The Fifth Jhāna (The Realm of Infinite Space)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:34:18

What I wanted to talk about today is the fifth jhāna. Actually, the Buddha never calls it the fifth jhāna, to my knowledge. He calls them the first, second, third, fourth, and then he calls them the realm of this, the realm of that. The fifth jhāna is the realm of infinite space.

I don't know how it is for you, listening to and hearing about things that you may not have experienced yet. For some people, it's super exciting and they want to jump straight there. For some people, it's just—what's that got to do with me?—and something turns off a little bit. For some people, the inner critic kicks in: "Oh, I'm not there yet."

It's always interesting, I've found over the years, talking about or possibly talking about things and areas and experiences and openings and insights where it's often the case that many or some of the people I'm talking to are not there yet, and how that lands. I've noticed that when talking about something, one person is totally transfixed and bewitched and enchanted, while another person is sort of looking out the window.

This is for you and it's for future yous—of which there are actually an infinite amount for each of you—and it's for other beings elsewhere now and in the future.

So, the realm of infinite space. I don't know, how does that sound? Big, yeah. Not a place where you want to lose your keys. Let's see what the Buddha has to say about that.

The practitioner is practicing and has reached a certain place in this very contrived exposition, contrived unfoldment. The stage-by-stage is a teaching contrivance. So they reach a certain stage in their samādhi, and they're sitting there or standing there, walking, whatever, and the thought occurs to them: "What if I, with the complete transcendence of perceptions of physical form—I'm going to come back to retranslate that because I don't like that—with the complete transcending of perceptions of physical form, with the disappearance of perceptions of resistance and not heeding, not attending to perceptions of diversity, realizing space is infinite. What if I then were to enter and remain in the sphere of the infinitude of space?"

Without jumping at the sphere of the infinitude of space, he enters and remains in the sphere of infinitude of space. He sticks with it, that theme, develops it, pursues it, and establishes himself firmly in it. That's all the Buddha says about it. Actually, there's a bit more in other suttas—suttas that for some reason are very rarely talked about, but I'm very fond of them.

But that's one translation. I'm not particularly keen on a lot of that. "The complete transcending of

perceptions of physical form" is translated by someone else as "bypassing entirely beyond bodily sensations." I'm not entirely happy with that either.

The Pāli is rūpasaññānaṃ samatikkamma. Samatikkam is something like transcending, going beyond. Rūpasaññānaṃ is just rūpa and saññā, both of which words you want to know. Saññānaṃ is the genitive plural of saññā, which is perception. And rūpa is rūpa.

But rūpa is an interesting word because it can mean body, and it can also mean form as in a shape of something. I think the least misleading translation here would be something like "with the complete transcending of perceptions of materiality." I think that would pinpoint it more easily.

"With the disappearance of perceptions of resistance"—perceptions, so the floor is resistant to me and that's why I can stand on it. The wall is resistant to me and that's why I feel it when I look at the wall. I sense that it will hurt if I run at it with my head first. There's a sense of it blocking something. Physical objects block something.

And "not heeding to perceptions of diversity" or manifoldness means not paying attention to the many things that make up the world of materiality. There's the clock, there's the lamp, there's the glass, there's the flowers, there's the shirt, there's the table, there's the person, there's the body, there's the cushion—not heeding all these separate things, transcending the perception of materiality and the quieting, the disappearance, or the setting down—which is really the Pāli—the putting down of the perception of resistance. It's another way of saying solidity.

And then again, without jumping at it, without snatching at it, enters and remains.

But then again, this sense of sticking with it, developing it, pursuing it, establishing it. So that's pretty much all the Buddha says about that. The descriptions become shorter and shorter, terser and terser. We'll return to another sutta where there is a bit more detail, but only in terms of how to reach this state.

In translations, you often encounter phrases like "thinking space is infinite" after the transcending of perceptions of materiality. This is a strange construction in Pali—common but slightly unusual. I'd prefer something like "seeing" or "sensing" or "perceiving that space is infinite." The word "perceiving" captures both a passive aspect—recognizing that space is infinite—and also an active dimension. As we've highlighted so much on this retreat, perception has this active quality. I actually tune the perception. I play with perception so that the infinitude of space opens up. For me, the word "perceiving" is better because it encompasses both that passive recognition and active engagement. I play with my perception so that the sense of infinitude reveals itself.

The first four jhanas are called rupa jhanas, and the last four jhanas are called arupa jhanas. The "a" is a negative prefix. Usually this is translated as the rupa jhanas and then the arupa jhanas as the "formless" jhanas. Again, I'm beginning to wonder whether a better translation would be the "immaterial" jhanas. And as I mentioned, the Buddha doesn't actually use the word jhana for these states. He uses the word

ayatana, which means something like sphere, realm, or base. I prefer "realm." It's a world. It's a realm of existence—ayatana.

So these jhanas five through eight are really openings into other realms. We had a glimpse, a taste of that—the beginnings of this—perhaps in the third and fourth jhanas, but now we're clearly in other realms.

This business of realms is quite important because this entire range of jhanic experiences maps neatly and coherently onto a whole cosmology. In Buddhist cosmology, there are three worlds—tiloka in Pali, meaning three worlds or three realms, three planes of existence, three levels of the cosmos.

There is what we might call the form realm, the realm of rupa. It's sometimes called the desire world in Buddhist cosmology—kamaloka—but I want to point out that it's the world of materiality. It's the world of the four elements: solidity, liquidity, air (which really means movement), and heat—heat and cold. Earth, air, fire, water. It's the world of materiality. This is the world that we all agree on. We might slightly disagree or be more or less informed about current thinking in physics regarding the nature of the world, but it's the world we all experience—the world of materiality that everyone agrees upon.

Above this is a plane of existence that correlates with the first four jhanas, the rupa jhanas. This is the world of subtle form. All of this cosmology often gets ignored in modern secular Buddhism, dismissed as superstitious religious mumbo-jumbo belonging to ancient Eastern thought. But actually, when you start to really move in and out of these jhanic perceptions, transitioning between these different realms, you begin to think, "Well, maybe there's something to this." What appears to be completely irrelevant, abstract, and arbitrary metaphysics reveals its direct correlation with meditative experience.

