Q & A

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:15:56

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A period is open for questions if anyone would like to ask.

I have a question about primary nimittas, and you've talked about satellite states a few times. Last night as I was practicing with my base practice, it didn't feel like there were primary nimittas of pīti or sukha around initially. Then after a while I noticed a sense of physical well-being in the body, which didn't exactly feel like pīti as I'd been used to, and it didn't really feel like happiness either. It was more of a physical, gentle calm. But that was what was around, so I tried to absorb into it, and that worked to some degree. There was quite a lot of absorption into that state.

But it didn't feel jhanic in the ways that other states have felt before, and so then I started thinking, is this some kind of satellite state? Do all of the jhānas have satellite states? And then I also thought, perhaps this is another kind of pīti which I haven't encountered—a sense of physical well-being, but it just didn't fit the box of how I've conceived of pīti before.

I also have some questions around primary nimittas. You've encouraged us that the primary nimitta needs to be what we focus on in jhāna practice. And I began to wonder, why is that? If love is one of the characteristics of the second jhāna, for example, why do you not encourage people to focus on those aspects? And then also some questions around soulmaking, where you talk about an infinitude of qualities that we can theoretically absorb into. So it's not one question, but just an exploration of those themes.

Well, how nice was it?

It was nicer than any hindrances. It wasn't... I think it could have been a bit brighter, perhaps. It felt a little bit low energy, maybe. The pleasure could have been brighter.

Yeah, the pleasure or the state—the state itself.

It doesn't sound, again, it's like when to fuss over is it, isn't it? But that's partly what you're asking. So it doesn't sound jhanic. And yes, there are lots—the nature of the pīti will change over time and it will certainly change, as I said, after you've gotten more into the third, fourth, et cetera. They really have an effect on the pīti. But the pītis, they have an effect, but it's still really yummy. It's not just that they make it kind of bland. It's actually really nice. It's just different—it's mellower, but really, really nice.

And so yes, probably there are what we could talk about as satellite states or states in the neighborhood.

I'm not sure I would call that a satellite state or state in the neighborhood. I'll talk hopefully in the next few days about different kinds of satellite states where there's this very clear, amazing state, and there's this very clear, amazing state, and there's this very clear, amazing state, and they have some things really in common as if they're part of a larger constellation.

In a way, what it sounds like you're talking about is something where some of the jhāna factors are a little bit gathered together, but not really in a way that they're blossoming. I don't know, strictly speaking, I would call that a satellite state, but it's in a certain territory.

The question practically then is, is this fruitful to hang out in? And obviously compared to papañca and compared to whatever else, it's skillful, it's fruitful. Is it going to be fruitful in the way that I can hang out in it and the way that I'm hanging out with it allows it to blossom into an actual jhanic state of, say, peacefulness or something like that? That takes... As I said when I talked about the third jhāna, it's a much safer bet to go through the happiness and really drink. It's not to say that it's impossible the other way, with just this kind of nice, calm feeling. It's not that it's impossible, and it's worth playing with and trying, but generally speaking, it will be more the other way, from a really ripe, full, fleshy satisfaction.

It didn't feel like how I would think the third jhāna would feel. It wasn't refined in that way. It was sort of the similar level of refinement as pīti but just without the movement and energy.

It doesn't sound at all like the third jhāna. So a lot of people—it would be very common, we've talked about this several times now—mistake a kind of sense of calmness, maybe even one that they're familiar with, deep peacefulness, very quiet mind, et cetera, for that territory.

But the question is whether the way that I'm being with it can refine it. So it didn't feel refined, but the question is: can I be with it in a way that refines it?

It is possible, but that's going to depend on a lot of things. Partly it will depend on whether I really have a lot of experience with the third jhāna, because then the chances of a state like that refining into the third jhāna are much higher. If I don't really have much experience of the third jhāna—and I mean the real third jhāna deal—then the chances of a state like that refining and ripening just through careful attention aren't impossible, but they're not very high. Rather, it's much more likely to ripen through the second jhāna and that real fullness and really getting into it.

As for the other secondary nimittas, none of this is black and white. Of course, there's a lovely love there. You're going to want to explore that. It's just that if you make that your primary thing, it will ripen into something else. It will go in a different direction. What we pay attention to is what gets amplified, and it also sets a direction.

If we were on a retreat about exploring metta and different heart openings and different kinds of love, then of course we would do that. But because we're on a jhāna retreat, it's really something to keep this intention—it's like, okay, this is my road. Yes, there are lots of interesting things at the side of the road,

and I can explore all that, but I need to remember: this is my road if we want to develop the jhānas.

As to soul making, there's an infinitude of different states and lovely things and different openings. Yeah, I guess the question is that we're selecting in the jhāna path—there's a very specific trajectory that we've been talking about. And then there's a curiosity about the outcomes: How does it unfold if one begins to absorb into these other qualities?

Sometimes in the second jhāna, or just in the sitting, there's a sense of nobility, for example. That would be more of an imaginal practice of taking that as an object or feeling the resonance of that. Though it may or may not be a fully imaginal practice—it could just be an energetic practice.

