Q & A

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:30:40

Okay, so before we start today, I've got a request. You may or may not have realized, but we're not alone at Gaia House—there are other retreatants here on personal retreat and work retreat. There's been a request to please not talk outside of the Q&A period and interviews. I don't know what exactly is happening during your work periods, but for their sake, who naturally expected to come on a silent retreat, and also for your sake, we need to maintain silence.

There's this idea of actually letting things build, letting the energies build. When there's happiness and appreciation—very natural human responses—you want to share that or talk. That's important, of course; it's an important part of being human. But in this practice, we're also wanting to let the energies build and not squander them so much. There will be a chance to talk at the end, to share time together verbally at the end of the retreat. But unless it's talking with each other about the work and what needs doing right then about whatever yogi job you're doing, just repeat the initial agreement to sustain silence together.

Can you feel together in that silence? Do I need to speak and be heard and exchange that to feel connected? One of the opportunities—I think this already somehow came up in a Q&A—is that as a retreat gets longer, we get more sensitive. Part of the gift of that sensitivity is that we can feel each other more deeply, more widely, more completely, more openly and sensitively, and we don't need to talk necessarily. We don't even need to talk to someone or hear their story or hear whatever to sense how they're doing and their personhood and the particular flavors of their being, and to sense that connection and the way one can feel very connected across space without all that.

I don't know the details, but the other resident teacher has obviously heard from some yogis or encountered something. There's a request to all of us to uphold, to revisit that commitment together and keep that. If it feels like, "Oh, but it's such a nice connection," then I invite you to remind yourself that you can have that verbal connection at the end of the retreat with each other, and to see how connected you can feel without words. This has to do with the same qualities that we're bringing to this kind of practice anyway, and to me, that are part of what we bring to any practice: sensitivity, openness, receptivity, attunement.

It's all the same thing. If a certain period is a time when you don't want to do that, then you just shift the balance of attention. So if you are feeling like you're really enjoying and appreciating each other and the connection, let that be more prominent. I'm washing dishes or whatever, and there can be eye contact and smiling if you want, without the expectation that it comes back. But the emphasis of attention is more on that sense of connection and appreciating it and feeling it with the whole body and resonating it.

You can get exquisitely sensitive. Some of you know this on long retreat. You might be sitting right here at the front, and I don't know how many yards it is to the back of the hall. Someone comes in quietly and you know who it is—how does that happen? If I'm just talking all the time, I won't develop that kind of sensitivity.

You can play with the balance of attention. If I want that connection, then I can be a little more open. If I want to be more inner—maybe I'm working with my primary nimitta, maybe I'm processing something inside, maybe I just need to collect my mind and be mindful, whatever it is—then the balance is more inside. Again, it's just context.

It's never the case that we want never to talk to anyone, although the Buddha seemed to recommend that almost as a preference for his monks and nuns. But we want to have this freedom and this capacity to do things differently at different times. This is a really important part of expanding our range and expanding our freedom. So we can just revisit that together.

Good. I have just a few questions from people, and we can take some verbal, live ones. Is there anything anyone would like to ask? I just saw Nicole first, so why don't you go ahead...

"So last night before sleeping I had a vitakka and vicāra attack, which is a great time to have right before you go to sleep. But really appreciating the whole jhāna system. A bunch of things you said all came into order, and I'm just really feeling like this thing is really brilliant. Particularly I've been struck by when you said the most important thing about the jhānas is working towards a goal and asked who actually believes me. I raised my hand, and then as soon as I raised my hand, I was like, 'If Rob asked me why, I would have no idea.' It was just this instinctual hand raising. So as it all came together last night, it was long and extended, but the short of it is basically the Buddha setting up work towards a goal, but the goal necessitates that you let go of clinging and aversion and even delusion and get more and more and more subtle."

So all the ways that you would naturally go towards a goal, you're asked to let go of in order to complete that goal. And then along the way, you make the world over and over and over again through dependent origination, and you see that—either through hindrances, where you create a hell realm, or through beauty. And I was like, mind blown.

But the thing that I'm grappling with: after you gave that talk about desire, it struck me so deep, I actually went to my room and I just wept for an hour. I haven't ever had that kind of response on retreat. I was disturbed—not necessarily in a bad way, but in this deep-in-my-belly kind of way—and went through a whole process. From one way of looking, I could see it as a sort of self-doubt, hindrance attack. But this other way of looking, it's like I felt how important intention and desire is.

I mean, I've been listening to you say it for years—"Desire is a maker of worlds"—and I'm like, "Yeah," but then I *got* it and I was like, "Oh." That's really where I'm struggling. I can see if I looked at it one way, it's

amazing—like what can I do? But I'm actually just having this response of the gravity of like, can I live up to my desire and stick with that intention?

Being on this retreat, it's been so beautiful to have the intention so strongly held. And then I leave and it's a world where literally, on one level, your attention and your desires being grabbed at everywhere. So it's just, yeah, I'm just really wondering if there's words around the gravity of intention and grappling with that.

*Rob:** Thank you, Nicole. So do you mean—I just want to try and make sure I understand—so you mean in your life, the question is really about now that I've seen how important it is to honor my desire in the deepest sense of the word "honor," and to deeply honor my deepest desires, and I see how difficult that is to do in the world with different things pulling... What would support that? Is that what you're asking?

*Nicole:** Yeah, I think there's just a lot of self-doubt coming, like, just deep-rooted. Like, can I... My desire is strong and deep, and it's vast. Like, yes, I desire the jhānas, but way more than the jhānas. It's for mystery and beauty and these things that—do I even know the definition or the depth to which they go? No, I don't. And yet seeing how intention is going to make my life, I'm just feeling like, can I... like I want it, and can I do that? And there's just pain around that.

*Rob:** So the pain is around not knowing whether you can and the self-doubt with it.

*Nicole:** Yeah. Feeling the desire and not knowing about, yeah.

