The Seventh Jhāna (The Realm of Nothingness)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:26:23

So, seventh jhāna—which the Buddha didn't call it that, as far as I'm aware—has the appealing name of the realm of nothingness, the dimension of nothingness.

Let's again start by checking out what the Buddha says. A monk has gone through the first six jhānas, and then the thought occurs to him: "What if I, with the complete transcending of the sphere, the realm, the base, the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, recognizing there is nothing—what if I were to enter and remain in the sphere of nothingness?" Without jumping at the sphere of nothingness, he enters and remains in the sphere of nothingness. He sticks with that theme, develops it, pursues it, and establishes himself firmly in it.

Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

But believe me, it gets worse trying to put language to these states.

Some people—and I have no idea about statistics, but it's certainly not unheard of—encounter this realm unexpectedly. A person, even a beginner on their first insight meditation retreat, maybe someone who just heard meditation was good for stress reduction and relaxation, might be sitting there one day following simple instructions, minding their own business, when suddenly a huge black space opens up. They feel like they fall into it—a void, the void. They might have heard this language before. The term "void" carries different meanings in different Buddhist traditions over the years, and in other traditions as well.

Some proportion of people have that kind of experience. But usually when it happens out of the blue, without much preparation or orientation, there's not really a discerning of which, if any, of the four arūpa jhānas—the four immaterial realms or dimensions—one has encountered.

The person will speak of it simply: "Everything disappeared. There was nothing there." But actually, I've heard people say that in relation to the first jhāna. These states, including the first jhāna, are so different from people's usual experience that one understandably struggles not only to put them into language and describe what happened to a teacher or friend, but also to actually discern what has occurred. As the Buddha said, we need to understand what's present and what is absent.

So someone just says, "Everything disappeared." Well, actually, there's still a lot present. In the first jhāna, there's still pīti, sukha, and all the rest of it. Here, in the realm of nothingness, there's much less. But usually, without training, the eyes are not used to the dark, so to speak. There isn't this discernment of what is still there and what is not.

If you ask such a person who has stumbled into encountering something like a void or big black space, "Was there a sense of space there?" they may not have had that much discernment. Was there a sense of space or was there not? Usually, if someone is asked to imagine nothing—maybe not for you at this point, but if you say to someone, "Imagine just nothingness"—probably they would try to imagine a big black empty space with nothing in it. But that's not the realm of nothingness. That's probably more akin to the realm of infinite space.

At any rate, this novice meditator, without any kind of map or orientation or understanding of what has just happened—experiencing this big dark space with nothing in it—lacks the discrimination necessary because they're not trained and not prepared to discriminate the subtleties and differences in all these states. Most would call it nothingness, but actually, because of this non-discrimination and non-preparation to discern, there won't be the blossoming, the full blossoming of whatever potential state is there.

It's the discriminating, the discerning, that allows something to blossom. We're back to this process of noticing, attuning, amplifying. Amplifying means blossoming. If I don't notice a difference, if I don't attune to it—and if I don't notice and attune to it—then it doesn't get amplified. In other words, it doesn't blossom.

So whatever state this is that oftentimes scares the living daylights out of a novice meditator, it's probably not really any of the formless jhānas. It's in that territory, potentially could be any of them, but because there's not the discrimination, because there isn't the preparation and skill and subtlety and sensitivity of awareness to discriminate, it doesn't actually become any one of them.

More significantly, the person almost certainly does not understand how that happened. They were just meditating, just noticing things, letting go, and then this thing occurred. They have no idea how it happened or why it happened. They may or may not get much explanation from books or teachers or retreat talks. No understanding of how it happened or why it happened—it just seems like a random occurrence.

What's the important thing? Two things: you'll be okay and it's impermanent. Both of which are true, but there's no real understanding of the why there. The why has to do with dependent origination, dependent arising, or dependent fading.

So it probably doesn't fully blossom. Probably there's very little or no understanding of how or why that has opened or kind of emerged. And as I mentioned, there's probably or often would be quite frightening, such an experience. One just feels like one's on the edge of an abyss or has fallen into an abyss.

There will be fear with such an opening, such a deep bottoming out of experience, such a deep disappearance of the world of phenomenal reality, the conventional and accustomed world of phenomenal reality. There will be fear, usually, if there aren't a series of stepping stones to such an

experience—a series of stepping stones that one has enjoyed and learned to trust and delighted in and they've become stable bases, stable stepping stones.

And what are they? Well, the other six jhanas. So these other six jhanas up to the seventh jhana, because we learn to really trust them, they're also droppings out. They're also disappearances of to some degree. They're unfadings, unfabrications, unfabricating to some degree. Do you understand? But we've gotten used to that. Not only have we gotten used to it, we've learned that they can become stable and that they're delightful and we trust them. There's nothing to be feared here.

Without those stepping stones and the training and time that it takes to really establish those stepping stones, then just being presented with this edge of an abyss or falling into an abyss is going to be frightening. It's a long way from normal consciousness to such an abyss. It's much less of a way from the realm of infinite consciousness, the sixth jhana, to the seventh jhana. It's just a step. And so there's much, much less likelihood for there to be fear. And then that fear can cause mayhem in all kinds of ways.

So what's going on here? And the Buddha doesn't help that much, does he there? So we were in the infinite consciousness, and it's not then with this next step that consciousness is not there in the realm of nothingness, but the sense of space has gone. This is why I say, if I say to you, can you imagine a big black space with nothing in it? Most would have some sense of that. But we're saying that's not actually the realm of nothingness. Can you imagine nothingness, not even space? Little trickier, huh?

So this is really kind of gone beyond our, gone quite beyond our usual sense of things. Space has gone. It's not that consciousness has gone. Consciousness is there, but consciousness is not prominent in the way it was in the sixth jhana, in the realm of infinite consciousness, when the consciousness and the consciousness knowing itself or even knowing the infinite space was the primary nimitta.

