The Sixth Jhāna (The Realm of Infinite Consciousness)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:19:53

I mentioned at the beginning of the retreat that in many ways, the retreat happening at all has been somewhat of a miracle for many different reasons. We had initially gambled that Robert's employers would give him the time off work to come, and then it turned out that they were only given partial time. Then Kirsten heroically sacrificed a full retreat to sit this retreat fully and joined with the teaching. So it's been a bit of a patchwork in that sense, but it's happening.

Now, in fact, tomorrow, the time has already come for Robert to say goodbye, as his employers demand his services on Monday morning. So he will be leaving us about lunchtime tomorrow after his interviews. Just again, I really want to say how grateful, how absolutely hugely grateful I am—and I think we all are—to you for being here and using your holiday time to do that, and also to Kirsten for stepping in. The retreat couldn't have happened. This kind of patchwork of tag team teachers was the only way this could have happened. So we're really, really grateful to Robert for everything that you've brought here—your spirit, your knowledge—and also to Kirsten, for that willingness to step in and offer and share and be there for everyone.

Robert will slip out quietly with belly full after lunch tomorrow. Too much emptiness of time, and you get a little bit confused. Do you want to say anything, Robert? You don't have to.

[Robert responds] I would just say that eating with you all these last two weeks and seeing your practice and your patience and your perseverance has really touched me and brought much joy. As I'm leaving, I guess my wish for you all would be that during these last few days—this victory lap of the retreat—where the conditions are so rare and so precious, that your intentions remain strong and that the fire continues.

Actually, just to echo that last point, you all probably know how it is on retreats. We have, I think, four days left, something like that. If this was a week retreat, this would be really towards the end. The mind starts sensing it's towards the end. Papañca begins. Hindrances don't give a damn. They'll be coming and going—you're up and down, wherever you are in your little or big struggles.

As Robert said, keeping steady, keeping going—this is so much a part of the art, the fundamentals of the art of this practice. The fundamentals of any practice, the fundamentals that sustain staying in relationships, staying with a project that you love—it's so crucial. So how is your intention? How's that doing? What am I believing? Am I, again—this thing we've come back to several times—am I buying into what the seeds of the hindrances have spawned? And then it's a story and it's very, very convincing. And

then my intention is wobbling.

They're seductive and they seduce us, the hindrances and upādāna seduce us into believing this or that because they're so convincing. So these are precious days, you know—these four days are precious days, precious opportunity to practice, to go further, to learn more about this territory, but also everything around this territory that we've talked about: my personal relationship with desire and intention and steadiness and form and all that. So again, once more the invitation to work, play, enjoy, and find out.

Okay, so today we will talk about the sixth jhāna—which the Buddha didn't call the sixth jhāna, but called the realm of infinite consciousness, the sphere or the base of infinite consciousness. Hoping to shed great light on what's involved here as he goes through the stages, describing a practitioner practicing, the thought occurs to him after he's gone through the first four jhānas and the fifth jhāna:

"What if I, with the complete transcending of the sphere, the realm of the infinitude of space, realizing that consciousness is infinite, were to enter and remain in the realm of the infinitude of consciousness?"

Without jumping at the realm of the sphere of the infinitude of consciousness, he enters and remains in the sphere of the infinitude of consciousness. He sticks with that theme, develops it, pursues it, and establishes himself firmly in it.

So there's not a lot to go on there other than stick with it, develop it, pursue it, establish it. And it's something to do with consciousness. And again, it's very, very big.

Okay, what is this? What's he pointing to here? What's involved in this perception, this attainment, this opening?

I would say the central feature, if you like, is awareness knowing itself. Sometimes I've heard it described as actually it's awareness knowing the infinitude of space—in other words, it's the consciousness of the fifth jhāna. And there's certainly a way that it can seem like that. But I've come more to think that the primary feature is just awareness knowing itself, and then there's an infinite expanse of that.

But either way—whether it's awareness knowing infinite space, or the awareness that knows infinite space, or awareness knowing itself—I tend to think the second one, awareness knowing itself, is primary.

I should say right now that I use the words awareness and consciousness completely interchangeably. Over the last forty-five years or so, there have been different approaches—not really trends, but some people have at times drawn these two words apart, referring to consciousness as something much more limited. They see it as one of the aggregates, impermanent, unsatisfactory, narrow, tied to objects, while they regard awareness as something vast, free, even ultimate—giving awareness a capital A.

I don't ultimately buy into that distinction, so I think it's actually clearer to just use the words interchangeably—awareness and consciousness. Then we can explain different senses or perceptions of the nature of awareness at different times, each having different relative truth value. Anyway, all we need

to know for now is that I will use those words completely synonymously and interchangeably.

So awareness knowing itself. What's happening here is there's a kind of honing in, tuning to and focusing on awareness, on consciousness. Consciousness hones in on consciousness. Awareness hones in on awareness. The Pali word is *viññāṇa*. There isn't, by the way, a distinction in Pali between a word for consciousness and a word for awareness. *Viññāṇa* is, I think grammatically speaking, a verbal noun. It literally translates as "knowing." So awareness, consciousness, or knowing are synonymous terms.

