Q & A

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:28:02

We have gathered today for some questions, if there are any. I have a couple written questions and perhaps three little things I wanted to address. Are there any oral questions to begin with? I will get to all of these things, including the written questions, but perhaps we could start with an oral one.

*Question:** Correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't recall you actually describing how one might practice with the ringing in the ears as a concentration practice. Did you, or could you?

I can, though I deliberately didn't. The reason I deliberately avoided this is because the more you pay attention to it, the more prominent it becomes and the more sustained it becomes. It's possible that further down the line you might decide you don't want it to be prominent and sustained. So I feel somewhat tentative about giving that as an instruction.

There are, I think, four ways you could relate to it. One possibility is that this is actually tinnitus, and I don't know if there's a medical solution for that. Another approach, which someone mentioned, is ignoring it—though I would frame this not so much as ignoring it, but as not getting into a fight with it.

So one option is this: whether it's tinnitus or simply the ringing in the ears that comes up as the mind gets still and energized for some people, you might decide this isn't something you're particularly interested in working with meditatively. If that's the case, then the best attitude is not really paying attention to it, and most importantly, not getting into an aversive relationship with it. What you're really watching then is your aversion in relationship to it. It's just some noise happening. It doesn't mean anything about you.

If I get into an aversive relationship with it, I make it unpleasant. I will perceive that sound as unpleasant. Then that unpleasantness triggers more aversion if I'm not careful, and it's perceived as even more unpleasant. The whole thing cycles around because of dependent arising—simply because there was even just a little bit of aversion at the beginning that I wasn't taking care of.

Do you understand that loop? It happens with any object of perception. There it is, and I'm in an aversive relation, even a subtly aversive relationship to it. It cannot help but color and shape and form the object of perception—in this case the internal sound—and it colors and shapes it negatively. It becomes more unpleasant. Then usually, without mindfulness, without care, without skillful relationship in the moment, what's more unpleasant just triggers more aversion, and the whole thing loops around. That can eventually become as maddening as it is for people who really don't like their tinnitus.

Whether it's organic in origin or whether it's this meditative phenomenon, if I decide I'm not really taking it up as an object, then I really need to just watch that aversion. That's one approach if I'm not really

interested in it.

If I am interested in it—again, with the caution that this is why I didn't initially present it, because one might change one's mind—I explored it for a while, and it doesn't come up that much anymore. Enough time has gone by that I wasn't particularly interested in it. I didn't get aversive, and the whole thing died down.

But if one did decide to experiment with it, then broadly speaking, there are two ways. One is using it as a kind of concentration object. That would be like a samatha practice—the primary thing you're paying attention to. It's a sound, so when you get distracted, that's what you return to. As with working with the breath, it's about getting really intimate with it. Can I really listen in a very fine way? Do I need to play with the delicacy of my listening, the intensity of my listening? It's the same kind of approach.

What often happens for people who choose this as an object is that as they listen more carefully—or it might be obvious from the beginning—it begins to reveal that it's actually not so much a single tone as a collection of frequencies. There's a lower one, there's a higher one, there's content in the middle, and maybe they're slightly different. You can begin to discern these distinctions. It's almost like listening under a magnifying glass.

Everything is individual, but it's often the case that listening to the higher-pitched frequencies will bring more energy into the being.

Everyone's individual, but find the highest pitch in this kind of chord, if you like. The highest pitch in the chord—that's what you listen to. And that brings more energy and is, if you like, a more refined object.

So we were talking about the refinement with the jhānas and that kind of business. It's similar to that. It's a more refined object, partly because in a way a higher pitch sound, in terms of physics, is a more refined object. What can then happen is you tune into that higher pitch, the higher pitch, the higher pitch, and probably again, the background of the whole thing with the body. You really want to include the body as a bit like... It's a bit like the instructions we gave to Julian. If I paid attention to my upper lip here with the breath, I still want the body in the background.

Eventually what will happen with the sound or with the body is the body just gets integrated into, in this case, into the listening and one is listening with the body. Some people can start that already because they're familiar with kind of listening with the body. But at some point, just by including the body in the background awareness—this sound is a foreground, the higher pitch is foreground, background awareness—it starts to integrate. And the connection between that and pīti in the whole energy body can go.

And what happens is this higher pitch that I've been paying attention to, it may be that after a little while, that starts to kind of split into a chord. It was perceived as one pitch and then it becomes a chord. And again, you can go to the highest one. So that's a method. And for some people, it's really, really helpful for

their samādhi.

But again, not to get confused what the primary nimitta is once the jhānic factors arise. So it might be that some people listen to that and they listen to that and that's the object and they're really, really steady and very focused and very concentrated, but they're not getting so much into the pīti or the sukha or the whatever. So again, in this way of teaching that we're exploring on this retreat, once the pīti or sukha or whatever it is comes up and it's very, you know, it's constant enough, it's strong enough to work with, it's definitely pleasant, then that becomes the primary. And then the sound is a bit like the breath in the energy body. Is there a way that it helps it? Probably is because energy body in energetic terms—which remember is completely an illusion, it's a relative truth—but in energetic terms, in that language, energy body, we're talking about vibrations.

When I say pay attention to the energy body, I say frequencies, vibration, tone. This is all musical language. A tone is a note. A frequency, a vibration—that's all music. So it could be that the energy body and the sound are just kind of mutually vibrating like that and that's what allows the whole thing to grow in the samādhi direction if that's what I want.

There's another way of using it which is more—some people use it as a kind of insight practice. So then it becomes less an object of concentration in itself and more a kind of backdrop that relativizes the arising and passing of other phenomena. In other words, this sound feels like it's going on forever and it's just there, even though it's a bit like when I talked about a vastness of awareness. In fact, they're very parallel practices.

So this sound feels like—people who really get into it give it a kind of cosmic significance, like it's the primordial sound of the universe or whatever. The concepts and views wrapped up in there are that it's eternal. It eternally pervades the whole universe forever, maybe even before the beginning, before the end of the universe. It's just there. My ability to hear at any time might come and go. That's actually really important.