There's still consciousness. There has to be consciousness there in the realm of nothingness. Otherwise we wouldn't have any sense of anything, any perception of anything, any consciousness of anything. But the consciousness is not prominent. It's rather that the citta, the mind, the heart is struck, captivated, drawn to the sense of nothingness. This sense of nothingness, which doesn't even have a sense of space with it. I might have the last vestiges of space, but as you get deeper into it, even the space kind of collapses or gets sucked into itself like a kind of black hole or something like that.

And that nothingness is the primary nimitta. That's what the mind is drawn to, captivated by, struck by, entranced by. The consciousness is still there but it's not the primary thing. Later on, and I hope we will get to go into this or describe it on this retreat, later we have to re-find and refocus on the consciousness as one aspect or thread of being able to go even deeper. So at the moment we forget about the aspect of consciousness. Later we have to find it again, as just one thread of a path that can take us beyond even this nothingness.

Experientially, the realm of nothingness is usually pitch black. As I said, we've gone beyond anything that

could be described as space with nothing in it, which would be more akin to the infinite space. Sometimes, without the sense of space, it can feel as if it almost has a thick texture to it, because the space sort of thins things out—and then there's no space. It almost feels thick, though this is difficult language to use. But that quality probably passes, and it's not that thickness doesn't represent a step backwards in terms of refinement. This is definitely a refinement over the previous realm of infinite consciousness.

There's nothing left as a perception. Nothing left as a perception but the perception of nothing. There's nothing left but nothing. There's nothing left but nothingness. And that's the one thing that's striking one—something, again, very breathtaking.

It may be for some, even those who are not beginners—like the person we described just innocently sitting on an insight meditation retreat, having never heard about any of this—it may still be an acquired taste for some people. But I would say that at some point, either immediately or gradually or eventually, at some point it will turn and one will fall in love with it. Fall in love with this mystical nothing, this mystical void, this mystical nothingness.

So how do we get there? How does it open up? Well again, one possibility is just letting the realm of infinite consciousness mature—really getting to know that, sitting in that, loving it, opening to it, getting to know it inside out, staying in it, staying in it, staying in it, dissolving as much as one can. And naturally at some point there will be an evolution, and it will sort of take a quantum leap, a quantum jump into a different dimension—the dimension of nothingness.

As always, eventually with time and the intention to develop mastery, there's the possibility of accessing the realm of nothingness just through a subtle intention, through the memory of it. That takes a lot of practice, as with all the jhanas, just getting familiar, but it's equally possible.

But here—and I want to dwell on this—is where the insight ways of looking as a way into this realm get really interesting and really important, really significant. In the other sutta that we've already mentioned, the Anañja Sappaya Sutta, "The Way to the Imperturbable" or "The Conducive to the Imperturbable," sometimes translated, here is a sutta where the bulk of it is the Buddha talking about insight ways of looking predominantly to the formless realms. There's other material in it too.

He's talked about up to the sixth jhana and gives the name "the imperturbable" to the fourth, fifth, and sixth jhanas. So just for this sutta, it seems to refer to those three. He's gone up to that point and then says, "Then again the disciple of the noble ones considers this"—I would say this "consider," again, I don't know what a better word in English would be. It's not an intellectual pondering. One employs a way of looking. And that's very light, very agile, very subtle and very potent. A heavy pondering philosophically is not going to produce any meditative state and open any doors to other dimensions. We don't really have a word in English, but the way I would definitely translate this is: the disciple of the noble ones employs a way of looking.

The text says something like this, and understands something like: all sensuality and all sensual perceptions and all perceptions of forms and all perceptions of the form jhanas, the rūpa jhanas, and the realm of infinite space and the realm of infinite consciousness—all that, all sense perceptions, all form perceptions, all rūpa jhana perceptions, all perceptions of infinite space and infinite consciousness, all that—they're all perceptions. They're all just perceptions. Where they cease without remainder, where they end without remainder, where they no longer are, that is peaceful. That is exquisite—that is, the dimension of nothingness. Practicing and frequently abiding in this way, her mind acquires confidence in that dimension.

Let's take this individually rather than reading all the others first. So what's going on here? Basically, one's employing a way of looking. Again, if you're not used to this idea of ways of looking, we're talking about something very subtle. It's an insight way of looking. It's a certain conception and relationship with, in this case, all those perceptions. So anything that comes up or that might come up—one might be in the fifth jhana or one might be looking at a perception, a material sensual perception in the world, it might be the third jhana, a perception of a rūpa jhana, whatever—all those perceptions and whatever perceptions will come up or have come up, they're not peaceful, they're dukkha basically. Some of you know what I call the first dukkha practice: unsatisfactory. Particularly, they're not peaceful.

There's a sort of confidence there that when they're let go, when these perceptions fade, when they let go, there's a dimension called the dimension of nothingness which arises when they quieten, which arises when they're absent. Does that make sense? All that I just said is all right there in a way of looking that's just happening again and again and again. Very subtle tincture in the way of looking, very subtle—not a whole verbose philosophy. And one's applying it to whatever one is perceiving, again and again and again, sustaining over and over and over, and those perceptions fade. And in their absence, the perception of the realm of nothingness opens up.

They're not peaceful, but this is peaceful—this is exquisite, the dimension of nothingness. So that's one way the Buddha describes it. As one could say, yes, they're dukkha, they're unsatisfactory, but particularly with his emphasis on: they're not peaceful. This is peaceful.

The second way, the second insight way of looking that opens up this realm: Again, the Buddha says the disciple of the noble ones, having gone into the wilderness, to the root of a tree, into an empty dwelling, or into a retreat center in rural Devon, considers this. Again, "consider"—same deal. It's with the insight way of looking, very subtle, very potent. Its potency is proportional to its subtlety in the mind, to its non-verboseness. There may be words there, very subtle, but we're talking about something very agile.

Considers this—I really don't like the word "considers," but looks in this way: "This is empty of self or of anything pertaining to self." Or you could translate it: "This is void of self or of anything belonging to self." Practicing and frequently abiding in this way, the mind acquires confidence in that dimension, and the dimension of nothingness opens up.