What does awareness mean? In Buddhist understanding, it means knowing. Not knowing something—not "I know something" or "I'm clever because I know the square root of two to eight decimal places." It means knowing itself. It means being conscious. It means the recognition of something, the perception of something.

There's this quality, again and again in this state, of almost returning to and locking in on the sense of knowing. Sometimes, depending on how you access it, you can use these little grains, little tinctures of internal whispers in the mind to direct the mind and help support it to lock in on that primary *nimitta*. The primary *nimitta* is consciousness. The primary *nimitta* is consciousness knowing itself. You can use these little tinctures—just like "knowing" or "consciousness" or whatever it is—very, very subtly, to help support the mind in its attuning to, finding, and then sustaining its focus on the sense of knowing. There's a very subtle whisper internally to direct the attention to the sense of knowing.

I would say—and this is a long debate certainly in Buddhist history, in the Mahāyāna as well as the Theravāda and the Vajrayāna, and probably a debate outside of Buddhist philosophy and psychology as well—I would say consciousness of consciousness is an integral aspect of consciousness. In other words, to be conscious involves the subtle, at least the subtle recognition that one is conscious in the moment. Otherwise, a machine can be aware of this or that, but a machine doesn't have consciousness. It doesn't recognize itself. It doesn't have that feeling of being aware.

There's been a long debate about it, but in a way I think it's a little ridiculous. It's just part of the definition of consciousness—that consciousness in any moment is conscious of itself. Do you understand what I mean by that? Usually, that sense of being conscious is not something that receives much attention. It's very much in the mix of a moment of consciousness. There's much more attention to what we're conscious of—the object, this or that thing that I'm paying attention to, this or that object of consciousness.

But to some degree, some subtle degree mixed in with any moment of consciousness and as part of what defines it as consciousness, as I said, is some small degree of a sense that there is consciousness right now. And it goes with the subject: I am conscious. This is conscious.

Now that subtle sense, that subtle portion or strand within consciousness, can be amplified. And how do things get amplified? First they need to be noticed, then they need to be attuned to, and that attuning to what we notice amplifies it. In other words, in the mix of what consciousness is in any moment, by

noticing this sense of being conscious, this awareness of awareness, by noticing it and tuning to it repeatedly, we amplify that sense within consciousness.

Eventually the relative balance can shift from mostly "I'm conscious of the object"—whatever the object is I'm paying attention to—and very little sense of the consciousness of consciousness, to the reverse. With noticing it, tuning to it, and the amplification that will happen naturally with that, it can start to reverse until eventually all the attention, all the consciousness, is the consciousness of consciousness.

Does that make sense?

So there's this kind of lock effect—you know, locks on canals with water, the way they function? Do you have those in Israel? Because it's a desert, you might not know. Like that, yes.

Can you just either look at something right now, or feel a body sensation, or listen to the sound of the heating? So there's the object—the sound, the sensation, the visual object, whatever it is. And at the same time that's there, can you get a sense that there is awareness present? You're conscious of being conscious. Can you be aware of the awareness there? It's mixed in with it.

So this is a beginning of something. It's quite a hard thing to stay with. It's a subtle thing. As we go into the jhanas, everything gets subtler and subtler, but you can train the mind to pick that up and stay with it and amplify it. But we're really talking about the present moment—this moment, this moment, this moment of awareness, and getting the sense of awareness of awareness in the present moment.

So this is key to the whole thing. It's subtle, and so some of you might not have been able to get a sense. That would be very normal. Some of you might have practice already doing this. Either way is fine. But we're talking about a subtle sense, and therefore it needs practice to develop that—to notice it, to stay tuned to it, to kind of develop it.

As I'll explain later, there are many ways into this, but this sense of consciousness can then expand. This lock effect happens where all the other objects are kind of filtered out of it, and it becomes just an infinite consciousness—infinitely expansive consciousness. Here, now again, we're really talking about something wow. It's so different a perception, so different an opening than we usually have as human beings.

I think I shared much earlier in the retreat: someone coming in for an interview and saying, "Oh yeah, I think I got into the sixth jhana the other day, and it was all very light." It can't be. We're really talking about something that's immensely striking and very, very impacting on the consciousness, on the sense of being. So it's a deep realm of existence, a deep—that's what that word ayatana means, I've explained—a deep realm, a deep dimension of the cosmos. Something divine there, for sure. That's a sense. It's very intense.

So it's quite an intense experience. Electric, almost, I would say. Consciousness moment after moment focusing on itself with nothing else there, and just an infinite expanse of this. It's electric, it's compelling,

it's intense, usually. And there's something in that—it's almost like it's sufficient unto itself. It's just consciousness. There's nothing else. And this consciousness just knows itself and it pervades infinitely. And it has this kind of transcendent quality of being. It's sufficient unto itself. It does not need anything. Just consciousness knowing itself forever. Eternally sufficient unto itself. Eternally transcendent. Eternal in the sense of lasting forever.

So again, it is, as the Buddha calls it, nissarana, nissaranam—an escape. It's another dimension of the cosmos, another dimension of being. It's another realm. There is a freedom from everything else there. Freedom from the phenomenal material world. A release, a letting go of all else. There's just nothing else there but this pure consciousness, knowing itself, sufficient unto itself, infinitely expansive. And the objects are filtered out—everything else gone.