Is it an ultimate truth? I would say absolutely not, but it can be a really important stepping stone in terms of insight. So if I just, I have this sense of it as constant, eternal—not in the transcending time sense, but as in lasting forever—and I have that sense of it, then anything else that comes up, any other sounds, the birds, the heating noise, the voice, any other sensations, the pain in the back, whatever it is, taste, smells, touches, thoughts, all of that is given a constant backdrop with which to offset its relative impermanence and the fact that it's just coming and going and this thing just stays.

Do you understand? Does it make sense? So that's very similar to what people get into with the vastness of awareness. And what that does, because you've got something that's constant and you've got a little bit of a—like, I haven't got the view this is an irritating tinnitus sound. I've got the view this is something mystically, mystically lasting forever, and it pervades the whole universe. So it's less a thing that you're doing that to, more a thing you're kind of—it's a backdrop.

And that enables one, if it's working well, to let go in relation to the phenomena—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and thoughts—that arise impermanently, arise and pass, arise and pass, against the backdrop of that forever lasting... Does that make sense? So that would be a way of using it as an insight practice. And some people, either way, can find it really, really powerful.

The reason I didn't pursue that approach was because of what I mentioned earlier—some people end up genuinely irritated by this practice and feel somewhat trapped by it, not realizing that if they want to change direction, they actually need to work with the aversion itself to free themselves from that stuck place.

But yes, for many practitioners, this can be profoundly transformative.

The question I would still pose, however, is this: let's say you're an insight meditator practicing in that second way I described—wonderful, but then how do you transcend that? How do you go beyond it? I'm genuinely curious about anyone who has practiced this way for an extended period and derived significant benefit from it. By extended period, I mean probably months, though I know people who have been practicing this way for decades. Yet I haven't encountered anyone who has moved beyond it—not to say it's impossible, but the "how" becomes a real question.

Through this practice, you might establish your entire view of practice and its goal in a particular way. This comes with conscious and semi-conscious views that shape everything. Through all of this, you might set up your understanding of what practice is and what the goal of practice is in a way that actually prevents you from going beyond it.

So it's simply a question I'm raising. I'm not saying it's impossible—of course it's not impossible—but it would require a complete reworking. In that system, there's nothing integrated into the view that you can rely on to naturally carry you beyond that framework in time. Rather, you would need to re-examine the entire view and probably do something quite different.

Whereas there are other approaches to insight practice that I'd like to explore in this retreat—approaches that have within them a principle where you simply keep applying the same fundamental understanding, not necessarily the same technique, but the same principle. And it naturally goes beyond, beyond, beyond wherever you are. It will consume everything in its path. But that's an entirely different subject.

So there are different possibilities available to us.

Nick, thank you. Yes, an exploration has opened up over the last couple of days around the spectrum from subtlety to intensity of experience—particularly experiences of the energy body and of the nimittas. I feel like I've done most of this work within a soul-making context, and within that framework, I feel quite confident working with subtle energy body experiences, especially when there's image present as well.

But I've realized something here. Because there's this particular map we're working with, and there are these more universal qualities we're trying to access or these realms we're attempting to tap into and experience, I began to feel confused about what constitutes subtle versus intense experience, and whether subtlety might actually have some near enemies.

I had two really powerful *pīti* experiences in two separate sits, and then one that was much, much less intense—much gentler and softer. I found myself uncertain: was this subtle *pīti*, or was it somehow blocked or hindered? Then you offered the image of the glowing ember and fanning it gently to coax flames into being. It seems obvious that the ember represents the subtle aspect and the flames the intense aspect. But you can also have a really intense feeling of a glowing ember, or a very subtle experience of flames.

I've been reflecting on this quite a bit. I might be making too much of it, but it seems like an important distinction to feel into more deeply, to develop greater confidence. For instance, does one need to experience a quality like equanimity really intensely before being able to recognize it in its subtle aspects?

Let me respond and see if this addresses what you're asking, Nick.

I think the confusion lies with the word "subtlety" itself, which I've been conscious of when I use it. It's actually—what's the word when something has at least three meanings? Not ambiguous, but... well, it's potentially confusing.

We can speak of the intensity of the *pīti*—how strong it feels—and that's an element of the "S" in our formula, the *sukha*. As I mentioned, the intensity doesn't matter. What matters is only that it's definitely pleasant.

Over the course of developing jhana practice, you'll probably experience piti across the entire range of intensity. The crucial point regarding sassa (the first establishment) is that you don't need to worry too much about intensity levels. As long as the piti is relatively pleasant, that's sufficient. If it becomes so intensely pleasant that you're struggling to open to it—almost uncomfortably pleasant—then you may need to work with it differently. But generally speaking, you needn't be concerned about intensity.

Over time—and by this I mean initially with jhana practice—you'll notice variation in the strength and intensity of piti from session to session, regardless of whether you've approached through the ember method via the energy body or through the nostrils. This variation doesn't matter. Over much longer periods, once you've developed second, third, and fourth jhana, you'll realize there's been a gradual, though not uniformly linear, lessening in the intensity of piti over time. This simply refers to its strength.

But we can also discuss subtlety and intensity of attention—and I would question whether these even mean the same thing. What does it mean to turn up the intensity of attention on something? This is quite difficult to communicate if one hasn't experienced it directly. You could have a very subtle object while paying attention to it very intensely, absolutely, and perhaps in different ways.

A third term that gets mixed in here is refinement. As we progress through the jhanas, each becomes more refined than the previous one. Subtlety isn't quite the same as refinement, and subtlety of attention certainly differs from both. We're dealing with at least three distinct concepts that could easily be confused: subtlety, intensity, and refinement. Then we have these qualities both of attention and of the perceived object.

