a walk. That's pretty rare, but that would be backing way off, for example.

Or backing way off can look like I'm just sitting here, but I'm going into a very different mode in terms of my relationship with whatever the principal object I'm working with, whether it's *pīti*, whether it's breath, or whatever it is. Or it might mean going to an insight practice for a while—but I've still got my mind engaged, I'm still doing samādhi. That's my intention. I'm just taking this kind of detour into a practice I know brings a lot more ease, and it's within a much larger context.

Or it could be finding an imaginal image that you've worked with in the past that has been helpful in this relationship. That's not... really, in terms of samādhi practice, again, it doesn't have to be just *pīti*—it can become whatever it becomes. There are lots of ways there. If it looks like, well, right now I'm headed in the wrong direction, it might look like that. But in the bigger picture, it's really not.

If you go into some imaginal practice that changes your whole relationship with being on retreat and what you're doing, that might be exactly what's needed. It looks like a detour. It looks like you've given up something—maybe you haven't. Some part of your consciousness firmly holds the intention and the navigation and where you're going in mind, and it's just very skillful to go off into something else for a while. Does that make sense? Do you want to say a bit more about the specifics, or is it better to work with this one-to-one in an interview?

[Response from student]

Okay, so there's fear in the larger picture that you've been asked or told to back way off, and maybe that same thing will happen on this retreat—maybe we'll say don't meditate, or maybe it's better if you go back home, or whatever at that scale. To address that first: I've very rarely done that as a teacher. I would be extremely surprised if that were my usual way of teaching. So I don't think that's going to happen on this retreat.

In terms of grabbing at the *pīti*—the other thing you mentioned—the fear is not a neutral factor. It's not like this thing is happening and the fear is there, but it's not affecting anything. When fear is present and when it's strong fear, it's doing something.

So when we talk about what look like detours, it might actually be working with the fear in different ways. We can talk about that in an interview. But it sounds like the fear at this point is strong enough and prominent enough, and probably having quite some effects, that it itself needs working with. It needs understanding. Something in you needs reassuring. You need to be able to diffuse the power of the fear—its energy and its contraction and the belief in the thinking. There are different parts to fear: there's energy, there's the cognitive component (what we're believing that we're afraid of), and the contraction.

One thing is to work with this—again, we can meet in an interview with one of us and really go into that, actually work in real time with the fear. Because as I said, it's not just happening to be there. It's not a neutral factor. It's doing something, and almost certainly what it's doing is not helpful in the mix.

In terms of *pīti* and grabbing at the *pīti*, this is really quite common to some degree. I think I mentioned it briefly in one of the talks. The Buddha took the trouble to say exactly that. Why would he say that? Partly because he must have encountered it a lot as a teacher, is my guess. So it's normal.

Let me just say two things for now, and then I think it would be good to meet one-to-one. First: is there access at times to lovely states—not necessarily jhānic, but lovely states sort of other than the *pīti*—that are much softer or warmer or a bit more expansive or something like that?

[Student responds: "Yes"]

So at times you're able to ask the question, what's pleasant, and find a kind of mild pleasantness. And does that mild pleasantness have a quality of softness to it? Because piti can sometimes be quite intense, and that's often part of the issue.

So that's good. The softness itself is not a neutral factor - it's softening something. That's the thing about jhanas. This whole marinating and resource aspect means that whatever the jhanic quality is, it then affects the citta and the body. So if there's something soft and warm and maybe even soothing that's lovely, then actually hang out in that. Take your time with this. Hang out in that. Feel that touching the heart, touching the body, touching the consciousness.

Sometimes you may want to then put the fear in that. Take the fear, the idea that you've had, and put it in the middle of that - whatever your language would be - of this soft, warm space, and just see what that does. Put the difficult and the lovely into contact with each other. Other times, and you don't need to rush this, you could see if you can hang out in that soft place.

The second thing I want to say about all this: snatching is this kind of movement that, although it looks like something I'm doing, feels to you right now that you're not in control of it. The mind is just grabbing beyond your will. Is it possible to spend much more time in that sunbathing posture? Both with the softness, and then practice that stance, that poise with what's lovely.

Over time that just becomes - maybe that resets the habit. The habit is not so much to immediately grab forward, but also to soak it up, which involves much less doing. So you're training the habit so that both possibilities become more equalized, and eventually you will have autonomy because they're equal - they're equally available possibilities. They've both been practiced equally, and therefore you can begin to choose.

And with that, then you can really soak up that soft whatever it is. Let's not even worry whether it's jhanic or not jhanic - it doesn't matter. It's a skillful state. You want to be tuning into the very softness, the warmth, the healing. There's something that reassures the whole system, the whole nervous system, the mind eventually. But you're really just lapping it up, like soft, gentle water just lapping over the being.

Then when you're used to that, at times maybe you can see if the piti can come up and you have the same stance, the same poise in relation to the piti. When it goes out of that, the mind might quickly want to panic a little bit - "Oh, here it is again, my over-efforting" - and all that stuff very quickly gets ignited. But can I keep bringing it back to this more open, receptive, sunbathing, showering poise, this relationship mode of attention?