The world of the four jhanas—the plane of the four jhanas—is the world of subtle form, the rupa jhanas. Again, I would say "subtle materiality." Consider what happens to the perception of the materiality of the body. In normal consciousness, I perceive solid bone, solid flesh—that's my body. Organs, all the rest of it. Even in the first jhana, the body becomes much more subtle in this cosmology. It's more refined, this perception of the body's materiality—it's subtle materiality.

Yesterday we discussed the energy body as something that spans physical and mental. This too would fall into the category of subtle materiality. This kind of cosmological thinking in relation to the energy body doesn't exist only in Buddhism. It also appears in Islamic mysticism, probably some strands of Jewish Kabbalah. It's a bit more complicated in Christian mysticism, but perhaps there as well. The energy body or subtle body belongs to that middle realm of subtle materiality.

And then you reach the immaterial realm.

in Christianity and also in Islam and maybe in Judaism, different levels of angels inhabit each realm, just as in Buddhism different levels of devas and gods inhabit each realm.

So usually translated as "formless," but "immaterial" may be better.

How do we get there? How does this open up? Well, probably in most cases it's going to first open up in a convincing and persuasive and deeply impactful way from the fourth jhāna. And then the fourth jhāna really needs a sense of being really deep and really well established.

Once that fourth jhāna is really established, then you can start almost feeling into the space of the energy body again, with a view, with feeling for the sense of the body space. And what you sense there is a lack of solidity, a complete lack of solidity, as if it's just empty space. And actually that goes with a subtle well-being.

So you could either tune into the—here I am in the fourth jhāna. It's not pīti, it's not sukha, it's something much more subtle, but there is a well-being there, despite this "neither pleasure nor pain" language. There is a well-being, but it's the well-being of non-solidity, of non-materiality. It's almost like you feel as if you could just put your hand right through this space here.

That feeling right there in this location, in the energy body space, in the energy body region—the kinesthetic sense of that lack of solidity and the well-being that goes with the absence of solidity and materiality—is very refined.

Again, if we think about the five jhānas plus normal consciousness: normal consciousness, it's just solid. It's not very refined at all. First jhāna, more refined. Second jhāna, more refined. We've said this before. Third, fourth. By the time you get to the fourth, it's very refined. By the time you get to the fifth, it's refined out of any sense of solidity. There's not even a sense of a kind of energetic substance or the stillness or whatever. It's kind of gone. Do you understand? It's just an extension of the same thing—the energy body sense of refinement.

So to really sense that, to really feel into it, inhabit it and stay with that—stay with that very sense of the well-being that comes from the absence of solidity and really focus on that. This is one approach.

And one might notice, actually there's no edges. This very absence of solidity has no edges. It's edgeless. Or one might notice that any edges that maybe habitually creep in—the assumption or even an imagination of edges that might creep in subtly into the mind—they just keep dissolving. The mind just sees through them. So they just become space.

In the Visuddhimagga, which is this commentary that I mentioned a couple of times from Sri Lanka, there is a technique where you use little discs. They're called kasiṇas and you focus on—they can be different colors. And that's one of the meditative techniques that's explained a lot and emphasized a lot in the Visuddhimagga. And then from that little technique, you deliberately try imagining a bigger and bigger disc until it's infinite.

But this way of doing it that I've talked about, I don't think you need to stretch anything. Just this absence

that you're feeling, the kinesthetic sense of absence—you don't need to stretch anything. You don't need to push anything outwards or make an effort, kind of stretching space to infinity. Just hanging out there, after a while you just realize it just goes on forever. There's no end to this. And if there are, as I said, if there are edges, they just keep dissolving. You just keep kind of seeing through them.

For many people they have an internal visual imagination and there's literally the seeing of space. That can be really helpful. There's a seeing of this kind of infinitude of space. But we really also want to get a kinesthetic sense involved as well.

So it can feel as if one just was falling through space. I think it came up partly in a Q&A really early in the retreat—it can feel like they've just taken the floor away and it's as if there's just nothing underneath me at all and nothing above. So the visual and kinesthetic sense can very much work together and that will really help kind of empower the whole thing and consolidate it.

And there is a delight in this. There is something actually to enjoy.

So technically you're supposed to be beyond pleasure and pain, but actually there's a great delight in this very absence of resistance that the Buddha is talking about. The very sense of just infinite, of just falling through space or potentially being able to fall through space. Nothing there, nothing at all in the way, nothing at all that one could bang into or that would obstruct in any way.

So that enjoying is actually quite an important element. We'll come back to that. But really what one's doing is staying focused on the space, on the total absence of solidity or resistance, and not attending to anything else that comes up in the mind or anything else that one might perceive. That's the non-attending to perceptions of diversity.

And you keep doing that and the thing starts to get bigger, but also really, really consolidated. Sometimes people want to worry about how big it is. They sense space. It's definitely not solid, but how big is it? Is it infinite yet? I don't think we need to worry about that. It's the same thing. I don't need to worry about pushing it. It's more just one's sense that there aren't edges.

The Pali word in the suttas is ananta, which literally means without end or without a boundary, without edge. It's that absence of boundaries. And one just keeps any sense of wherever they could be—they just disappear and just kind of the mind falls through them. They just disappear. And then the sense just opens out, opens out. Keeping with the sense of space allows the expansion.

Sometimes, as we mentioned already, there's a kind of level of the fourth jhāna, which we could say is a slightly deeper level, like the third jhāna, where it opens up wider. But in the third and fourth jhānas, we want to keep the attention more in the energy body space. But there's a sense of a wider realm. So it could go from there. One starts giving one's attention to the wider realm rather than just keeping the energy with the energy body. But essentially, it's the same thing. You'll have to see what works better for you.

So, as usual, damn bursts at first, perhaps, and it just goes there effortless. But it might be in time and with enough experience in and out, in and out, that one time one's practicing this and body sensations start to come back, or even physical pain starts to come back. Either one then needs to go back to a lower jhāna, probably the fourth jhāna, or if you have more experience, you could go to a higher jhāna actually.

Let's say you already know the sixth or the seventh. Here I am trying to get into the fifth in this session but something in the body keeps returning. I could go back to the fourth or could go to the sixth or seventh if I know them and then come back. Those visitations will really help everything to become less solid again and then one can stay more in the fifth jhāna.

Or another option might be that one could—here I am, pain is starting to re-emerge in the body or just body sensations—and one can almost focus in between the regions of pain. Just look at the gaps, the space in between. And eventually those will open up and the space will re-establish itself.