When we read that originally, you think, "Oh yes, that's to do with there being no self because Buddhists talk about there being no self, right?" I think it's actually more to do with what I call the phenomenal self—not the personal self, but the self of phenomena. This is a lamp, this is a piece of paper, this is a glass, this is a hand. Just as habitual avidyā, habitual delusion, takes self to be something real, a real thing, we also do that with anything at all. This is a sound, this is a taste, this is a clock. Do you understand?

To me, what the deep teachings of emptiness are pointing to is not just the emptiness of the personal self, but also the emptiness of the selves of phenomena. Everything is empty. All things are empty of being things, of being inherently existing things.

So the way of looking: "This is empty of self. This is void of self or of anything pertaining to self or belonging to self." I think it's referring to that. And that if you practice it that way... And the "this" there, again, is anything. Anything that's in the attention, anything that one pays attention to—whether it's this body or this whatever it is—is empty of self, empty of self. It's empty in itself. That's another way of saying it's empty in itself.

If one does that again and again and again—we're talking about something very agile—it has to make sense to me what that means. It's empty, empty. It's empty of self or of being something that is a part of some larger self, like it's a part of a larger phenomena, like this spring here is a part of a larger lamp or anything like that. That has to make sense. The insight way of looking has to make sense to me.

A way of going about "empty of self" means it's fabricated in the way we've been talking about. This thing does not exist as a thing unless the mind fabricates it as a thing. And if the mind doesn't put in the conditions—clinging and conception and a certain relationship to it—that thing does not get fabricated or constructed as a thing. Does this make sense?

So these ways of looking have to make sense, but it will be equivalent, or one way of doing it, or a shorthand way is: fabricated, fabricated. But I have to have the experience of having seen things unfabricate through playing with other ways of looking in the past. I have to have enough experience of that so that when I point at something with my mind and say "fabricated," it's resting on the consolidation of my previous insight, seeing things fade. I know they're fabricated. I know it here in my heart. So I can just look at them as fabricated.

And in that one word, there's a whole—you could write a book explaining what that one word means: fabricated. So it has to be there, and that's what I mean. It's very agile because that one word contains a lot of understanding but in a very dense way, but very light.

So fabricated, maybe... It's empty in itself or of a phenomenal self, which is more than to say it's not me or not mine, I would say. To really point to this jhāna, we need to go beyond the teachings about personal self and not me, not mine, and actually to the level of the phenomenal self, the emptiness of phenomenal self, which is a deeper level.

It could also be—and some of you know this, and it's in *Seeing That Frees*—all this stuff is in *Seeing That Frees*—but it could also be: this is empty, empty of self or of anything belonging to a self, void of self or void of anything belonging to itself. Some of you know, in *Seeing That Frees*, you can find a meditation on wholes and parts and a way of going deep into emptiness, or pretty deep into emptiness, through a meditation on wholes and parts and their relationship and their mutual dependency and mutual emptiness.

And so this could be referring to something like that. Whatever this is, it's not a part of something bigger and it's not a whole which has parts. The very notions are empty. So there are different ways of doing it.

We don't have time to go into detail. I'm just pointing at various possibilities here, though they're explored in quite a lot of detail in Seeing That Frees. But that might be another approach.

So that's the second contemplation. The third one presents us with an even more puzzling formula: "Then again, the disciple of the noble ones considers this: I am not anything belonging to anyone anywhere, nor is there anything belonging to me in anyone anywhere."

This formulation should make us scratch our heads. I think we must consider the historical context of the Buddha's time—the different religious views and meditative practices that were prevalent then. It's quite possible that this addresses specific metaphysical positions. In fact, in the Buddha's biographical story, we encounter practitioners who take the realm of infinite consciousness as ultimate reality, believing that everything in the world belongs to that ultimate reality. Not only do they view it as the ultimate reality, but they hold that I in my true essence, and you in your true essence, are that ultimate reality. Your true Self with a capital S is that infinite cosmic consciousness.

This strange formula cuts through any possibility of viewing myself or any elements of myself in relation to something like this cosmic consciousness. "I am not belonging to anyone"—that deity, that cosmic consciousness. There's nothing in my makeup that belongs to that. Even though I might have been deeply attached to such a view, and it might have been an extremely helpful, beautiful, liberating, heart-opening perspective at another level, now I cut through it. Remember what we discussed about provisional truth—I'm moving to another level now.

"I am not anything belonging to anyone, any deity for instance, anywhere. Nor is there anything belonging to me in anyone anywhere." I'm also not taking the seat of identification with the cosmic consciousness or anything like that, claiming that all this somehow belongs to me.

If you reach this point in practice, however strange these formulas sound—puzzling, baffling, seemingly arcane—it's still worth engaging with them playfully. Sometimes even when we only half understand something, these contemplations can have a magical power.

Now I'm contradicting what I said earlier. I emphasized that when you work with concepts like fabrication or emptiness, they must really mean something to you—you have to genuinely understand

them. Yet I'm contradicting myself here: there's also the possibility of thinking, "I have no idea what this means, but I'm just going to try playing with it and see what happens." That exploration is for later stages of practice.

The Buddha continues: "Practicing and frequently abiding in this way, his mind acquires confidence in that dimension." The realm of nothingness opens up in all its mystical depth. Again, we're talking about insight ways of looking, not mere intellectual pondering. We're working with something very light, liquid, agile, very subtle, yet possessing immense power. I want to return to these insight ways of looking and their relationship with this dimension of nothingness shortly, speaking practically in terms of technique.

So here we are again. I really want to dissolve into this nothingness as much as possible. As with all the jhānas, there will be a subtle polarity between subject and object. The object here is the nothingness itself, but there will still be some degree of subtle polarity, a subtle sense of separation, a subtle duality present. The fundamental structure of consciousness—what I call "sati"—remains.