We did something on the opening evening about getting in touch with the sense of devotion. Do you remember that? Something like that's very skillful. Lawrence mentioned working with anger, then it goes to power. Those things are emotional, energetic practices, transformations. They don't necessarily need to be imaginal. For something to be imaginal, it involves a lot of different things happening.

All of these fruits are there. But like I said, what do we want to do? And it's not better or worse, because for some person, actually being able to feel into their devotion that's connected with their desire that way and actually feel it in the energy body and let that empower—that's huge.

For another person, like what Lawrence was talking about, the ability to be with anger in a way that's not fragmenting the being, driving them crazy, hurting everyone around them, toxic, et cetera—to actually distill that energetically, emotionally, and find the power and strength there that everything coheres around, and then sit in that, and act from there, speak from there, be from there, perceive from there. That's huge.

Those things are huge. So again, we have to really get clear: what is the larger context of what we're doing here? To me, the larger context of what we're doing here, as I said in the opening, sits within all these other practices and feeds and complements all of them, and is fed and complemented by all of them. But it's also distinct.

If we're walking down this road, there's all sorts of "Look at that lovely pear on that tree. Oh, and look at that over there." And it's fantastic. In the context of our larger life of practice, yes, we can go to that. There's a side road down where the apple orchard is or whatever it is. Brilliant! But jhānas won't deepen unless that intention is really, "This is my road, this is my road, this is my road."

It doesn't mean you can't have a few apples and pears on the way, but there's something about keeping it that way to deepen in jhānas. There are more potential riches and openings than anyone can ever experience in their whole lifetime, whoever you are. And that's the thing, especially when you get talking about soul making.

There are things that are part of what I would call basic Dharma training—by which I mean things like

working with anger that way, things like being able to get a sense of my nobility and have that energized in the heart and affect my sense of self and my life, things like being with the sense of devotion and letting that empower, things like working with the emotions, emptiness, all that. That's all a very large plate of stuff to get through in terms of basic Dharma practices—very possible.

But once you get to soul making, it becomes infinite. By the nature of what the soul making dynamic does, it will always create new openings, new states, new perceptions, new territory, new beyonds. It will create and discover new aspects of reality. So there's a distinction there.

I guess what I was calling the tray or the play of basic Dharma practice is probably quite wide compared to some other presentations.

Provisionally from a teaching point of view, if you think, "Oh, have I now gone into my first jhāna? Have I skipped ahead and I'm calling something that's actually the beginnings of the third jhāna the first jhāna? Am I still calling that the first jhāna and then calling the sukha something else?"

From my point of view, it doesn't actually matter that much. What matters is that you're exploring these territories with some kind of map sense, and you're getting familiar with different territories and different energies. The precise labeling of "this is first jhāna, this is second jhāna" - while it can be helpful - is not the most crucial thing.

What's more important is that you're developing familiarity with these different qualities of energy, these different textures of consciousness and embodiment. You're learning to navigate between them, to recognize them, to cultivate them. That's the real skill development that's happening.

So yes, I think you're very much on the right track. Keep exploring with that sense of curiosity and openness that you seem to have. The refinement you're noticing in what you're calling pīti is quite typical - these energies do tend to become more subtle and refined as we get more familiar with them.

And the wild, bubbling quality of what you're experiencing as sukha is also completely normal. Sometimes sukha can indeed be quite exuberant, especially when we're first getting to know it. As you spend more time with it, you may find it has its own range of expressions, from the more effervescent to the more smooth and flowing.

The key is to stay curious about both, to keep visiting them, and to notice how they feel different in your body and awareness.

I see what you mean. If that's a concern, though, I would check with the emotion, because the emotion in the sukha is going to be primarily this very warm, tender, exquisite peacefulness or satisfaction—whatever it is, depending on the level.

But you're shaking your head, so it sounds like it's not problematic.

"No, the emotion is clear. It's more the refinement that I was concerned about."

Okay. Yeah. So I don't know, other than just hang out in both—lots and lots—and hopefully it will get clear. It should get clear. But don't rush all these things. Probably everyone's got kind of post-it notes still at this point, and that's appropriate. Things mature, things change. We notice different territories. We notice more as time goes on.

So it's all basically really nice. You're enjoying it, and it's just asking you to get more and more familiar with it. And then it will get clearer.

"I have a question about going from second to third. Sometimes it feels like—especially if it's come from quite a bubbly end of second—when I get into third, it's like coming from a really bright place into a darkened room, where it's kind of hard at first to make out the nuances of third. Because it's like, okay, right, it feels peaceful, but I haven't yet seen the crystal clarity or the tenderness or the divinity or those qualities. And I found that sometimes I actually end up in a space a bit like what Juho was saying, which is not really what I thought it was. So it's like, okay, that's not quite the kind of deep, dark pool of third. What would you recommend at that point? Is it just better to go back or try and refine?"