So I've mentioned a couple of times on this retreat, and I know some of you are familiar in practice with what I call the practice of the vastness of awareness. So it's actually worth lingering on this and comparing the two, because they can sound very similar.

They are both infinitely vast consciousness or infinitely vast awareness, both of them totally unperturbed by the arising or passing of phenomena. In both states, there's a sense that they last forever, that they're eternal in that sense of forever duration—forever undisturbed, forever radiant, forever peaceful. So there's clearly some similarity, and people might wonder about the distinction. But it's good to distinguish them.

We've said there's a letting go of everything else in the sixth jhana, in this infinite consciousness. The vastness of awareness too, if we compare, is also a letting go. It's quite difficult to pinpoint exactly what the differences are, but I would say that the vastness of awareness, yes, it's a letting go and it has all those other similarities in common with this infinite consciousness, this realm of infinite consciousness. But the vastness of awareness is more inclusive of phenomena, objects, experiences.

Particularly, it includes and is even accessed by way of its relationship with phenomena, with other experiences. It's their relationship with the vastness of awareness that's the key difference—one of the key elements, including what we might call their substantive relationship.

When one practices the vastness of awareness, there are different stages. As it moves into deeper stages, there can be this beautiful sense that not only do phenomena seem to arise out of this vastness of awareness—this beautiful, peaceful, radiant and divine space of awareness—not only do they rise out and die back in, born out of and dying back into this source, but as it gets deeper, it also feels like their very substance is awareness. There's a sense that the substantial nature of all phenomena is this awareness, this vast divine awareness.

So the vastness of awareness also feels like a freedom, but it's a freedom with and within appearances and experiences and phenomena. It's a view or a way of looking, a perspective on phenomena, on experience,

on this life as we experience it. It's a different view, a different sense of this world and this life, whereas the sixth jhana is something transcendent. It's beyond. It's gone beyond this world.

The infinite consciousness is more intense than the vastness of awareness, which has an almost infinitely deep ease to it. There's a real intensity in the sixth jhana, and it's a much rarer state for people to access for a number of reasons. Sometimes because it takes a lot to sustain that intensity, or even build up enough intensity that one would find oneself in such a state. It's also much rarer because one can open to the vastness of awareness from much more common ways of practicing insight meditation. If we just practice insight meditation with more open awareness, just being aware and letting things come and go, it will start to open up the beginning stages of the vastness of awareness. So quite a number of experienced insight meditators will have opened to some degree, to some level, to the vastness of awareness.

If you're interested in the vastness of awareness—we've mentioned it a couple of times on this retreat—there's a whole chapter on it in Seeing That Frees, depending on maybe the three chapters that come before it. It's there and should be very clear. Really worth that opening, and the modicum of effort it takes is so worth it. There are also, I think, four guided meditations I did years ago, each titled "The Space of Awareness" with different subtitles—guided meditations of different ways of opening up the vastness of awareness, if I remember.

It's a different state. It's not the sixth jhana. You could say it's related, and definitely worth visiting and opening to, putting some time in there and being touched by that beauty and the liberative and healing qualities. But the sixth jhana, the infinite consciousness, is something rarer.

They're also slightly different in their aftereffects on perception. In the vastness of awareness, you could get up and go for a walk and see a stone, and the substance of the stone is that awareness, is the divine awareness, is this vastness of awareness. Or that stone is somehow, the appearance of the stone is the play of this awareness. It's really hard to put your finger on, but I think it would be more accurate to say that in the infinite consciousness, with its aftereffect on perception, a phenomenon or a stone or an object feels more as if it has consciousness. Not so much that its substance is awareness, but that it has consciousness—even as part of a cosmic consciousness.

So distinguishing the aftereffects on perception between these two states, the vastness of awareness and the infinite consciousness...

The after-effect on perception in the vastness of awareness will be something akin to the stone—the appearance of the stone feels like its substance is awareness, or that the appearance of the stone is the play of awareness. With infinite consciousness, the after-effect on perception feels different—perhaps moving more toward the sense that the stone has consciousness, even if the stone's consciousness is part of a much more unified cosmic consciousness or divine consciousness.

It's hard to articulate. I've never really heard anyone even attempt to make these distinctions, but that's

my current thinking about it.

Both of these states, though, are undisputedly mystical senses of divinity. It's very often the case that a person will start using words like "divine" even if they've never in their life used those words before—with either of these two experiences, the vastness of awareness or the infinite consciousness. One really feels as if there is something of a divine order here, something of the nature of the divine that is being revealed, that's being opened. "This is God's awareness" can be the sense.

But as we said, the sixth jhāna, the infinite consciousness, is more purely transcendent. It's really a realm beyond phenomena.

I would say that both of these experiences are immeasurably precious. And I would also say that they're part of our human birthright. As human beings, this is part of what is available to us and what is our human birthright—to know this, to open to this, to be touched by these levels of being, these dimensions of being, these openings. They're available.

Particularly with infinite consciousness, with repeated exposure, it brings such a different sense of existence—such a sense of opening up the dimensionality of existence, of the cosmos, of being.