But again, absorption: how much can I dissolve into this? It's an open-ended direction that doesn't reach a final endpoint. We keep trying to absorb more deeply, to dissolve more completely. Yet we will never totally absorb. Even if you feel completely absorbed, it simply means you haven't noticed a subtle remnant of subject-object duality, of subject-object polarity still present.

We cannot totally erase or collapse the subject-object duality without much deeper insight ways of looking. I know that in many circles it's very popular and quick off the tongue to say "no subject-object duality" and "there was no self" and "there's no this or that." It's very easy to say these things, but again, this is precisely why I place so much emphasis on subtlety, discernment, discrimination, attunement—really noticing that there is still a subtle subject-object duality here.

Unless I move the insight to a completely different level—which hopefully we'll explore in the next couple of days—that duality is not going to collapse. Usually when people talk about "yeah, there was no self and there's no duality and there's no separation," it's simply that they're not paying close enough attention to what's actually happening. They haven't noticed something crucial. There hasn't been sufficient training in subtle discerning and discrimination.

So when we talk about non-conceptual awareness, when we talk about the total collapse of subject-object duality, we're talking about something extremely rare and extremely strange. That takes quite a rare and sophisticated, profound, and subtle insight to collapse, to go beyond.

But practically speaking, I want to keep this absorption open-ended. I will never reach the end of it. It's open-ended, this absorption. I just try to dissolve mind and body in this nothingness as much as one can.

And again, this forward leaning tendency—we can configure this nothingness differently. We can configure this nothingness upright, so there's less leaning. Instead of it being in front of me with me falling into it, or the mind getting sucked into it, or trying to probe it in front of me, I can put it where the body is.

There's nothingness here—it's not just in front of me, it's here too, in the space where the body used to be. Or I can configure it 360 degrees around. All this can help with that strong tendency to lean that happens for many people.

Depending on how one approached it, just like with infinite consciousness, many aspects of working with it depend on which route one has taken into it. If one is going from these insight ways of looking, one considers: this is empty of self, this is empty of anything belonging to a self. The "this" is really anything at all—anything that arises. It could be the perceptions of normal sensory awareness. And one starts with that: the perception of my body, the perception of this pain, the perception of this pīti, whatever. One just keeps training the insight way of looking on it.

Let's say it starts with a pain in my tummy. I just keep looking at it with the same insight way of looking. What's going to happen? Probably the pain fades. Probably it goes through a phase where there's pīti arising, maybe sukha. So maybe it goes through some of the jhānas. Maybe the train doesn't stop there—you're just kind of seeing the station out the window, and it goes by as it's fading. Then it starts to open up into deeper senses of fading.

So the "this" from the insight wavelength could be anything. And it might be, if one is approaching it that way through the insight ways of looking—or sometimes if one is approaching it other ways, from the infinite consciousness, for instance—that still other perceptions are arising.

This is quite important because some people say, "Oh, they're not gone," and they get into a tizzy about that, thinking the perceptions need to disappear—a very subtle tizzy. If that's happening, then what's really skillful is to regard them as no-things. They are not things. In other words, the same insight way of looking is just trained on them.

Now, by that point, it might be that I don't even need the whole "it's empty" formulation. It's just: they're no-thing. This thing is a no-thing. It's a no-thing. It's a no-thing. Or they're fabrications—again, I need to understand what that means. This sound I hear, that plane or whatever it is, it's fabrication, that sense perception. I need to understand that.

Or they're just perceptions. That's an interesting one. The insight way of looking "just perception" has many alternative subtexts. It can mean—and I think when some people hear it, or I've taught it in the past, they take it to mean, and it's totally valuable for it to mean at one level—what it means is: this is just awareness in substance. Whatever this sound or this pain or this thought is, it's just awareness in substance. So it's taking the insight from the vastness of awareness and applying it as an insight way of looking. It's just a perception. It's just awareness in substance.

But here we need to go beyond that. And if I say "just a perception," it really means it's fabricated. It's a deeper insight.

It's just a perception, meaning it's just something that's fabricated—as all perceptions are. So we might use

as our tincture for an insight way of looking just this very subtle "just a perception," for example, or something like that, whatever the tincture is. But it's important to read the small print. It's important to know what it means, because the small print will determine what happens.

If I'm viewing it as "just a perception," but what I really mean or what I really understand by that is "it's just the same substance as awareness," it will take me to the vastness of awareness or maybe the infinite consciousness. But if my "just a perception" has the small print "just fabricated, because all perceptions are fabricated," then it takes me deeper. Make sense?

Again, when perceptions are still arising—when the nothingness is sort of there, but there's still stuff at the edges that one feels like, "Oh, it's not completely pure yet"—one could regard those perceptions as *duk kha*. *Dukkha* because perceptions are not peaceful, which corresponds to the first of the Buddha's three insight ways of looking. They're *dukkha*. But it has to be that we're not talking about aversion there. If that's *dukkha* and it's got irritation in it and aversion, that's not going to take me deeper. It will take me out of the whole depth, because aversion is a fabricator and we're moving in the direction of less fabrication.

So you have to be careful with these kinds of things and these insight ways of looking that aversion doesn't get woven in subtly. It has a very strong effect when it does that. You're really trying to view without aversion: "It's *dukkha*, it's unsatisfactory. It's *dukkha* because it's a perception and perceptions are not peaceful," as the Buddha says, but that doesn't mean there's aversion to them.

These insight ways of looking are very subtle, light, agile, liquid, but very finely poised as well. There's something where the degree of the delicacy and the subtlety of the poise is the degree of their power.

Actually, what I've just described—this kind of not quite pure *jhānic* state—it's like in the neighborhood of the nothingness, or the nothingness is there but the mind hasn't completely entered into it, or it's kind of half in and half out, or mostly in and there's a little bit less. This not quite pure *jhānic* state may actually be more useful because of the opportunity to practice those ways of looking at objects and at sense perceptions and mental perceptions right then.