We could be discussing quite a few different things here. Are we talking about the attention? The nimitta? And are we discussing its subtlety, refinement, intensity, or something else? In some circumstances, subtlety and intensity might simply be opposites of each other, though this doesn't quite hit the nail on the head.

Again, we return to the big picture: What am I actually trying to accomplish here? In soul-making practice, we're not necessarily seeking more intensity of anything particular. What we're developing is sensitivity. Part of truly opening to an image and working skillfully with it involves having the art, skill, and capacity to notice—do I have sufficient sensitivity to perceive the different soul resonances and energetic resonances?

You're simply tuning in to what's present, what it needs, and what you can notice. With samadhi practice, it's more about what's needed to deepen the experience, to make it feel better, or to help you feel truly absorbed in it.

This is why, for example, the intensity element in sassa doesn't actually matter. What matters is how you're relating to it. If you have clarity about where you're going—wanting to deepen into a pleasant experience or help it progress to the next level—that guidance only becomes relevant at certain times, once the experience has truly matured and is ready to ripen.

As a general principle, if you can become accustomed to this big picture view—where am I going in this practice?—it helps guide you in moments when you won't have a teacher to consult. Consider where this practice is leading. The larger hierarchical view informs the middle hierarchy, which informs this present moment: what you emphasize in attention, what you attune to, what you amplify through attunement.

For a beginner just learning to work with piti, rather than worrying whether this is subtle piti or whether it's hindered or blocked somehow, ask instead: How do I make this feel better? How do I increase the well-being?

Moving in that direction rather than worrying about whether this is subtle or intense. Subtle and intense doesn't matter. It's simply about whether it's definitely pleasant, and knowing that it will naturally move across a range.

The question of whether something is blocked or hindered is different entirely. It's not a matter of thinking, "Oh, it's not so strong in this session, so am I blocking or hindering it?" No. If it's blocked or hindered, you will feel that as an actual obstruction—it will feel uncomfortable. You'll sense it as stuck

somewhere, or as tension or pain in the body.

So I wouldn't worry about that. What you can always ask is: Can I get into this more? Can I enjoy it more? This doesn't equate to "Can I make it stronger?" Rather, getting into it more and enjoying it more might include playing with the intensity of attention, the delicacy of attention, different modes of attention. Am I opening? Am I going into it? Am I wrapping myself in it? All of these explorations.

But again, as a general principle, it's really helpful to think backwards. This is oftentimes what's missing in people's dharma practice—one hasn't thought through what the actual aim is of this or that practice, and then how everything acts to support that aim. We end up being quite unsure in any moment what to do, or unfortunately, because we've heard one teacher say this and another say that, we end up emphasizing something that doesn't fit into our paradigm or creates confusion between different approaches.

Does that make sense?

Good. So I have a couple of written questions here.

"Today I had a very strange meditation experience. I was doing formal sitting practice outdoors on a chair under my favorite tree. I was aiming at exploring the realms close to the first and second jhana. I had played with the nada sound—that's the sound Jason was just talking about—and played with connecting the sound and my left foot.

"I had moved on to metta as a springboard and felt the warmth and happiness and well-being of giving metta. In the scene, there was also the nada and light." So even though she was doing metta, there were still the sound and this light present as secondary nimittas.

Going back to the nada sound—it can arise for people as a kind of secondary nimitta, an indication that their practice is deepening in terms of samadhi.

"I was working and playing with expanding and enjoying that too. Then I sensed as though something was moving under my right foot. I had heavy trekking boots on. This felt very surprising and strange and caught my attention. After a short while—about five or ten seconds, it seemed—that subsided. Instead, I felt something trying to push my left foot up from the ground, as if it were in the way.

"I experienced this as very strange. First I wondered if the wind might be moving a branch on which maybe my foot was resting. The sensation continued, and I opened my eyes and saw my left foot moving almost rhythmically in pace with the sensation. I lifted my foot and boot, but there was nothing—no branch that could have been moved by the wind, no animal, no hole in the ground, only small pieces of branches, leaves, soil and mud.

"I perceived this as very strange. I put my foot back and went back to my intended practice, meditating in the playground of the foothills of the first jhana. To my surprise, the sensation of something trying to lift my left boot reappeared soon. This was scary. Was an animal trying to break into my boot or wanting to

get it out of its way? Again, I opened my eyes, lifted my boot and looked carefully..."

I even poked around with a stick. Nothing. I was really puzzled.

Let me say that I don't think this is that common, though I can share that I've experienced something similar. In certain meditative states—maybe less in the deeper jhanas, but certainly around the first jhana territory as you described, in those rooms, those foothills around it—the energy, the piti, opens the body in various ways. One of the ways it opens the body for me is that my heels come off the ground. It's really not a big deal. They just slowly rise up off the ground, similar to the head tilting back that I mentioned earlier.

Maybe it's just you and me experiencing this, but I'm perfectly okay with that. It doesn't bother me at all. I understand it as simply a movement, an expansion of piti actually expanding the physical body, much the same way that the head tilting slightly back is. It disappears as the samadhi gets deeper beyond the first jhana territory, and even in the first jhana, it tends to quiet down.

So that's how I perceive it. I suppose it could move the other way—the feet could go to the side or the toes could lift up or whatever—but it's really just an energetic phenomenon. Nothing weird at all, nothing to worry about. If I look back at my list of things I might have done slightly differently, maybe I should have tried to keep more still, but it's such a non-issue for me.

How does that sound?

Just a couple of other things, and this is for everyone: When you've got a lot of secondary nimittas and things going on, really make sure what the primary one is. These are all secondary, and to the degree that you can mix them in such that they really feel supportive rather than pulling the attention in different directions—that's good. We can do all kinds of things with our sense of body anatomy. You mentioned connecting the nada sound with your left foot. You can do all kinds of things like that.

The direction we're moving is such that at some point in the jhanas—for some people quite early on—the whole body shape kind of dissolves from consciousness. So I guess we want to make sure that we're not perpetuating these phenomena beyond where they're useful. Does that make sense?