But really, I think the best foundation is probably a really strong sense of stillness from the fourth jhāna, a really refined and pristine, pure sense of stillness from the fourth jhāna. And then if one attempts the fifth jhāna and it's not steady, one can always return to the fourth jhāna so that you can make it kind of a home base in many different ways.

But it's tricky. Like I said, a lot of what I say will have exceptions, but generally speaking, the fourth jhāna wants to be really quite mature before the fifth can be really established.

Sometimes there are suttas—I couldn't find them, but there are suttas where the Buddha talks about, if I remember, it's almost like there are four jhānas and then there are four immaterial realms. And what they really are, are perspectives on the fourth jhāna. They're ways of looking at what's happening in the fourth jhāna, particularly ways of looking at what's happening to the sense of the body. So that the immaterial realms are different ways of sensing or different ways of looking at the body sense in the fourth jhāna.

So in a way, infinite space as a realm is already there in the fourth jhāna. If I look at the fourth jhāna, if I look at the sense of the body in a certain way and I just see it as space, it's already there. There's already so little solidity. I just look at it and sense the body as space. Or, and this one matches more of the Buddha's descriptions, if I sense the body space—what did the Buddha say about the fourth jhāna? The analogy was a purified, bright awareness. Purified mindfulness. That's what was pervading.

It wasn't sukha. It was a purified, bright awareness that was pervading the body. So that one's already hinting at the beginnings of the sixth jhana. I look at the body and I see it as awareness. What I'm paying attention to is the very awareness there. And that will take me to the sixth jhana, and so forth.

For most people—I've never done a statistical analysis, but I think for most people—this jhana is perceived as pitch black. So you could have a very luminous white, bright white fourth jhana. For most people, I think the fifth jhana will be black, but it doesn't really matter. That's a very secondary thing.

I think one of the lovely things about this realm is that you can actually practice it with the eyes open. And this is something I would really, really recommend in addition to the usual eyes-closed ways of working: sitting, standing, looking at the sky, for instance, looking at space, getting a sense of the space, feeling that space—the space of the sky, the space there in nature—feeling it with the body, feeling it kinesthetically as well. And again, realizing it's boundless, it's ananta, it doesn't have boundaries.

When I was learning this, we had a heat wave—I think it was really hot from something like March until October—and I was on retreat the whole time. I would just stand in the fields and the less busy lanes and just be staring at the sky, much to the amusement probably of the neighbors. But that's one way of practicing and it's very potent, just as potent. Eyes open, looking and getting a real feel for the space. The body and the mind become kind of one with boundless space. That's what we're trying to do—again, dissolve the body and dissolve the mind in this boundless space.

And it's very exhilarating. Exhilaration is perhaps a really accurate word. There's really a sense of "wow." It's almost dramatic in that dissolution, in that infinitude, in that disappearance of body and solidity. We're moving in that direction. It's the same thing with samadhi—it's absorption, absorption as a direction. Dissolving body and mind. Absorbing into it. Being space. I used to say to myself, "Being space. I've become space." But it's a direction. However absorbed we are, we can always be more absorbed.

So with this kind of opening, there is—or there should be—a very strong sense of cosmic oneness, mystical cosmic oneness that emerges with the opening to this realm. Both in the jhana certainly, because one has become space, there's nothing but space. The whole cosmos is just space. And also in the aftereffects on perception. As I mentioned yesterday, to me, the aftereffects on perception become really important at this level. The formless jhanas are really powerful. They're potentially very potent. So there's a strong sense of cosmic oneness. And again, that does something to the heart, to the soul, to the sense of existence, to all of that. I'll return to that later, come back to the oneness bit later.

There's also in this state what the Buddha calls a sense of release. I meant to look up the Pali—I can't remember—but the Buddha talks about a release. Now all jhanas are releases. They're releases from the hindrances. Certainly the first four jhanas are releases from sense desires and the irritations or aversions to sensual impacts. But here we have a different kind of release. We're released from the perceptions of materiality and solidity. And that really is felt as a release.

That release, that sense of release is what I would call a secondary nimitta. The primary nimitta here is space and its endlessness—space, just nothing solid there, just nothing, nothing, nothing solid there. That's the primary nimitta. A secondary nimitta—which again, like we've talked about before with the metta or other secondary nimittas, you can lean into and emphasize and explore more at times—but probably overall, if you want the whole journey to deepen, it needs to remain secondary. But it's still really important to sense the release here.

And that's what I would call a secondary nimitta. It's a tremendous release to be released. This is one of

those things—you could stop a person on the street and ask them if they feel imprisoned by materiality and solidity, and they'd probably tell you that you need to get out more.

There are imprisonments that we don't realize are imprisonments until we've gone beyond them. That's why I prefer to keep the word dukkha in the Pali, because it's talking about subtle things that we have no sense of as dukkha at all. We wouldn't list them on our catalog of what constitutes suffering. But the release from perceptions of materiality and solidity—there's a genuine freedom there. So that too becomes a secondary nimitta.

They're completely connected: release, freedom, secondary nimitta. It's very exhilarating. There's joy as well, perhaps, as a secondary nimitta at times. I would say wonder and awe arise, but these are all secondary.

The sense of infinity itself is going to affect—or it can, if we let it, if we don't get in the way, if we're not entrenched in certain views which erect walls of conception that aren't demolishable—if we actually allow it, then the sense of infinity and the release from materiality, this whole perception of cosmic oneness, they really affect the being deeply. They affect the sense of existence, the whole relationship with death, the self and the self's dying. This taste of infinity—it's more than a taste, this immersion in, this dissolution in infinity.

Like I said, all the jhanas really have their impact, and part of their impact, a strand of their impact, is in lessening attachment. So here as well.

Another secondary nimitta will be love—metta, let's say metta more accurately. Why? All this oneness and non-heeding of perceptions of diversity—metta is unconditional love. The more oneness, the more naturally there is metta. When I'm not heeding diversity and not attending to perceptions of diversity, then everyone is equally deserving of metta, and the metta flows to all equally. It's when I prefer this bit of diversity to that bit of diversity that metta becomes conditional and not so pure.

So metta is there as a secondary nimitta, again something we can certainly lean into at times. In the aftereffects on perception, it might be among those aftereffects—you might have many different aftereffects, so that might be a very strong one. Just walking around after this kind of experience, there's tremendous metta, and one may really lean into that. You're not so much concentrating on the space sense or the infinity—it's just the metta now, that profound sort of ocean of it.