Again, we tend to think, "Oh, it's not going well," or we judge it dependent on how deep the absorption is. But the very fact that it's kind of not quite in yet gives us more opportunity to look in a certain way at these perceptions. And that may be more useful than when it's just completely, purely emptied out, because it's the ability to look at—it's the ability to sense and to relate to perceptions in these ways, with these insight ways of looking—that's what's most liberating. That's what brings the radical change and the radical openings of view: our ability to be in the world of things, to engage things, knowing they are empty.

So this kind of "it's not quite settled yet" state with regard to the realm of nothingness gives us the opportunity to practice ways of looking right then in this kind of in-between state that one might judge as

"I haven't really got it." It gives us the opportunity to practice ways of looking that are, in the end, actually more powerful.

So this whole realm of nothingness and everything that goes with it is an experience and/or an understanding of emptiness at a very deep but not yet total or ultimate level. When we're talking about the dimension of nothingness, we should be understanding emptiness at a very deep level from it, with it, or on our way to it. It's wrapped up in the dimension of nothing—an understanding at a very deep level of emptiness. It's not the final, ultimate deepest level of emptiness, but it's still really important.

Again, we can talk about nothingness and no-thingness, but they're really just two sides of the same coin. The advantage, I think, of working from the insight ways of looking, as the Buddha described—and as we went through very briefly there, and in a lot more detail in *Seeing That Frees*—the advantage of working that way is because those insights get consolidated more.

Especially the second and third: "This is empty of a self or of what belongs to a self." There's—what's that phrase again?—"I am not anything belonging to anyone anywhere, nor is there anything belonging to me and anyone anywhere." These ones are empowering a view of emptiness with regard to phenomena, the phenomena of the world, the phenomena of our life.

The first one—"perceptions aren't peaceful, let me go for something without perceptions where there's more peace"—again, you can hear the danger of dualism there. You can hear the danger of a dualistic attachment.

In a way, what I've just said—the *samādhi* here, in other words, how absorbed am I in this state—is actually less valuable than the insight. The degree of my absorption into this state may be less valuable than the insight that comes from the state or on my way to it or around it or in the after-effects. I would say that the insight is actually more important than the degree of *samādhi* here.

So no-thing, or the emptiness of things. The understanding of the no-thingness of things, of the absence of inherent existence of things—that really ultimately there are no things—the understanding of that while we're perceiving things is, as I said, immensely liberating. So freeing in its potential. It's a very profound understanding and it has different levels to it. Lots of different levels to it, at least the way I would teach it. The same understanding of no-thingness at deeper and deeper levels.

That's the usual way I would teach emptiness. You just go one level, consolidate that, then to a whole other level of what the same thing means. What it means to say something is empty. What it means to say there are no things. But even at not such a profound level, it can be enormously liberating. There is so much potency of potential freedom there.

When there's no thing, when we begin to sense that or be able to see there's no thing here really, then there's the possibility that we can be with something with either no or much less sense of imprisonment with regard to that thing. Much less sense, or no sense, of imprisonment in, with, or by any form.

Whether that form is a relationship one feels claustrophobic in, whether it's a work situation that one feels hampered by, stuck in, constricted by, whether it's any kind of situation or a social situation or an ongoing social construction that one finds oneself in, whether it's an illness, whether it's a retreat—all the bonds of finitude. Where there's finitude, we can feel imprisoned by those edges in all kinds of ways.

You just have to ponder this and actually see: where there's a thing, there's the possibility of imprisonment in relation to, with, by, in that thing.

So understanding this no-thingness, being able to relate to a thing, see a thing, be in a thing—I'm using 'thing' obviously in a very broad sense now—to be able to see that way and know its no-thingness can open up tremendous freedom, the end of a sense of imprisonment. One is free. The bars are still there; one is free.

Sometimes I used to say to people years ago, for example, in walking meditation: "Can't I just go for a walk? Same thing. I'll walk. I'll do it mindfully." And I would say, "No, walk up and down and up and down and up and down. You have a beginning and you have an end. Closed form."

Sometimes I would say to people, "Do a walking meditation period for six hours or more—six, seven, eight hours. Walk, walk, walk until you see the illusion of the closeness of that form." Of course, I have to incline my mind to that insight. Here I'm imprisoned. I can't be free to go anywhere. I'm just walking up and down in this body—until one sees through, sees through the form, sees through any sense of imprisonment in that form, sees the emptiness of walking.

What we're talking about here applies to so many other things, so many forms, so many structures, so many imprisonments. It's an emptiness insight, and it's related to this no-thingness of the seventh jhana.

As I said, there are many different levels of this. But even at a more conventional level, we can—as I said, "I don't know what all this means, just walk"—for example, do your walking meditation hours and hours and hours until you see through what looks like a restricted form. You're free.

So the samadhi, as I said, may be less valuable than the insight here. And there's a way, as we've been talking about, the jhana should bring certain insights. It will bring certain insights. When one goes into this level, this dimension of nothingness, it should bring certain insights.

But certainly the insight ways of looking will deliver the jhana. So the causality works both ways. But if I enter this jhana and this dimension of nothingness via the insight ways of looking, it will tend to reinforce those insights more. I will learn those insights more because they've been part of how I've arrived there as well.

In the jhana, as I said, you can have a sense of nothingness and a sense of no-thingness. They can be slightly different. I mean, the actual jhana is really a sense of nothingness. The insight is of no-thingness. It's the latter—the sense of no-thingness, the recognition of no-thingness—that's most important for

insight.

Even if I just have an experience of nothingness, deep nothingness, to me it should lead to the insights that the Buddha is talking about: emptiness of phenomenal self and so forth. It should lead to the insight that there are no things, really.

But again, the power of conceptual framework. Because I've heard and read people talk about this state, and they seem to have very good absorption into it, but they don't seem to have sucked the juice from it in terms of the most relevant and the deepest insight from it. So all very well—the absorption is good and fantastic, and you can hold your mind there—but where's the liberating insight from it?