*Rob:** So I don't know you that well, but to the degree that I know you, it seems like you have done that pretty well in your life so far, but I don't know if you would agree with that. Like I said, I don't know you that well yet, so...

*Nicole:** Yeah, I guess I can see both. There's times that I've done it very well and times that I've failed. And I think the times when it fails is very painful. And not so much the not getting the thing, but seeing how I've let intentions fray.

*Rob:** Yeah, okay. So, you know, with something... I mean, there's so much to say about this, but I think what you just said is maybe the key thing. Rather than get into "I failed or I didn't fail," it's like, what just happened there? And what just happened there might be over the last ten years with a certain desire, or it might be in one interaction. I had a certain desire in a certain situation. Whoa, I just got completely sidetracked or blocked or afraid or inhibited or lost my risk-taking capability.

So to me, I wonder from what you're saying, whether the most important thing is learning from—one of the most important things is learning from when you feel like you haven't lived up to that. Is that... Just wondering if that's distracting people or not. It seems okay. It's really okay with me as long as it's not.

Here's the continued beautified version:

Perhaps one of the most important aspects is learning from those moments when you feel you haven't lived up to your intentions. When something happens and you sense you've fallen short, it becomes crucial to examine what exactly occurred. Was it fear? And if so, fear of what? What thoughts arose? What beliefs were you holding? Was there inhibition?

Desire has a profound relationship with risk-taking. How willing are we to feel fear and still take the risk? This might involve long-term visionary risks or immediate, moment-to-moment choices, depending on the entire context of our situation.

On a larger scale, I can recall several pivotal moments in my life where I took significant risks. I mentioned earlier the decision to pursue music—situations where things appeared very promising from a social perspective in one realm, yet I chose to venture into something that made others wonder, "What are you doing?" These represent long-term risk-taking. But there are also immediate moments when we're afraid to take certain risks. The key is identifying what just happened when you feel lost, when something occurred and you didn't live up to your intentions.

Another important element from what you shared is this sense of "I don't quite know what I'm desiring." To me, that's perfectly acceptable. If you're familiar with the soulmaking teachings, this aligns with eros. Eros creates and discovers "beyonds" that are often completely nebulous. I might sense gorgeous, luminous divinities that I cannot articulate or even differentiate in my perception of them, yet they're pulling me forward. This is completely valid.

However, along the way to such nebulous destinations, this sensing wants to translate into practical action. A full spectrum of desire, a complete eros, encompasses both very clear choices it asks us to make here and now—or later—as well as more nebulous longings that extend into the future. This entire range is part of the fullness. Does that make sense?

There's also something worth considering: it's valuable to desire, to long for, and to risk something for goals we may well never achieve. So one important question becomes: Is it acceptable not to attain this thing, yet still give myself completely to it?

When we think imaginatively, wherever there's desire and eros for something, there will be within that constellation an image or images associated with that very desire—the angel who wants that, the self that's desired. From the very fire of desire and eros, other images should constantly arise, beckoning you toward what you love and long for, or emerging from it. These can take very potent imaginal forms, so allow them to do so.

This relates to another person's question as well. If you truly want certain things in life, you're going to disappoint some people and invite their disapproval. People will consider you selfish or criticize your choices. Depending on what you desire, some will wonder why you're less available to them, why you've become different for them in some way. This is simply part of what you must navigate.

You cannot satisfy everyone. Depending on your relational and empathic sensitivity—which you may possess to quite a degree—you're likely to feel the pain of these disappointed expectations acutely. It becomes very easy to feel guilty, to believe you must take care of this person or that person, to explain why you're not available or why you're choosing one path over another.

This is precisely how deep, strong desires often get derailed. We feel obligated to explain ourselves or to give others what they want instead of following our own path. It's challenging to be in the world with authentic desire, and even more difficult when people don't understand what you're seeking, don't value it, can't appreciate it, or consider it not worthwhile. They may doubt your ability to achieve it, among many other responses.

So that's quite hard. Someone who's more emotionally less sensitive, less pulled upon in relationship by others' needs and wishes and pain, actually has an easier time with that. I don't know, is any of this addressing what you're exploring? We could probably talk all day and night about it because it's a huge subject.

One more thing. So it sounds like what happened was potent. And in that potency, again, there are lots of different things going on. One of the things that was going on was this self-doubt. But I would wager there were lots of other things going on, and some of them were probably very beautiful and probably very empowering.

It's like, okay, all this is going on. You could actually visit every frequency and emotion that had been going on in there, but some of them, when you get to them, will be very potentially empowering. Here's self-doubt—obviously, that's potentially disempowering. It needs attention, partly for that very reason. I need to understand it.

But there might be within it, just for example, here's this thing I really, really want. And I feel that wanting. And in that wanting, another way of saying it is, here's this thing I'm devoted to. This devotion and this longing I can feel energetically. I can feel emotionally and energetically. That's something that I can really sit with.

Even if what I want is actually vague, I'm not yet clear, but the fire of it is clear, and the energy of it is clear, and the devotion in it is clear. So rather than worrying too much about getting the clarity right now about what the object is, I can come back and be with my sense of devotion. I might even get at first that it feels like it's just somewhere in the mass of burning and confused—somewhere in there is my devotion.

When I sit with my devotion, it naturally samādhi-fies the being around it. It harmonizes and energizes and I can feel that uprightness. I sit with that uprightness and that sense of devotion and I let it shape my energy body. That's a kind of prayer, even though I'm not clear exactly what I'm praying to. It does something to the body and the psyche, regularly sitting in that and feeling one's alignment.

So you can do that for a long time. You can do that for a short time. But it will do something.

That's a bit what happened. It was useful to look for the hindrance in it and then sort of tend to that, which I did by devoting this retreat to a teacher that I mentor who suffers from self-doubt a lot. So I bring her into the sits especially when that comes up and use that for that part of it.