You also have to think about retraining the sankaras. That grabbing movement is a very base level mind movement. Retraining often happens just by over and over and over doing something different. When we notice it, diffusing that by doing the opposite. Partly just knowing that's what you're doing. It will come up. This habit will come up. You're going to encounter it so many times you can't count. Can I not freak out? Is it possible to just switch the mode in that moment?

Let's see how that goes, but bring that to the interviews because there are lots of details here. It gets very individual. So much depends on micro-moments and micro-choices at a subtle level. But how does that sound for now?

Mikhail, yes? So Mikhail is asking - hadn't heard much about the absorption which I mentioned as one of the elements of this sassy, and thought he would try focusing on that. He picked the second jhana, as that's where your playground is anyway, and said, "Okay, let's see if I can get absorbed."

And then did indeed, after a bit of work, find himself very absorbed in this state, a very deep state. But the

happiness, he noticed at some point, had gone. And also any sense of energy body experience. So if I ask you, what was prominent in your consciousness at that point? No happiness, no energy body—what was it?

This is definitely possible. There are two possibilities really within that. One is that what happens is the mind does get more absorbed, more concentrated, whatever we say, and actually goes beyond the second jhāna into a less fabricated state. I'm going to have to explain this at more length—I've mentioned it a couple of times—but there's no longer the fabrication of the perception of happiness.

So it might have gone into something like the fourth jhāna, where there isn't the fabrication of perception of happiness. And then it might have gone even beyond that. As you say, it's quite vast and empty. It might have gone into the beginnings of one of the formless jhānas—no body sense, no dominant emotional sense really, apart from a kind of stillness. Or it might have gone into something akin to that, that isn't strictly speaking one of the classical jhānas, but it's in that sort of territory.

It's very possible, but if you want to practice this or that jhāna, I need to know what's the factor in it that's the most important. And in the second jhāna, it's happiness. Unquestionably, it's happiness—for me, at least, that's the way I would emphasize things. It's not even the fact that there's no thinking or whatever; that's secondary. I'll come back to that when we talk about the second jhāna, but it's the happiness.

Now within the second jhāna, the quality of the happiness, as I said—jhānas are not one uniform experience. The second jhāna is not like this every time, where you could take a snapshot and it's just the same thing. There's a whole range within the second jhāna. So you get a very bubbly kind of happiness and a much, much stiller happiness. Part of the art of really learning the second jhāna is getting to know that territory, but also learning to keep the mind focused and fed by the happiness.

So what can happen? Because it gets more subtle within that range, the mind is actually not quite able to stay—it hasn't been trained in staying with that more refined object, that happiness. And it might, because of past experience, be actually more trained with staying with a big empty space, even though technically speaking that's even more refined.

So partly what you can think of as what you're doing in each jhāna is training yourself to really stay with and really absorb in the primary nimitta of that jhāna over its range. And then the other thing is that in the first four jhānas, that means—happiness is an emotion, it's a mental quality, but you really want to feel it in your body as well. So this double-aspected nature of the primary nimitta is actually quite important in the second, third, and fourth jhānas particularly.

If you stopped a guy in the street in Newton Abbot and said—I don't know, asked him to think of something that made him happy and then said, "Can you focus on that happiness?"—it would be the strangest thing. Most people would say, "How do I focus on happiness?" So we're actually learning to do that, and part of what helps, and part of anyway what is the nature of the jhāna because it's a rūpa jhāna,

is that we feel the happiness and we focus—we feel the happiness in the energy body as well as in the mind. But what we're focusing on is the energy body experience of happiness, as well as the mental. That has to be there.

So if you're saying, "Okay, my job is, my playground is now the second jhāna," I really have to keep it within those bounds. And for all kinds of historical reasons, it might want to slip out of it. The mind wants something deeper. The mind is just used to going to big open spaces, whatever. But I have to keep bringing it back.

In terms of the happiness, the intensity of the happiness as well as its subtlety can vary. Sometimes in the second jhāna you're really talking about this upsurge of joy—it's almost overwhelming. Sometimes you're talking about almost like it feels like this underground spring that the Buddha was talking about is really the subtlest thing. It's the subtlest thread that you're paying attention to. And your job, if that's your territory, is: how can I keep paying attention to that? And by paying attention to it, I keep it in that realm.

How does this all sound? Exactly, yes. The subtlety of the attention was probably not enough to stay with the subtlety of sukha as it got more subtle. And you're probably more used to that silence a little bit in different forms.

Again, there's a habit of mine. It's just created a groove there. It's great. We're not saying you're never going to—we don't want you ever going there again in your life. We're not saying that. We're just saying, okay, this is my playground.

Eventually we want you to have everything—all the toys and all the swings and everything. But it takes a certain training: when the happiness gets subtle, can I keep it on that subtle happiness without it sliding somewhere else? And that's a training.

In terms of what you said about backing out—so you can back right out, open your eyes, that's great, well done, and then you come back again. In time, you can do it much more subtly than that. You can remember back a certain happiness that you can pay attention to and then just do it again. But you have to have enough experience with the happiness to be able to remember it back, call it back.