You could go back, because probably that place you're describing that's not quite it is, as I said, one of these habit results of your insight practice over the years. It's a state of relative equanimity and quietness, and the mind has got quite used to that, so you're ending up in that.

So one thing you could do is come back to the second and maybe you could even start feeling the drinking of the happiness as satisfying, as a verb in present tense. You understand? And maybe that will take you to the satisfied. So you're tuning a little bit more to something more specific that's more related to the third. So that's one option.

Another option might be—and this should be possible with time—that you can, since a lot of this just starts to become memory and subtle intention, you're actually remembering the whole set of qualities of the third jhana. That whole gorgeous, realm-like, exquisite—we're using words like divine—you're actually remembering that flavor and you bring that. You actually go there, but try going there by memory of those things.

Does that make sense? So it's really a realm that you're remembering, almost, as opposed to just hanging out. Because you've been practicing so long, there's probably a lot of momentum and habitual momentum to get into these other states that are, as we've been saying, relatively skillful, relatively equanimous, relatively peaceful, relatively non-eventful. It's all good, but if you want to make sure you don't bypass the actual third jhana—which by this point you can see the qualitative difference is quite marked—then you have to aim a little more.

Either in the process of the second jhana with the satisfying, satisfying—you see what you're doing there? You're actually inclining the mind towards a certain emotion in the present whose fulfillment is the third

jhana. Does that make sense?

Or, as I said, you're remembering a whole realm—other aspects of the realm apart from the fact that there's equanimity and peace there.

It may not be ready for that, but it may be getting there. We have to see. But that's part of the whole mastery deal. And you can maybe remember that when it's going well in the second jhana. You can maybe just lightly, subtly intend to remember that. Okay. Does that make sense?

Yeah, no, that's really helpful.

Good. I just want to ask one more thing about... So yesterday I was sitting with a really bright, bubbly, quite silly actually happiness in second jhana, just really enjoying it, and then suddenly this spontaneous "not me, not mine" came out of it just completely from nowhere. It was really surprising. And so then I had this happiness that wasn't about anything and didn't belong to anybody. And it had this kind of—it was just really wonderful, magical, just like, wow. And I just wanted to know whether there was anything worth exploring there or whether I should shelve that for later.

I think that probably, to some extent, to some degree or other, there is less self-identification with the happiness in the territory of the second jhana. So usually when we're happy, it's connected to a story and quite a more fabricated sense of self who is feeling very happy about something or other. And there's a whole projection in time and with one's life and all that's going—even if I'm not thinking, thinking, thinking, that's all there. It's all being fabricated to a certain extent: the self and then taking this happiness personally. Does this make sense?

In the second jhana, naturally—which I'll get to in the next couple of days—the self is, as we go through the jhanas, less and less fabricated. Maybe I'll modify that statement at some point, but it's less and less fabricated. So in the second jhana, there's very little personality. There's very little story. There's very little background history and where I'm going and what I want and the whole rest of it. There's even very little psychological history. It's just happiness. So already, to a certain extent, there's a kind of—to some degree or other, there's a sort of—it's not perfectly "not me or mine" in the same way that it would be for the usual sense of self. Do you understand?

So it might be just that you're—this is something we kind of notice as it goes on anyway. But because it's a little less identified, then it lends itself more to being seen as less identified. And you have a history of "not me, not mine" practice of anatta, of disidentifying. So it just kind of piggybacks on that.

Or rather, it's available as a practice. And again, I hope to talk about this at some point, and maybe even a few times on this retreat: we turn an insight way of looking onto a jhana. The jhana itself, or the primary nimitta, becomes an object for an insight way of looking. I wouldn't recommend that to anyone at this point. It's a whole other level of skill and art.

But one can then regard this or that jhana—the whole thing or one aspect of it—as "not me, not mine, not me, not mine." And that becomes a super powerful practice. You have to stay with it, stay with it, stay with it and see what happens. But I wouldn't do that before you really know that jhana inside out and it's really got established. Again, if you do that too early, so to speak, you risk being the foolish inexperienced cow kind of thing that the Buddha was talking about. It will probably just slide all over without kind of knowing where you are, and then you might lose control.

The jhanas themselves need to be consolidated, thoroughly familiar, thoroughly steady and established. And then for some people, they can start doing their insight ways of looking on the jhana itself. And that, as I said, is a both very lovely but super powerful way of practicing. But I will try and talk more about that another time.

Yeah. Thanks. Yeah. Good. Good.

I think Mikhail had one.

Yeah, thank you. I have a quick technical question about steadiness and enjoyment. What to do when it seems that when I emphasize steadiness, I start to lose somehow the capacity to enjoy, and when I emphasize enjoyment, I lose my steadiness and mind starts easily wandering. They seem somehow to close each other out to some extent.

Continue beautifying this talk (part 6/14). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

So what could be the answer? What exactly happens when you emphasize the enjoyment?

My way to emphasize enjoyment generally is to open and open and open to the enjoyment and really let go—somehow fall into the lap of, say, happiness or pīti or something. I really like to let go and let the whole consciousness and energy body sense open, and I just fall somehow into the arms of the nimitta. I wondered if this really opening, opening, opening strategy is actually causing some... like I'm opening, it's kind of like too much.