And then a kind of fire of devotion. I was aware that once that was taken care of, there was actually—it was vague, but a sense of what I was longing for, at least just in the energy body. And that really kicked the practice into another gear the next day. But it came back last night as the sort of system of jhānas and what we're doing and maybe why you said that thing about why working towards a goal is so important. It wobbles.

What's wobbling? Going between feeling overwhelmed by the power of that desire and can I meet it, and just feeling the power of the desire.

Again, if we just talk about imaginal practice, the very doubt and wobble and fear and whatever it is—if I let myself go into that, out of that will come an image. The one who, potentially, in relation to what they love most deeply and long for, feels very unsure of themselves. The dukkha of that can take—you have to go into it though. You're not trying to pacify or talk your way or reassure it. You're actually letting that constellate as an image.

So yeah, it might get clear what I'm desiring, but it also gets clear just the desire itself. And I begin to trust that more and more, let that empower the whole being.

Okay, great. We could talk a lot more, but that's good. Some other people had their hands up earlier. Victor, please.

I wanted to tease out the term equanimity. I think you've mentioned it a few times, and I think you said the ordinary use in English of equanimity doesn't quite cover what happens in jhānic states. I was struck by how, from what I gather, Bhikkhu Anālayo uses the term equipoise as the translation of upekkhā. And I think because he says equanimity as a term can have a dampening effect.

Thoughts?

Yeah, thank you. I'm going to talk more about equanimity tomorrow, but we can say a few things now. So equanimity as a term in English—I'm not sure if I even heard it before Buddhist speak—but what's called the near enemy in dharma of equanimity is indifference. So that may be what Ānālayo is pointing to, something that can look like equanimity but actually dims the brightness.

I think he said it in the context that pleasure could be seen in the context of, "Well, there's pleasure here but dukkha is somewhere else." So it takes the brightness off the term equanimity compared to equipoise, which is sort of like a balanced stance.

I'm really happy with the word equipoise. I think, yeah, I'm not sure about the word equanimity. Equanimity—animus, you know—equal soul, equal animation is probably what it comes from. So equal

what? Passion. So does that take the brightness off or does it not take the brightness off?

Equanimity is actually—we can talk about it very briefly, or we can talk really, really a lot about it. And it's actually, once we start inquiring, quite complex. I was trying to remember—I think upekkhā—I think somewhere or other I traced the word. I think in Sanskrit it's upekshā and the ikshā, upa ikshā, and I think that's to do with equal seeing. So seeing things equally.

So you could say it's equally poised in the sense of there's a balance between this and that, and even between pain and pleasure. And so at one level, yeah, that would be a good translation. Here I perceive pleasure, here I perceive dukkha or whatever. And the being is equipoised. It's not leaning towards the pleasure or away from the dukkha at one level. Yeah, that would be a good word. It's a balance of mind, something like that. And that's good at a certain level. That's really fine at a certain level.

I'm just wondering whether I should talk about this now or wait till tomorrow. I mean, for me the bigger picture is the effect of the term equanimity in Buddhist communities in relation to climate issues. That's the background.

I don't actually use the term much. I actually think equanimity doesn't really exist, which I'll explain, I hope. The other thing is exactly because of that—it very easily becomes a shadow for Buddhists. So that equanimity in relation to something like climate change very easily goes to a kind of indifference, you know, or to whatever social injustice, racial injustice, could be anything. So we have to be really careful. And of course, everyone—we all teach that the near enemy of equanimity is indifference. But it's still there as a really dangerous edge.

So there's one level of equanimity, as I said, which is an important but more superficial level. When the Buddha talks about equanimity in terms of the eight worldly conditions—have you heard that? It's praise, blame, success, failure, gain, loss, and pleasure, pain. And then we could put this word, this other translation, equipoise.

So a good practitioner at this superficial level of understanding views those things as kind of indifferent in the best sense of the word—doesn't mind if it's success or failure, doesn't mind if it's gain or loss, doesn't mind if it's praise or blame, at one level.

Of course, we can refine that a little bit and say, even with relation to climate change: yes, I care, and this is how it should be. Equanimity in the context of the brahmavihāra, equanimity in the context of really caring passionately, really with a lot of mettā, with a lot of compassion for what's happening in the world and the suffering that something like climate change is already delivering for so many people. There is the compassion, ideally. There is the mettā. There should also be the engagement as well. And it might be that the ship is sinking—and that's where the equanimity comes in. One isn't going to be incapacitated in one's efforts or totally incapacitated by grief and disempowered by grief or worry or fear. That's the best sense of equanimity at that level. Does that make sense?

But then there's a whole other level of equanimity, which I think maybe I'll speak about tomorrow, and that has more to do with this other possible etymology, upa-iksha in Sanskrit, where the iksha is seeing things equally.

We're getting into equanimity as we encounter it in the third jhana, which we already talked about, and then more fully in the fourth jhana, and then as we relate to insight practice. Let me say this very briefly for now.

Let's take this basic level, this polarity of pleasure and pain, or pleasant and unpleasant. In practice, the usual reaction to the pleasant is to want it and to try to hold it, to grasp it and bring it towards ourselves. And the usual reaction to the unpleasant is to try to push it away. That push and pull of grasping and aversion—to the degree that they are present in consciousness at any moment is the degree to which equanimity is not present. You could define equanimity that way.

So as I practice, in one way or another, letting go—and this is not a way to live one's life; it's completely not a way to live one's life, but it's a practice—in the moment of letting go of any pushing away of anything that I notice at any level, and letting go or calming any pulling towards me or hanging on at any level, if I just practice that, and there are many different ways of doing this, I notice there's a calming in the being. That calming is part of what equanimity is and looks like.

But it doesn't stop there. If I keep doing it, I will then begin to notice that the very perception—which may be the iksha, the seeing—of the pleasant and unpleasant begins to change. The very sense of them begins to change. What's unpleasant becomes less unpleasant. What's pleasant may for a little while get more pleasant, and then it goes towards more neutral, until in the end, everything becomes a kind of neither pleasant nor unpleasant vedana.