It could be again that because of a conceptual framework which isn't relating these things to emptiness, there's actually a stranglehold on the growth of insight. It may be that the force of the jhanic experience anyway opens that. But I do know cases where that's not the case. And to me, it points again to the hidden power of conceptual frameworks and how important it is to pay attention to conceptual frameworks and just see: are they—are we adopting and using and relying on the most powerful conceptual frameworks, the ones that make the most sense, the ones that point in the right direction? Are we picking the right thing from the fruit tree?

Or are we walking away with something else like a twig or something and not an apple?

So the view then that comes, that becomes available and the understanding and also the after effect on perception here is one moves in the world afterwards and one's clearly moving in a world of things. But they're at the same time felt and seen to be in some very mysterious way, not things. It's a thing and it's not a thing. And it's hard to put that into language. But one way of saying that is these understandings and these perception attainments, they don't make us dysfunctional in the world. Like I'm now unable to drink water because I can't sense a thing there. Of course I can sense a thing, but I can also sense it as not a thing.

No thing, as I said, related to emptiness, does not mean impermanence. Emptiness is way beyond impermanence. When we talk about the no-thingness of things, we're not saying there's not really a glass of water here, there's not really a glass here, there's not really water here. What there are is the really, really rapid arising and passing of either perceptions or atoms or whatever it is. That's impermanence. It might be super-fast impermanence. That's not emptiness.

So that would be an example. If I took the insight of rapid impermanence from all this business of no-thingness and this jhāna, I would be taking, I don't know, a twig from the apple tree and not the apple. No-thing emptiness, this is much, much deeper, much more powerfully liberating than impermanence.

So again there are certain recurrent themes through all this and still with this level of opening and this mystical kind of revelation really, it still brings mettā. Mettā comes from it, just like all the other jhānas. The mettā here, you know, luscious, profound, flavored with the depth of mystery and flavored with the

depth of the mystery of no-thingness, of thingness and no-thingness at the same time, of emptiness. Mettā at a whole other level.

And again, we can ask, why mettā? Why mettā? Everything's disappearing. There's no thing. But there's also then less emphasis on the differences. There's certainly less emphasis on this self and the interests of the self and the selfish interests of this self over and above others. But even more, there's a kind of, again, there's oneness. Just like the other arupa jhānas that we've talked about. Oneness, another whole level of oneness, another whole level of mystical oneness opens up with these perceptions.

So we have the oneness of materiality, this sort of woven togetherness of our bodies, of our matter, of all matter, with all matter in the universe. We had the oneness of awareness from the infinite consciousness, the mysterious oneness of our consciousnesses. And here we have a kind of oneness of essence or substance, but that essence is a kind of essence of emptiness. I use essence almost in inverted commas, the substance of all beings and all things, the substance of all phenomena, the essence of all beings and all phenomena is recognized, is felt to be emptiness. But we have to use that word essence a little carefully. And that's a whole other level of mystical oneness that the heart opens to.

So it's emptiness understood at a certain level there, or a certain bandwidth of levels pertaining to the seventh jhāna. So mettā comes, as we would expect by now, and a further opening of oneness.

So just to linger on the mettā piece, later, after you've developed this for a while, and also with the development of other emptiness practices, again, we can make cocktails. So we can mix perhaps certain brahmavihāra practices, maybe mettā or karuṇā, compassion practice, with, for instance, this sense of no-thingness or emptiness.

There is, as we talked about, this spectrum of fading, spectrum of unfabricating, and it's possible, with practice, it's possible to play with perception, which is, again, one way of construing everything that we're doing, one way of construing what the whole dharma is. We're playing with perception and play along that spectrum of fading so that self and other fade to a great degree and phenomena as well. There's a partial fading of this being or that being who one is then directing mettā towards. They become extremely insubstantial, barely there because they're just on the sort of cusp of completely fading out and diaphanous there. They're on the verge of fading, but still they're there as an object, as a person, knowing that they're empty.

So there's a knowing that they are empty, they are empty of inherent existence. There's an experientially, that knowing of their emptiness is empowering an insight way of looking, which is empowering the fading down to a point where they're just kind of appearing, teetering on the edge. And then the love, and then practicing the mettā or the karuṇā towards this empty person, that balance somewhere on a cusp of fading and appearance.

So they're barely there. They're appearing, but they're barely there. They're barely formed. They're half

faded, yet they're distinct.

They're just about distinct as this person or that person. Doing that and then adding into this alchemical mix, adding your metta towards this person or your karuna towards this person empowers the metta or the karuna to a whole other level.

Some people think, well, if someone's empty, surely I'm not going to have metta because they're empty, right? But no, if you actually practice it, it takes the love and the compassion to a whole other level, a whole other empowerment. And actually this kind of thing—playing with the spectrum of fading through an insight way of looking, making cocktails—there are all kinds of options that start opening up, all kinds of games we can play and be very creative here, all kinds of beauty and wonder that can open up in this territory.

In a way one could say this is the territory now of tantric practice, of vajrayana, ideally I would say. It comes from this knowing of emptiness, this understanding of emptiness, and this ability to actually control, if you like, or play with perception to a certain degree so that things don't just completely fade and then I can't do anything, there's nothing because everything's completely gone. But nor are things or beings reified and solid. They're in this diaphanous, divine, empty yet appearing, on the cusp of fading yet appearing. They're in that place and it's a magical place and it's a place of potent magic.

In the Mahayana teachings, it's said that only a Buddha—not an Arahant, not a fully enlightened person in the Theravada teachings—only a Buddha, a complete Buddha, can both fully view something or someone as empty at the same time that they still perceive that thing or that someone. They still perceive them as someone or something. For all the rest of us, when I view X or Y or this person or that person or this phenomenon or that phenomenon as empty, if that makes sense to me what it means and I'm applying it in this agile, subtle way, I'm viewing this as empty, that thing will disappear, it will fade. Only a Buddha can fully view something as empty and still perceive it.