These are just things to check, but really nothing to worry about and very normal.

Before I forget, my interviews will move to seven o'clock, so that's an hour earlier, whatever your time zone. Please come an hour earlier.

Let me address another question that came in: "Working with pleasure, joy, love, et cetera, brings up a lot of guilt and a little sadness and even pain. Am I allowed to be happy and live my life joyfully if someone is suffering? Does my happiness cause suffering in someone else? I can sense the piti, the joy underneath something that feels like holding back and guilt. I want the joy and happiness so badly, but I also feel very sad that other people suffer and maybe even suffer because of me, and don't allow themselves to live their life or don't have the conditions to do so—race, social status, et cetera."

I feel I need to suffer with them to show some allegiance and solidarity. Focusing on that guilt and sadness takes me away from the pīti again—a habit that is there for too long now. Not focusing on it seems as if no one would hold that pain, and it feels as if the pain wants to be held.

This is quite important, and it's actually quite common. I've heard this kind of thing relatively often from students over the years.

"Does my happiness cause suffering in someone else?" Well, it might, but it might in two ways. Obviously, if you speak unkindly to someone—though that's not really your happiness causing the suffering. Your happiness in jhāna doesn't cause suffering to someone else.

People might experience this when considering retreat time: "I want to go away on retreat for this long," and family or friends respond, "I'll really miss you, it'll be difficult without you." Hard, tricky. Technically speaking, your retreat decision alone doesn't cause the suffering. Or if you say, "I really want to do this—this project is really important to me. I need to devote myself to this and therefore can't have time for this or that person right now"—does that decision cause their suffering?

If they're suffering over it, is their suffering dependent on your choice alone? Or is it dependent on many conditions: their psychological propensity, their background, the agreements in your relationship, other conditions, the way they're relating to their suffering?

This is quite important, this word "cause." Sometimes it's much more helpful to think about the coming together of conditions that gives rise to suffering, or the coming together of conditions that gives rise to happiness or whatever.

What happens is we get very easily caught when a person says, "You made me suffer." Now in some instances, that's actually a really healthy view. If I rob someone or I'm inappropriately angry at them or I punch them—yes, definitely. We can think very helpfully about a one-to-one causal relationship.

But in many situations, what's actually happening is a person is suffering, and that suffering they're experiencing in this moment has all kinds of conditions—often over many years of cultivated psychological habits, or what's been cultivated in their history, or in the agreements of your relationship, or a lack of clarity about relationships, or the absence of conversation about needs and supporting each other to have different needs.

I don't know exactly what the example is here, but I would caution about thinking that one's own happiness causes suffering. Yes, if I choose X, it may mean there are certain things that if I choose them, I effectively cannot choose Y, or I have to postpone Y. We really, really need to understand this.

Sometimes this becomes an ethical question. Even with something like flying—many people have heard me go on about how we fly too easily these days with the carbon emissions. But maybe someone is making an ethical choice between X and Y, weighing up what's the most ethical, virtuous thing to do. In making

this choice, they can't do that other thing.

So either I go—let's say my grandmother is dying and she needs care and I have the time and we have a good relationship. If I go, I have to fly. If I don't fly, I can't go. There are a million examples—every day, little examples, and through our life, lots of big examples.

You cannot avoid, we cannot as human beings avoid those kinds of choices. With the best conscience and sensitivity and listening that we can muster, we have to choose. But we will always be choosing, in some ways, what we could call a moral shortcoming, an ethical shortcoming. Some kind of suffering may come out of that.

This is just part of what it means to be a human being. We have to recognize this, acknowledge it, open to it, and deal with it. Someone somewhere is going to get disappointed at some point with our choices. But the question is: what's navigating me and how am I relating to that?

Let's say I devote my life to serving others, to alleviating suffering in the world. I still have to make particular choices within that.

I cannot possibly address the whole of the suffering in the whole world. Maybe I work in human rights or maybe I work in racial injustice, whatever it is. In doing that, in order to give my energy to that, I'm neglecting something else. And let's say I choose one. I mean, I have to be conscious of this. I cannot possibly help everyone's suffering at the same time.

But even then, let's say I've chosen something, I'm aware of this—okay, I have to choose and that's at the cost of something else, of not doing something else. I still have to... I give all my dedication, it's my job, whatever, but even my job, half of my money I give back into that organization. I just live on the bare minimum. I'm still going to need to sleep and eat and rest.

In a way, what we're doing with jhāna practice particularly is really taking the time on a retreat like this to develop really deep sources of rest and nourishment, so that—and I've mentioned this a few times but not so directly—so that we can move out into the world if we want to and be that much more resourced.

One can stay with this service work in hard conditions, in conditions that are not in themselves very supportive or very nourishing, that might be quite difficult. One can stay steady with the flak and the eight worldly conditions—praise, blame, et cetera—that are there. One can keep doing that and one has those resources accessible to one.

So if you didn't, and you say, "I'm going to try and help, I'm going to go somewhere and help in a refugee camp or whatever," and I decide to do it without sleeping and eating, how sustainable is it going to be? So it's similar to that. If we want to really make our capacity and the possibility of our service very stable, very far-reaching, it's like we can stay steady. We have the capacity. We can keep showing up, we have the energy, we have the flexibility, we have the bigness of heart that can be close to really difficult dukkha,

and something in the heart has grown large—and partly it grows large through jhāna practice, partly.

So all that... there's still that kind of question to kind of, again, understand what are we doing, what's the context of what we're doing here.

Again, I don't know how often, but it is really quite common. I have heard this kind of question quite a lot over the years. Oftentimes, it's just asking for a more thorough and careful, loving psychological inquiry into what's going on there for oneself. And because it might be we've been educated in a certain way to believe certain things that... as I said, around the first and second jhāna a lot of this comes up. Is it okay to experience this much pleasure? But also is it okay, just this, is it okay to feel this happy when other people are not?

So this is very, very common. And yeah, there might be all kinds of views that have been implanted in there socially, culturally, from the family, whatever.