Just a small point here that may not be needed anymore, but I remember years ago it was commonly taught that metta and karuna and mudita—loving-kindness, compassion, and appreciative joy—were good objects for jhana practice, but they only went as far as the third jhana. That's as far as you could take them. Has anyone heard that? It's from the Visuddhimagga. The Buddha never said that. In the Pali Canon, the Buddha says metta can take you to the fourth and fifth jhanas and beyond.

Again, it's a strange historical thing that has happened with the Visuddhimagga. A lot of material in there

gets unquestioned for some reason, even though the Buddha is saying something quite different.

Relating a bit to what Derek asked yesterday, the Buddha says metta delivers, or karuna delivers to, let's say, the fifth jhana, but he adds, "for one who has not penetrated to further release." In other words, if you know the sixth or seventh, your karuna, your compassion practice, could take you to the sixth.

There are a couple of interesting things to point out here. First, just a small point regarding karuna: if karuna is taking you to the second or third jhana—karuna means compassion, right? That's your meditation—that means compassion needs to be, that means compassion is a happy state. Sometimes people have an idea that compassion is not a happy state, but actually, it's very clear what the Buddha meant by compassion: it's a happy state, a state where there's a lot of happiness in it. That's a small point.

The other thing—and I throw this out for you to explore, or whoever wants to explore when you're ready—is that at some point with all this, if you really get into it, you can start experimenting with different kinds of cocktails, what I call cocktails. I mean exactly this: mixing infinite consciousness, the sixth jhana, the realm of infinite consciousness, with, let's say, compassion. So you've got—you're starting to color space, or put two things together that are ordinarily not thought of together.

Mixing jhanas with brahmavihāras creates entirely new experiences—cocktails of consciousness, as I call them. What you read about in traditional categories begins to feel limited compared to the vast creative possibilities that open up. You can make your own combinations and even give them playful names.

But perhaps even more transformative than what happens during meditation are the aftereffects on perception. These aftereffects touch the heart, bring liberation and wonder, and fundamentally change how existence appears to us. They create the opening that transforms our lives.

From the realm of infinite space, two primary aftereffects emerge. The first is the perception that all is space. You know that old illustration about atomic structure? This pen represents the nucleus of an atom. Where are the electrons? If this were the actual size of a nucleus, the electrons would be orbiting somewhere around Plymouth, or perhaps Johannesburg! The point is we feel ourselves living in a solid world, but atoms are mostly empty space. When you really look at what matter consists of—this nucleus with electrons at impossible distances—you realize that what we experience as solid is actually almost entirely space.

The second aftereffect strikes even deeper—the perception that all sense objects are one materiality, one substance. We truly are star stuff. Everything and everyone in this room, all our atoms, probably originated from the same supernova. When a star explodes, the physical and chemical processes generate complex atoms that form carbon and other elements making up our material world. All of us, everything on Earth, likely emerged from atoms scattered by that same ancient stellar explosion. Before that, it all came from the Big Bang.

We can hear such facts intellectually, but with this perception of oneness—oneness of materiality, of

physical substance—the truth impresses itself directly on the heart. It's not merely interesting information; it becomes a living reality that touches your being at the deepest level. This is mystical oneness, even though we're discussing matter. You sense not just connection but actual oneness with all materiality—the earth, each other, bodies, trees, everything.

While many suttas mention the realm of infinite space, most offer only the brief description I shared earlier. However, there's one sutta in the Majjhima Nikāya called something like "Ways to the Imperturbable" that I found particularly compelling when exploring the relationship between insight and jhāna practice. This text demonstrates how insight ways of looking can open particular jhānas.

Here the Buddha teaches that we should view all sensuality and sense perceptions in specific ways. He offers three options, though the third proves most relevant. First, all sensuality and sense perceptions are dukkha. Second, they are impermanent. These aren't mere intellectual concepts—they're insight ways of looking that must be translated skillfully into moment-to-moment perception, sensing over and over again.

This is what we mean by an insight way of looking. If the Buddha says all sense objects are impermanent, and I think, "Yeah, okay, that tells me I should live and try not to be attached," it's going to have about zero power in our life. But if we engage it as a way of looking—I mean a subtle meditative engagement—this is what I mean by insight way of looking: something very light in the consciousness as we're looking, sensing, relating in a particular way. Seeing impermanence, recognizing all these things are dukkha. Whatever I see as I walk around, sit, look at the materiality, sense the materiality—impermanent, dukkha. Then it starts to do something.

And it's not that it starts to do something twenty years later, where maybe I'll be a little less attached. I mean, it may well have that effect too, but it does something now. This again is what I mean by insight ways of looking. They have their power now. They bring release now. They change the perception now. I just need to do it over and over and over. I'm training, playing with perception over and over.

But the most significant one of the three that the Buddha gives is not the dukkha, not the impermanence, but that all materiality is just the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. So again, what does that mean? It means perhaps I do my walking meditation or stand outside or sit with my eyes open, with my eyes closed, and with any sense of any sense object, I'm looking: it's just materiality, just materiality.

This has to mean something to me. If it doesn't mean something, then it won't work. So it has to both mean something but also in the looking be incredibly light and incredibly agile. I can't have a big philosophical essay that I'm pondering through and repeating. But pregnant in my "just impermanent, impermanent," or "it's just materiality, just materiality," there has to—that one's quite an easy one, I think—but it has to encapsulate something that means something for me. Do you understand? Then it has its power. Then it starts to have its power, and I need to sustain it moment after moment. It's a way of looking, an insight way of looking.

And that insight way of looking can take me to the fifth jhāna, the realm of infinite space. Why? You're not attending to diversity—that's one reason. And you're also not—it's all just, especially with the impermanent and dukkha—there's also a sense that I'm not interested in this. It's just all materiality; all sense objects, sense perceptions are just not interesting. There's a letting go of any clinging with regard to materiality and material objects.

So both for the reason Nicole mentioned—not tending to diversity—but also this kind of... we'll come back to this, but basically the Buddha says this is worthless, this is dukkha, this is Māra's snare, this is a cancer, this is a dart, an arrow. So all that's kind of in there. It doesn't need to be so—the Buddha's a little extreme sometimes in his language. It's more just a kind of "hmm, hmm." But very, very subtle. And then we're doing something very, very powerful. And this other realm can begin to open up from the insight way of looking.