Well, yes, thank you for saying that. This is so individual and can change with time. But just immediately when you say that, it sounds like you can't open too much, but what you can do is open too much relative to how much probing you're doing.

There's no end to how much you can open. I don't think there is. We're infinitely deep human beings. We can just open and open. But relative to how much penetration and probing you're doing, you can hear it in the way you language it, Mikhail. When you're doing that, you're kind of going into quite a passive mode. And that's the problem.

Whereas when you're penetrating and probing with the intention, the agenda of enjoying, then it's really

like they go together. The enjoyment and the sustaining go together. You understand? So it sounds like for you right now, in the mix of things, upping the penetrative probing with the enjoyment—in the mix.

For other people, for a lot of people, it's more opening that needs to happen. I said this already—people can think, "Oh, but I am opening," but actually they're not. One isn't opening as much as one could. But one's so used to only a limited amount of opening in the being that one thinks, "Well, I'm opening." But actually there's more opening to be able to do there.

So all this is very individual. But if you keep in mind—you know, there are lots of modes of attention—but if you keep in mind these two principles, one's a bit more yang, if you like, and one's a bit more yin. One's a bit more active, one's a bit more passive or receptive. If you just keep that in mind and the necessity to play with both and to move around, then the question becomes: well, it may not be because it's all going fine, or it might be like, "Am I overdoing it a little bit right now on one or the other?"

And "right now" might be for the six months I've gotten into a habit of overdoing on one side or the other, or it might be just in this moment or this five minutes or whatever. Does that make sense?

So when you probe, there's no mutual exclusivity between enjoying and sustaining. If I'm probing trying to enjoy to the max, I will obviously try and sustain, of course. But if I go into too receptive a mode, then everything gets a bit loose and I'm not doing any work. I'm not really working there. I'm expecting everything to happen.

But again, this is an answer I'm giving you right now, and for someone else it might be that what's needed is the other one—oftentimes without realizing it or recognizing that's what's needed.

Thank you. Would you say generally that steadiness arises out of the balance of opening and probing? When it really hits the sweet spot of opening and probing at the moment, at the nimitta, at the context of the practice—that's where the steadiness arises?

I'm not sure. I feel a bit... I'm hesitant to say that. The probing and the opening thing is a very fluid, responsive, sort of unformulaic thing. So really we were just saying the most general thing, like don't neglect one for the sake of the other.

So I'm not sure there's a sweet spot per se, as much as just... that whole movement is not only going to help sustaining, it's going to help deepening, it's going to help absorbing, it's going to help all kinds of things.

If you go back to the Buddha's original image—or rather the image for the soap mixer with the first jhāna—it's quite active. You're kind of mixing something. There's something about moving between those modes that's also part of it, mixing. And in a way that applies to the other jhānas as well, in a way, or at a much subtler level.

So I don't know that it's just about sustaining as much as the whole show just works better. It's like kneading bread, working it in the flour.

Alright, thank you. Is that Nick back there?

It's just related to part of that question about the probing and the receptivity. You just called it passive as well as the more active being with the nimitta. Naturally, I'm just much more receptive. That's where the opening comes much more naturally.

With PT, it's really about opening to that experience. I've been working to develop a sense of what the probing is like, since it's unfamiliar to me. What I found is that several times when I've taken a part of the energy body that has felt particularly strong in PT and really put my concentration there to probe into that, what tends to happen is that immediately there's an opening.

The sense in the energy body then is that the probing goes almost immediately into an opening. It's like the sensation there just opens right up quite expansively. I feel like I've lost the probing already, and I don't know if this is just because I'm not very skilled at it yet or if that's something that naturally happens. When you probe into anything, there's space in there, and that's what you kind of fall into. So I'm a little confused about how to work with that.

Yeah, I think what you're describing is very normal. That's where the image of someone diving into a lake becomes helpful as a way to understand the probing movement. The body becomes streamlined in its shape when you're diving, not just splattering into the lake. If you're diving, there's this streamlined probing of one point in the water, but then very quickly you find yourself surrounded by water. You aimed at a point, but then it was like, "Oh, now I'm in a new territory."

So that may happen, as you're describing, very quickly, or it may happen at some point when you're probing. Very normal. But then you can just do the same thing again. So it's not like you're getting it wrong. You can just probe again, and again, and again. It's not like you need to rush—"Right, same again, immediately, quick, don't lose any time." The whole thing is simply: what feels helpful right now?

If it feels good, great. Then you may try doing it again and again and again, or you may at some point switch to a more open mode. It's not that we're trying to eliminate any gaps in the probing or any interruptions. If it's opening that way, something is working.

Does it mean that you can't sustain the probe in one area, that it just won't sustain, but you can go back a bit later and probe somewhere else? Or can you stay much more in the probing mode?

