Q & A, and Short Talk

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:10:23

Okay, so time again if there are any questions that feel relevant to your practice or to anything that's been said about the framework, or anything about the detail that we've covered.

I have maybe just a few things I'd like to throw in as well, but why don't we start with some questions?

Andy, yes. Why don't we use the mic, then it's easier.

*Andy:** This was a question, Rob, about the difference or the similarity and the contrast between tuning in to the nimitta or the qualities of the jhana, which feels to me like quite proby and sort of—you know, it's almost like keyhole surgery. It's almost like getting into the quality amid all the other stuff around it.

But also finding the need for something more expansive. I've been trying to play with it, almost conceiving it as listening to those qualities rather than probing in—a listening, a tuning. I think you said something about trying to hear a noise, a faint noise amid lots of other noise. Because it feels like I need to open more, and yet the very active kind of fine-tuning feels the opposite of that.

Thank you. So are you talking in particular about this space of peacefulness that opened for you?

*Andy:** No, but with the first jhana as well. Actually, probably more with the peacefulness.

More with the peacefulness. Okay, good.

It's both, you know. Sometimes the probing is a concentration thing, literally like how much attention can there be in a small amount of area? But then there's also the probing with the sense of, can I really get the sense of this?

And then with the opening, there's also, as you say—I don't quite know what would be the best analogy—that thing I said about listening for a sound, where there are lots of sounds and there's just some particular sound I'm listening to. Maybe that's a quality. You're actually not scrunching anything up. You're sort of opening more. It's like your antennae are just becoming more sensitive within that openness.

So yes, those two modes will be important and you can play between them.

What happens sometimes with the peacefulness is—I'll get into this when we talk more about the peacefulness—sometimes there's a very large peacefulness, actually, and it's even larger than the energy body size. Depending on where you are, we want to spend more or less time in that. But at the beginning

of the peacefulness, it's probably more an energy body size, but you can still open up the attention wide.

It's really like, almost like imagine it's a kind of realm. It's a large realm where you're almost listening to the music of the realm. So there's very subtle, exquisite, quiet music there. This is a metaphor, yes. And that's more open and the whole thing can feel more open.

Other times you can, just as with the first jhana, pick a place where it seems strongest and you kind of burrow into it, probe into it.

But sometimes what else can happen is—and it might be after you've just lost it for a bit, or it might be as you're getting into it more—there's almost like a filament of something, a filament of that peacefulness. So spatially, it's relatively—you don't know where you're going to find it in the energy body space, but it can tend to be more lower down in the body. It's a kind of filament, like some kind of organism that has these filament-like things. An anemone? Do they have them? That sort of thing. But it's physical.

The other thing to add here—and we'll get to it more when we talk about the third jhana—sometimes you're talking about a point in space that you're probing more. Sometimes you're more open.

Sometimes you're more tuning into the mental quality of peacefulness, and sometimes you're more tuning into the physical quality of peacefulness. Ideally, we want those two to blend. But what it means at any time in your responsive play and working is: what do I pick up here? If in doubt, pick up the physical one first.

And so that might feel like it's just a filament. It might be located—oh, it's located in my belly button or my kidney or whatever it is. But more likely it's just a sort of place in space, a region in space. And there's this kind of filament of that exquisite peacefulness. And that's what you're going with. So there's that as well.

The other metaphor I want to add is tuning the receiver. If we think about tuning a radio receiver, we're thinking about the wavelength changing—lower frequencies, higher frequencies. What you're doing in each jhana is tuning to a particular frequency as much as you're probing a certain point in space. Probing a certain point in space is very helpful, but that's not really what you're doing. You're really tuning to a certain frequency.

If probing a certain point in space or opening up wide space or working with a filament or whatever helps you lock in and get a sense of that frequency that's particular to that jhana—or that bandwidth of frequencies—then that's all good. But in a way, the primary thing you're doing is focusing on a certain frequency. As I said, the jhanas themselves are more and more refined.

So one of the things I forgot to ask you yesterday is: is this state of peacefulness more refined—let's use the word refined—than the second and the first jhanas?

"Oh, yes. Yeah, definitely."

Because that's also a signal. If you say, "Well, I'm not sure," then I wouldn't be so sure that you've moved into a deeper state. It might be peaceful, it might be very nice, but one of the real markers—apart from the other questions I asked you, maybe some others I can't think of right now—is the shift in refinement. And as you shift in refinement, then you have to get skilled at tuning your receiver and holding there. How that happens might be through the probing, might be through the open space with the antennae up, might be through the sense of filament. You can play with all of that.