But it doesn't stop there either. It goes even deeper. If I keep doing this, letting go at really deep and subtle levels of this push-pull, the actual sensation begins to disappear. So we've gone way beyond a state of calmness in response to, or a state of okayness in response to pleasure and pain. We're actually affecting or fabricating the very perceptions of pleasure and pain.

These are practices. I can say this a thousand times, but until you actually know how to practice this, put it into practice and see it for yourself... There's a whole range here. Eventually what happens is not just that pleasure and pain disappear, but the very sensations disappear. And then actually the very world disappears. Self disappears, world disappears, time disappears.

In that state, we're not talking about equanimity in relation to anything that's pleasant or unpleasant, but it's a deep level of equanimity. That's partly why I think equanimity is actually a thing that doesn't exist, because by the time you've got real equanimity, there's nothing to be equanimous about.

Equanimity is a big subject, complex, and very much interwoven with the territory we'll get into as we go on to the fourth jhana and the other jhanas and how that meets with insight.

But in terms of what you're saying about climate change—and I know what a concern that is for you and how passionate and dedicated you are, and also living in Australia where there doesn't seem to be much consciousness about it at the moment—it's really important that we don't use certain teachings, and it could be in any spiritual tradition, to brush over or hide our noblest responses.

"Thank you, Rob, for mentioning the push and pull, which you also spoke about when you described the third jhana. When you mentioned the third jhana, you spoke of something like peacefulness that arises from quieting the push and pull. I have a question regarding that, because if I remember correctly, when you read the description of the first jhana, there was something about being secluded from the hindrances. So I was under the impression that we were done with the push and pull in the first jhana already, because aversion and greed weren't present anymore, which are the push and pull. If we're already secluded from the hindrances, where is this pushing and pulling coming from? I'm confused."

Thank you, it's really important.

Thank you, Rob, for mentioning the push and pull, which you also spoke about when you described the third jhana. When you mentioned in the third jhana, you mentioned something like peacefulness that arises from quieting the push and pull. I have a question regarding that, because if I remember correctly, when you read the description of the first jhana, there was something in the lines of "secluded from the hindrances." So I was under the impression that we were done with the push and pull in the first jhana already because aversion and greed weren't present anymore, which are the push and pull. If we're already secluded from the hindrances, where is this push and pull coming from? I'm confused.

Thank you, it's really important. It depends... I use the word clinging, and push and pull is just another word for clinging for me. But I use that word in a very elastic way, so that there are very obvious manifestations of clinging—like the hindrances, for instance. But that's really just one level. As you say, when we let go of the hindrances, a certain amount of clinging, a certain amount of push-pull has gone from our experience. But it's enough that then the being, the energy body and the being feel really good. First jhana arises.

But as I use that word, it has all kinds of a range of depths and subtlety. Maybe in the dharma world, there's a lot of teachings that don't use that word so much—it stays like quite a gross thing. Either there is clinging or there isn't. And that often goes with teachings that either there is a self—the self was there or it's not. But I view all these words—self and clinging and all of that—as spectra. They go really, really subtle.

So by the time we get to the third or fourth jhana, the amount of push and pull is way less. But even there, and I'll repeat this as we get into more territory, it doesn't stop there. There's really, really subtle clinging and push-pull even in the fourth jhana. Now, I'm sure a lot of people wouldn't agree, but that's how I use those words.

Yeah, I understand. So it's really the degree of push-pull, where in the spectrum we are in the push-pull that becomes more and more subtle levels.

In a way you could say one way of understanding what's happening in the jhanas is that we're just letting go of clinging at deeper levels or to more refined things. How do you cling to consciousness? We tend to think of clinging, as I said, or in English and in a lot of dharma, as referring to something that's actually quite gross—clinging, craving, and all that. But I really mean them as open-ended terms. Let's just see where the limit is.

It's the stillness and subtlety of the attention that allows us to see where that clinging is more subtly. But it's also framing the teachings from the beginning in a way that doesn't define things in a limited way. If I define clinging as something gross, then I'm not going to look for any more subtle clinging. But if I define it in this more open way, right from the beginning, then it's a question of, oh, well, maybe there's more. I have to get still and sensitive. I have to get down to a certain level of very little clinging to see when there's even less.

That whole process, that whole investigation of letting go of more and more clinging, is what I would call an insight investigation. Like I said, any insight way of looking—which means any insight practice as I would frame it and teach it—is doing just that. In one way or another, that's the primary thing it's doing. It may look like it's doing something very different, but that's primarily what it's doing.

At certain points, you may just be able to follow the same practice into deeper and deeper, more and more subtle levels of clinging—deeper and deeper letting go. Or you may need to tweak the practice a little bit so that you can get into subtler and subtler levels of letting go.

The way we're practicing jhana at the moment is we're not really thinking so much about letting go of clinging and where's the clinging. But there is a way—and I hope to get to it on this retreat—there is a way of practicing jhana where that's actually how you move from one jhana to another. You identify the clinging and you let go, and you can just keep and let go, and that takes you to another level.

But at the moment, that's not really how we're approaching things. We're approaching more through just getting into it, letting it ripen, enjoying it, opening to it. In a way we're approaching more just trusting the samadhi intention of enjoying and getting into something and trusting that will naturally ripen in this process.

So when I mentioned the other day that the equanimity of the third jhana arises from attenuating the push-pull, in a way that's more just a "let's understand kind of technically what's really happening here." For most of you at this point, the methodology to get to the third jhana is actually more through just getting into the second jhana and really getting satisfied.

Now we could see that satisfaction as, because I'm satisfied, I don't need to push-pull so much anymore. So it's a deep level of letting go of push-pull, but it's not the end of it. There's more. It gets subtler than that. So

that point was more just wanting to be really precise about understanding things and trying to weave things together in terms of understanding, less about the practice.