Or, if you're familiar with the first jhana, you can go back to the first jhana rather than opening your eyes and all that. Go back to the first jhana. There's definitely, by definition, the bodily experience in the first jhana that's more gross, because the first jhana is less refined, more gross than the second jhana. So you find that, hang out in that for a while, and then see if it goes again by itself, or you can just encourage it to go.

So this kind of maneuvering, as you meet different difficulties, that's all part of the art of it. Back up into a lower jhana, sometimes even go forward and then come backwards—which we'll talk about. But yeah, well done. That's great.

Let me read Andy's note. Is it okay, Andy?

"The citta wants to move towards peacefulness—a deep, delicious, beautiful, dark, juicy peacefulness—rather than piti or sukha, which have been around. I've been working with the peacefulness just as recommended, and will continue to do this as it feels like what the mind-heart really wants. There was such a sense of relief when I let it. Is there anything else I should consider or do on this front?"

Yeah, you know, just take these as well. So each is a part of the work-play you want to do—get used now to that peacefulness.

Actually, let me ask you a question first. Would you also say it's got love in it?

Okay. Love and grace. It has got love and grace in it. Would you say it has a tenderness to it?

Okay, it's got tenderness. Would you say it has a kind of emotional warmth—and almost by implication it does?

Yes. Okay, tick, tick, tick. Okay, good. So it sounds to me like we're in the right territory. Fab. Great.

So what you want to do is let yourself go. The mind really does—it's like it wants to go somewhere. And partly this is dependent on your past experience, you know, a lot of sitting in different places and all that. So yeah, let it go. Let that be your primary playground even now.

And your job then is to really know that territory inside out. And to me, there's quite a lot to discover about the third jhana. Things start to get really quite interesting then in terms of the different aspects and levels of it. So rather than me tell you what to look for, you just hang out there with the awareness, with the sensitivity, noticing what changes, and then you can report back and one of us can talk about it.

Second thing is there's also—what would you say—particular challenges, particular subtle difficulties that are particular to each jhana. And there's some that start to arise in the third jhana. Also, obviously some really beautiful stuff that starts there, but some particular challenges that arise. And again, rather than me tell you what they are, you'll begin to encounter them as well.

And that's exactly what I mean—this sense of where the mind wants to go is very much part of the territory of long-term jhana practice. Some people have a style of practicing jhanas where they simply sit down and see where the mind wants to go, then follow that. I'd say yes, that's wonderful, that's part of it.

But we also want to develop the other capacity. Going back to the horse analogy—sometimes you get on a horse and just see where it wants to go. That's certainly a possible relationship with a horse ride. But we also want the ability to say, "No, I want to go to the bingo hall," or wherever it is we need to go.

Often when people ask me "Should I do this or should I do that?" my answer is: yes, both. We want to have this range. Sometimes I let go of control completely, and sometimes I want to have choice and mastery.

Here's why I chose to read this question out—what might be needed here is recognizing that while in the long term you do want mastery of the first and second jhana, how you get there might be different. It might well be that taking the third jhana as your learning edge right now, really getting to know it and hanging out there, becomes your priority.

After you've been sitting in the third jhana and feeling really, really nice from it, then see if sometimes you can go backwards from the third. By that point the mind has gotten a lot of what it wants in that particular scene. It's drunk from that particular beautiful well, had its submerging, refreshing dunk in that spring. Then it's much more amenable to going back.

You might find—and you'll have to experiment—that maybe it goes right back to the piti, or maybe to the sukha. Going back to the sukha might even be easier because, as you pointed out, the third jhana has sukha in it. So it's easier to get a sense of the sukha. And secondly, the mind is just much more... well, here's where my horse riding analogy gets stretched—the horse has been given the right water to drink.

What's that? The right food to eat, yeah.

Once it has, it's satisfied and it will go. If it knows the food's that way—that it likes, the carrots are that way—and you want to go to bingo, and they won't let the horse in the bingo hall, then once you give it the carrots, it's happy to go to the bingo hall.

So that's one thing. It's also, as you said, the happiness is closer to the... Now, it might be that you just remember the happiness and it comes back. Another little trick you can... Well, actually, if the happiness is there, it's fine. Sometimes people can't get back to the happiness, and then we would offer something else, but I'll leave that for now.

And then from the happiness, you can just... Remember, in the second jhana, it has sukha and piti. In the first jhana, it has sukha and piti. So you're just in a way, slightly shifting what you're bringing out of the mix. But again, attuning to a quality in the mix amplifies it. I amplify the sukha in the second jhana, I amplify the piti in the first. And then going back to that again will be much easier and the mind will be more amenable to that.

Does that sound okay?

Yeah, please.

Well, no, not in the next few days. Marinate in that. That's your primary playground. But as you've already tried, as you already reported, the happiness that's prominent in the second jhana is already available after you've marinated for an hour or two hours or whatever it is, right? So after you feel like I've had a good, long, lovely, refreshing drink of the peacefulness, then try to come back in the happiness. But at the moment, you can spend much, much less time in the happiness than the peacefulness. And let the peacefulness be really where you're hanging out the most.