"That's really helpful. I think the tuning is so helpful. It's completely shifted my thinking about this whole practice, just this tuning of the dial. But it seems like when there's tuning, or at least I'm finding it difficult then to also incorporate the enjoyment. I'm tuning and then I'm like, oh no wait, actually remember to enjoy it as well. Any recommendations about how to make sure the enjoyment is there with the tuning?"

Well, if we turn it around and say maximize the enjoyment—that's the most important thing, the 'E' on the end of SASSIE—then you will inevitably find that getting your tuning right is part of maximizing the enjoyment. So it might be just reversing the intentionality.

I do think that so many people obviously think of jhana and samadhi as "I'm focusing on one point and it's a spatial point." Even if they don't think that consciously, that's what it becomes. But that's a very limited and actually limiting way of understanding what's happening. So I would rather go with this frequency thing. But in terms of intention, you can reverse that.

So just: I'm here with this thing. It's like I'm listening to a radio program and I really want to enjoy it—what is that music or whatever it is? I love it. Then I'm going to want to play with that dial just because I love it. I'm just following my enjoyment.

It's just part of like, well, I can play with the volume. I can shut my door so I don't hear my siblings arguing or whatever it is. But that's going to be just organically part of me being into it. Do you see what I mean?

So it might be part of it as just a kind of subtle reordering of the hierarchy of intention at any point. Like I said, sometimes I feel that all you need to do is trust this kind of wish to enjoy things to the max and really let that lead sometimes.

But let's see if there's anything else. It might be related to something I said earlier—the sense of tuning to the refinement might be helped at different times by tuning in more to the physical and, in inverted commas, the energy body frequency of that refinement, and sometimes more to the mental. But that shift might also help incorporate—literally incorporate—the enjoyment more. Does that make sense?

Julia, I have a question about using insight ways of looking in jhana practice. So I've been using them as a base practice and noticing that there's some anxiety about how indiscriminately or discriminately I'm using them, like remembering that part of the instruction with them in emptiness practice is to use them for everything—whether something is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. But then some worry about using them to look at well-being, for example, like that will prevent piti from fabricating.

So part of what I've been playing with is just sort of using them indiscriminately for a little while, and then once a sense of well-being starts to open up, using them more discriminately. Like, I found using anatta can help relax some clinging around the well-being that's coming. But if you have any thoughts...

Yeah, really important question. Thank you. So it's a bit like—what's it a bit like? It's a bit like going down a water slide, you know, one of those theme park things. But imagine this water slide at certain points all the way down has turnings off it. So it goes, but every once in a while it has a turning off to the left, a turning off to the right. And you can just kind of veer, if you want, hopefully without slamming—it's not a great analogy. But you get the idea. It's got padded sides.

So what that means is, yeah, if you use it indiscriminately at first—everything that comes up, you said anatta—let's say we're taking that as anatta, anatta, whatever comes up. Once some well-being comes up, then if you keep—let's say if I just started with back pain, so I just did anatta, anatta, anatta to everything, including the back pain. What would eventually happen was the pain would attenuate, the body sense would start to dissolve, and at some point pleasure of some kind would come up. Let's say it was piti.

So at that point I've got—okay, I'm sliding down this thing, it's great, and I've got a right turn there that I can lean into, which means once the piti has built enough, I can then stop doing insight practice and just subtly or gently—let's put it gently—but completely switch what I'm doing to now I just want to enjoy that particular thing, which is the piti.

If the piti comes up—okay, back pain's gone to neutral, and then piti's come up, and then the body's dissolving, and then I say, okay, piti, and I keep doing anatta on piti, it will go beyond it. Have you found that already? Is that what's happening? Or you're worried that it might happen?

That's what I'm worried about. And so I find that I'm not even using it to look at the piti to begin—like as soon as something in the realm of pleasurable comes up, I just stop and then sort of things shut down.

Okay. So you need to find a kind of middle ground between being—you know, as the Buddha says, don't snatch at it. Okay. So that's really important. But you can also kind of relax.

Don't worry about exactly where you land. You might overshoot and find yourself in some other jhana, and that's perfectly fine. Either you can work backwards from there—and we can talk about how to do that—or you can hang out there for a while, get really comfortable with that state, and then work backwards. Or that deeper state can simply become your primary playground.

The important thing first is to feel confident that you can do this, to gain that sense of wellbeing where at some point you can steer your body into this beautiful state and just enjoy it. You make that shift. Exactly where it lands initially—don't worry about it. First, cultivate that confidence. That's really crucial.

Then we can map it out more precisely. We can see where you're actually landing. Maybe it turns out to be the fourth jhana, for example. Well then, let's learn the fourth jhana before we learn the first. This is

what I mentioned about people who've done different practices.

I realize now we have a room full of practitioners with extensive experience, especially in insight practice. Things won't necessarily evolve for everyone in the traditional order of one, two, three, four. It may or it may not.