The second thing, I think, is investigating the very essence of a desire. When I compare my desire for awakening—or whatever words I might use for what feels most important to me—with my desire for, say, a particular food or even for a relationship, there's something qualitatively different about them.

There's a texture to the desire for awakening that feels less fabricated, less conditioned. It has a different quality of urgency, a different kind of pull. It doesn't seem to get blown out as easily by external circumstances. When someone ridicules my spiritual aspirations, that desire doesn't just evaporate the way other desires might.

So while it's absolutely true that desire is fabricated—we're constantly being shaped by what we're exposed to, by cultural conditioning, by spiritual teachings we encounter—I think we can still discern something about the depth and authenticity of different desires. Some feel more rooted in what we might call our deepest nature, while others are clearly more superficial fabrications.

The practice becomes one of learning to distinguish between these different qualities of desire, learning to sense which ones feel most true, most aligned with our deepest sense of purpose and meaning. This isn't about finding some inherent, unchanging desire that exists independent of conditions—that would be a metaphysical position that might not hold up under scrutiny. Rather, it's about learning to sense the difference between desires that feel authentic and life-giving versus those that feel more compulsive or driven by external pressures.

Does that speak to what you're exploring?

Two different things—and obviously a ridiculous example would be your desire to eat a certain food versus something else—you can actually feel when a desire is deeper in you. There is a qualitative and quantitative difference, but we need to really begin sensing into the differences there and learning to notice, tune into, and take care of the deeper desires. Introspectively, there should be differences that you can tell. But that's a short answer for now.

And there is really—and I was thinking very much because somehow it had come up between us at some point and I devoted a chunk of time to it on those recordings—the other thing with all this is that some people have patterns. In fact, it's quite common to have patterns that... This is a jhana retreat, not a desire retreat, but anyway. Because I have talked about it a lot and I think it's important, but I don't want to spend the whole time talking about it. But it's good to know oneself in relation to desire. And what I see is that that's quite rare as well—that a person really knows, "I know my patterns with desire." It's not that I know what I want, but I actually know what happens in me with desires.

So some people, the flame can't get going. Some people, the flame goes and they can't tolerate it. Some people get confused or distracted by other ignitions that get thrown from all kinds of other sources. Some

people, the flame bursts up and then somehow they don't really follow through. Or they say, "I'm going to do this and I'm going to do that," and it doesn't really follow through. What's happened? What happened over those months or whatever it is that one isn't a person of one's word? So it's really good to know oneself in relation to these things. I think it's really, really important.

I really meant it the other day when I said, in terms of significance of teachings, this is a much more significant teaching than anything I might tell you about how to move from one jhana to another—maybe even than the jhanas themselves. In fact, I would say that. It's like really understanding ourselves and really becoming mature in relation to desire—it's huge. But there's a lot of aspects to that. A lot, lot, lot of aspects to it. And I've spoken about it a lot on recordings and things. Is that okay for now?

Thank you. Okay. I've got a couple of written ones. Should I do that or is someone else right now? I've got a couple from you here, I suppose. Let me do someone else's one and we'll come back.

"I'm exploring sukha and its different nuances—the buoyant and bubbly, and more recently its soft, gentle aspect. I'm enjoying it. I feel absorbed into it. But a question keeps arising for me again and again about the difference between a mental feeling and a physical one. What is a mental feeling or an emotion exactly? I thought that all feelings could only actually be felt in the body. I do have a sense of feeling the mental aspect/emotion, but it's not really clear where in the body I'm feeling it. It just feels all over, so it's harder to probe than with the pīti. Yesterday you spoke about tuning into a frequency in the energy body, which I do, but isn't the energy body just imaginary? Maybe I'm just experiencing a hindrance of doubt. If you can distill this somewhat lengthy question and offer any answers, that will be much appreciated."

Yeah, this is important. Thank you. There's a few questions sort of woven in there. What is a mental feeling or an emotion exactly? It's a really complex thing, is what it is. So usually, usually I would say an emotion has several aspects to it. It usually has some kind of thought content or a type of thought content associated with it. Of course, once you get into the jhanas, then it's like emotions free of thoughts.

It also usually has a kind of texture of the mind. It's like the mind feels like it has a certain texture to it—agitated or spacious or calm or whatever—but even more subtle than that. But it also has a bodily aspect to it. So at least those three aspects, plus probably beliefs and the whole network of other things are a part of the complexes that we call emotions.

This business about sukha being an emotional thing and piti—two things about that. One is it's a thing from Abhidhamma, so I don't necessarily subscribe to that. Abhidhamma is Buddhist psychology and it tends to have a certain way of framing things that sometimes is useful and I find sometimes really not useful. So they classify things: when sukha is this or something like that, this is a mental feeling, this is a this, this is a that. They like putting things in categories and it's all very sort of black and white and very simple sounding, but there are lots and lots of categories of different things.

So an emotion to me is actually a complex thing. When we get down to jhanic emotion, like let's say the

sukha, in a way you're talking about a simpler thing, but I would still say it's felt two ways. It's felt in the body and again in jhanic terms that's the primary thing because every time the Buddha says with the first four jhanas: "The practitioner pervades and permeates, suffuses and saturates, drenches and steeps their whole body with that quality."

Most people, I think, who haven't practiced meditation or energy body awareness would just be a bit baffled by that. What does it mean to have, let's say, happiness in one's whole body? I mean, some people might get it, but generally it's—and then to focus on that. But this is really the primary thing in jhana practice. It's the energetic vibration, the energy body vibration, so to speak, or frequency, which is an aspect of an emotion.

Now there's a mental one as well. Where is that mental one? Well, it's in the mind. But where's the mind? I don't know. It doesn't really matter. What matters in terms of practice is the primary thing is body, body, body, energy body, energy body, energy body—where it is in the body.