I haven't gone through jhānas one, two, three, four. I've gone through the insight way of looking. There will be in that, and in all this—both in the sense of oneness that comes in the aftereffect on perception, and also if you follow that insight way of looking that I just described and the Buddha offered—there will be, in time, certainly in the moment but also more long-term in my life, more disidentification with the body becomes available.

And again, I would say it becomes available rather than just a constant thing, because sometimes it's important to identify with the body. Of course it's important. But that view, that relationship with the body of non-identification, becomes much more available through the insight way of looking or through the aftereffect on perception from the jhānic realm. There's just elements of the cosmos, just the material elements of the cosmos. And when we're eating, we're just moving elements from there to here and then out again, or breathing, or whatever. And again, there's a release, there's a beauty in that.

If I only ever think of body and physicality like that, to me that's an impoverishment. I miss all kinds of wonderful, beautiful, important things about existence. Do you understand? I think that's really important.

So that's one way it can happen, but the other way is not with the eyes shut, nor with the eyes open looking at the sky or looking at space, but actually looking at objects. And particularly if you've had a lot of experience going in and out of the realm of infinite space, but also maybe from other meditative experiences—which many of you have already actually already had—where you look at an object, and usually, as I said, I look at the wall or I look at Nathan or whatever it is, and in the looking there's a sense of their solidity. I just somehow sense it as part of the normal consciousness.

Again, I know there's going to be resistance and there's going to be obstruction there. But sometimes, especially if you've done a lot of fifth jhana or other kinds of meditation, there's this other perception available where you look at something and you can kind of see right through it, so to speak. It just doesn't appear solid.

So you can also train your perception, play with a way of looking where you're seeing and sensing things as space, not as solid. Look at the table and just get a sense of it not as solid. One's ability to do that rests on how familiar you are with that kind of perception from before. It could come from your previous experience of the realm of infinite space, but it could also come from other kinds of meditative opening. Because that decrease of solidity is, again, it's a kind of unfabricating.

And any meditative practice, certainly any kind of classical meditative practice, is a practice of unfabricating to some degree. Dana, sila, ethics, concentration, samadhi, jhana, insight practice—they're all unfabricating to some degree. So this kind of perception, if you're practicing any different kinds of meditation, it's very common to have that experience.

And so it might be that resting on one's previous experiences of a sense of the non-solidity of things, when one looks at them, you can actually engage that more deliberately rather than just waiting for it to come as a result. Engage it more deliberately, and then the realm of infinite space begins to open up with your eyes open. Don't need a big space. Don't need the eyes shut. It's more just a way of seeing, a way of sensing what's there that we usually perceive in a certain way. I'm just perceiving it a different way.

Does this make sense?

As we said at the start, most of you are pretty interested in this. But if my question is: Why am I doing Dharma practice? Why am I meditating? People have a lot of different reasons why they're meditating. They're looking for a lot of different things. There's such a huge variety in terms of what brings people to practice meditation these days. It's enormous. And even within Buddha Dharma, even people who come on retreats, and maybe I would say even really hardcore practitioners still have a lot of range of what they're wanting.

So if what I want in my life is simplicity and equanimity—equanimity in the sense of with regard to the eight worldly conditions: praise, blame, pain, pleasure, success, failure, gain, loss—if that's kind of why I'm practicing, I have a vision that Dharma and meditation can make my life more simple and that attracts me, and I want this kind of evenness of equanimity, if those are the goals of practice, I'm not sure whether there's that much point or need to open up to these kinds of realms really. Maybe attention to impermanence, realizing the impermanence of things would help, but I don't know that this is really necessary.

If, turning that around, if my vision of awakening, my idea of what an awakened person knows, is that they know the impermanence of all things, I'm also not so sure that one needs to open up to the realm of infinite space or the other immaterial realms. You don't really need that.

I would like to, having said that, just revisit again this question of desire, which we talked about earlier on the retreat. And one of the points I made—and I was trying to convey its significance because it wasn't obvious—is that exactly what I desire, exactly what I'm looking for, is more significant than whether I

reach a certain jhana. How I relate to my desire and what exactly my desire is, is more significant than whether I reach jhana.

As a teaching, that very nugget there—how much what unfolds depends on both exactly what I'm desiring and how I'm relating to my desire—that, as a teaching, I would say is more significant than any tip or technique or instruction on how to move from this jhana to another. I think I asked how many people believed me, and some of you put your hands up and some of you didn't. And then I talked a bit about desire.

I think the piece I wanted to emphasize was not so much how much desire we have. Because sometimes when I talk, it might sound to some people like, "Oh, there's so much desire. I don't have enough desire. Rob has all this hot-blooded Mediterranean Arabic passion and whatever. And I'm not like that."

So it wasn't really about how much—it was about how we relate to our desire and what exactly we are desiring. And that an enormous amount hinges on that. An enormous amount of what will unfold for us as practitioners hinges on that. And knowing that and understanding that may be more important than how to get from one jhana to another.

And it may be more important than attaining whatever jhana.

So again, what are we really desiring? Again, there's such a huge range in the Dharma. Many people these days, with meditation entering mainstream culture, come to the Dharma for some ease—understandably enough—for some reduction of suffering. They're oppressed and badgered by their inner critic and want a certain amount of freedom in relation to the inner critic, the self-judge, or whatever you call it. They want some ease in their life and some reduction of suffering.

What might happen is that a person might actually get that. They might get some ease over time, through practice—some ease, some reduction of suffering, some abating of the inner critic. Maybe it comes from a certain amount of Dharma practice. Maybe that ease, that reduction of suffering and reduction of the inner critic, comes as much from a change in outer circumstances: a shift at work, entering into a relationship or leaving a certain relationship, life conditions changing, and they actually feel better.

So they've got what they wanted originally. They've got that degree of ease or that reduction of suffering that they wanted. And then maybe at that point, they don't really want anything more. Why am I even practicing anymore? I've kind of got what I wanted. How much would jhanas and these immaterial realms matter to such a person? How much would they even want or need to come on a retreat like this, or give much time to all this?

What exactly we want determines what unfolds, determines how we relate to practice and Dharma and all that. Someone was telling me a while ago they were talking about going on another jhana retreat—or for them it would have been the first jhana retreat—and explaining why they wanted to go. They said they thought that the jhanas would enable them to be more present.