But once the piti has arisen, don't snatch at it. You may also find that piti is arising while you're doing anatta practice on something else entirely. That's another option. I wouldn't recommend doing anatta on the piti itself so much. As I mentioned, if you stay with those insight practices, they'll take you all the way into the formless realms, and that will probably be disorienting for right now.

How does that sound? I'm not giving exact step-by-step instructions here, but I think the most important thing is not to worry too much about precise placement.

"That's what I wanted to hear."

Good, that's really important.

"I'd like to ask about subtle hindrances—hindrances that seem to be somehow coupled with increasing subtlety. I was practicing the second jhana, doing the same thing I mentioned yesterday about really absorbing into it and trying to keep up with the subtlety of attention when the sukha gets really refined. What I've been noticing repeatedly is that after a certain point, when it gets really subtle, especially when it starts to lean more toward peacefulness and the third jhana, my attention somehow... there arises a bit of micro-level sloth and torpor, some micro-level tiredness. When it gets really subtle and moves toward that peacefulness, I just get tired somehow and lose my focus, and it falls apart. Then I have to reverse, come back. I might get some energy from increasing the sukha or increasing the piti, and then again I go back to that level of very subtle attention, subtle nimitta, but then it falls into this tiredness. How could one work with this?"

As I'm listening, Mikhail, I'm wondering if you could consider two things. One is maximizing the enjoyment rather than maximizing the concentration or even worrying about the subtlety—although we talked about that yesterday. The other thing, mixed with that, is: could you keep it longer at a more bubbly level of happiness? Which technically is just happiness with more piti mixed into it.

Let it stay there much longer with the intention and attitude to really enjoy it, rather than thinking "now I'm refining my concentration, now I'm going deeper into absorption." These are all important factors, but it might be that what's happening—given your background and practice habits—is that the absorption and concentration are deepening faster than the enjoyment is deepening.

I find the Buddha's images so accurate in so many ways. His similes are remarkable. It's like really drinking that water from the spring. Really, truly delight in it. Because that's doing something important as well. It's giving you energy, but it's also transforming the way the state then moves deeper.

It can go deeper through this increasing subtlety, as you described, but sometimes it gets too subtle and we're not able to follow it. Sometimes that's simply not quite the right movement that needs to happen.

I'm going to talk about the second jhana tomorrow, but this is actually quite key. What's the most significant aspect of the second jhana? One might be tempted to say it's where thinking stops—the Buddha says that's where thought ceases. That's certainly a very significant threshold in terms of deepening concentration.

I'm going to come back to that. It's not as simple as we might think what that means. It is important, but I would say in the grand scheme of things, what's much more important is the happiness. Bathing in the happiness is doing something to the being. Knowing these different bandwidths of happiness is doing something to the being, marinating over and over again in that happiness, drinking your fill of happiness, is in the long term, in terms of its relation to insight, in terms of its work that it's doing, in terms of your capacity to let go, in terms of how it's opening the heart, in terms of what it's teaching you eventually about perception and malleability perception, emptiness, dependent arising. That's the key thing.

So yes, what's the work that needs to happen in this moment? That's a sort of very subtle question that's going on for any meditator in not every moment, but a lot of moments. And I can, one can say, oh, I really need to focus more. I really need to let it subtilize, you know, drop down with the subtlety and corresponding subtlety of mind. I want to be absorbed more. These are all valid choices at any time.

But it might be that just delighting in the happiness is actually much more significant. And as I said, it will probably deliver you to a slightly different place or a very different place. Even in terms of the third jhāna when we get to it, it's not... In a way, you can divide the third jhāna into three and all those levels are important. But going with the happiness more and really, really enjoying it might help steer you a little bit better.

Does this make sense?

Yes, indeed. To do that, it sounds like you already know, but just to add, I want to keep the happiness relatively gross. It's a little bit the opposite of the instructions I gave you yesterday. You can play between the two. Sometimes just keep the happiness more gross. How do we do that? It's part of this tuning. It's part of just an intention to keep it. I want to keep it in this ballpark, in this bandwidth.

But it's also, sometimes what you can do, it sounds like you already are doing it, is just mix a bit more pīti in if it gets too subtle, or rather if it gets too calm. If the happiness starts to get too serene, you just mix a bit more pīti in with it.

Eventually all these different bandwidths of the different genres become just accessible without having to do any tricks. You just kind of remember back to this and that level within it. But how does that sound?

Yeah, it sounds very good and you have been describing some of my experiences already and just wanted

to add that I just realized that many times my second jhāna works better when I'm doing it in walking meditation. So it keeps on a grosser level just because of the movement of the body and coordination.