Let's take this person who dives into a lake. They dive and they dive, and then they're underwater and it's all around them. They could, if they want, just keep going in the same direction. They're in a bigger space now, but they could just keep going in the same direction. It's something like that. Their perception shifts—rather than a spot that they're aiming at, aiming to dive right on that spot in the water, their perception is now that it's three-dimensional around them, but they can keep going in the same direction. It's more like a direction.

I'm wondering about the spectrum between pīti and sukha, because I've been exploring the really, really subtle, fine end of pīti, where it's just these beautiful, tiny explosions, and I'm loving it. Then there are times—and I'm less familiar with the sukha—but there are times when I'm in that bubbly, really bubbly energy that feels like it has much more pīti in it than the fine end of pīti does.

I've been playing with cross-fading pīti and sukha, and it seems almost like pīti has this spectrum here, and then the second jhāna spectrum is here, as though you can almost go finer in pīti than you might at the top of the second jhāna.

Can I offer something and see if it helps? There is a spectrum of refinement across all the jhānas. The eighth jhāna is just unbelievably refined compared to any of the others, and certainly compared to the first.

So there's that spectrum of refinement.

Then there's a spectrum of refinement... Well, again, it's maybe these words subtlety and refinement that get a bit confused. So I would probably say there's a spectrum of... Let's use the word calming and refinement differently. What gets confusing is maybe the word subtlety.

There's a spectrum of calming sukha, for instance, through the second jhana. There's a spectrum of calming the peacefulness and the sukha in the third jhana as it gets towards the fourth jhana. In the first jhana, although piti has a large range, in a way it's not that the deeper end of piti has a subtler or more refined piti.

If I said anything, I probably wasn't that clear because I think these words are getting slightly overlapped and confused and I'm perhaps not being consistent with using them. The thing about subtle piti is just that if that's all there is, then we need to be good with that and be able to work with it. And really be okay with that.

"Yeah, I've been loving subtle piti, I feel. It's incredibly..."

Okay, can I just say one more thing? So that's all we need to do. If you're loving it and you can work with it and you can get into it, great, fine, tick. You've passed that particular thing.

And generally speaking, if I've got all the other elements of mastery of piti, then I really want to just be getting into the piti, no matter how strong it is, until it just goes to the second jhana, rather than keeping it at a subtle, or what you're calling refined state. Do you understand? It's like, let's just do this thing until it gives birth to the sukha. And then we're going with the sukha. Does that make sense?

"Yeah, that makes sense. It was kind of like a nerdy question more than a problem, really. I think that happened, and I can tell the difference of refinement and the quality between the piti and the sukha. The bodily sensation of them feel different, and that seems clear to me. It just seems like there's..."

There are probably all kinds of nerdy—your word—corners we could get interested in and all that. But in terms of what we want to do on this retreat, it may well be it's time for the second jhana and really, really ripening into that and really getting into that. And then maybe sometime later you can come back and explore this level, in terms of priorities.

So it may well be, and there are all kinds of interesting things, and that's great, but just in terms of setting our priorities, it might be that it's ripe now and this would be holding yourself back a little bit unnecessarily. We want to move on. Sounds like it to me.

"I've developed two habits in my working with piti that I wanted to check out with you and just make sure I'm not veering off course. The first is because I think I'm not so good at probing without probing too hard and kind of turning it into what was the word the Buddha used?"

Snatching.

"Yeah. I find myself kind of micro-probing just for a second. Like, pleasure over here, pleasure over there, pleasure over here. And what can the being do to maximize it just for a split second here or there? Does that feel like a suitable substitute? Should I work on the way you describe it more?"

My intuition would be no, it probably wouldn't really cohere that way and it would be much more useful—and probably useful in your life as well—to be able to really sustain a kind of probing intensity without it being too tight. It's not just jhanic skill here, but there's probably a mirroring on a life level of what it is to really be able to focus on something and sustain that effort and sustain intensity without it being problematic.

But really, having said what my intuitive sense would be, I should have first said, well, how does it work? Does it work well?

"It has resulted in jhana, first jhana a few times. It's probably the most useful thing so far, but I haven't had a whole lot of... I don't feel super successful about attaining jhana on this retreat compared to my expectations."

So you could do it sometimes and also think about developing the capacity to probe, be very directed, be intense without it being a kind of problematic grasping. View that as something that you could develop. But don't give up this because as you said, it's been successful sometimes.

In the end, we want to find out what works best for you. No matter what I say or anyone else, it's really what works best for you. But if you've got nothing to compare it to, then you're not actually going to know. Is this the optimal thing for me, this method? Or actually, is it second or even fifth best?

And there may well be - like many of these practices - when we talk about opening, when we talk about hanging out, there are fruits to developing certain ways of working that may be worth more than the jhana itself. In terms of life, in terms of desire, in terms of capacity to be intense sometimes in life and

sustain that intensity. Some of these things are much more significant than whether or not I get into the first jhana or whatever it is.

Try a few things, and it may well be that what you're describing actually is your method and it works fine no matter what anyone else says. But you don't know yet because you haven't tried enough.