I don't think there'd be anyone who said the first jhana is a better experience than the third jhana. Unquestionably, the third jhana is lovelier. Maybe there's someone, but it would be pretty unusual. So there's no arguing with that. But what we do want is a sense eventually that, gosh, they're all lovely. They're just lovely in different ways. And even the piti, which relatively speaking is gross, it's really a treasure.

Somehow, whichever way we arrive at it, we want to get back—or get, if you haven't had it before—a sense that, yeah, the first jhana is a really lovely place. The piti is a lovely thing. I have a really good relationship with it. So we're just finding which way will help you get to that being the case.

Does that make sense? Very good.

Anything, please?

Oh, should we try that? Yeah, let's try that. If you're happy to do that.

I've been on a bunch of insight retreats and never deliberately spent time cultivating jhanas. And I believe I'm one of a few people who've experienced third and maybe fourth jhana as a result of just relaxing in the midst of an insight retreat and the mind wanting to go to a very peaceful place.

In all of the experiences of jhana, on and off of retreat—first of all, I've never really verified this with anyone—but it tends to have a flavor of like the floor kind of goes out from under me and I drop into a place that's very different from normal. And sometimes incredibly peaceful, sometimes incredibly blissful.

So I guess my first question is... Well, you don't want us to ask, is that it? So I'm not sure if it's even necessary. I don't want to ask—like if I'm on the right track in those experiences.

Oh, you mean if they are the right experience? No, no, it's not that I don't want you to ask.

Let's take our time with this. I really think it's important to differentiate between genres. People can get so hung up on where the division is and "have I achieved it?" The relationship with that question is often not so helpful. But it may be really fine.

You need to map out the territory for yourself. There are certain ways that people can relate to this questioning that's quite common but really not so helpful. I would need to hear more about those experiences based on what you said. Bring it to our one-to-one interview where we can find out more about what's involved there.

What can happen for someone who's done a lot of insight practice is that one drops in because of the insight—mindfulness, letting go, letting go, letting go. Equanimity is a result of letting go. You get that, right? Equanimity can be defined as the relative absence, the relative attenuation of pushing things away or trying to grab on. In other words, it's a relative degree of letting go, and equanimity is a result of that.

Another way of defining equanimity is as a relative degree of letting go itself. If you just keep letting

go—aware, letting go, aware, letting go, aware, letting go—you will end up in some state of equanimity. Equanimity will arise. Does everyone understand that?

Whether that state is a jhanic state of equanimity, well, technically speaking, equanimity begins in the third jhana and goes all the way to the eighth, actually. We'll talk about this when we get to the formless jhanas. The Buddha sometimes describes the formless jhanas as almost like perspectives on equanimity or things you do with equanimity.

So where you are, I'd have to hear more. That's one thing. The second thing is whether it's an actual jhanic state of equanimity. Again, relative to normal consciousness, any state of equanimity and stillness where the mind is quiet and peaceful is going to feel like "wow." We still don't know whether it's a jhanic one.

So we do need to map this stuff out. We need to map it out because it might give us information about how you need to move now. What do you need to prioritize? Where's your playground? How do we need to progress from here? A bit like with Andy—what order are we going to move in here?

"Bottom dropping out from you." Yeah, that can happen. One thing that can happen in the fourth jhana is there's a real sense of sinking—everything kind of goes down. In the fifth jhana though, the bottom can fall out in terms of the floor falls out. Because there's no solidity, it really feels like they've taken the floor away and there's just space, you know? So there are different kinds of bottoms falling out.

"That was sort of the setup for what's happening now. What's happening now is nothing jhanic, actually, on this retreat, as far as I can tell. Nothing like those experiences, in any case. It feels as though, at times, there's plenty of piti, sometimes plenty of sukha, less often. I will feel that kind of beginning of that dropping that I'm used to, and sometimes be able to even conjure it. It feels as though it's on the verge of entering a jhanic state. But what happens instead is that I'm confronted by more intense... I guess it sort of feels like energetic blocks in the body. So as the resolution is being turned up and the subtlety and the sensitivity is being turned up, that's what becomes prominent and it kind of pushes me out."

So you're turning up the resolution at that point? The sensitivity of the attention is going up—it's sort of like all at once goes up quite a bit.

When does that typically occur? This is worth mapping out. I suspect there are certain conditions under which the pleasant tears come versus the more neutral pīti. But even when the pleasant tears arise, you're still finding it challenging to move into jhāna?

Actually, let me step back. When you do get the pleasant tears flowing and you're working with them skillfully—letting them move through the body, opening to them, really luxuriating in that quality—what prevents the deepening? Is it still these emotional blocks or contractions that arise, or is it something else?

Because what I'm hearing is that the pīti can become quite strong and pervasive, which sounds promising for jhānic development. The key question is what's interrupting that natural deepening process.

Sometimes it's simply a matter of learning to stay with the pleasure more fully rather than unconsciously pulling back from it.