So that's great. And eventually what we want is that it's not so influenced by posture, walking, sitting, standing, but by intention and this kind of steering. It's all part of the responsiveness and creativity that we're talking about. And you can do it by just a little bit more, a little bit more pīti in there.

I have a couple of questions. Let's start with the first. I've been working on the first jhāna for a few days, and then it felt like I reached your mastery definition, and I moved on. But I kind of wonder whether it might have been too fast because it feels like the access to all these different aspects of mastery is very dependent on the fact that I do it all the time. And what I would really like to do is to be able to practice jhānas back home on a daily practice, you know, just one hour a day or two, and with all the noise of daily life in the background. So I kind of wonder...

Yeah, probably, you know, access to jhānas is dependent on a million conditions, a lot of different conditions. Off retreat, on retreat, there'll be lots of different conditions which allow that each day, each sitting, you know. But one of them is just how familiar it all is, you know, how familiar that pīti is. So a lot of those aspects of mastery are just dependent on being so repeatedly soaked in something that it's just easy to summon it and etc.

So it might be, yeah, longer. Then how would, you know, just like spend more time with what already feels like familiar and stable work? It might be, but it still might be that you might have, because we talked about you having two or even three playgrounds. So that increasing familiarity, let's say, with the first jhāna might happen in parallel at the same time, in other words, on this retreat with the second and the third, you know, and you're just developing more and more of them like that together, right? In other words, you're still getting familiarity with the first, but you're still developing familiarity with the second as well.

I don't know. At a certain point, as I'll perhaps mention tomorrow, what will happen is it becomes almost a little difficult to stay in the first jhana. As Andy was saying, the mind so much wants to slide forward. It's almost got its own agenda and its own wisdom.

So it's a tricky question, but there's no reason why you can't just continue for a while with three jhanas and move between them. It doesn't have to be rigid—the next three days I'll spend in one, the next three days after that in another. It could simply be: today I'll practice all three, tomorrow I'll practice all three, and the day after I'll practice all three.

As to what happens in your daily life, it's hard to predict because a lot depends on circumstances. Go back to the Buddha's description of the first jhana—it's dependent on seclusion, dependent on withdrawal. But not withdrawal from people and things; rather, withdrawal from entanglement, seclusion from the hindrances.

Of course, sometimes in our daily life we're just entangled in stuff—relational difficulties, work pressures, this stress, that pressure—and the mind is actually more entangled. Then it's harder to withdraw internally from those pressures. Health issues and all kinds of things affect what actually happens. So it's really hard to predict.

My intuitive hunch is: why don't you let yourself just have three jhanas for now? Let them develop in parallel. So your day is moving between those three as best you can, maybe roughly equally though it doesn't have to be. This day might lean more toward one, that day more toward another. Just trust in all of that—it will bear fruit in different ways.

It's probably the case that whatever you can access regularly on a long retreat is further along than what most people can access in their daily life, but there's so much individual variation in this. So that's my intuitive sense. Does that sound okay?

"Can I ask one more thing?"

"Of course."

"So with the first jhana, it was very different than when I practiced it previously, in the ways you mentioned—less intense and all that. But it was also just less wonderful in a way. The first time I practiced it, about a year ago, it was really deeply affecting my whole being, very impressive, and produced a lot of faith in the Dharma. Now it's as if some parts of the psyche just aren't interested anymore. They don't get involved. It's not like the body is suffused with pīti, and even though consciousness can be full of the jhana, some parts seem to... So I wonder: is it important, and can I convince them to join again? Or should I just say okay, never mind, now they're in the second and third jhana? And will this happen with each of them?"

It's very normal—I think I mentioned this—to become much less interested in the first jhana after you've tasted particularly the third. It's very, very normal, and you can go through a period like this.

One thing to consider is taking a larger view: I'm really wanting all eight jhanas. It does get less intense over time, becoming more mellow, and that's partly due to opening to the third jhana and these more peaceful realms. So that's all normal.

Again, if you think in terms of direction rather than trying to achieve a certain amount of full involvement... Just think: here I am now, practicing the first jhana. Maybe it's a little less engaged than when I practice the second and third jhana. But when I go there, part of my intention is: can I find this really lovely? Can I actually get into it?

Rather than asking "am I or am I not," it's more a direction. Is it possible to find more engagement, more delight? Without the sense of "did I pass or fail that test?" It's a subtle difference—it's a direction of exploration rather than evaluation.

Does that make sense? I don't think it's about whether you pass or fail—it feels like some areas are just off-limits, not interested in this. Yeah, but your task is simply to give yourself to it more, to open to it more.

It may be that when you've had more to drink from the third jhana and perhaps deeper jhanas, your relationship with the first jhana becomes recontextualized. When it first comes, there's nothing else—just normal consciousness or papañca, and the first jhana. It's completely the most amazing thing, a signal to the being that entirely other states of consciousness are possible. Often it makes a dramatic impression.