They had been practicing meditation for probably twenty-five or thirty years. And that was how they viewed the whole of practice. It was really about being more present. Can I be more present to life? And they practiced diligently, very committed, but that was their view: it's about being present.

Wrapped up in that—it's about being present—actually is a whole cosmology. Do you understand that? Why would being present... In other words, being present gives a kind of sanctity to something. To what? To the present moment, to this world as I perceive it. It's got a whole hidden metaphysics and cosmology on which this idea rests, and this kind of raising up of this aspiration over and over: to be present, to be present to life, to be present to the way things are, to be present to the moment.

All these charged words—life, the moment, things as they are—they all pick... or rather, scratch away at the charge and they all hide certain worldviews. They're all pregnant with certain worldviews. Does this make sense?

Again, such a person, I don't think, would need to come. First of all, the jhanas are not going to make you that much more present. You don't need the jhanas to practice presence. So maybe that person would have gone on a jhana retreat and actually found only a marginal increase, if at all, in their ability to be present, but would have also realized that you don't need that. I think more would, at some point, decide that it wasn't really their cup of tea. They weren't really interested in that. It would be hard for them to sustain an interest in jhana practice.

When we talk about other realms or mastery or this mystical state or that mystical state... but the whole elevation of the idea of presence—those things have nothing to do with that. Presence has nothing to do with other realms or opening to other realms. Do you see what I'm trying to say?

So such a person, had they gone on that jhana retreat, probably would have decided—wouldn't have been able to sustain the intention. If it was a long retreat like this one, they wouldn't have been able to sustain the attention. They wouldn't have kept working and playing, because it actually wasn't what they wanted. They wanted something else. And wrapped up in that wanting more presence was resting on a whole cosmology which was kind of entrenched, and there was no real interest in shifting the cosmology.

Or sometimes it's more obvious in other ways. A person doesn't want to—there's a kind of negative desire. My desire is not to budge a certain cosmology.

So I also run into people talking about jhana practice and retreats, jhana retreats they've been on, where—you know, I think I mentioned this before—a person's come after a jhana retreat and said, "Oh, it was really fun. I had a great time," whatever. But there was a kind of walled entrenchment in a certain cosmological view, in a certain view of the world, of human being, of the cosmos, of what awakening is, of being itself.

And the absolute priority was that this view did not get challenged, that it remained what it was. There was so much invested in that view—that the world is as it is, and existentially we have to face up to that: a

purposeless world of cold, purposely dancing atoms in which a human being inexplicably finds themselves. Finite life, then death, and the whole point of dharma practice is to realize that, face up to it, and be relatively okay with that existential truth. That's the point of dharma practice.

So you can do a little bit of jhanas, but not too much. You can have a little bit of fun. Even the language—"Oh, I had a great time"—is almost dismissive. "I had a great time." It was like a little hobby on the side, something that was kind of cute to play with for a bit. But I don't want to do too much, because then if I have enough of these kinds of experiences, it might start challenging my view of the cosmos, my view of what human being is, my view of existence, of what the world is, of what reality is.

So there's a kind of negative desire operating, if you like—a desire for something not to be pushed on and challenged. This person will limit their exploration of jhanas and the ways of looking that we talked about yesterday, so that they're not allowed to open up those drastic and radical, repeatedly opening, drastic and radical changes in the sense of things and existence.

Limited exploration limits the challenge. So you can zip through jhanas from one to eight, but it doesn't really make any difference to the whole sense of existence. It's just a fun game that one's playing—pleasant in the mind.

Or again, it might be someone wants a kind of equanimity in daily life. And as we've already said, then again, it will be limited. The interest in this kind of thing will actually be limited. A little bit of impermanence, maybe a little bit of the vastness of awareness because you get quite a bit of equanimity there. Maybe a little anatta at a certain level. But also, those practices will be related to as a decrease of papañca—we've talked about this—as a decrease of reactivity, as a decrease of fussing. And that's the point of dharma practice: decrease of papañca and fuss.

So I want to speak a little bit more about desire. Yesterday we spoke about emptiness and awakening and jhanas, and I still think more fundamental and more fundamentally important than emptiness, than jhanas, than awakening, is the question of desire and how we're relating to it. I'd say it's more fundamental than all of that.

When I talked about it the other time, what I perhaps should have said—and if it was a little out of balance—is that people are different with desire. In other words, people are unique with their desire. Not everyone burns with a certain kind of passionate desire. Some people do and some people don't. Some people's desire burns differently.

So whatever I said previously, I didn't mean to sound—and I'm sorry if it did sound—as if I was implying you should all burn this way, or like this, or with this kind of intensity. I think the more important question is: what is authentic for you? What's authentic for you? Your desire and how that burns.

Some people—and I was giving some stories from my past about how the pain of desire and of staying with something, the torment and the rub of it—but some people much more naturally don't have desire

that burns that way. It doesn't burn with a great, huge, passionate flame of intensity that's problematic—their eros, their desire. Either they just don't have so much—it's just what's authentic to them, not so much desire, and this has to be respected. That's one of the points I'm trying to make. Or it burns in a much easier, less intense way than something I might somehow communicate when I share about myself. A less pressured way.

So this is really important. Some people's desire does burn with a lot of pressure, with a lot of intensity. Sometimes the pressure and intensity is not authentic—it's something added on by the inner critic or by peer pressure or something like that. Sometimes a person's desire is not so flaming, burning, and passionate like that. And sometimes that's authentic, but sometimes not being so burning and intensely is not authentic. In other words, there's actually something going on where a person is dampening their desire without even realizing it—inhibiting it, blocking it, avoiding it, fearing it, dissipating it, forgetting it.

So the question here, one of the important questions, is about authenticity for each soul in relationship to desire. I think partly after the other talk on desire, I felt like I didn't make that clear enough. So that's partly why I'm saying this now.

I think I said that a talk is a talk. When I give a talk in public to many people and it's being recorded, I speak in certain ways, but it should be—I hope you feel it—

If you come to an interview with me, I need to match you where you are and not impose anything about whether you need to be desiring this or you need to have more desire or less. My desire for one-to-one interviews is to meet you where you are with that, and to really respect—genuinely respect—if your desire burns differently than mine or than the next person. It would be rather obnoxious if I didn't, I think. But talking with a group is a different thing. And talking when there's a recording, when we don't know who's going to listen to this in however many years—it's a different thing. Anyway, I didn't make that clear enough.