That's a core and fundamental but not very well known Mahayana teaching and it has enormous implications. One way of construing what one's doing when you're practicing Vajrayana visualization practices and seeing appearances as divine—and some of you will never have heard of this, some of you will have—is you're deliberately mimicking the mind of a Buddha and that capacity of a Buddha to do just that, to understand and view something as empty at the same time you're actually perceiving it without it completely fading. So that Vajrayana, that kind of practice, is just this pretend mimicking of being a Buddha. And if you do that enough, that's one way to become a Buddha, is you just imitate a Buddha and then you become a Buddha. That's all Mahayana and Vajrayana teaching.

I'm just mentioning it. But a couple of things from that, and they're significant. Well, I think that's very significant in all kinds of ways. And certainly as practice options, hugely significant and immensely beautiful playgrounds open up, immensely beautiful realms and possibilities open up there.

But there are a couple of points I want to draw out from what I've just been talking about. So one is about this malleability of perception with the emptiness and the fading. I'll come back to that. The other, again, is revisiting our theme of desire. We said there's this iddhipāda that the Buddha talked about, and desire is one of them. And then we keep touching on it in this retreat. And one of the things I said, and I've said it now, I've pulled it out as something to talk about twice and a third time now, at least I think, is again, what is it exactly I'm desiring from practice?

What exactly is the mix of desires, the precise mix of my desires that brings me to practice, that keeps me practicing, that takes me to retreats or whatever it is? What's in there, what those desires are, has a tremendous influence on then what unfolds, let's say, on a retreat or in your practice or in your life. So that if one of those desires or even the main desire for practice is to open my heart and for the heart to be touched and that's really what takes me to practice and that's maybe what brings me on a jhāna retreat somehow—that may seem a bit of a strange choice of retreat. If you want that, why would you choose a jhāna retreat necessarily?

And again, talking about this, the influence of exactly what it is that I desire, the influence of that on what unfolds and what becomes possible. If that's my primary intention, maybe conscious, maybe semi-conscious, then it's probably not enough to sustain the intention for jhānas and for jhāna practice. It's a wonderful intention, but it's probably not enough to actually show up hour after hour on a retreat like this or a longer jhāna retreat to actually sustain: this is what I'm doing. I'm not getting distracted. This is the primary thing I'm doing. I'm occasionally doing something else, but this is what I'm doing.

We've talked over and over about just how hard that is to sustain that intention and also just how important it is to sustain that intention because without it sustaining, things won't open up. They'll open up in a very limited way, but they won't unfold to these kinds of depths or any real jhānic depths. Hard to sustain that, difficult to sustain that intention, a single intention like that. But if my kind of primary thing that I'm looking for or wanting from practice is the heart to be touched or open, then as I said, it's probably not enough to sustain that intention. It's probably not enough to keep working and playing, for instance, in the ways that we've been taught, because I'm actually interested in something else and it's hard to see the connection and I'll be drawn to other things because they're more obviously in line with my desires.

So this might seem a strange thing to say at this point of the retreat, but again, partly I'm talking to the recordings when I talk, but there's a more general principle which applies anyway, and I want to really reinforce that general principle. So if I'm interested in any deep practice, developing any deep practice—jhānas, emptiness, whatever it is—then I really have to understand, I'm saying it again, I really have to understand desire. And I have to understand my relationship with desire. And that has to be authentic. And I have to understand what I tend to do or not do with desire. And I have to understand what the influences are of different desires. And all of that, which is repeating what I've said before.

So it's this general principle that is really important. If there was someone listening to the recordings who starts listening, let's say, to the recordings from this retreat, but really what they're mostly wanting is open-heartedness and for their heart to be touched or something—which may not even be something they've articulated consciously to themselves—it's probably the case that they will have given up listening to the recordings by now. But the general principle is really important about what we're talking about: that desire and really being clear about what the desires are.

But the second thing I think is really important because it is true. Most of you will have got this sense. It is true that the jhānas open the heart. Can I say that now? And you feel that that's a—yeah, it should be. You should have a real sense of like, wow, this really has an impact on the heart. The capacity of the heart to be touched, the capacity of the heart to hold ranges and depths and beauties of emotion and also difficult emotion, and all that. Jhānas do open the heart enormously in ways and at levels that perhaps before really engaging in such practices and staying with them and pursuing and staying with the intention and working in these ways would have been undreamed of—the way the heart opened. It would never have occurred to us that the heart could open in such ways or at such levels.

Again though, again, if consciously or semi-consciously I have a conception or a conceptual framework or an idea or an image of what heart opening, love, or even sensitivity—one word that we've been using—if I have an idea, an image, a notion, a conception of what those things mean. Heart opening, love, sensitivity, for example. What they mean, what they look like, what they involve, what they need. If my idea is limited, then it might be that there is a limited range and possibility and depth of heart opening. Because my very conception, even if it's semi-conscious, is limiting what's possible for the heart. It's limiting the heart opening that's possible. One remains confined in the presupposed limits. Again, they weren't even conscious perhaps.

In fact, the danger is even more, and especially so when we think, "Well, I just want my heart to open. I'm not really into conceptual frameworks. I'm not really a conceptual person. I'm just kind of open because I want my heart to be open. So I keep my mind open." But actually it's not. There's an idea there. There's a limit. There's an idea, an image, a notion of what heart opening or being touched or whatever means, involves, needs, looks like. And that limited idea is limiting what's actually possible.

So heart opening is endless, I would say. It's endless. There's no end to heart opening. There's no end. It's endless in terms of what it is and also what it includes and what it involves. It's endless if we let it be endless—meaning if we let the heart open, but also if we let the mind be not limited in terms of what it means.

Again, the power of conception, the power of conceptual frameworks, the power of notions and ideas, conscious or unconscious, is enormous, really, really enormous. This is something to really explore. Again, we can talk about jhānas, but there's other issues like desire and idea or conception that have power and have determinative power over much, much more than we recognize. And they have determined over

what will open for us as human beings or what remains closed. We don't even understand why is it remaining closed. We don't even recognize it remains closed until we hear other people talking about things. "Why haven't I had that experience?"