As you progress, it takes its place in a much larger jigsaw puzzle or mandala of the eight jhanas. You still have a sense that this is really valuable. Part of your task is to find, within that larger context, "Can I really discover the enjoyment here?" You're working in that direction, though it probably won't be as dramatic as it was the first time. But that's okay, because it's just one part of a much bigger picture.

"Does the same thing happen to the other jhanas as well, or is it just the first because of the third?"

In a way it does, though there might be something particular about our relationship with the first jhana. You'll have to find out. I think once you've done more and have a whole context, you really start to—it's almost like having that context takes the pressure off, you know, removes the need for it to be a certain way.

Does that make sense, what I'm saying about context? It's like having a larger context just takes the pressure off. I also think if you spend more time in the third, the quality of the rapture becomes delicious in a different way. You have to discover, "Oh, it's a different taste than I was originally used to." And then, "Oh, that's actually really nice."

"Yes. Sometimes the samadhi is quite dry, actually. I recognize myself in what you're saying about people who've been on traditional insight retreats. For me, it's quite spacious, a lot of equanimity usually, but quite dry—no big deal, no big clashes. The energy body is quite light but not really pleasant, more like neutral. I've tried different things, like warming the whole thing up with metta, trying to find pleasure, but sometimes there is no pleasure. So, any advice?"

This is really important. This is why I said the movement to equanimity, or the tendency to find oneself in a sort of equanimous space, will be quite common for people who've done a lot of insight practice. The question for our purposes here is whether that equanimity is close to a jhanic equanimity—there are different kinds of jhanic equanimity, very big ones or smaller ones with the energy body—or whether it's just equanimity and not really close to jhana.

What you're describing doesn't sound like it's very close to jhanic equanimity. It's still a skillful state, much better than being in papañca, but not really close to jhanic equanimity. For some people, what they're describing develops into something like the fourth jhana as they work their way into it. But from what you're describing, it's not that close.

Rather than trying to go there first and convert that to a fourth jhana, try from the beginning to think more about pīti and sukha. What will ignite that? Are there ways that pīti and happiness can arise? If I asked you what would bring up pīti and happiness, what would you say?

In other words, not letting yourself go to that state, but cultivating something else from the beginning that would...

I mean, in the big picture, I'm moving between the third and second jhana quite easily throughout the day. It's not happening all the time, this dry samadhi thing.

Okay.

But it does occur.

Okay.

So I can just come back to the first...

I mean, I'm a bit snobby about the first jhana now, I have to say. I go easily to the second one. I really love to explore the different subtleties of this jhana, so I really love that one. It became sort of my base.

The second?

Yeah, the second one.

Good.

Yeah, good.

Okay, so it's only going to this equanimity place that's not very jhanic sometimes.

Yes.

Yeah, okay. When it goes there, bring it back. In other words, at the moment, it's not ripe enough. The others are not ripe enough to turn that into a jhanic state at the moment. You need more time in the happiness and the equanimity. As I said, it's not quite the same as Mikhail's question, but somewhat related. Then they will deliver you to a different kind of equanimity that's much closer to a jhana.

So when it goes there... Like I said, relatively speaking, it's a pretty skillful place to hang out. But it doesn't really sound like it's got in it what will, at the moment, allow it to blossom into an actually jhanic equanimity of any kind, really.

So when it goes there, fine, just see: "Oh, it's done that again," and do something to bring back—if you can summon it just by itself—the happiness or the peacefulness of the third. Great. Just go back. If you can't, then ask: "How am I going to get back?" If I can remember it, if I can add a happy thought, if I can just

have a subtle intention, if I need to go back to the base practice, or whatever.

Yeah.

But I wouldn't hang out in that at the moment. I wouldn't hang out in that kind of equanimity too much.

Yeah.

So you're liking the second and third, and you just need more time there. It really works on the being gradually, you know, and it prepares something to ripen in its time. So this space that you're in now is more a result of your other practice rather than the jhana practice. Does that make sense?

Yes.

Yeah.

Okay. Great.

So is that Lauren?

Yes, please.

So I felt your suggestions yesterday were helpful, and I've today been able to work a little with piti—well, a lot with piti—and two questions about it that are coming up today, but also in the past when I've worked with piti.

The first one is related to some of these questions around enjoyment. Sometimes, especially if I'm working with the breath energy, there'll be a lot of pleasure. But if I let the breath go and bring the attention to what are like sensations of tingling and sort of an effervescence in the body—like compression, expansion—the energy body feels like it's harmonized, but there's not a lot of pleasure in it.

So that's one question.