So I need to respect how your desire burns and how much desire there is, if that's authentic. And I may also respect, even if we're working one-on-one, even if your desire is different than mine—why should it be the same? I also need to respect your process and where you are in your process of uncovering your—let's call it—natural and authentic flame and desire. Or where you are in liberating it and knowing its power. And that takes time. That process is at a certain place at any time.

So if I'm working one-to-one with someone, that's also part of what I need to do. Even if in some sense I feel that this person actually has a lot more desire and they're not really—for whatever reason—not really in touch with it or not really allowing it, I still need to respect the process there and not push that impatiently or out of time. So there are many different elements to consider here when we talk one-on-one, and again when we're talking in a larger context.

Authenticity comes in two respects. There's authenticity about what I desire. Monica asked this question:

what's the difference? Through introspection, can I slowly learn to feel the difference between a desire that's coming, let's say, more from what we might call ego and a desire from what we might more call soul? That's why we give, partly, all the soul-making teachings—they point to the difference, all those elements of the imaginal, etc. They point to all this talk about eros. Can I discern the difference when a desire of mine is actually not authentic?

I might have been pursuing something for ages before maybe someone points out, or maybe I realize, actually this isn't what I really, really want. It's not what I really, really care about. As I said the other day when we were talking about getting inundated with advertising and all that, but what about things like—how many people have been engaging emptiness practices diligently, and yet emptiness and that realization is actually not what they really, really want? How did that happen?

I think what unfolds in terms of your emptiness realization depends and is determined to a large part by what exactly I'm desiring. And if I'm not really, really—if I'm not really genuinely, authentically passionate about it, it won't deliver. I do all the practices, I kind of do the things, but it's not my thing.

So what I desire, and learning to discern the difference between what's really an authentic, deep soul desire and what's a more ego desire and what's just indoctrination and programming from cultures or the wider culture or the subculture, including dharma cultures. You're in a situation where everyone—the teacher and everyone else—is going on about emptiness, emptiness, and doing these practices, and people are excited, and one naturally thinks, well, that's what I've got to do. And it could be jhanas as well. But I would say, you know, for these things to really deliver, there needs to be this authentic passion. And the same thing—even if a person wants to be a writer or a singer, songwriter, whatever it is. Why? Where's the desire coming from? Is there something that needs that? Or is there something that needs you to do that? These are hard questions.

So authentic about what I desire, and authentic also, as I said earlier, about how my desire burns. And that's really different soul styles. And that I think really needs to be respected. Some people, yeah, it's just kind of a whole big intense thing, whatever. And some people much less so. Some people it's a quieter flame, but it's very, very steady and it's not so dramatic. What's authentic to you, to your soul?

And then there's another question, another aspect: how to be true to one's deep desires. What does that mean? What does that look like? What does it mean really for me to honor my desires? For this, I need to know myself. If I say, "I want this, I'm going to do this. I will do this. I've pledged myself to this. This is the thing that I really care about"—

And then you see a person, a little time goes by and they're not following through on it. There are all kinds of what often look like good reasons to them: "Oh, my mother hurt her leg," or "Someone asked me to do this," and there are a million reasons. But oftentimes it's actually to do with self-knowledge. For some reason this person is not seeing this pattern of getting very passionate about something and not following through. It's not steady. It's difficult stuff.

This is why I say this is actually more fundamental than emptiness or jhana or awakening or whatever—because all that is going to depend on how wise I am about my desire, what's my relationship to desire, and how well do I know myself around that.

It's interesting. I think one of the gifts of modernity is that in a way we're free. There's no dominant narrative, no dominant kind of view anymore in modernity of what the most important thing is in life, and therefore what's most desirable. So we're not obliged to believe that this or that is the best kind of desire, and that if we were somehow wiser or better or clearer or less deluded, that would be what we would really desire. Modernity has done away with all that. If I was just less deluded, I would simply desire awakening. I would simply desire this. Modern Western culture has just done away with that.

It's no longer legitimate to say to anyone else, "This or that is what makes a life really worth living. That's what you should really desire." What that does—the gift of that—is it makes us free, free to choose. Or to a certain extent, it makes us more free than if that were uniformly agreed in the culture. Like in certain cultures, it was always agreed: it's best to become a monk. If you've really got the desire and the spirit and you're really clear, you'd become a monk. Everyone knew that. Someone who wasn't becoming a monk knew they were making a kind of second-level choice. But that whole view and narrative and framework has gone. There's nothing we can point to anymore, nothing that it's legitimate to point to in modern Western culture.

So there's an absence, the gift of which is a certain kind of freedom—freedom to choose, to a certain degree, because then we have to deal with all kinds of other stuff that gets in the way of freedom or looks like freedom but actually isn't.

But this very gift is at the same time, I think, a huge problem for modern culture. The loss of any kind of objective criteria or universally agreed-upon criteria to determine what is it that makes a life really worth living? What is the good life? What is a beautiful life? What is a life most worth living? And of course, relative to that is: what then should I desire? All this is connected.

The absence of that is the cause of huge and widespread and profound problems in modern culture, modern society, postmodern society. These are ethical issues, and I think at the root of our climate change, species extinction, racial injustice—so much of what's going on in the world are actually ethical issues at root. Part of the very ethical problem is this absence. Does this make sense?

So I've talked about that quite a lot recently on recordings and I hope to be able to talk about it some more. I just think it's so pressing and so important. You see how all these things are connected. We talk about emptiness, but until the desires are there and until that's connected to what actually makes a life worth living and how we're going to relate to all this and what is my relationship with all that—it's huge.

I just want to touch on this and pinpoint what's actually significant. Sometimes we don't realize what's significant because we're certain that something else is significant. You actually have to go to another level

and realize, "Oh, there's something else here, a whole other level that I hadn't even considered that's actually really, really significant."

Just following on with a couple of small things about desire, primarily for soul makers—I'll be brief because this is not a soulmaking retreat. If you love soulmaking Dharma and if you love soulmaking practices, then you should realize, if not by now, you should realize at some point that your very sense of soulmaking Dharma will expand. It will expand into new territories that it hadn't included before. It will expand new possibilities, new realms of existence and being, and your being will get included. If you haven't already, it more and more gets included, worked into the soulmaking dynamic. What soulmaking dharma pertains to and is, the sense of it starts to expand.