There's often a kind of threshold where the nervous system wants to either fully surrender into the jhanic absorption or it reflexively contracts away from it. This can happen even when we consciously want to go deeper. The contractions you're describing—whether emotional or energetic—might be part of that protective mechanism.

So let's be very specific about the pleasant pīti experiences. When they occur, how long can you sustain them before something shifts? And when they do shift, is it always toward these contractions, or are there other patterns you notice? This mapping will help us understand what's most skillful to work with in those crucial moments when the jhānic factors are gathering strength.

And relative to the times it feels like, well, I'm really not sure I like this, what would you say?

I would say it's 10% incredibly pleasant, like 60% mildly pleasant, and then 30% not sure.

Okay, that's not bad. So I was just wondering about whether you needed to bring in some of those other experiences that you had in some of those other states that you've gone into on the insight retreats and actually let that help. But it doesn't sound like it. It sounds like the PT is fine. It's just sometimes getting into it.

Sometimes you want to be playing with the relationship with the PT. As I said, it looked a little bit like more opening would be the thing. And when I say more opening, you know, these things are really like—we can have words like opening or paying attention, but you're really kind of, like I said, dial it up to 11, you know, if we're talking about opening.

So really, really kind of—what does it mean to kind of maximally open my being and surrender and abandon? And just that relationship with the PT, you're in a different relationship. Everything is a dependent arising, meaning how we experience PT and what it does depends primarily on my relationship with it.

One way of thinking about what we're doing is we're playing with our relationship with the primary nimitta. That's all we're doing. We're playing with our relationship with other things which allow the primary nimitta to arise. Coming into a different relationship with something will shape the perception of that thing.

When we talk about this emptiness, dependent arising, playing with perception, we're talking about playing with the way of relating and noticing that the very experience, appearance, perception of this thing—in this case PT—changes dependent on my relationship.

It's not always the case that there's a formula. Okay, you always need to go into this opening mode. So what we need, again, is this kind of willingness to be responsive, to try this, to try that. Ah, that's better.

Okay, or that begins to—oh no, or that suddenly makes it much better or just gradually makes it better.

But the very sort of willingness to be responsive and really try different relationships. So it might be a lot of the time that it's more of that opening, you know, really, really go into the opening mode. It might be that that's just sometimes and other times it needs something else, you know.

So how does that sound?

Yeah, but we'll still talk later.

Okay, great. Anyone need any help with the hindrances or anything?

Nicole, yeah. Is it okay to take it?

Thank you. I'm thinking of it as a hindrance. I think there's probably different ways to think about what happens, and it happens for me on every retreat. But for this one, it's really turned up, which is that I have a constant conversation, like I'm in an interview with one of you, about the experience as it's happening.

And in some ways, I really like it because it's kind of the way that I'm—oh yeah, you said this, so okay, I'll try that. So in part, it's quite a positive thing because it's a way that I'm experimenting and playing, but it also gets exhausting. There's a kind of neurotic tendency to keep doing that throughout the day.

So I've been, since it's on this retreat, trying to play with it as a kind of restlessness of the mind and open the energy body from the top of the head and see if it can get more space around it and also trying the breathing and the counting in relationship to add more pegs. And I also went on a walk and did a little inquiry around maybe some more psychological reasons why that might be. But it was really insistent.

Okay. And when you say it's a neurotic tendency, does that mean that you feel, for instance—well, one question would I have is, do you feel like the tone of it is quite anxious or for instance, are you saying I'm trying to impress or I'm afraid how they're going to judge me or what's the—I'm just interested in those words, neurotic tendency.

I suppose, just habit of mind.

Yeah. And maybe it's more of a habit.

Yeah, that's my sense.

So this is really, really common, just again, really, really common.

If it was more like, "Oh my gosh, I'm going to have an interview tomorrow with someone and heavens, what will they think?"—if it had that anxious quality—then we would need to unpack things more psychologically. But it sounds like there's sometimes even delight in it, so that's quite different.

If it was more of that worried, anxious type, then we would need to address it differently. But returning to

Ajahn Chah's understanding of vitakka and vicara—this evaluative thought—it may partly be your way of processing and understanding your experience. There's some natural pondering and reflection happening, and that's not necessarily problematic.

So I personally wouldn't be too worried about it. What might help is actually writing down your questions very briefly. By doing that, you're telling the mind, "Look, I've got this handled. You don't need to keep rehearsing it. It's written down, and I'll take it to the interview or wherever it needs to go." That might help—just something simple like that to reassure the mind that it will get dealt with.

In terms of moment-to-moment practice, I really want to emphasize this: we can make so many things into enemies that don't necessarily need to be enemies. If I think meditation is all about stopping thought, then these mental activities will be regarded as enemies. I just wouldn't go there. I don't think it's a problem.

The only concern is when it feels like it's interfering with absorption. So what I want to point out on a moment-to-moment level is this: there's a difference between a thought arising and me being entangled in a thought. There's a difference between noticing "here's a thought going over there" and being dragged along with it, or willingly going along with it.