And then the other one is that sometimes when that harmonized energy body coalesces even more, or there's a deepening of the samadhi, there'll be actually pretty frequently an immediate response where my mind will immediately pull back and be like, "No, don't go in there."

So yeah, those are two questions. Sorry, I'm struggling a little bit today with the medication and things.

So the first one, I just want to make sure I understand. You're working with the breath and the energy body, and piti arises. But when you switch to the piti, you find it's not really strong enough to work with. Is that correct?

Well, the pleasure.

Yeah.

So maybe there's a lot of sensation in the body...

There's a lot of tingling throughout the whole body, but it's not necessarily pleasurable—it's just kind of odd.

This is quite interesting. It might be that you need to spend more time working with the breath. You're working with the breath and energy body as your principal practice, yes? It might be you just need more time with the breath and energy body to allow that tingling to become clearly pleasant.

Or it might be that actually you turn your attention to the tingling and find that whether you perceive it as pleasant or unpleasant—I mentioned this briefly the other day—is actually something you can play with. You can just decide to see it as pleasant. It may be that that's the case.

It's a bit like when we talked about excitement. Sometimes it's kind of on a fence and you can flip it either way. It's just odd, or it's a bit unpleasant, or it's pleasant. And you can learn to play with the perception that way. Then it's like, okay, that's what I'm doing again and again until it is established in a kind of flow of pleasantness.

I would try both approaches: playing with perception—just decide to see it as pleasant—and also staying a little longer, or maybe even a lot longer, with the practice. Let the tingling build up and see if it transforms by itself.

And the second question was about when the samadhi starts to deepen, the mind pulls back from the felt sensations of the deepening or the experience of the samadhi.

What might be interesting is to get a little more specific. Is it fear arising at that point? If so, what exactly are you afraid of at that moment? Because samadhi deepening involves a whole bunch of different things happening, a whole bunch of interwoven aspects. So what exactly is it that you're afraid of? Do you have a sense?

That's a good question. You might not know now, so that would be something to take and find out. There are all kinds of things that a meditator can get a little bit afraid of at that point. The pullback may be coming from fear, so that would be just an inquiry to take into practice—really, really valuable potentially.

Find out what it is exactly. Then we can target more specifically what we might need to do, how we might need to work differently with that. Does that make sense? Why don't we just say that for now? Give it to you as an inquiry, as something to begin to discern a little bit more clearly.

Hannah, does it feel like your question can wait till tomorrow or is it better to ask now? It can wait? Okay.

Let me just say a few things that have come up in interviews that might be useful to everyone. First thing—I didn't mention this in the opening talk, but

I never said, and I never say on a retreat, don't make eye contact or that kind of thing. Some of you will be coming in from other retreats and other forms where that's what you're taught, and you're just plugging that in. As I said, I don't consider it a particularly helpful teaching to give or kind of guidance to give for retreat generally.

So you can make eye contact with each other and with coordinators and with whoever else, if you want to, when you want to. Again, can you be responsive to what you need at any moment? Because actually the connection with each other is part of the appreciation, it's part of the metta, it's part of the rich soil of what allows samadhi to deepen. It may not be that shuffling around slowly staring at your feet and being kind of insular like that—it may not open up much samadhi because something might get dry in the heart and feel not connected.

But you have to see at any moment what you need, because there might be moments where actually you do need to be a bit more inside. Something's going on in your experience or whatever, and you need to kind of—yeah, I'm not into that right now. You're not obliged to make eye contact. Eye contact gets very complicated psychologically, or it can on retreat. What's involved in eye contact or what it triggers or what it means or all this. What are my psychological patterns of avoiding contact or needing it or seeking it? We could probably talk for hours on this. I'm certainly not going to, but it's quite complex psychologically. But we say one thing: just what do I need right now? And I might need to be a bit more within and a bit more focused for whatever reason—maybe it's an emotional thing, maybe I'm just working with a certain energy at that point or whatever.

But correspondingly, if you make eye contact or smile at someone, they might be at a moment or a time when they need to be more insular. And so you might come at them with eye contact and a smile, without realizing that you're hoping for a smile back, and they just completely blank you. And if you're not careful, that can be kind of—I start to take that personally and I start to think, oh, they don't like me for some reason or whatever it is. And the mind just spins with that.

So if we're going to let ourselves at times make eye contact and be open, you have to be also quite spacious about: am I putting pressure on this situation or expecting or demanding something? Really respect other people's space and their rhythms and what they need.

In response to Karen's question, we're talking about when the Buddha says—he hardly ever says, I said this before, but I'll say it again—he hardly ever says, "Dependent on really focusing very hard and very steadily on the tip of the nose, the first jhana arises." He hardly ever says that. He says basically the standard formula is: dependent on withdrawal or dependent on seclusion from the hindrances, from entanglement, the practitioner opens and enters into the first jhana.