Just in terms of the last thing in the note, I think it's quite important. So there's already a recognition in this note. There's already a recognition: focusing on that guilt and sadness, et cetera, takes me away from the pīti again. And the person who's written this has written, "It's a habit that's been there for too long now." So there's already a recognition.

Now there's something else going on here that needs some investigation: "Not focusing on it, not focusing on the sadness and the suffering in the world seems as if no one would hold that pain and it feels as if the pain wants to be held."

So again, if we're talking about world suffering or social injustice, I think we need to be clear that I'm not the only person in the world caring for this issue. Sometimes the mind just gets squeezed into sort of semi-conscious beliefs that obviously don't make sense. There are other people working on this. I can afford to take a rest for a few weeks to do a retreat or I can afford to sit for half an hour in the morning or two hours a day or whatever. It's not really going to mean that that suffering is not attended to or goes unheld in the world.

If it's, for instance, there's one person that I know in my life and it really seems like they're isolated and they have no one but me to have a sense of holding with, I think that needs a larger conversation and a larger look at the situation and their situation and our relationship et cetera and what can be brought in there because that's also... maybe it's obviously not that helpful for them and it may not be that helpful for me.

So... but again I don't know the details here and the person hasn't signed it, but I hope that... at least there's something to this kind of thing. It's very, very common, so I'm glad... I'm glad to know it's really common especially around this territory with the pīti and the sukha, given, I think, some of how we've been educated in our culture.

Okay. I wanted to just throw a few things out there and then we'll see if there are any more. Are there any more questions? Live as well? Yeah. Please. Yeah, please, with the mic.

I started to practice the walking meditation—the walking around practice—and it was really lovely. I was pleased that it opened up and became very beautiful. It moved into a space that was similar to what I've experienced before when practicing metta and also in soul-making practices, where it feels like everything has that quality as I'm walking around the space. I was wondering, first, is that what it's supposed to be like? And second, it feels like when you focus on that nimitta and then enhance it, that kind of experience naturally happens. Can you do that with any object that has an open-hearted, well-being quality? I've done it with metta, though I haven't practiced jhana or soul-making formally, and I've never practiced things like the brahmaviharas.

Let's take the first question first. Walking around with this primary nimitta quality goes very well, and then you notice that basically everything is perceived almost as that nimitta or as if it's a manifestation of it. This is very normal, and I'm very glad that it happened. It's extremely important—extremely important. I'll return to it later, but basically it's the dependent arising of perception and has everything to do with emptiness.

If I experience this—let's say I experience it with something like metta—I might first experience metta as coming from me, something I generate and direct outward to another person or all beings. Then I begin to experience another sense where the universe *is* metta, or the universe is made of metta, or everything shines that forth, or that's its real substance.

If I experience that three or five times, it will be nice—a pleasant experience. But if I experience it five hundred times, really going back and forth between that perception of the world and our usual perception in Western culture—where of course the world is not love, this glass is not love but made of whatever chemical composition glass has, there's the water, and that's reality, and a being is made up of their molecules and is not love or a form of love or a spark of love—something begins to shift.

If I really start going in and out of these perceptions extensively, the very movement between them starts to relativize or dislodge this entrenched view about what is really real and what is just an occasional nice experience. I begin to wonder: which is real? Some people then conclude that the love perception is the real one. While it's very good to live there and even hold that view, perhaps for a long time, at some point I'm going to want to go even beyond that and realize something about the emptiness of perception, the dependent arising of perception.

As you move deeper into the later jhanas, this becomes an extremely important element of what is significant in jhana practice. Again, we return to this question: what's actually significant, what's less significant? For me, this turns out to be extremely significant, beautiful, and lovely. This theme we'll revisit at least once more.

For your second question about whether you can enhance any quality in this way—well, there may be qualities I could work with, but I wouldn't enjoy it. Qualities with suffering at their core, like hatred—well, actually hatred for something can be enjoyable to a certain degree for some time, but self-hatred probably isn't something I can get into and really enjoy. So the ease at the end won't be possible with such qualities.

But with skillful qualities, what the Buddha would call *kusala*—wholesome qualities—I would say yes, probably. In soul-making practice, different kinds of spaces open up and one can absorb into them more or less, and there's an infinite amount possible. So my initial response is yes, probably. But on this retreat, we're focusing on the primary nimitta—what's the primary thing we're doing this with.

Let me mention a few small points that refer to things I've said before, but perhaps saying them slightly differently will help them land better. With the second jhana, I'm not sure if I mentioned this when we discussed it, but with the *sukha* as the primary nimitta of the second jhana, we really want eventually to experience that whole range of *sukha*—really the whole range. It can become very ecstatically happy, bubbly, laughing on one extreme, and on the other extreme, it can become very, very serene.

It's nowhere near laughter. There's not much bubbles in it, and everything in between. As I said, maybe even with love or without love—that's a bit secondary. But we want to really know that whole range, that whole territory. That's what I meant about getting familiar with a jhana.

When we take the time to marinate and master, it's like really—I used to say to people, it's like knowing the library at Gaia House. I use that example because I spent so many hours in there doing interviews. You can put your head in the room and say "it's a library, it's got books in it" and then close the door. Or you can really know every square inch—it's a big room with lots of complexity. There's this little bit on the carpet here, there's this little angle where the windows meet, there's this bit of a bookcase there that's chipped. You can really, really know a place, a territory, or not.

We want to know the whole range. We want to be comfortable, actually—this is more what I wanted to say. We want to be comfortable with that whole range, enjoy that whole range, all of it. So we need to get to a place where the whole range is really comfortable for us and enjoyable, and we know and feel its value. Every place on that range we want to feel like "I love this, I love this."

It's like asking a musician or a chef or someone who's really into something: "What's your favorite food?" or "What's your favorite piece of music?" Someone who's really into something is not going to give you one answer. They're going to be like, "I can't, I can't." They're going to give you maybe ten options. It's the same thing with the bandwidth of happiness. "I love that, but I also love this. I love the bubbly, but I also love the really serene one. And that bit in the middle is pretty nice too."