Okay, last thing relating back to the emptiness. We talked about the metta and the love and the desire. And again, coming back to our theme of malleability of perception. So it should be, I would say, that to the degree that one has realized the emptiness of things—and remember, that's a spectrum. It's really a spectrum. So we're talking about emptiness of things can be realized at a very everyday, not big deal level. And it's still really, really important. And it can be realized all the way down, incredibly deep, everything in between.

But that realization of the emptiness of things—or the no-thingness of things—for many people, it legitimizes and opens up the possibilities for playing with perception even more, for the malleability of perception.

In the opening talk, or very near the beginning of the retreat anyway, I acknowledged and wanted to recognize together the fact that I knew many of you would have been very active in different sorts of activism recently, particularly around climate change and species loss and the environment. You may have arrived at the retreat tired from all that—from the craziness of extinction rebellions and such—tired, wired, and grieving.

Someone who indeed arrived at the retreat after lots of dedicated activism, wired, tired, and grieving, left a beautiful note the other day. I'm going to read it to you and then say a few things about it.

She writes: "This morning I decided to walk in sukha"—so walk with the primary nimitta of the second jhāna—"being surrounded and welcomed by it rather than walking in a sukha bubble of my energy body." The usual instruction has been to keep the sukha, if we're doing sukha while walking, contained within the energy body bubble space. She tried something different—to walk surrounded by it rather than just in the energy bubble.

She continues: "For many months, I found it nearly impossible to enjoy being in nature, although I was in amazing places in the natural world. I mainly perceived nature as wounded, deeply ailing, dying. A perception that is not only very painful, but also, as I was very aware, not always helpful or sustainable for the being. This morning, all was radiating or being an expression or manifestation of happiness. The very fabric of the cosmos was sukha. This was very beautiful and healing.

"Yet what was even more profound and made me cry was that not only was all an expression of sukha, but the cosmos—or all, or it—was delighted and happy at my activism. No matter how flawed, mad, confused it may be at times, it rejoiced in it, no matter what the outcome."

I want to analyze this a little bit. This is a beautiful experience, very healing. There's jhānic familiarity—in this case with the second jhāna—and at least some degree of mastery, because walking with the sukha is

part of the elements of mastery. There's jhānic familiarity, some degree of mastery, and then the deliberate choice not to contain it to the energy body as would be usual for the second jhāna, but to allow it to become huge and cosmic.

In soul-making dharma, I want to make a distinction here. We use the word cosmopoiesis, which means cosmos and poiesis—making or creating, or an art of perceiving the cosmos a certain way, of sensing the cosmos a certain way. Here came a cosmopoiesis at first, but that cosmopoiesis wasn't fully imaginal. The point I want to make is this: we can have a cosmopoiesis—as someone shared in a note the other day about the fabric of the universe being joy—so here the fabric of the universe is sukha. There's a cosmopoiesis, an altered perception of the cosmos, but we can have a cosmopoiesis that's not fully imaginal. It's just a cosmopoiesis, an effect of perception, a malleability of perception regarding what the sense of the cosmos is.

Then, in this report, that cosmopoiesis becomes more imaginal. What's the difference? One of the differences is that the self gets drawn into the soul-making dynamic. It's not just that the universe has joy as its fabric—delightful as that is, incredibly beautiful and mystical and lovely an experience as that is. When it becomes imaginal, when we enter soul-making territory, something else starts to happen: the self gets drawn into the soul-making dynamic. The self becomes image to some extent. Then other elements of what we call the lattice of the imaginal—the nodes, the different elements—start to get drawn in because the self has become imaginal.

This is very different from an experience where there's joy, where the cosmos is joy, where its essence and substance is joy, but the self is not really drawn into the experience. The self is prominent, enjoying it, touched by it, but it hasn't become imaginal in that way.

One of the moves that sends experience into imaginal territory—and it's not really a black and white division, like all these things, even with jhānas—is the becoming imaginal of the self. It's not just the objects, not just the world, but the self as well.

Back to fantasies of the path: what supports our desire, what supports our intention? Here opened up the possibility of an image that involved the image of the self and of nature and of the cosmos. Self, other, world all became imaginal. The potential here is for that very image—the delight and happiness and rejoicing in her activism, in the narrative of the self, in the dedication and even the willingness of the self to do this work, mad as it seemed, ineffectual as it seemed, difficult and painful as it seemed—the narrative and the dukkha of the self become image. They get drawn into the image.

It's different than just a cosmopoiesis where the fabric of the cosmos becomes joy and the self remains very quiet, very much in the background. It's a different level, but that possibility then can become—

immensely helpful in the long term—for instance, as a fantasy, as an image that really ramps up the support long-term for working at difficult things, working through difficult times, whatever it is.

If you're on a retreat and it's difficult, what's the fantasy of the path we've talked about? What's the view? In this case, it's activism. No matter what the outcome.

The blessing of when things get imaginal that way is they get liberated because of the eternality of the imaginal territory. They get liberated from dependency on the outcome. So one's free to work, free to be with the pain, supported by the beauty and the soulfulness and the depth of the fantasy that touches the self and not so hampered by and worried by and limited by what the outcome might be. And yet one's still working full out for it, but supported by this whole other dimension of being, the imaginal sense.

And then this support in the long time to be able to sustain one's soul desires, one's deep desires through the difficult, through the long term, without the heart having to close, without the heart having to close to grief, to pain, to possible failure and the threat of possible failure.

So it's not a soul-making retreat, but I wanted to say this because again, desire and understanding desire and understanding has a lot to do with being able to open up to what we want to open up to. Being able to do what we set out to do and sustain that. And there's also this connection with the malleability of perception, which starts to—we've talked about it from the beginning of this retreat, in this realm of nothingness, and we talk about the emptiness of things. As I said, the legitimacy and the possibility of the malleability of perception just open up even more, goes to a whole other level. So relevant in a few ways.

Okay, let's have some quiet time together.

Thank you everybody. Time for tea. Enjoy.

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