Once it's spread, let me backtrack and say one more thing about this piti and sukha. I've said it already. At first, when people are opening to all this, I will say something like piti is a physical feeling and then sukha is an emotional one. It's a white lie. It's just something that helps people differentiate those two at first. But after a while you'll be like well actually they're both kind of physical. They're just different vibrations physically or different ranges of vibrations physically. So it was just a little teaching device but basically they're vibrations in the body.

And then the second sort of piece of question here: "I do have a sense of feeling the mental aspect or emotion, but it's not really clear where in the body I'm feeling it. It just feels all over."

So that's perfect. You know, that's what we want. For me, it pervades the whole body. That's exactly what I want. I feel it all over, even homogeneously all over.

"So it's harder to probe than with the piti."

Not necessarily. So sometimes when the piti or the sukha, when it feels stronger in some place. So you've got three scenarios. You've got a scenario that hasn't spread yet and it won't spread this session. And then, okay, that's where I do my probing, obviously. I stop trying to spread it, but that's where I do my probing.

You've got a second scenario where it's spread, but it's not 100% homogenous. And then I take the strongest area and that's where I do my probing. Does that make sense?

And the third scenario is it's completely spread and it's completely homogenous. And then I just choose a random place. It doesn't matter if it's homogenous. And I just go into it at one point. It's like a person diving into a swimming pool. They're diving in at one point.

But once they dive in—or into a lake—once they dive in, then that very diving, that very penetrating might make them feel like they're in a different terrain. It might take them to another level in that process. So

you don't have to worry about finding the perfect spot; you can just choose any place and do that.

Yesterday you spoke about tuning into a frequency in the energy body, which I do, but isn't the energy body just imaginary?

Well, the energy body is no more imaginary than anything else is imaginary. So again, it's one of those things—sometimes it's really helpful for me, I feel, or I sense for a particular person at a particular time to take the energy body as a real thing. And of course, there are loads of schools of yoga and healing and all kinds of things, shamanic healing that take the energy body as a real thing. They talk about subtle body or energy body and it's rarefied. That's fine, but I really think that has limits.

The thing about the energy body—or one of the things about the energy body that's really important to understand—is that it's very amenable to our imagination. That's not quite the same thing as saying it's totally imaginary, because when we say something's imaginary we tend to then dismiss it relative to something else. That's why I say it's as imaginary as anything else maybe.

But the energy body as we're playing with it is very sensitive and susceptible and responsive to our imagination. So if I imagine the energy moving in a certain way from my energy body, lo and behold that's what I will experience in the energy body if I keep doing that. Make sense?

And then with other people, or the same person at a different time, it's like, okay, enough now with this reifying of the energy body—you've been doing that for years. And again, the whole—it's a bit like what Jason was asking about, or someone else about blocks and unblocking things. One can get kind of obsessed about this, as if the whole of practice is getting my energy body to feel a certain way.

For those people, I might say, it's not a real thing. Actually, what's more deeply real or more usefully seen as real is just the idea that we're playing with perception. I don't think it's doubt so much as some clarity was needed there. Does that sound okay?

Very good. I think these questions are useful anyway for other people.

Which jhana does that second bright light nimitta appear in?

The bright light is quite common for some people—it can appear in any jhana or even before a jhana. It's what I call a secondary nimitta. It's just an indication that the samadhi is going well. So some people get it very associated with the first jhana, some people it only comes in the fourth jhana, some people it never comes, some people it's just their access concentration or whatever. So it's not particular to a jhana; it's just a secondary nimitta. In other words, it's not of primary importance unless we really mix it with the primary nimitta and get into it that way.

And second question: did you say that jhanas one to four had equanimity in them?

No, I didn't say that, but the Buddha said jhanas three and four had equanimity in them. But I was saying,

well, hold on, that's a little misleading. So we really need to unpack, first, what's primary in jhanas three and four—it's the peacefulness, and I'll explain that about jhana four tomorrow—and unpack this whole idea of equanimity because, as we've been talking about a little bit today, it's actually quite a complex idea and we need to go a little more carefully.

From another point of view, relating to Monica's question, yeah, you could say each jhana has some degree of equanimity to it because most things are not on-off switches. It's not either you have equanimity or you don't—you have some degree of equanimity. So the first jhana, even when it's so intense that you have to peel me off the ceiling because it's just ecstasy like that, actually has some degree of equanimity in it in relation to other things.

So a lot of these things, a lot of dharma concepts are really not on-off, black or white—they're really spectra. And if we think of them as on-off, we're actually making the same mistake I mentioned about clinging or self. A lot of people report, "I was meditating and then there was no self." It's like, no, think about it more as a spectrum because what you're calling "no self" at the moment is actually just a much less fabricated sense of self. It's just lower down on the spectrum.

And if I have that idea of spectrum—repeating what I said before—in relation to equanimity, in relation to self, in relation to clinging, all these other words, then actually that's going to enable me to notice way more than I would have noticed if I just had a view of either there is self or there isn't self in a moment. Either self is being fabricated or it isn't. Either there's equanimity or there isn't.

So this idea of a spectrum, which just goes subtler and subtler, and it's part of the beauty and the art to trace it and understand it—that's really, really important.

I think this question is about territories and responsiveness. I've been trying throughout much of this retreat to figure out how to stay in one territory. I'm working in the third jhana space, and I'm wondering about what you said regarding contentment being one of the levels. I've been following this and notice there are edges where I drop out into another space. One of them is with contentment, and I'm really trying to figure out the edge of where that is—how far down to go in my experience of what's coming up in terms of contentment.

I notice in the middle range there's a very particular atmosphere, exactly as you described for the third jhana space, with contentment. When I go lighter, there's a kind of perfect contentment—quite light feeling. But then I notice I can go really very low with the contentment and still have the qualities like the sukha and peacefulness. But the contentment becomes quite a lot bigger. It's more like a deep well of rich contentment feeling rather than the perfect contentment kind of feeling. I'm wondering how this is still within the range.