So if you're not clear on that distinction, that's something to notice. What's the difference between a thought arising and actually being attached to a thought so that we get dragged along with it?

You mentioned that often there's still physical tension while the thinking is happening, and you can focus on that tension. But you have a desire for the mind to be quiet so the physical work can be more prominent. I think this is totally understandable, but in terms of strategy, it's like when one of my teachers started meditating in a building site. I'm sure he had the desire that those demolition machines and all the construction noise weren't there, but that was just the reality. It had to be in the background.

Imagine we were sitting here and there was a radio playing. It's there. Or we're having a conversation with a radio in the background—we just deal with it. We don't have to get into this battle. If I get into too much desire of "I wish that would just shut up," then actually my attention is going over there in a very unhelpful way.

So if I can come into a relationship where it's simply "okay, it's just there"—like background radio—there may well be some useful material in it about processing the day or remembering things I need to handle. But you can take care of that practical aspect by making notes. And moment to moment, if you're working toward more absorption, just aim at what's most prominent and get more deeply into that.

The other piece to remember is what I said about "drifting"—it's a subtle manifestation of restlessness. One way it often manifests is that the mind has more thought and tends to follow those thoughts more readily. Sometimes that drifting comes from too much effort. Just a little bit too much effort can actually stimulate more thinking and encourage the mind to follow those thoughts.

So this could also be an effort issue. And if I get into too much desire for the thoughts to go away so I can absorb more deeply, that can add to the over-effort. The usual pattern is: there's more thought, so I need to try harder. That may be the case sometimes, but it may be exactly the opposite. When there are more of these mental threads unreeling, what I actually need to do is back off more, go into a softer mode, become more receptive.

So it could well be related to effort levels as well. And you mentioned you're also working with over-effort and finding the retreat tiring, and that you get most annoyed with the mental voice when you're tired. That makes perfect sense, and it's something for everyone to note.

This is hard work. Sometimes it feels completely effortless and wonderful, but much of the time it's going to feel like hard work for many different reasons and in many different ways. It might be that just a little too much effort accumulates to become very tiring after a while.

But as I said, it's not like, "When will this effort question go away so I can get into the real stuff?" That *is* part of the real stuff. It's not going to end. It will actually just become subtler and subtler, this effort question. So we really have to get our view right about that as well.

It sounds like not that you need to stop meditating and go for walks, but much more a question of subtle effort and learning to back off—which may be more about this opening, receptive mode.

Let me share a note I received last night. Someone wrote:

"I just wanted to share some practice. As I was listening to your talk yesterday, I kept noticing some contraction and dukkha in the energy body. Finally, as you moved into the Q&A, I decided to see if I could untangle or smooth out whatever was going on. Just a little reflection on emptiness and some long breaths opened up a beautiful, peaceful tranquility. It was time for tea, but I continued to sit till my bladder suggested it was really time to go.

I was inspired by what you said about carrying the jhana around, so I thought, why don't I try that now? I made it all the way to the loo, and after that, through tea, fairly slowly, and into the lounge. I kept working, playing and reestablishing the jhana—or perhaps more accurately, the connection to the sense of tranquility. It was so easy!

I've really had a view of not being able to carry this kind of mindfulness concentration outside of the sittings very well. And it has been a source of some measuring and self-judgment. I felt some of this heal tonight."

This is such a beautiful example of skillful working with something that was initially a contraction and then quite easily—this thing about quantum shifts—turned into something lovely. And there's this long-term view of being inadequate or measuring oneself as "not doing it right," and then suddenly something opens up and it's like, "Oh, actually this is possible for me. I can do this."

The content could have been different, but in terms of that general pattern, it's so important not to believe "I can't do this. I'm like this. I'm not built for this." In time, confidence comes. This confidence is really important.

There was something else—Boaz asked yesterday about *ekagata*, and I felt I could have said something more about that word. It's usually translated as "one-pointedness," which I said was a good translation. It's just that in English, most people thinking of "one-pointedness" would think of one narrow spatial point. The better, though clumsy-sounding translation would be "with one thing prominent."

Boaz asked why this is a significant factor in the jhanas. In the Abhidhamma, in Theravada Buddhist psychology—maybe in the Mahayana as well—they would say every moment of mind has something that's prominent in it. The difference in the jhanas is that a jhanic state continues. It's moment after moment after moment.

Jhana is related to the Pali word *jayati*, which means "to burn." People say jhana is like a candle burning steadily, or that jhana will burn up your defilements. But the point is it's something continuous. This *ekaga ta*—what makes it characteristic of jhana is that moment after moment, the same thing is prominent. There's a kind of temporal extension of what's prominent.

Yes, it's spelled E-K-A-G-G-A-T-A. In the first edition of my book, I completely mistranslated it, so I changed it in the second edition because I had missed the double G. I translated *ekagata* as "gone to oneness," like unified, but that's wrong. It's actually "due to one," one prominence.

Okay. Anything else? Yes—who's that there?