So we really want to be comfortable with the whole range, enjoy the whole range, know and feel its value. And let it do its—this is part of letting it do its work on the being, on the heart, on the soul, and also on the body. Marinating with the sense of loving and enjoying and opening. It does work. It does work on the

being. It does work on the heart.

What's common for probably any human being is that certain emotions are more frequently gravitated to. Of the whole emotional spectrum that a human being can have, there are certain ones that a certain personality tends to gravitate towards, and tends maybe, relatively speaking, to avoid the others. Some people gravitate towards a subtle kind of—well, whatever it is, could be anything. But oftentimes, for example, one might find themselves avoiding the really bubbly happiness. We're now talking about psychology and energetic makeup. What's my propensity, my habit of psychology?

Part of the power of jhana practice is, again, to open all that up and really have the whole thing available to us. That's part of—if you ask me what does it mean to be a free human being—part of it to me means having the whole range. Having the whole range, the whole playground, the whole delicious range, including the really difficult. I can experience really hard grief and grieve with the world, and I can experience this incredibly bubbly, giggling, laughter-like thing, and there's no either-or. There's an either-or in the same moment, but one is free and one's not scared of any of that or holding back. One's letting all that range work on the heart, work on the soul, work on the being. It ends up being wide, having that range and that freedom.

So that was one thing. The question is, is that also true with pīti? That's a good question. I don't know. I think I would be, as a teacher, less insistent about that with the pīti than with the happiness. Because I'm not sure if experiencing, let's say, the really intense... Let's turn it around.

What I am sure about is experiencing subtle pīti—going a little back to Nick's question—that that's important for everyone. That one needs to actually be able to even notice it and tune to it and be able to enjoy it. Why? I don't want to be always having really super strong pīti and then not be able to notice something that's more subtle, not be able to tune to it and kind of turn my nose up at it because that's that same kind of negative "it's not good enough" thing. So the subtle end of pīti, I would say everyone needs to explore. With the stronger end, I'm just not sure.

I don't know what the answer is. I feel less inclined to insist on that. It may be that intense PT is necessary for everyone, but I think it's more of a personal matter.

Stepping back from that particular question and thinking about human freedom and what it means to be liberated, I do feel that sometimes certain people are habitually holding their energy in or holding it back. They maintain a subtle energetic pattern where they don't allow things to build up, and oftentimes they don't even know they're doing this. It's become so familiar as a psychological and energetic habit.

I'm not just talking about in meditation—I'm talking about their whole life. For these people, to really open and surrender or to have a lot of energy is territory they don't go toward or don't allow to happen. They don't realize they're preventing it through this subtle holding. It's very, very subtle how that can get blocked.

Sometimes for some people—and I mentioned someone who's convinced that what she needs is to focus more—my opinion is actually that what she needs is to learn to let energy build and to open more. Does that mean she needs a super intense PT? I don't know, but psychologically, knowing her over some years, that seems to be what's needed.

But I would feel tentative about saying that about the PT in general, or for everyone. For me, with the intense end of the PT, I think it would be more an individual question as a teacher, and together we would sense it. For these kinds of things, it's also a matter of timing—is it the right moment to even bring this up with a student? At times, there's nothing they're going to be able to do with it anyway, and it's probably only going to bring self-judgment. There are all kinds of factors involved.

And also what they want, because at the end of the day, it's what they want. It's also their vision of awakening. If someone's view and vision of awakening is of people who are very, very even and equanimous, who don't show big eruptions of emotion or experience those—who are more "mature"—if one holds that whole view, whether semi-consciously or through verbal teaching, or just from seeing this repeatedly in the Buddhist world with people who are supposed to be respected, then they assume that's how a seasoned practitioner comports themselves.

If that's their view of awakening and they say, "No, that's what I want. I want to be like that," it's up to them. It's their life, their emotions, their body. It's not up to me to override that, unless they specifically ask—which is very rare for a student to say, "Tell me everything you think" or "What do you want?" I've only had one person say that to me, I think—Robert. It's very, very rare. Which I hope you still don't regret!

As a teacher, you have to respect people's choices and their views. In dharma talks, I do find myself shaking up those whole views—like, is that what awakening is? Are you unconsciously thinking it looks like this? But one-to-one as a teacher, I tend to be very un-pushy and very much oriented toward: What does this person want? What's the right timing? What are they asking for?

A talk is different, especially when it's being recorded. I feel I have a different responsibility when something's going out on the internet. Even though you're asking the question now, I'm answering it to people I don't even know. I'm answering you, but I'm answering people I don't know. Does that make sense?

So I think it's really important to acknowledge: I don't actually know the answer regarding the PT, or I feel unsure. But with the happiness, yes, I think I would be a bit more insistent on that in this way of teaching the jhānas.

Again, if I think of the jhānas as just getting more and more concentrated, more and more able to hold my mind, then none of this matters. It's just a matter of noticing that as you do that, you go through these different stages, but basically what's most important is: Are you thinking or not thinking, and how steadily

can you hold your mind on an object?

But to me that's not—again, we're back to the larger framework and the implications that has for what I'm doing.

Returning to the effort question—as we engage in all of this practice, the effort question never goes away. It only becomes more subtle, if anything, but it's never something we should abandon entirely. We need to be willing to overshoot the mark of right effort at times, and to undershoot it. I need to be willing to experience both, to taste them and recognize what each feels like.

When I really overshoot, there might be a headache between my eyes or some other physical tension. When I undershoot, I might fall asleep or lose focus entirely—these are extreme examples, but even with subtle overshooting and undershooting, I really need to develop a sense of recognition: "Oh, that's what that feels like." To cultivate this sensitivity, I have to be willing to experiment—let's try a bit more effort, or let's try a bit less, whatever counters my habitual tendency.