When you go deeper, the contentment is not perfect—is that what you're saying?

No, it gets more rich and deeper in my experience rather than quite light and gentle—not quite uplifting,

but more light and gentle. But it still feels like perfect contentment.

Well, that's fine. The contentment thing is not the primary indicator. It's just me pointing out a bandwidth that, if you really want to develop sensitivity to all these different levels, is good to know and hang out with. Might it take different flavors and colors at different times? Yes. But the primary thing is the contentment, and it really feels extremely satisfying. Then you're still in the contentment.

I want to say a couple more things. Again, there's real encouragement to marinate. Especially if different things are opening, it can be very tempting to want to just slide around everywhere and check out what's this, what's that. But as we've been emphasizing right from the beginning, the fruits of this particular set of practice—what we call jhana practice—will come from marinating. This means many, many times over and over, just putting yourself, submerging yourself and holding, sustaining something for as long as you can: an hour, two hours, longer, three, whatever, four. Just sit in something over and over and over. That's going to do something to mind, heart and body that just won't get the chance to happen if we're sliding around too much.

If you've done a lot of soul-making and imaginal practice, oftentimes one doesn't actually... One of the amazing things about soul-making practice is just a couple of minutes sometimes with an image can be incredibly potent. It's also true that a couple of minutes with a jhana can be incredibly potent, but it's much more the case that if we really marinate for much longer in a jhana, it's going to do something that it won't do in just a couple of minutes.

It's actually quite rare for a soul-making practitioner or an imaginal practitioner to really spend hours and hours and hours revisiting the same image and just really being with that. At least I haven't put that out as an offering. I haven't heard anyone really do that. It's not really what we're doing so much with imaginal practices. There's a difference here.

I'm going to say this very briefly because I know some of you don't know this territory at all about soul-making Dharma, so I'll say this for those of you who do. In case you are a soul-maker and you find yourself taking the same kind of rhythms into jhana practice—just moving quite quickly with all these lovely amazing things opening up—

When we're with an image, when we're with an erotic imaginal image, when there's eros for an image—I don't mean by that sexual eros necessarily, though it could mean that—we're doing something different. We're resonating and being with it, but we want to maintain the two-ness. Remember this from soul-making teachings? Why? Because eros needs two-ness. Eros needs the polarity and the imaginal needs the eros. Without the eros, the imaginal folds, and without the two-ness, the eros folds and therefore the imaginal folds.

In jhana practice, actually what we're doing is, as much as we can—that's the 'A' of SASSIE—can I dissolve into this?

Can I kind of dissolve my body into the peacefulness or whatever it is? So it's almost like in imaginal practice, the duality is maintained, and self doesn't dissolve into its object. There's not that even intentional direction. We maintain this polarity, this erotic tension between self and imaginal object. Lovely as that is, but we're not letting it collapse into oneness. In jhana practice, the movement is actually to let it dissolve.

In imaginal practice, the self also might start to become imaginal. Here's this wonderful imaginal object and the self also starts to become imaginal. In jhana practice, the self should become less and less of a sense of self. Back to the spectrum of self, it's actually less and less of a self. It's more and more dissolved.

So these are really, really important differences. The movement is towards less—we could say less polarity, less duality in jhana practice. Whereas in imaginal practice, you're actually sustained—not always, but for the most part, you want to sustain some sense of duality and polarity. Sometimes you can let yourself go there, dissolve that way a little bit, merge, union and all that. But if you do too much of that, it will just dissolve the whole thing.

Do we ever reach a state of complete non-duality in jhana practice? No. No matter what it might feel like. Again, here's one of those spectra. It's a spectrum of less and less separation. Not necessarily as you go more and more from one to eight, but your experience of, say, jhana number four at different times might be more or less separate, dualistic.

It never becomes—in my way of understanding—because duality is also a word that I consider a spectrum. So it's very easy to say, "That was a completely non-dualistic experience and the self was gone." It's probably not. In fact, it's definitely not. If there's a jhana, in my way of understanding this, there's still some duality. But still, because of the A being open-ended in SASSY, the movement is towards less duality.

Does this make sense for the soul-making practitioner? So there's a difference. Just check if you're getting around too much—that's a different modality, that's a different rhythm. In the jhana, it's really towards dissolving, dissolving, towards dissolving. You will never completely dissolve. You will never, however absorbed you are, however great the A is of SASSY, there can be more.

So just to delineate between those two.

A participant shared: "I feel like I have a strong erotic relationship to the jhanas and I've had this since piti began to arise, so the way I experience absorption in the jhana is kind of a temporary absorption, but I also have this long-term relationship with the jhana which is soulful and erotic in a sense, and it's very central in my experience of them."

Yes, so I mentioned this very briefly one time. There's so much information, but let me say it again. If I understand what you're saying—in soul-making teachings, we talk about eros. There is this—we define eros as this wanting or movement towards more intimacy, more closeness, more touching, more penetration, more opening with whatever it is. That could be an image, it could be an imaginal person or

whatever. But that definition is, if you like, the seed definition.

The larger definition of eros means that it is—okay, it does that, there's that movement—but in doing that, it ignites and stimulates the whole soul-making dynamic, which involves psyche and logos as well. When psyche and logos get expanded, the object becomes bigger and richer and more multifaceted and more complex, has more beyonds. And then the self becomes imaginal as well.

So outside of meditation, outside of jhana meditation, one might have—and ideally to get the engines really going and the whole relationship with it—one does have an erotic relationship. There is eros in relation to the jhanas in the bigger sense, in the wider sense. There's a whole image, there's a self image: me on the path, me and the history, me and the teacher, me and the jhanas, that territory, their mystical sense. But that's outside of meditation.

In the meditation, it's eros in the smaller sense. We're not letting it go to psyche and logos because it's a kind of proliferation. And we want it simple. It's this thing and I'm just dissolving into it. We don't let the self become imaginal. We don't let the thing become more complex in a way.