"And the other thing that I find myself doing - you've said maximize the pleasure. And I think because of all my insight practice, I noticed that my attention goes so easily to pain. Maybe it's just being human. What I noticed myself doing yesterday was, how could this not hurt? This place of pain? Because when the jhana comes, gross pain pretty much just goes away. And what I was finding yesterday was that focusing on a spot where there's pain, the pain would go down just from the attention. I guess there's a certain degree of letting go in the way the attention is. I'm not sure - it doesn't really seem synonymous with focus on pleasure or maximize the pleasure. I'm just wondering your thoughts on that."

Well, there are two things. First of all, I didn't say maximize the pleasure. I said maximize the enjoyment. They're very different, right? Pleasure is in the object. Enjoyment is in my relationship with the object. Do you understand the difference? That's really important.

Then just now you said "focus on the pleasure." And that was an instruction at some points. Because what we are trained in - maybe just as human beings, or habitually, certainly as insight meditators - is paying attention to the unpleasant and the difficult. Mostly that's what most people spend most of their insight meditation retreats doing: paying attention to what's difficult in one way or another. And there's a real encouragement given for that and developing of willingness.

So when you come to jhana practice you realize that sometimes what you can choose to do is focus on the pleasant. When there's unpleasant and pleasant, you can focus on the pleasant. You can choose to do that, and in doing that you can learn all sorts of things - not just about the tendency of the mind. Actually, it's really hard because the mind keeps wanting to go to the unpleasant. Why don't you just stay there? It just will go there. There's something to learn about the tendency and habit patterns of the mind, but there's also something to learn about dependent arising.

Sometimes when I focus on the pleasant, that pleasant amplifies and it takes over and the unpleasant disappears. What's going on? What do I need to understand about perception there?

So there are at least two things to understand if that's the case. One is just a jhanic skill. If I want to develop in samadhi, there are many occasions when it will be more helpful to focus on the pleasant and not the unpleasant. There's a life skill in that, but there's also a samadhi meditative skill in that.

But then there's another level that has to do with dependent arising, dependent arising of perception. How is it that this pain that has been there for however long disappeared, was unfabricated when I looked at the pleasant? Really, really important.

Then there's a third option or third category which is, as you said, sometimes I bring the attention to the unpleasant and the unpleasant disappears. Just bringing attention to it makes it disappear. A certain kind of attention. That's the thing. It's a certain kind of attention because I can certainly bring... This is the thing. We talk about mindfulness as if mindfulness is just mindfulness and it's a pure thing. You bring mindfulness to this, you bring mindfulness to that.

We don't bring mindfulness alone. We bring mindfulness plus about a hundred other things—perhaps not literally a hundred, but we bring mindfulness plus intention, plus relationship, plus subtle aversion or grasping, plus equanimity, plus metta, plus self-view, plus reality view. All of this is present in a moment of so-called "bare attention." It's not bare at all. There's no such thing. Do you understand this? This is really, really important.

So what you find is that sometimes I bring attention to a pain and it makes it worse because there's more aversion wrapped up in it, or there's a certain view, or a certain time view—"how much longer?"—or whatever it is. All kinds of things get wrapped up in the mindfulness in that moment, and while I'm looking at it, this is actually fabricating more unpleasantness.

Other times one looks and brings an attention, and what's wrapped up in that attention—or what's absent from that attention—allows the pain to unfabricate. Still other times you bring attention and it just stays the same. Whatever's in the mix of mindfulness is holding it at a level point.

Two important things emerge here. One is to realize this fundamental truth. There's an old teaching—I remember a teacher saying that if you pay attention to a pain, three things could happen: it could go away, it could get worse, or it could stay the same. What's the insight there? The insight was: you can't do anything about it, just put up with it. In other words, you're not in control of pain. This isn't my teaching—have you heard this before? It doesn't matter anyway.

What we're exploring here is whether I can realize two things that are extremely significant. First, that there isn't such a thing as bare attention or pure mindfulness. And how do I know that? Because I start experimenting—I'll try to talk about this more tomorrow—because I start experimenting with noticing what else is in the mindfulness and then changing what else is in the mindfulness, playing with what else is in the mindfulness. And that equals playing with perception.

What is it to have a mindfulness that has much less aversion in it? What is it—going back to Andy's question—what is it to have a mindfulness that has much less "this pain is not me or mine," much less identification? What is it to have a mindfulness that has much less "this is a real thing" or much less time sense in it? These are all factors in the real sense of the word—from the Latin "to do"—so they do stuff, and we want to realize that.

The only way we can really realize this is by actually getting skilled, learning the art of playing with this. It's really, really subtle. And you start to realize: when I bring this kind of attention—let's say with no

aversion—the pain will decrease. When I bring that kind of attention—let's say with more aversion—it will increase, and so forth with all these other elements.

Playing with this equals what I'm going to call insight ways of looking. I start to get really interested in how the way of looking affects the perception. In this case we're talking about pain, but it could be anything. That's the whole road of insight meditation, in my view. I start learning about playing with perception and its effects on the perception of anything—the dependent arising of perception.