I'm noticing that I keep falling into some—I don't know if it's a jhana or not, but I find this very tiring and very intense. I feel I can't stop it. Right now I was kind of going... It's like a pulling. I get pulled into some states. I don't really know.

Yes, okay. So as we've been saying, that sort of thing can be quite normal. We can get pulled into a hindrance, we can get pulled into a jhana, we can get pulled into some other state that's more familiar because of our meditation habits.

Again, I would probably say come to a one-on-one and we'll really try to identify what those states are, because that identification will help guide us in terms of how you need to move from there. Sometimes it's not a bad thing—it's just, okay, now we're here a lot. How do we move from here? Other times it's like, okay, we need to help it not go there, in which case we need to try different approaches. But we need to probably hear more about what those states actually are.

This sounds quite helpful—to know what it is and then proceed accordingly.

Yes. So bring it to a one-on-one interview and we can really hear more about it—or them, if there's more than one—and get a sense of what it is. That will guide us in terms of how to respond. But that sort of

thing is very normal.

Thank you.

Good. I think... Oh yes, I already said it, but just to reiterate—if the pīti is really strong and feels very sexual, like an orgasm, it's really, really completely okay. Just enjoy it. Really get into it.

You see what Robert's going to bring to the retreat.

No, it's really important because we have this feeling of "this can't be right," or we feel like, "Am I maybe emanating some kind of weird sexual energy into the hall that's going to pollute the pure, pristine atmosphere of renunciate celibacy?" It's completely not an issue. It's just a manifestation of pīti. Open to it. Enjoy it. The same approach applies. There's absolutely no shame in it. It's something to open to and get into. It's doing good stuff. It's really good.

I can't see who that is. Did Danny have a question? Okay, Sabra, please.

Just a clarifying question. I feel like I remember hearing you warn about elation, and I'm wondering about the difference between elation and excitement and happiness and sukha.

Yes, thank you. The difference between elation, excitement, happiness, and sukha. I don't know—for elation, I'd have to look up the original Pali and see what that refers to.

The Buddha was addressing a small group of highly advanced meditators who were working on psychic power meditation. One of their practices involved what we might call clairvoyance - a kind of seeing far away that occurs within meditation. And the Buddha noted that one of the subtle hindrances they encountered was getting excited about their ability to do this, or about what was opening up, or about entering new territory, or about what they were seeing.

I don't have the Pali term at hand and would need to look it up, but my sense is that what was being cautioned against is something closest to excitement. Excitement is quite fascinating in this regard. When there's too much excitement, it can lead to that snatching quality we've discussed. It also creates a certain agitation that disturbs the serenity necessary for these kinds of practices. For developing psychic powers and similar capacities, the mind needs to be extraordinarily still - super, super still. Any kind of excitement will make the waters turbulent and become a hindrance.

But excitement itself is quite interesting - it's almost like an energy. This brings us back to what I was saying earlier with Jason about how sometimes people come to me saying they have fear about this or that, and I find myself wondering whether what they're experiencing is actually fear or excitement. Often it turns out to be excitement, but the mind is relating to it in a particular way and labeling it such that it becomes an experience of fear. At its root - though that's not quite the right word - it's more naturally excitement. They need to learn to play with their relationship to this energy so it can become excitement again. And excitement can be energizing, empowering, galvanizing - it can give you courage.

But excitement can also wobble in different ways. An excited energy might become bubbly happiness or pīti. All these states are quite close to one another. The different modes of relating to something like excitement will shape the very perception of it, transforming it into something else through dependent arising.

Excitement and pīti, for example, are very close. There have probably been times in the tradition of translating Pali to English when pīti has been translated as excitement. They're intimately related. Part of the experience of the first jhāna, especially initially, is excitement - it's tremendously exciting for many reasons, both because of its energetics and because of the sense of "Wow, look what's happening!"

The key point is that we can come into different relationships with the energy of excitement, and because of dependent arising - because everything depends on the way of looking, because there's no independent appearance of anything - this can actually shape the experience. The energy itself is open to malleability. You can shape it toward pīti, perhaps even toward sukha.

I usually translate sukha as happiness, though I'm not sure what Karen had in mind yesterday when she asked about this. "Happiness" seems to me the closest English word to encompass sukha's territory. Looking back at English translations over the past thirty years, there have been all kinds of different renderings of both pīti and sukha. Some translations even reverse what each means, which I find baffling. I think as time has gone on, the translations have become more consistent.

But you'll notice that when the third jhāna opens, the kind of happiness characteristic of that state is still technically sukha, though most people will never have experienced that particular quality of happiness. It's supremely serene and feels almost otherworldly in its flavor and texture. I use the word "happiness" simply because it seems the broadest, most stretchable English term to cover sukha's different ranges.

"So that was actually helpful," someone responded, "because I've been experiencing a lot of that kind of excitement today - getting in the way of my clairvoyance!" They continued: "You mentioned that we need to train attention at each level of subtlety. I'm really noticing that with a lot of pīti comes a particular kind of papañca - very inspired ideas that seem really great, and I think they are, but they're a distraction from the practice."