We actually want to get more into it like that. So it's a different approach - there's eros, but it's the small version, the seed definition. We can explore this distinction more another time, but I think it's quite important.

There are just a couple of other points I want to touch on before we end. Again, this relates to context. Right now we've been discussing soul-making practice, desire, and equanimity. Yesterday we talked about emotions. Sometimes you hear - perhaps less so these days - that jhanas are dangerous because what you're doing is suppressing emotion. You could be bypassing, engaging in spiritual bypassing, or suppressing emotions related to traumas that are really important to address.

I think as you do more jhana practice, you'll realize more and more that there isn't really suppression happening. The whole idea will become obviously incorrect, at least the way we're practicing it. This is not what's occurring here.

But the wider point is that there's no single practice that's complete and perfect. We really need to have this sense of a larger context. When we're doing jhana practice, yes, we do have a certain leaning or preference in how we relate to difficult emotions when they arise - as I mentioned in the opening talk. But then I have a second-order preference, a third, and a fourth. There's a certain leaning in that direction.

When we do other practices, we'll reverse that order. Is there a danger of spiritual bypassing? Yes, there is. Does everyone know that term? It's like avoiding some issue by hanging out in a nice space, in this case. But we can spiritually bypass through any practice, and there are other dangers. No single practice avoids all dangers or is without pitfalls.

If I never relate to emotions in the way we're exploring on this retreat - this inquiry into whether

something might be a hindrance at its root, giving attention there and letting the mind develop its loveliness - what might I miss? Sometimes when you let the mind develop its loveliness, a difficult memory comes up within that loveliness. Very occasionally, you can place that difficult memory in the loveliness and see what happens. Sometimes it's very clear that I'm not suppressing anything - I'm actually placing it there, or it's arising naturally. There's no sense of blocking or inhibiting emotional responses.

There's something we can learn about emotions through jhana practice that's much more difficult to learn through other modalities or modes of practice. The danger of not doing jhana practice is that we don't learn those particular things about emotions. Are they the complete and final truth about emotions? No, they're not. They're just one perspective, one aspect. But to have this range of understanding, possibility, freedom, and skill with emotions - that's really precious.

We're operating within a certain context here. Of course, I could be in psychotherapy or working with emotions in other ways. Then at some point, someone might ask whether I'm engaging in sociopolitical or ecological bypassing - somewhat akin to what Victor mentioned. There's every possibility of that as well.

There have been critiques of all kinds of spiritual and psychological practices: that I'm getting so absorbed in this particular thing and believing in its reality that I've neglected something else. There's no one practice that will take care of everything. What's really important is the bigger picture - how am I seeing this within a larger mandala of practices that will do their best to cover the whole terrain of what it means to be human, seeing things from different angles and perspectives, working with things in different ways. That's really important.

One final point before we end. How long have we been here? I know it probably feels like decades for some people, but how long? Thirteen days? Usually, around the third or fourth evening of a week-long insight retreat, as I ring the bell for the final sitting, I would say something like: "Check in with how you're feeling right now. It's the end of the daily schedule, but maybe there's actually energy there and you're just going to bed out of habit. Or maybe you feel tired, but actually, if I look into it, it's aversion that's making me tired. Maybe I want to sit up and explore that a little bit."

There would be encouragement to see what's possible in terms of extending the effort on a macro level. So it's thirteen days now, and I don't know where each of you are - you're probably all in different places. But now I'll say this to everyone, though it's one of those things I should have mentioned at the beginning. I thought it was obvious from the way the schedule looked.

The rhythm of retreat extends beyond our formal schedule. While we gather as a group between 9:00 and 9:30 in the evening, the hall remains open. As retreats lengthen, practitioners often discover different rhythms emerging, with much more energy becoming available. Sometimes we find ourselves naturally rising or retiring at unusual times.

It's worth examining: how much of our daily rhythm stems from mere habit? Sometimes fear drives our

choices—we worry about being tired tomorrow. Sometimes subtle aversion masquerates as tiredness. We think we need sleep, but actually we're pushing things away very gently, and the mind closes down. Going to bed becomes a way of avoiding what's present.

Similarly, the meditative day need not begin at 6:45. That may suit your rhythm, but I invite you to listen inwardly, feeling what seems possible and right, sensing your energy capacity. If you're uncertain, experiment a little. While the old practice of progressively reducing sleep has fallen out of favor—and I don't think it's wise—there is value in listening deeply, discovering your rhythms, and if you're unsure, genuinely experimenting.

All practice spaces remain available during morning work periods, at lunch, after lunch. We've been exploring effort on the micro level—that moment-to-moment capacity to lean back metaphorically into greater receptivity, or to intensify attention right now. This is crucial. But there's also the macro level regarding the rhythm of your day.

Your day can breathe naturally, yet we want to remain listening, responsive, stretching ourselves, experimenting. Sometimes we think, "I know I'm an over-striver, so I shouldn't stay up late or rise early or sit so much." But remember—opening the heart, which we've emphasized throughout this retreat, isn't mutually incompatible with spending more time in formal meditation or extending your effort. If you practice one, the other doesn't disappear.

This time is precious. I truly mean it when I say don't pressure yourself about these three weeks. Yet simultaneously, I hope you sense this preciousness. We're already thirteen days in. Time flies, circumstances change, and some opportunities won't return.

Rather than operating from "should," approach this with sensitivity, attunement, responsiveness, experimentation. How much am I sitting? How much am I exploring my edges? What habitual patterns emerge around formal practice, bedtime, rising time? How much stems from habit? How much from subtle fear? How much from gentle aversion?

Instead of formulas—everyone should sleep exactly this many hours—I invite you to extend that same sensitivity, attunement, responsiveness and experimentation to this domain as well. Play with it. See what unfolds, without any sense of obligation. But we must experiment to discover certain truths and recognize what's possible.

Let's rest together in some quiet now.

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