This brings us back to the question of inertia that we discussed in the first couple of days. Do I have inertia with effort levels? The opposite of inertia is fluidity, malleability, ease of movement. Am I willing to slide that effort up and down fluidly and play with it? "Oh yes, too much. Oh yes, not enough"—whatever is needed in this moment.

Inertia creeps into our meditation practice, certainly into our jhana practice, and actually into our lives in countless ways. One ongoing inquiry is: where is there inertia for me? Where might there be inertia? This awareness is part of developing the skill and art of working with effort levels.

We're playing with the intensity of effort—up and down—the intensity of delicacy, all of that. Remember, there's intensity of probing, but also intensity of opening. We don't tend to think of opening, abandoning, or surrendering as something one can do intensely—or perhaps "radically" is a better word. We really want to develop a feel for the whole spectrum on these dimmer switches of intensity and learn to play with them deliberately. They're up to us. We can adjust these fader switches.

The third thing that occurred to me is a question—and again, this may or may not apply now, but it's something you can explore. It's a kind of mental exercise or thought experiment that I think might be really fruitful. It has several parts.

The first part involves entertaining an idea: whatever your mind is snagged on, if your mind is circling around some issue or feels held back by something—whether subtly or quite significantly—or if it feels dragged somewhere by something, in either a gentle or stronger way, what if you entertain the possibility that this issue and its effect on you actually has, as its real root and origin, a hindrance?

It's not about what I think the issue is, but rather—and this is just a game, a conceptual experiment—what if hindrances are actually more originary? What if they're the origins of things that we later don't

recognize as hindrances? They're like seedlings that sprout, and then we see a tree without recognizing the original seed.

This relates to what I mentioned about hindrances becoming papañca if we're not careful. Papañca is the complete opposite of samādhi—do we all agree on that?

Yeah, it's completely the opposite of samadhi. This kind of circling around an issue or whatever—sometimes it can be a very noble issue. I'm not insisting that every time we're thinking about something or every time we're upset, we're just playing a game here, like a thought game.

No matter how noble the issue, how important it seems, how important to my soul—just play with that view. Maybe the true origin of this thing is a hindrance. What has happened is that hindrance has not been recognized as a hindrance and it's been allowed to grow up and become a poisonous papañca tree. Because without a lot of care and practice, that's what happens with hindrances. That's what they do.

This is part of why I said we get to a place where we don't believe the hindrance. It can seem so convincing, so convincing. Even being really upset about this or that political issue—sometimes what's happening there is aversion. A part of us obviously really cares about this, and sometimes it's just our aversion hooking into this particular issue. It can all sound very justified, but there's actually a mixture. At times it's more one or the other.

We want to encourage the quietening of papañca because papañca is the opposite, and papañca prevents samādhi. Where there's papañca, there's no samādhi. Where there's samādhi, there's no papañca. They cannot coexist.

What we're doing here, if we play this little game, is tracing back the papañca through the aid of entertaining a certain conceptual possibility—that it might have a hindrance as its root—and tracing it back to that hindrance. Then we can work on it as a hindrance. It may not feel relevant at all now, but it might actually turn out to be really helpful as an exercise.

One of the teachers I studied jhāna practice with made this their main teaching on jhāna practice. This is really the point of jhāna and samādhi. Obviously I've talked about it, but I want to emphasize it more now. I don't agree, or it doesn't appeal to me that this would be the main thing, but it's hugely powerful. There are teachers out there—and you may well encounter them—for whom this is the main thing we're doing. Watching out for papañca. Relating that to hindrances, dealing with the hindrances, allows the samādhi. That's actually the most important thing. I won't elaborate—this is that person's teaching—but I actually feel it was valuable. It's a very valuable teaching.

So just a game, just very light—play with it. You're not signing up to "I believe this idea forever about all emotions and I can never change my mind." You're just entertaining a certain concept and seeing what happens for five minutes or whatever it is.

Kirsten asked: "I started to do this a little bit, and sometimes I'm not clear what the hindrance is exactly. It might be a mixture, and then I might get lost a little bit in this. So then I might go to restlessness. I just want to know how accurate or how important the accuracy of defining the hindrance is."

That's really important. I had jotted down before coming in that it's probably more than one hindrance, because what we often get is multiple hindrance attacks. Yeah, it can be—in fact, maybe usually hindrances come in gangs. So it's probably more than one, and that's fine. Maybe you can split them, or maybe even just thinking of that—just see what helps.

Sometimes just the notion that it's a hindrance—that's what I mean. Sometimes the precision of the identification is not important. It's just, as I said, playing with a certain framework and actually reframing: "Oh, maybe this is a hindrance," and I don't even know what the hindrance is. It doesn't matter.

Just that simple recognition can be enough. Sometimes you might think, "No, I need greater clarity about which specific hindrance this is," but the true power lies more in the general conception rather than precise identification—though identification certainly has its place. You'll have to discover what works best in each particular instance. But I don't believe it's necessary to identify the exact hindrance every time.

Often multiple hindrances operate simultaneously—two or more ganging up together. This is perfectly normal and part of the territory.

*Yogi Question:** I've been experimenting with this approach throughout the retreat, and it's been tremendously helpful until yesterday when I fell down what I can only call a "hindrance cliff." When I found myself deep in it, I became so angry at even asking the question about hindrances. Eventually I recognized it was likely a self-doubt hindrance cliff I had tumbled down. But I needed considerable time before I could engage with this framework again without working myself up even further. So I'm curious about timing—when do you know to stop playing this "game" and try something else? Perhaps the answer is simply that you know when it's making things worse.

*Response:** Thank you—this is a really important question. Several elements deserve attention here.

Everything I've shared about working with emotions on this retreat exists within a much larger context of opening, skillful engagement, and soulmaking with emotions. This broader perspective feels essential to remember. Sometimes for you or anyone, simply knowing this larger context can remind something deep within your being—and that recognition alone might be sufficient.