This has to do with emptiness. I'll go into this more when I talk about it further. The meaning is that this pain does not exist as a thing unto itself. It's dependent on how I look at it. When I say "how I look at it" or "way of looking," I mean how I relate to it—everything that's involved in my sensing of it. This "way of looking" is just shorthand for what's in my sensing of it: my conception of self, of it, of reality, of materiality, of time, and also my relationship with it. A little bit of pushing away, or a little bit of "I need to hang on to this because it's important"—all of that is part of the way of looking.

The art is to really start exploring all that and really playing with it, eventually coming to the conclusion that this thing, and that thing, and that thing—everything, everything—no thing exists independently of a way of looking. Nothing exists by itself. And that's what emptiness means.

Everything is empty of independent existence, of an existence inherently independent of the way of being looked at in the moment.

So there's a lot here. At the moment, it sounds like what you're bringing is a skillful attention and it's disappearing. Now, what I'm adding to that is fantastic. And that little discovery there should pique your interest. There's a huge, gorgeous avenue of insight exploration that takes you to the most profound insights if you want to follow it and explore all that.

But in the context of jhana retreat, what order do we choose these approaches? So here's this pain. First thing is maybe don't focus on it. Just focus on the pleasantness. That's my first choice in the context of jhana retreat. I'm still learning about dependent arising there if the pain disappears.

But if that doesn't work in this context, then I can bring the attention to the difficult. Since you're doing metta as your base practice, I can work with it in two different ways. One is what we mentioned already: what if I make that very difficulty, that very unpleasantness, that stuckness or whatever it is, the center of the metta? In terms of attention, I'm bringing a certain kind of attention to it. I'm looking at it in a certain way. There's a certain way of looking that involves the imagination, where the metta is coming from. That would be a second choice way of working.

But a third choice in this context—in other contexts, it would be the first choice—is that you bring the attention to it, but you take care of what's wrapped up in that attention, primarily in terms of aversion and identification. There are lots of other possibilities. As we get deeper in this whole insight exploration, you also get much wider in terms of how many possibilities there are, and also the power of different

ways of looking.

So just to finish, going back to what was mentioned: to view something as not me, not mine. This pain is not me or mine. The conventional view is that it's happening in my shoulder or whatever. So automatically, without thinking about it, we identify with it. It's me or mine. To bring in a view and actually practice this subtle view—it's not a philosophy. It's a subtly woven into the attention. Or you could say what we're doing is subtly taking out the habitual subtle me-mine. Rather than adding something, you're actually taking something out.

As you develop this more and more, there are more powerful ways of looking. To get to the point where you're sensing this pain and woven into the sensing is "it's not real, it's empty. It doesn't exist independently." That's an even more powerful approach that works even more powerfully to unfabricate.

You could flip it around in the negative. Actually, it looks like you're doing something extra. People say, "I don't like doing in meditation. I don't like doing. I want to just be." Well, we're doing plenty all the time with this unconscious habitual "me, mine, me, mine" or "it's real." Most people don't walk around thinking and obsessing "it's a real knee, it's a real pain" or whatever. There's just automatically, subconsciously, non-verbally woven into the way of looking...

that's unconsciously fabricating experience 99,999 times out of 100,000. These views of me-mine, not verbal, not conscious, and also views of "this is a real thing"—it's a real thing—are simply woven into our way of perceiving.

At first, of course, when you do these practices, it feels like you're doing something. "Oh, now I have to remember me-mine, me-mine. What a lot of work. I do this over and over," or "not real, not real, empty," and so forth. There are different variations of that. But actually what you're doing is taking away, in that moment, in those moments, a doing that has just become so habitual and so unconscious that you don't even recognize it's a doing. You understand? So you can view that as well as a kind of less doing.

So when Bahiya—who knows the story of Bahiya and the Buddha? Monarchy, surely you know the story of Bahiya. Yes. "In the seen, just the seen." What does it mean? What's the Buddha getting at? It's bare attention, right? In the seen, just the seen. You could read it that way.

You could read it as: "In the seen, just the seen. Let's see what else"—S-E-E-N, not S-C-E-N-E—"Let's investigate what else we're adding to the seen habitually, unconsciously, through avidya, through ignorance, that we don't even realize. And in the seen, just the seen—let's start taking those things away. See what happens."

And that's why the Bahiya Sutta ends with a description of the cessation of consciousness and perception, of the unfabricated. There's no air, earth, fire, water, no sun, no moon, no nothing. There's no form, no perception there. If it meant just bare attention—he's given Bahiya this instruction of bare attention, Bahiya has gone and done his bare attention practice—then what should Bahiya end up with? He would

end up with some kind of vivid sense of this moment and its pristine sort of reality. That's what you get from bare attention practice.