I think at some point most practitioners, most soulmaking dharma practitioners, will realize two things. One is that jhana practice is a kind of art, and as such is also part of and contributes to the art of soulmaking practice.

So some of you already kind of get that connection, while others find it much less apparent or not there yet. Jhana practice as an art becomes or is seen to become very relevant to soul-making dharma practice - relevant in terms of the sensitivity and attunement that we've talked about, the magic. Some of you already get a sense of the magic of jhana practice and this magic of playing with perception. If you're practicing soul-making dharma, you're practicing a kind of magic too. You start to see that these things are really, really connected. They're truly relevant to what possibilities open up. So that's one thing that should become clear.

A second thing that should become clear is that being able to really sustain - the demand in jhana practice to really sustain, to stay with over and over for hours and hours, to marinate in and return to the primary nimitta, to let that really mature that way in practice - that kind of sustaining needs eros. The very way we're relating to the primary nimitta is, in soul-making dharma language, erotic in the small definition of erotic. To sustain, to be able to sustain that eros in the small definition is relevant to the art and skill and also relevant to being in relationship with anything that we love.

So again, this question: How does your eros burn? What's your style? Is it that you get excited about this and then a quick flame, then a quick flame of excitement about that and then another quick flame of excitement - oh, this wonder opens up and then something else? Or is it this very steady staying with one thing, staying with one thing? What's the style of eros? A lot depends on that in terms of our relationship with jhana practice and our ability to really sustain. It is an erotic relationship, in the small sense. And again, that comes back to what's authentic - what's the authentic way my eros burns?

A kind of contradictory or complementary question arises: because of the nature of the soul-making dynamic, there's always this double question. Because of the nature of soul and soul-making, there's always this question of what's authentic to my soul, and there's the possibility of my soul's growing and extending and learning new ways and new ways it can burn that I hadn't even recognized were available

to me as part of me - the kinds, the styles of my fire burning, of my eros. So you get a kind of complicated question there.

The second small thing for soul-makers is this: I said much earlier on this retreat, and this is connected to all this business about desire, that one of the most significant things, one of the most crucial elements of fruitful practice is the view that we have of the self on the path. If that's problematic, then no matter what we experience in meditation, no matter what we open to, it won't deliver its full fruit. It can be stymied, it can be blocked. The view of the self on the path - this is important for everyone. It's not something we usually talk about. We usually expect that if I just do the right practices, that will all get taken care of. Maybe, but maybe not.

When we come - again, this is just for people interested in soul-making - a view of the self on the path can also be related to the fantasy of the path and the fantasy of the self on the path. Sometimes a person recognizes that they really need something like this to help them sustain, whether it's jhana practice or emptiness or just dharma practice or soul-making practice or whatever it is. I need something in the view of the self. If you know soul-making dharma practice, I need a fantasy here to actually sustain and keep delivering, keep encouraging me, supporting me.

There's the possibility of a kind of formulaic answer - taking the bodhisattva vows and having that kind of quasi-imaginal relationship with the whole quasi-imaginal sense of the self on the path. I'm a bodhisattva, I'm doing this for all beings, or I'm a warrior or whatever it is. All that's okay, taking a formula if you like. But it will be much more powerful and much more soulful if it's personal, unique to you, to your particulars - authentic again. The word "authentic" comes from auto, and auto means self. So it pertains to you. In other words, if the fantasy is a particular one, not just a generic Buddhist formula or something else like that.

If you are the author - that word "author" is phonetically related to "authentic," though not etymologically related. Its etymological root is from augere in Latin, which means to increase. An author is someone that grows something. But phonetically they're related - authentic and author. If you want to be a real author, I need to be authentic, and that means getting in touch with what this self needs, what's personal and particular.

So how do I access that? Yes, possibly through generic universal Buddhist formulas or whatever. Or it's accessed in one of two ways, which is out of the corner of my eye, so to speak. What I mean by fantasy is something we kind of see out of the corner of our eye. When I'm really in love with something, when I'm inspired, there's somewhere - I'm not really noticing at first - somewhere is hiding a fantasy of what I'm doing and of the self.

in its journey of doing what I'm loving.

When I love, when I'm in love, when I'm inspired, there's a fantasy hiding there. So how do I discover

what my personal fantasy is? I kind of glimpse it out of the corner of my eye. It's not really an image—it's a kind of background narrative image—but I can glimpse that in those times. Then I can use it, draw upon it, and develop it in practice, and it becomes really fertile potentially as a support for my desire, for my sustaining on the path, whatever path I've chosen.

So it can come out of those times of love, out of the corner of my eye I catch it. Or it can come right in and through my dukkha. When I'm really struggling on the path, when I'm really struggling with a sense of the self on the path, when it's got so heavy, so frustrating, when the longing is burning painfully, when there's grief perhaps, when there's despair—right there, in and through my dukkha, the very crucible of that dukkha, there's enough in there.

I have to go into it with a lot of skill and a lot of the right kind of holding. But if I do, in the alchemy of it, of this crucible of dukkha, it can emerge—a fantasy of self on the path that's liberating and supportive and sustaining and powerful and generative and nourishing and beautiful and endlessly fertile, as soul-making images are. So it's exactly when I feel really the pain of the problem of having a goal and my relationship with it—with all the soul-making skill that I have and art—that's exactly when the most fertile thing can come.

Last thing. So that was a bit of a digression. Again, I feel very important, this whole desire business, but I've talked about it so much elsewhere. Back to the realm of infinite space. Same deal with mastery. Same things. We're aiming for the same things in time when it's ready.

Can go there not from any jhāna, as I've described. Can go there either by subtle intention, just from a normal consciousness, through an insight way of looking, through just looking at things and seeing through them, sensing their non-solidity. Can go from not the fourth jhāna, but the second or the third, et cetera. Want to play with all this and develop all that.

Then one of the things I think gets really delightful at this point is walking in the realm of infinite space. I mean going for a walk on the lanes. Very interesting and very lovely experience, I would say. Then again, with every new jhāna, we've added more permutations for our leapfrog ping-pong, because you can jump around all kinds of different places to this one and that one.

I think that's all I wanted to say today. So let's have a bit of quiet together.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.