There are also many variations and satellite states around the sixth jhāna, especially when we practice with the eyes open and especially in terms of their after-effects on perception. But I won't go into them now.

Again, I want to emphasize how important these comments about desire are. I think it would be really understandable if someone, with repeated experience of going in and out of this infinite consciousness—really being touched by it and opened by it, opening to it and assimilating that opening and that sense and that perception into their sense of existence—it would be really understandable if such a person were to look back and think to themselves that life knowing that realm is so much richer, so much richer in dimensionality, than life not knowing that realm. "How did I live that way?" would be very understandable.

And they might also think, "I wouldn't want to live without knowing this, without that opening, without that sense of dimensionality." To them, in retrospect, it might feel as if life without this was a kind of impoverishment—not that they want to escape into this transcendent realm, but that life without it would in some way be less worthwhile. That would be very understandable as a view or a feeling.

But it's tricky, isn't it? It's tricky. I'm hesitant even saying all this because it's loaded—loaded because of many things we've talked about on this retreat in terms of desire, in terms of goals, in terms of what I said yesterday about living in a Western culture that, beginning with the Protestant Reformation, has actually been deconstructing and dissolving any agreed-upon idea of what makes life worthwhile.

Don't underestimate how influenced we are—not by Buddhist history so much, but by Western history.

Things that happened in relation to medieval theology influence us today way more than people realize. Something happened starting with the Protestant Reformation that fractured and fragmented any sense of agreed-upon idea of what was holy. And that influences very much what anyone can say to anyone else about what is worthwhile or what one should desire.

So all this is here when we talk about such states. It's loaded, it's charged in all kinds of ways—potentially painful in all kinds of ways, potentially enticing in all kinds of ways.

The usual insight meditation way of teaching—or at least it used to be—is not about experiences. It's just: don't try and get experiences. Just notice what experiences there are. Just be mindful. Just notice what comes up and what goes. To say something like what I just said—that these states are precious—is a little bit loaded. It's implying something. It invites, it opens the door for the pain of striving, the pain of desire that we've revisited several times on this retreat.

So the usual way of teaching insight meditation is a lot easier, because it effectively just closes the door on any kind of striving like that. Just: all you have to do is be aware. Whatever comes, whatever goes, it's all the same. Good experiences, bad experiences, remarkable experiences, boring experiences. All you have to do is just be aware.

And when you're not aware, you just notice it and you come back.

There's such value in that way of practicing and teaching. It's a lot easier—I think for both student and teacher. When you start saying, "Oh, this is really precious," or "That's really precious," or "This experience is..." then you start running risks. But there are risks both ways. If you go just into the mode of "experiences are not important," there are significant risks as well.

All this is tied into desire. What do I desire? Why do I desire what I desire? What's going on with me? What's authentic desire? What's deep desire? What's involved in my desire? And how do we teach regarding such experiences, such openings, such perceptions?

If one goes into an interview and reports such an experience, and what comes back from the teacher is a response of "Sounds good, but it's just another experience. It's impermanent. Let it go. Don't get attached"—that response itself is a kind of teaching. It's set in a framework that needs to be at least semi-coherently nestled within a whole idea of what awakening and liberation is and what insight is.

Again, we get this tracing down—a feeding down from a top-level conception into how I'm responding to this or that experience in any moment, or someone else reporting this or that experience in any moment. So if I say it's immeasurably precious, it's loaded. But it's tricky.

I think it would be understandable if a person did report such a sense of—almost like, I can't imagine life without the sense of that kind of dimensionality to it. It would be understandable. They may have some work to do, but it would potentially be understandable.

Such a different sense of existence, such a different sense of the cosmos, of the dimensionality of being that comes with this. We assimilate that, incorporate that into our being in addition to the usual sense of consciousness. It doesn't replace it one hundred percent of the time. It just becomes available sometimes—this completely other sense of consciousness, this completely other dimension. But our usual sense is still available.

The usual sense of consciousness is that it's mine, and it's somehow in here—usually in here, in the head. From here, in my head, it's somehow sensing out. It's associated with this materiality, meaning this physical matter, this physical organism. That's the usual agreed-upon idea, but also sense of consciousness in our culture. So that's still available, but other senses become available as well.

It's not the case that this infinite consciousness is the ultimate nature of consciousness. It's not. Even just labeling it as the sixth jhāna would strongly suggest that it can't be. Nor is it ultimately the true nature of mind, nature of awareness, nature of consciousness. Nor is the vastness of awareness. Neither of these are the true or ultimate nature of awareness or consciousness. They're not the final truth regarding awareness, regarding consciousness.

Also, I don't think such an experience really proves the possibility of a consciousness—let's say, without or not contained by matter. So that's the experience: there's this consciousness. It's an immaterial realm, right? We're now in the immaterial realms, the arūpa jhānas, arūpa āyatanas. There's just this infinite consciousness sufficient unto itself. The experience would seem to suggest that here is a consciousness without being contained in matter.

To me, it doesn't prove that. There's the whole question of epistemology from meditation experiences and what we can deduce from a certain meditative opening. We would need more convincing, other kinds of experience, other phenomena, other things to happen to be more convincing that there's a possibility of consciousness without being contained or associated with matter.