If our soul feels compressed into a box, it will naturally rebel, and it should. It absolutely should. Does this make sense? Sometimes it might be enough simply to remind myself—and for you to remind yourself—of the bigger vision you hold regarding human emotional life.

We're not exploring this extensively on this retreat, and I've explained why. I've led other retreats where the primary focus was working with emotions in specific ways, but always within the context of vast emotions. So if I tell my soul that this vastness exists and we're simply playing a particular game right now, that reminder alone might help.

Even so, there may be times when this approach isn't appropriate. The essential question remains: What helps? How long does it take to recognize when something truly isn't helpful? I don't know precisely, but you develop a sense—especially with emotions. This is actually a very common discernment we must make in any dharma practice.

You choose a particular way of working with an emotion, then after some time you must ask yourself: Is this genuinely helping or not? If it's not helpful—and while I can't say exactly how long "some time" is, certainly several minutes—then you need to step away and try something different.

Sometimes it's simply a matter of cooling off. During that cooling period, the hindrance might naturally abate, or you might somehow—even subconsciously—remember the bigger picture around emotions.

What I most want to convey is this: Do we have the freedom to view emotions this way sometimes? Do I possess a range of perspectives and approaches without fear? Some people become terrified of certain emotions, while others become equally afraid of letting emotions settle into quietude. Do I have freedom from fear on both sides? Do I have skill and flexibility in both directions? This is what we're ultimately cultivating.

Wisdom also includes recognizing that sometimes an emotion can genuinely function as a hindrance—and viewing it that way becomes the most helpful approach. Sometimes we become so immersed in our immediate experience that it simply doesn't occur to us to consider that what we're experiencing could be a hindrance. We're so accustomed to relating to emotions in other ways.

This is more about maintaining a broad perspective. There might be periods of practice where you lean heavily into one particular relationship with emotions, and other periods where you engage quite differently. When I reflect on long retreat experiences, this applies not only to difficult emotions but to beautiful emotions as well.

I remember two instances at Gaia House. One was a short-lived thing and the other was a more general realization.

The more short-lived thing was... I can't even put it in a context. It was probably that I was doing samadhi practice for a stretch, and I just either remembered by heart a Mary Oliver poem about an owl. I can't remember the context, but somehow I went for a walk while reciting that to myself and was really deeply touched by the beauty of it, and had kind of realized: my soul needs that.

My soul needs that—in that moment, that particular poem, but also just... it's weird, not just piti and

sukha. It's strange. We have this banquet here that we're talking about, but actually, I think the soul is richer than that.

So that's one thing. It was also, I remember, near the beginning of retreat, so there was still a question for me, like: okay, was that restlessness just settling into this retreat? I don't know, maybe it was, maybe it wasn't. But I can also see that more generally, it's like... if you asked me, "Would you only ever want to experience piti, sukha, peacefulness, stillness, and all the eight jhanas, and that was your whole emotional range?" I would say no, I wouldn't like that. I would like the whole range, please, thank you very much—including, like I said, including the grief, including even anger and all that. To me, this is more soul-making, but to me...

So that was more a moment. I was still left—I mean, it all settled down—but I was still left afterwards wondering: hmm, I wonder if that was just not quite settled yet on the retreat. It was like day four of a long retreat or something. I can't remember, but anyway, that was a question.

The other thing, and I haven't mentioned this yet, is that for me... I can't remember exactly, but I was exploring—you know, again, for a long time—really, really marinating and making my intention very clear on, I can't remember how many jhanas, but let's say the first four. That was my territory that I was really working with, and I was on a long retreat.

And at a certain point, as wonderful as they are, I'm actually missing something more mystical. So that there are lovely experiences, and as we'll talk tomorrow about the third jhana hopefully, there is definitely the beginnings of a mystical sense, a sense of sacredness. But you can also very much practice those jhanas and not really have much sense at all of a mystical sense. And they're not, I would say, again, primary. So even if you're—like for me, my tendency is very much, my yearning is very much towards the mystical—but they're not really that primary in them.

And I know lots of people that practice those first four jhanas without any mystical sense. And again, that goes in... it's related to the whole big conceptual framework. What are we doing here? What's important, et cetera.

But I realized for me, I feel something missing here. Again, it was in the context of a long solo retreat and I knew that I had to keep my intention steady. We're back to that question about keeping intention. So I don't know, I think recognizing it was very helpful. I didn't then change what practices I was doing—I can't remember what I did, but whatever I did worked—but it wasn't a kind of radical shift or change of direction. It was maybe just including something at the sides a bit more or something like that.

Again, that's probably a much longer answer than you wanted, but does that make sense what I just said?

Maybe it was recognizing that, you know, I only missed the mystical because I knew the mystical. And, you know, maybe were it something that I'd never experienced outside, I would maybe have a sense... Let's say I was a soul that wanted the mystical, but I hadn't experienced the mystical, and there were four

jhanas. Well, these are great. Maybe I would have had a vague sense of: I'm missing something. Wonderful as this is, absolutely wonderful as this is, I'm still missing something. Maybe I would have had that sense, but not quite known what it was I was missing. I don't know, but back then I'd had quite a lot of different, all kinds of things.

And I think a part of me, yeah, in the context... but recognizing: Yeah, I can go back to that. I'm not signing up to this sort of forever. I will stay in the four jhanas as long as I can and do nothing else. That was never in my... I never signed up to that. So maybe that, yeah, that larger context and a larger sense of possibility was helpful.

And I think a part of me recognized that, yes, I could go back to that state. I'm not signing up to remain in the four jhanas forever, doing nothing else. That was never part of what I committed to. So perhaps that larger context and broader sense of possibility helped sustain the practice.

Let us close now with a few moments of quiet together.

Thank you, everyone. Time for tea, and then I believe Zohar and Lauren will need to transition. I'll be beginning interviews at seven o'clock.

Thank you for your presence and attention throughout this exploration of the jhanas. May your practice continue to unfold with wisdom and compassion.

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