So it's not that we want to close sense contact. I mean that's one way of doing it, but you might be drying something else up inside. And I said how much the samadhi practice depends on open-heartedness and openness of being. So this is something—it can be quite subtle as usual, quite some responsiveness. It's

dependent on open-heartedness, but not getting entangled, rather than just shutting everything down.

So that's part, again, to me, part of the art and part of the beauty of being on retreat: really sensing deeper levels of connection that we can have with each other. Deep sense of communion in silence without talking to each other or having someone listen to my story or whatever it is. You just get the sense of each person's being and the particularities and the uniqueness of each person's being, and it's just in the vibe. One's open to that and one's cherishing in a way, sensitive to each person's particularities and enjoying that. Sometimes we're a bit more like this and sometimes we're a bit more like this, but being open and feeling connected is actually quite important, I think, and it's part of the art. Does that make sense?

Some of you have probably never been on a retreat where anyone said to not make eye contact, but for a lot of people in the Theravada and Dharma world that's very, very common. So hopefully that makes sense.

If I'm going to be open, etc.—again, we go back to related to this in a certain way—I really need to keep my intention steady. My intention is jhana practice. And that's why we're here. That's what this retreat was set up for. So I can be open, et cetera, but my intention is steady. And that very steadiness of intention is what allows you to be open. Again, there's a difference between being open and getting entangled and then getting lost and my intention has gone somewhere else, versus I can be open partly because I'm just really clear about what my intention is.

So the intention is really for jhana practice, primarily. And then secondly, this intention: like what is my playground? So this should hopefully get, if it's not clear for you already, it should be getting very, very clear soon. Now some of you, like I said, when we responded to Karen, and I've said in interviews, some of you are going to have multiple playgrounds at once. So it's not necessarily it's the second jhana or it's the first. It might be. Some of you might be working on two or three at once, and partly because of how they interact with each other or what that enables. In other words, for example, like the third jhana might mellow out the first jhana. The first jhana is just too intense, and so the second jhana helps it a little bit. So yeah, it should be getting clear.

And if you feel it's really not clear where your learning edge playground is, let's try to get everyone clear with the three of us—with Sari and Robert—really what your playground is, within the next day or two at most. So you really know: oh, this is my learning edge playground, yes? And as I said, for some of you, because of your past experience, it will be a kind of multiple playground. That's completely fine.

This is different than teaching a retreat where people are just starting from the beginning in meditation. Does anyone who's quite familiar with imaginal practice—is anyone getting confused about what the difference is between imaginal spaces and jhanic spaces? Or is that okay? Good, so I don't really need to talk about that.

Now here's a funny thing. And again, everyone brings their own unique psychology to this. Sometimes

we're too easily satisfied as human beings. A lot of people, what you're running into is too much pushiness—either "I want this to be better," which we've talked about, or "What's next? What's next? What's the next jhana? What's next? I'm ready for the next one."

But sometimes we're a little bit too easily satisfied with something that we can already do. And it's nice. So it's like, okay, well, I'll just stay here. It's so individual and it can change at different times. This is part of the art of the whole thing, and something to check out with a teacher.

I learn a lot about my life psychology here. You see it in the microcosm of something like jhana practice. Jhana practice reveals a lot because it's inherently kind of goal-oriented, and so we learn so much about our relationship with goals and all that. Some of you, or some of you in some moments, will be being too pushy—and probably everyone has encountered that. But some of you will be a little too easily satisfied with where you are, or where you've been for a while. Again, that's something you might want to bring to interviews and explore a little bit.

The interviews—yes, they're quite regular, aren't they? They're every other day for people. And really, I don't know if you've been feeling this, but there's no pressure on the interviews. Don't feel like you have to come in and say something super insightful or interesting, or have a big problem, or a really great question. I mean, hopefully you will have all of those things, but you don't have to.

Sometimes what happens in the course of a long retreat with jhanas is the practice itself is just kind of plateauing for a while. It's like something's gestating, and then at a certain point it'll just take a quantum leap. So if that's the case at any point—well, I'm going into this interview saying pretty much the same thing I said in the last interview, reporting the same thing—no problem. Just report it. Maybe the interview is a lot shorter and we're just checking how you're doing. Maybe the teacher will ask you a couple of things or find something to work with, but maybe it's just shorter. If you feel any sense of pressure for the interviews, you don't have to.

Something I've said before, but I think it really bears repeating, maybe in slightly different words. If we're talking about piti, we'll have a huge range of how strong it is, how intense it feels. And in a way it really doesn't matter. It's got to be strong enough to work with, strong enough to get into. But sometimes it can feel relatively weak—and especially, like I said, maybe that's compared to the first few times I experienced it or whatever.