But still, again, how are we to regard all this? I think there's value to say: here now we're opening to deep provisional truths. They're deeper truths, but they're still provisional.

So we can talk about almost like a scale of relative truth, if you like. Deeper truths, still provisional. Provisional truths, experiences, openings, insights. What's the Buddha's words? Perception attainments. And he talks about them in a scale of perception attainments—the attainment, the ability, the achievement to perceive this or that as a level of truth, if you like, but still a provisional truth, not a final, not an ultimate truth. So that feels to me really, really important.

How do we get there? How does such a place, how does such a realm, how does such a dimension of existence, of being open up for us?

So there's a number of possibilities. One is simply, as usual, just hanging out in the previous jhāna—in which case the realm of infinite space—just hanging out there, really getting into it, revisiting over and

over, hanging out, hanging out, and it will naturally mature. It naturally matures at a certain point from the previous jhāna. That would be a very normal occurrence.

I think I very briefly mentioned this earlier in the retreat though. Though I know one teacher disagrees with me and one teacher who agrees, I think the order of ease of access through these rūpa jhānas, much as for some of the order of ease of access through the rūpa jhānas, is individually variable. So I feel for me, I felt it was easier to access, for example, to learn this infinite consciousness, then the infinite space. Other people, it might be the other way around or something. But I think there's an individual variation here. So one teacher had insisted on doing them in their sort of numerical order, and another teacher was much less pedantic about that, less emphatic about that. But I would agree. I think there's individual variations in tendency there.

But one way, as I said, is just hanging out in the realm of infinite space and just really, really getting into it. When the fruit is ripe, it ripens, it matures.

Then a second possibility is to be in the realm of infinite space, to hang out there, and then at some point when it's steady, when you're really into it, when it's established, when you've got some mastery, then begin becoming aware of the awareness there in that state, in that space. This is just a subtle shift of the attention and of the intention to pick up on that subtle sense of awareness that we experimented with earlier today, but within the realm of infinite space. So that would be a very kind of straightforward way of going about it if it needs a little nudging.

Third possibility is any jhāna—well, any of the jhānas up to now, let's say, better, easier to say—or even a normal state of consciousness, a non-jhānic state of consciousness, and actually just what we did earlier. So can you get a sense? So if it's a jhānic state of awareness, the object of the consciousness at any time will be the primary nimitta. If it's a non-jhānic state of awareness it could be any smell, taste, touch, sight, sound—something that's quite steady though. You don't want something flickering too much. Something quite steady, or it's probably easier if something's quite steady. So something you can look at and it's not going to disappear on you, or a sound that's continuous. If I pick the heating and not—well there are no birds right now—but pick the heating, it's more of a constant thing.

And so normal consciousness with a normal sense object or any jhānic consciousness with the consciousness of the primary nimitta and then noticing, tuning to and focusing in on that sense of knowing, that sense of consciousness. So in other words, this realm of infinite consciousness can be approached not from the fifth jhāna, not even from the fourth, third, second, first—can be approached from normal consciousness. It's just a matter of tuning, noticing, tuning, and then amplifying that very sense of consciousness, and then it can begin to open up and open up. So that's one way as well.

A fourth way is obviously related to that, but I mentioned it, I think yesterday—I can't remember—and the Buddha says it somewhere or other. He kind of classifies the arūpa jhānas, the arūpa āyatanas, as, if you like, perspectives on the fourth jhāna. So it's really that there are not eight jhānas, but four jhānas, and the

fourth one has five variations: the fourth jhāna, and then the four arūpa jhānas. Somewhere or other in the Pali canon, I'm pretty sure the Buddha frames it like that.

Already, we said in his description, what he emphasized in his description of the fourth jhāna was the pure awareness, the body wrapped in pure awareness, or he sometimes says pure mindfulness. So it's right there in the fourth jhāna. And if I pick up on that, pick up on the sense of presence, the sense of consciousness, of pure mindfulness, pure awareness, right there in the fourth jhāna, the body has become that. That will open up into the infinite consciousness.

Fifth, there's insight ways of looking that will open up the infinite consciousness. They're actually the same as what opens up infinite space. In other words, the same ones might take you to either space, either the infinite space or the infinite consciousness. We mentioned them yesterday.

And lastly, as always, with experience, with enough familiarity, enough in and out...

Part of the whole deal with mastery is that eventually we can access these realms—or this particular realm—just by subtle intention, just by remembering it. We remember that realm, remember our experience of it, and that opens the doors to this divine awareness, this God's mind.

Again, I don't think there's any need to push or stretch it to infinity. Whichever way you go, I don't think that's so necessary. It should—I think it will—but it should automatically just expand that way. This happens partly because there's nothing else in consciousness. There's nothing in the way. There's nothing but infinite consciousness.

Again, that could be a little tincture. If it's not quite stable yet and you're working to consolidate, you can just drop in that phrase: "nothing but infinite consciousness." That kind of primes—it's very, very subtle. It's not like a big thing. This is an alchemical tincture one's putting into the space just to very gently direct and guide the mind and support that opening out.

So it should go—it probably will go—automatically because there's nothing in the way really, there's nothing to limit it. Sometimes you just need to relax into it. So it's strange—it is a very intense state, but there might be, as you work with it, times when actually more relaxation is needed, and other times it's more like really honing in with the intensity on that focus on the consciousness, on the consciousness of consciousness.