But if you actually think about "in the seen, just the seen," maybe hidden in there is a teaching about what else is there. Can we remove those factors and then see what you get? And what will happen is all these factors are fabricators. Every time—to just say in different ways what I said before—every time we're sensing something with an unconscious me-mine or an unconscious sense of its reality, it's fabricating that thing. Start taking out those, and there's lots of hidden ones. Even the belief in a present moment—it's hidden in the conception of time. There's a past, there's a future, there's a present. It's so everyday woven in. No one's walking around saying, "It's a present moment." It's not at that level.

Start taking these things away—what's going to happen? You're going to end up unfabricating, unfabricating, unfabricating, end up in the place that's at the end of the Bahiya Sutta, which is "know this, know that"—disappearance of everything. That's why Bahiya became an Arahant. It's not because he... anyway.

Do you understand? So again, how we can read something or hear something a hundred times. I don't know, how many times have you heard about the Bahiya Sutta or read about it? Many. Yeah, it's very common. And we just read and hear, and we're just thinking with the same old—or reading and hearing, listening with the same old fabrication, same old view, same old box—and it filters out any possibility. Actually, maybe—and I don't mind—but maybe there's a whole other level here, and that actually makes sense of the two parts of the Bahiya Sutta, because otherwise they're very strange. It's an udana sutta. Udana means inspired utterance.

The inspired utterance in that sutta is not the familiar passage about "in the seen, just the seen" - which is what you often hear emphasized in teachings as if that's the golden piece, the instruction for attention. The inspired utterance is actually at the end, when the Buddha describes the unfabricated, the cessation.

If you take the whole sutta as meaning one thing, it becomes a very terse instruction. But if you read it that way, it completely disconnects the two parts of the sutta. They simply don't make sense together - they don't belong together. And the udana disappears. The inspired utterance vanishes, and this is significant. That's why you hardly ever hear it mentioned in the context of the Bahiya Sutta. Do you understand?

The principle here is really that there's a way of understanding what insight meditation is or can be. There's a way of framing insight meditation that keeps opening up deeper and deeper into this territory of emptiness, dependent arising. I would like to explore this further - understanding what attention truly is, and understanding these kinds of experiences you're describing. This is so, so important, potentially profoundly fruitful.

Andrew then asked about applying this same interpretive approach to other core texts: "I really enjoyed that exploration. I wonder if you could do the same thing for the Satipatthana Sutta and Anapanasati Sutta

- the mindfulness suttas. Is there a way you can find clues to deeper insight within them as well? Maybe even find the jhanas in there somewhere."

Let me offer just one clue from the Satipatthana Sutta for now, and perhaps we'll explore more another time. Who remembers the refrain in the Satipatthana Sutta - the repeated chorus that appears after each foundation?

It describes what you pay attention to, then includes a refrain that's usually translated as something like "attending to arising and ceasing" with regard to vedana, or mind states, or whatever foundation is being discussed. We read this and naturally think it's an instruction about anicca, impermanence.

But the Pali word is actually samudaya. This is the same word the Buddha uses in relation to dependent arising and how suffering arises. When he presents the Four Noble Truths, dukkha is something that samudayas - it arises together, it co-arises. The actual phrase could be interpreted as: "pay attention to origination factors and dissolution factors, factors of arising and factors of ceasing."

To me, it's possible to interpret that refrain as saying: pay attention not just to the fact that things arise and cease, but to how they arise and cease. Coming back to your earlier question - here's a pain, and it arises and ceases. Yes, it's valuable to realize that pain is impermanent, and you can develop that practice by noticing more and more impermanence.

Or I could start getting interested in what we've been talking about—the fact that when there's this kind of attention, a pain intensifies or arises more. When there's that kind of attention, it fades. It gets fabricated more, fabricated less. And I start becoming interested in the origination and dissolution factors of vedanā.

Does that make sense?

There are other suttas—and they're kind of repeated, and I can't remember where—where the Buddha says, you know, how do you move from this level of awakening, I think it's to the final level of awakening, and the Buddha says a practitioner should train themselves to pay attention to the aggregates: vedanā and perception and body and all the rest of it—mental formations, consciousness.

The usual English translation is something like "and see, and pay attention, such as its disappearance, such as its arising, such as its disappearance." But I think the emphasis there is on the such. In other words, how? How is it arising? How is it disappearing? Otherwise, it's just a teaching on impermanence, rather than a teaching on this whole business of the dependent arising of perception.

Is this making sense?

This is what I tend to emphasize as being what I feel is the more interesting, profound, liberating and coherent view. Whether it's what the Buddha meant, I'm not particularly interested in that. It's what I tend to teach.

Now, of course, like I said, noticing impermanence is important. Just relatively speaking, the liberative power and the kind of radicality of what gets uncovered is of a whole different order. Because to say that everything's impermanent is—okay, you could say it's radical—but to say that nothing really exists at all as anything is a whole other level of radicality, to me. It's a whole other level of whoa—we've just gone to a whole shift in our reality view.

So this is, again, people will know that's what I tend to emphasize, but the impermanence thing is really important too, and fruitful.

Is that okay for now? I think we're definitely going to need to end, so why don't we have a bit of quiet together?

Thank you, everybody. Time for tea.

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