When our base practice is metta and we encounter shifts toward greater subtlety, the habitual ways of practicing loving-kindness often no longer work in generating the qualities we associate with metta. This becomes an alive avenue of exploration: how do we practice metta at this level of subtlety? There may be moments of success, but sustained understanding—that sense of "I've got this now"—remains elusive.

Instead, there's often an abundance of piti, but it manifests as energy rather than the familiar warmth of loving-kindness. Sometimes this energy becomes more blissful, but it doesn't feel like metta. This raises a crucial question: if the traditional approach feels like trying to squeeze something that won't respond—like using a gross practice at a subtle level—should we abandon metta altogether and simply go

with the piti?

Everything changes as practice deepens. Things naturally become more subtle, and we must learn to work with these different levels of refinement. Even on a dedicated metta retreat, we would expect this progression toward subtlety, requiring constant adaptation in our approach.

When abundant piti arises in the context of metta practice aimed at jhana, we have several choices. First, we can let the metta intention go entirely. If the piti is strong enough—definitely pleasant and stable, present for several minutes without disappearing—we can work with the piti directly and set aside the metta. The piti becomes the principal object.

The second possibility, more appropriate for a metta-focused retreat rather than a jhana retreat, involves allowing the piti itself to become the metta. The lovely sensations we're experiencing become what we want to share: "I'm feeling something beautiful here, and I want you to have some too." We radiate this energy outward while bathing in it ourselves—there's no scarcity when we're already immersed in piti.

The piti becomes the very flavor of metta. This is what we imagine radiating out. On a long metta retreat, everyone would eventually experience piti, sukha, and the rest of the jhanic factors. The practice adapts: "This is the flavor of metta right now, so this is what I'm sharing."

To radiate these qualities effectively, we must still feel them fully. Rather than mechanically reciting phrases, we recognize: "This is the flavor I want to share with you." Whether it's the energetic joy of piti or the subtle happiness of third jhana sukha, we feel our energy body radiating this quality from every pore, from the entire energy space. We can visualize it emanating from our hands, learning to integrate metta, piti, and bodily experience.

Sometimes we maintain the metta intention while working with piti; other times we simply surrender to the piti itself. The choice depends on our primary intention.

However, when the issue isn't abundant piti but rather subtle manifestations of metta that we don't know how to work with—when we can't conjure traditional loving-kindness and experience only general well-being without recognizable metta qualities—the guidance shifts. Interestingly, this same practitioner might find that informal moments, like holding a door open for someone, deeply touch the heart, even when formal practice feels disconnected from metta.

This points to the crucial role of intention. On a jhana retreat, if there's well-being present but not recognizable metta, we work with the well-being. The absence of traditional metta isn't problematic because our intention is to develop jhanic states. If this were a metta retreat, we would focus on rekindling loving-kindness. But remembering our primary intention—what we established on the opening day—guides our choices and prevents unnecessary struggle with practices that don't align with our current developmental phase.

It makes so much difference. Even a subtle bifurcating or shift in the emphasis of attention—"I'm worried about my metta now"—don't worry about your metta. You have plenty of metta. You can worry about that on a metta retreat, about developing that more and more. But first, it's not something to worry about for you, and second, it's not something to worry about on this retreat. So it's the well-being, and you can let that be more primary.

Does that answer the question? What about the subtlety business? I think you spoke to it.

In terms of the first thing, where there's pīti, there's often excitement and often all kinds of creative ideas about projects that I'm going to do and such. Sometimes there's even more than that—there's actual... I don't know what you'd call it—creative energy, not just the idea to do something, but actual poetry or music arising.

Second jhāna, for some people, even more. It's almost like this spring that the Buddha talked about can be a spring of inspiration and creativity. You can kind of plug into something. In a way, well, any of the first four at least, but this is a big deal.

Again, I hesitated to even say what I just said, but really my invitation and hope and wish to stress: we're on a jhāna retreat. At some point in your life, when you've developed a bit more of this jhāna business, you might decide to take a retreat where you actually meditate for a bit, get in touch with that inspiration, write whatever is coming—poetry, whatever it is—go back to the meditation, do that, and actually do that. That's great. Doing that now will kind of pretty much abort your progress in jhānas.

My real hope is that you'll all keep the intention. Like that's why I'm here. That's what I'm hoping to serve and support. But you can, you know, if you get into this, there's no reason why you can't have another retreat at another time. You go somewhere and for a week or whatever it is, you're playing with that. But that's your intention. And then that's clear.

Here, if you really want these treasures to open up, you have to... it's what I said in the opening talk. There's something very, very powerful, much more powerful than we realize, about keeping the intention really clear and kind of single and steady. And you say metta's a great intention. Even creative—I don't know what it is—but creativity, they're all great intentions. But too many great intentions pulling in too many directions, you'll end up with not so much.

It connects to what you said, which I found really galvanizing, around this kind of soul—like gathering of soul power. Exactly. There's a lot of power in that gathering.

Let me just see... do I have anything else? No, I think that's okay.

So why don't we just have a few quiet moments together. Thank you all. Time for tea, and see you soon.

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