So one can just let it expand. This leaning forward business that I mentioned can start happening sometimes in the third jhana, but certainly in the fourth and later. This more relaxed approach may help with that because sometimes the leaning forward is, again, due to our usual—not just intellectual construal, but sense of attention—placing its mental object in front and then, with just a little bit of trying, we end up leaning forward because we're aiming in front of ourselves with just a little bit of effort. But the more relaxed approach can open it up more evenly. So it may help with that leaning forward issue.

A lot depends on how you access this infinite consciousness. If you're coming from infinite space, there's nothing there to prevent it from becoming infinite. It's already infinite. So it just kind of flips to consciousness. If you're coming from, let's say, just normal consciousness, and then you're focusing—you're noticing the sense of consciousness, you're noticing the awareness of awareness, you're tuning to that and amplifying it—then it may well be that other objects come in and out of the awareness as you're trying to do that. And either you just stay really, really with the sense of knowing, really with the sense of consciousness, or you somehow see, sense the other objects as consciousness.

The Buddha talks about escape—as we said, *nisaranam*. And again, I've still forgotten to look up the word, but he talks about what's often translated in English as "releases of awareness." So the different jhanas and then particularly the formless are releases of awareness.

So again, we're talking about a realm here, completely free from, completely transcending the hassle and the reach of material perceptions. Sometimes the Buddha calls the four formless realms "the peaceful liberations." So that's a synonym: the peaceful liberations.

And then there are passages where he talks about fully liberated beings, arahants, as liberated in one way or liberated in two ways. An arahant liberated in one way is just someone who's gotten rid of, exterminated, expunged all greed, hatred and delusion. They've ended their kilesas. But an arahant liberated in two ways is someone who also has access to these formless realms. And the Buddha has this lovely passage: they remain "touching with their body the peaceful liberations." Their whole sense of existence is touching with their body something that's beyond the body and immaterial. They remain in the world touching with their body the peaceful liberations. Other arahants, other fully enlightened beings, don't know these realms. They haven't developed them. They're not necessary. There's a difference.

Experientially, the very sense of release, of a beyond, of realms beyond—that very sense can help maintain, again, if you're working in this space, in this realm, and it's just working to really settle it at any one time, then the very sense of release and beyondness and escape can be part of what helps consolidate it in that moment. But I need to enjoy that. In other words, the very sense of this transcendence, the beyondness, the release—they're slightly different things because release is "I am released" or "this is released." Beyondness, transcendence—there is that. But the enjoyment of that, the subtle enjoyment of that, is again also part of the binding glue, the consolidating moisture, the liquid of the experience.

So again, such an opening, such a perception, such a revelation, relativizes this world—the world that we all agree on. This world of material forms, of things, of beings. Opening to that relativizes this world. It takes its place in a series of worlds, of realms. It's not just "there is this world and nothing else." And then it relativizes our relationship with this world, and that could happen in different ways. It could, as we said before—and this is problematic to my way of thinking—become problematically dualistic.

For many practitioners today, this kind of dualistic view—seeing this world as samsara, as something not

worth much, something we want to escape—rarely poses a problem. In fact, traditionally the thrust of Pali Canon teachings embraced this perspective far more commonly than we see now. Some practitioners find no issue whatsoever with this dualism. Yet I believe it carries real dangers. When we regard this world in such a way, do we still care for it? Do we love it? What becomes of our duty to this world and to others within it? The relationship itself risks becoming problematically dualistic.

This danger diminishes significantly when we apply the same principles we've explored throughout: allowing the aftereffects of perception to open up, really exploring them thoroughly. This is why I emphasize so strongly that the aftereffects on perception are as significant as the pure jhanic experiences themselves. These aftereffects truly change everything—they have profound impact on our sense of this world.

When perception opens to reveal that stones possess consciousness, that divinity radiates from everywhere, this very quality of divinity permeating all existence, then the dualism we've discussed gets evened out. This represents one crucial reason for attending to these aftereffects.

The second approach for addressing any tendency toward problematic dualism involves understanding the dependent arising and therefore the emptiness of perception—everything we explored together yesterday. This experience of the world that seven billion people agree upon, this experience of infinite consciousness, this experience of subtle realm worlds, this experience of infinite space—whatever emerges—all arise as dependent originations. They manifest dependent on certain ways of looking.

This world and that world, this realm and that realm, are perceptions arising dependent on different ways of looking. Understanding this in the most powerful way transcends duality entirely, granting us freedom to be dualistic when we choose dualism and non-dualistic when we choose non-duality. As I've said, this collapses any duality between non-duality and duality itself. We become free—free with a full range of ways of looking, free to move, free to experience all realms with equal sacredness because we've understood something fundamental about the emptiness of it all, the dependent arising of it all. Through playing with insight ways of looking, through exploring various ways of perceiving, we open this entire understanding.

The Buddha characterizes these states as embodying a kind of equanimity. Certainly they are profoundly equanimous—completely unperturbed, completely undisturbed. In this sense, they express genuine equanimity, without any push-pull toward other objects. They represent states of very deep equipoise. So yes, they are both calm and focused.