In a way, what we want is to be okay with that whole range—okay when it's really very intense. Can I bear that? Can I open to it? Can I actually find that enjoyable? Can I really come into a relationship with it where that's fruitful, rather than kind of almost cringing in relationship to it, or holding back or contracting, which would be very normal for most people? But also on the other side, when it's relatively weak, it's fine.

It's okay. It's definitely pleasant, but it's definitely nothing to write home about. Can I still get into that?

Can I learn how to work with that relatively unremarkable pīti and still really give myself wholeheartedly and see what's possible there?

It may not become more intense. I mean, it may become more intense, but as we said with the samādhi, the intensity is not so important. What's important though is here is this—in this sitting or this walking, whatever it is—is this pīti that's not so intense. It's still pīti. Can I stay interested in it? Can I work with it?

Maybe what has to happen is I have to actually increase the intensity of my attention—not the intensity of the pīti, but the intensity of my attention. And again, it's like, do I know how to do that? Do I actually get a sense of what it feels like to have a very intense attention and a less intense attention and a kind of medium attention? Do I recognize what that feels like? Can I turn the dial on that or the fader switch? Can I have an intense attention without getting a headache?

Or is it with this slightly weaker pīti that I actually need to go into the opening more? And that's what needs to happen. So can I open intensely? We tend to think of intensity as a kind of probing. What would it be to really, really intensely—that's why I use words like surrender and abandon oneself. So it might be that that needs to get more intense.

It's not the pīti necessarily that needs to get more intense, but I need to find the whole kind of—of all the aspects of attention, all the different dials there, all the different faders there, what's the maximal setting for each one? That's a way too technical analogy, but I'm playing with all these different aspects of attention, playing with all the possibilities there to really make this work, even though the pīti itself is not very remarkable. So that in itself is a really useful skill. It's a real part of the art.

I just want to throw out two things which I hardly mentioned, just in case people who haven't encountered them before are encountering them and are a little phased by them.

So one is, I think I mentioned it—did I mention the nāda sound? I just mentioned it, but I didn't really. So it's pretty common for some people in meditation, or common at certain stretches of their meditation life, when the samādhi deepens—in some degree it might be even not jhānic—to hear a kind of ringing in the ears, a kind of buzzing or that sort of thing. It's very normal. Some people take that as a meditation object and there's a couple of different ways you can work with it as a meditation object. You can work with it as a concentration object. You can work with it in a way that is a kind of help, a platform in insight.

But really what I wanted to just say right now is just that it's normal and nothing weird is going on. If you hear a ringing in your ears that sounds like it's really loud even sometimes, you don't have to take it as an object. And if you're fine with whatever practice you're doing, leave it. Just let it be there. It's just something that's going on. It might come and go. It's not a big deal. It doesn't mean there's something wrong with your brain or anything like that at all.

The second thing that can happen—it happens a lot with insight meditation, and certainly if you're doing these actual insight ways of looking that Julia mentioned and I mentioned the other day, but it will also

happen with samādhi practice—is that sometimes after a practice and you look around you or you're walking around, and it's almost like everything feels like you're looking at a wall and it just feels like it's made of paper or it's see-through or it's lost its solidity. Very, very normal. Not a problem at all. You're not going crazy. It's completely normal.

What's going on there is actually really interesting and is something I'll come back to when we really start to talk about insight and jhāna more. But I'm saying both these things about the sound and the kind of visual perception of sort of loss of solidity or that sort of thing just to reassure in case these things are opening up and you're not used to them.

I think that's it. I don't really know what to do about this note that I just got. I'm not sure if we should try and all decide, but it might be something we should somehow all try and decide together. This may not be wise to try and do it this way. We're all adults. The maintenance department have asked that we flag up to you the potential of setting off the fire alarm if there is much smoke from the Hanukkah candles in the dining room and to check that they are definitely not left unattended. I mean, for me, if I just say what I think and then you can tell me what you think.

I don't think it's a problem if a fire alarm goes off. It's fine. They know how to deal with it and they'll deal with it. It's probably pretty unlikely. So that's my inclination with the first bit.

The second bit about unattended—I don't know, how long do they burn for, do you think? Oh, is that it? An hour and a half. Okay.

So, you know, you can kind of get a sense if some of you are sitting there in silence with them and practicing. You can just, if you're the only one there, then sorry, you have to stay. If there's a few of you, then maybe you can just communicate where you're going now, and then, well, do you want to come back in fifteen minutes and do a rota or something? How does that sound? Anyone got any better ideas with that?

I'm glad it's only an hour and a half because it's not all night. Does that sound okay? So this doesn't have to be a big deal at all.

Okay, great. So let's have a bit of quiet to end before tea.

Thank you everyone, and now time for tea.

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