Yet with experience, secondary background emotions often arise. While maintaining that equanimous, calm quality, one might simultaneously be jumping for joy in the background. Wonder emerges, potentially love, peace, ecstasy—all these can manifest as background experiences, and naturally so, rightly so. We've already mentioned the qualities of release and freedom that characterize these states.

Just as with infinite space, I strongly recommend practicing this realm with eyes open as well. Look at the sky or sense the space around you, allowing that to expand. Perhaps consciousness first expands to infinite space, then flips into this new realm. Maybe you begin sensing consciousness within that much larger visual or kinesthetic space. Or perhaps you work more intimately, as we described, with a smaller sense of space—not the vast sky, but simply any object before you.

Like infinite space, these states evoke a profound sense of oneness—mystical, cosmic oneness that feels almost overwhelming in its intensity. This perception emerges both within the jhana itself, in the pure jhanic experience, and in the aftereffects on perception that follow.

Again, this is precisely why I emphasize so strongly the aftereffects on perception. Really take that time off the cushion in a much more relaxed way—walking around, having a cup of tea, whatever feels natural—and notice the effects that formal practice has had on perception. How is everything right now? What has happened to your perception of self, of world, of consciousness? What has shifted in your sense of things, of materiality, of existence itself? Really noticing these transformations does something very profound indeed.

That oneness can emerge in the jhana itself or in the after-effects on perception. Yesterday we explored how the primary oneness that comes with infinite space is a oneness of materiality, of material substance. We are all star stuff. We are all the same big bang. We are truly one matter—our bodies, everything. This jhana, in contrast, reveals a oneness of consciousness, a oneness of awareness.

One can have the sense that while there appears to be separate awarenesses, separate consciousnesses, actually at another level there is one. There is one divine consciousness of which we are part or in which we partake.

When you get to soul-making Dharma, there are important variants of this and it becomes significantly different. I've noticed when I'm teaching soul-making Dharma and speak about participating in God's mind, sometimes people write to me, and from what I read, it sounds like they're relating or hearing what I said through this lens of oneness of awareness. There's actually something different in soul-making Dharma. There are more variants and more subtlety and more allowances for individual particularity. God's awareness needs my awareness, my particular awareness, my particular dukkha, my particular ways that my mind works—and yours, your particularities, your foibles, your struggles. That's different from the notion that there is simply one awareness, a simple, pure, clean awareness in which we somehow participate. There are significant differences there, but this is not a soul-making treatment—just for those of you who are interested.

The oneness is technically, I suppose, a secondary nimitta. The primary nimitta is the consciousness. The oneness—though they may become completely fused at times—is technically secondary. So we should focus primarily, as always, on the consciousness most of the time. The oneness will come. It will arise naturally in the after-effects on perception. You can trust that.

Even though you could say perhaps one of the most significant, impactful, potent, and transformative perceptions here is the very sense of oneness, still we don't need to—probably most people don't need to—go looking for it. You can trust that it will arise and do its work. Of course, there are always exceptions, but I would say that.

The same approach applies with mastery—all the little tricks of the trade, going for walks, all of that. Just to emphasize, I don't know how all this sounds, but it's really just a matter of training.

When we talked yesterday about the fifth jhana, infinite space, or even today—yesterday with infinite space, we said looking at an object that we would usually sense as solid in the very looking, even though I'm not touching it, my sense in looking is of solidity. That would be the normal sense of it. Then seeing and sensing physical objects, material objects as space, seeing and sensing them as not solid and staying with that. Getting that sense and then staying with it—infinite space can open up from that.

What's basically happening, if I sustain it, is a training of different elements. Can I flip so I can see what I usually sense as solid? Can I flip the perception so that I sense it as space, as not solid? Can I sustain that? Can I allow that to open? These are all just elements of training. Training the perception of space.

Space is not something we usually pay attention to. Usually we're basically addicted or imprisoned by habit—we pay attention to objects in space. Even when an architect talks about paying attention to space, it's not quite the same thing. What they really mean is a geometry that has shapes. Actual space itself is not something human beings habitually pay attention to.

So we're training a perception, training an ability—a more refined perception. The point I want to make is it's all training, just training of perceptions. The training has slightly different elements in it. How many suttas are there where the Buddha describes some meditation, describing a monk doing this, and "thus he trains himself," and then a little further, "thus he trains himself, thus he trains himself"? It's just training.

What that means is it's possible, it's available. Even the thing we did earlier today—can you get a sense of the awareness of awareness? Can you become aware of awareness in the moment? Can you sustain that? Can you focus in on it? Can you let it amplify? Can you let it expand? It's all training, just training. What that means to me—it's an important word because it means it's totally possible, it's totally available.

I don't know how it sounds, but we're really talking about something majestic in its grandeur.

unfathomable in its beauty and wonder and depth and sublimity and dimensionality and divinity, but also that in another sense or at the very same time is just a training.

Yes, it's very rare and even rarer, as I said, than the vastness of awareness, but it's just a training. It's rare just because people have not been taught or don't sustain their journey of working towards it, playing towards it.

So it's possible and available if we get our relationship with desire right. All this. And I just want to keep

coming back to that. I can talk about blah blah blah and all this great sounding stuff, but if the relationship with desire isn't right, if I don't understand myself in relationship to desire, I don't understand what I'm bringing in or what is brought into my desires at different times and how I relate to that—not just in this moment but over time in a sustained way for a retreat but also for years, months and years. It's possible and available if I have that fundamental inquiry and understanding and right relationship with desire.

And I think if I bring a kind of intelligence to my working and playing—and by intelligence I don't mean scholarship, I've said that before, nor do I mean something really intellectual. I don't mean that at all. I mean everything that we've emphasized: the flexibility, the responsiveness, the attunement, the coherent conceptual framework of what am I doing and why and where is it going and how does this fit into where I'm going. Because that bigger picture conceptual framework should guide me in my momentary choices and momentary emphases.

So if that's askew or I haven't got a coherent one or it doesn't make sense, or if I'm trying to work towards this jhāna but actually I'm laboring under the umbrella of a conceptual framework that doesn't really support it or emphasizes an aspect like, how long can I stay on one object? We've talked about this before—that I'm emphasizing something that's actually just going to capsize the boat and not let this boat deliver me to where I want to go.

So if there's the right relationship with desire and inquiry into that in the open—that's the hard thing. That's not an easy thing. That's a big ask. And it's more fundamental. And if there's this intelligent, what I mean by intelligent work and play, then these things are really possible and available. And they're just trainings. They're just trainings.

So last thing about desire, and someone wrote a note, a couple of people wrote a note, in fact. So again, it's just a small thing for people who are already familiar with soul-making dharma, just very briefly. We talked about this, the importance of the absolute necessity of having a helpful view of the self on the path, a helpful view of the practitioner self. And in soul-making dharma, we talk about fantasies of the path, fantasies of the self on the path. And I've talked about that several times in other soul-making retreats over the last years. I can't remember where, but it's there.

And a couple of people were asking, "Yeah, but okay, but when you're on a jhāna retreat, for example, let's say it's an emptiness retreat, or let's say it's a metta retreat, or it's a themed retreat, and it's not a soul-making themed retreat, how do I relate to this whole idea of fantasy? How can I work with the whole idea of fantasy? Because I'm supposed to be doing jhāna practice, I'm supposed to be doing emptiness practice or whatever it is."

So a fantasy is something, as I said, that's almost—I use it as a word—something in the background, something in the background. It's a background kind of imaginal narrative, if you like, or semi-narrative. But it in fact has an eternality to it, but it appears in narrative form, if you like, but it's in the background.

And what can happen or what we can do sometimes is bring that, when we notice that fantasy, we can bring it into the foreground and work on it with our imaginal practice. In other words, what was fantasy in the background becomes image in the foreground, and then we work and play with that image. And of course, it might be an image of myself. So that's what we're working with. So a glimpse of fantasy in the corner of my eye when things are going really well, when I'm into practice, when I'm inspired, a glimpse of fantasy. And then if I want, I can bring that to the foreground and work on it in a sort of conscious, deliberate, imaginal practice. But then once you've done that, it can go to the background again. So that's one way of doing it.

Or you might find there's no fantasy, actually. There's just dukkha. I'm just stuck here. I just am hitting my head against a brick wall. I feel completely contracted or imprisoned or whatever it is. There is no fantasy. Or what there is is a self-view that's not an imaginal fantasy. It's an impoverishment and it's a reified self-view that's painful.

Then as I said yesterday, then what I have to do is I have to go through that dukkha. I have to go right to the middle of the dukkha and feel the dukkha of it and feel the pain of it. I have to hold it in certain ways. I cannot approach it just with simple mindfulness. Simple mindfulness will drain the self out and drain the story out. Very useful at times, but here we want a certain kind of crucible, a certain kind of holding which allows the self to be there and the dukkha and the story but allows them to alchemically reconfigure or arise differently in a much more helpful way.

So through the dukkha and through the very heat of the dukkha and the material of the dukkha in that crucible, if I hold it right in my imaginative practice, then an image of the self and an image of the path will arise. And then that can go to the background.

If this is all in the context of a jhana retreat or an emptiness retreat or a metta retreat—and not a soul-making retreat—it can go to the background. In other words, we only use these fantasies, we only bring them to the foreground as much and when they are needed. Otherwise, they can stay in the background. And from the background, they quietly but powerfully do their work in their subtle, half-hidden, almost subliminal way.

So you bring it forward or you concentrate on your dukkha and allow the image to become primary only when you need it. A bit like using insight ways of looking on a jhana retreat if an insight way of looking is not your base or springboard practice. For some people it is, and that's fine—they're doing that all the time. For other people, it's sort of almost last in the list of things to do when something feels stuck. I try this, I try imagining, I try breathing through, I try this and that. Last on the list maybe is an insight way of looking, but I'm just taking something else, bringing it into primacy for a certain time for the sake of lubricating and opening up the jhanic path.

Now, on this retreat where there's an intention to stay constant with my intention and on a certain path, I bring it forward, and when it does its work, I can let it go again—unless it's my primary, my base practice.

So we only use it when we've tried everything else which hasn't helped.

Let's sit quietly for a bit now. Thank you everybody. It's time for tea.

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