The Eighth Jhāna (The Realm of Neither Perception Nor Non-Perception)

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Yesterday we talked about the seventh jhana—what many people nowadays call the seventh jhana, though the Buddha simply called it the realm of nothingness. There's a possibility of going beyond that too, to a deeper jhana, a more refined jhana.

Again, the Buddha describes a practitioner who has progressed through the jhanas up to the dimension of nothingness, sticking with that theme, developing it, pursuing it, establishing himself firmly in it. After a while, the thought occurs to him: "What if I, with the complete transcending of the sphere of nothingness, were to enter and remain in the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception?" Without rushing toward this state, he enters and remains in the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception. He sticks with that theme, develops it, pursues it, and establishes himself firmly in it.

That's it. Neither perception nor non-perception.

What is this about? We should be very clear. Again, what's primary here? There's something primary that the title, the name of this realm and jhana captures: neither perception nor non-perception.

I've come across writings and heard things that seem to emphasize the absence of thinking in this jhana, or how delicate a state it is—how any little thought will decimate the state, knock you out of it—as if that fact is the most significant thing about how easily a thought will disturb it. But the title is telling us something. The name is telling us something.

So much here, certainly with regard to this jhana, and so much in relation to all the jhanas—and I would say, perhaps you're getting an inkling by now—so much in the whole of the Dharma, the whole way we understand Dharma and approach it, what we think we're doing with it and what is primary in it, so much hinges on what we mean by perception. What we mean by that word "perception," how we understand it, and how we relate to it.

What does saññā mean in Sanskrit? What does it not mean? To perceive doesn't mean to label. Remember that? Often you'll come across that in lists of what these Buddhist words mean: saññā as labeling or remembering. We could interpret it that way, but what then unfolds in terms of the whole scaffolding and conceptual framework of the Dharma will be much, much more limited.

Perception is not a labeling. It's not a verbal labeling of things. That would also imply that the sheep out there don't perceive. I don't think sheep have language, but they certainly know the difference between

food, a human being, and another sheep. They're perceiving without labeling, I would assume. We're talking about something else here. An insect, maybe even an amoeba in some ways, differentiates between what's to eat, what to avoid, which way to go—without, one assumes, labeling or language.

So what is perceiving? What is perception? I'd say it's probably most helpful, most congruous with the whole conceptual framework and scaffolding understanding of the Dharma that will be most liberating, if we think of perception as meaning something like the forming or constituting or fabricating of an object for consciousness. Do you understand what I mean by that?

This is so, so important. We do that when there's no verbal label going on. As you walk from here to the dining room, not everything you notice has a verbal label accompanying it. You're still perceiving. Sometimes we call it recognition, as if it's based on memory—that's another interpretation. We can always perceive an object without recognizing what that object is.

I don't recognize it, or just that it's some kind of object. All this is perceiving.

So we could say perceiving is the act of forming, constituting, fabricating an object for consciousness. And perception, as we defined earlier, we're using that word synonymously with experience—in other words, experience, phenomenon, appearance, object even. Object, experience, appearance, and phenomenon. Phenomenon is just a Greek-derived word—*phainomenon* or something in Greek means appearance. So I would use those words interchangeably: perception to talk about the object, the experience, the phenomenon, the appearance. Perceiving: the act of, again, constituting, forming, fabricating that object for consciousness.

So when we say playing with perception, we're playing with both. We're playing with the forming and the fabricating and the constituting. And of course that does form and fabricate and constitute a different object or a changed object, an altered object, a more or less fabricated object for perception.

Sometimes it's interesting what a difference in terms of defining terms makes. Defining terms in this way or that way can make for the whole possibility of what the Dharma can be. Something to really reflect on. And if you're really keen, you could actually trace it: have two different definitions of perception—for example, perception understood as mental labeling, and perception understood in the way we've just talked about—and see what kind of Dharma is possible from both. That would be a really good exercise if you're up for it. Based on that, the whole interpretation of the Dharma opens or goes in one direction or the other, or closes or gets limited. Other terms take on certain meanings which end up being very significant, very liberating, or not particularly.

Anyway, so everything to me hinges—certainly in this jhāna, because it's just in the name of the jhāna: neither perception nor non-perception; certainly in jhāna work in general; and even more significantly in the whole of the Dharma, the whole of the Dharma.

So in the realm of nothingness—the jhāna before this one that we're talking about today—the primary

perception, and actually the only perception left, so to speak, because we've kind of... all the other perceptions of *pīti* and *sukha* and space and all, they've gone. The only perception left is this strange perception of nothingness. The only perception left is nothingness. And that's a perception. And as we said, try to imagine that. We're not talking about a very, very big space with nothing in it, which is what most human beings would think of when they say, "Can you imagine nothingness?" We're talking about something even beyond that. It's nothingness. But that's the only perception left, and that's the primary perception in the realm of nothingness. So that's strange enough.

And now we're going to go even beyond that: neither perception nor non-perception. We're not even perceiving nothingness, because nothingness—a nothing—is a kind of object, is constituted. In the realm of nothingness, nothingness is constituted as a kind of object for consciousness, for attention, for the *citta*. You understand? It's some kind of very strange thing that's a nothing. It's a thing there. It's a nothing.

Here, in the realm of neither perception nor non-perception, without being unconscious—in other words, without being totally non-percipient, so without being unconscious—the *citta*, the consciousness, is, we could say, not landing on any object at all. It's not landing on any object, not even the strange object of nothingness. It's not landing.

So when there's nothingness, when there's whatever jhāna you're up to and is your playground, it forms an object. The primary *nimitta* forms an object for consciousness, and the consciousness wants to really get into it and enjoy it and yummy up. It's a kind of... you understand, there's the subject and the object. The object is the primary *nimitta* or the jhāna itself, and that's an object of the consciousness, and you could use the language: the consciousness is landing on that object. And that's partly what attention means.

Here it's not landing on any object, not even the strange object of nothingness. And it's not landing in that way moment after moment. And that's what makes it the jhāna, the sort of constant burning. This not landing, this sense of not landing on any object, is the primary *nimitta*. In other words, in some strange way, the state itself—the sense, the fact of neither really perceiving (which means, again, neither really construing, constructing, fabricating, forming an object) nor not perceiving at all—that state, that fact, the sense of that, the sense of the mind kind of... would we say doing that or not doing that? Anyway, somewhere in between. That's the primary *nimitta*.

And you could say a secondary *nimitta* is the sense of liberation with that.

Because when the mind doesn't land on something, it's not—you know, like when you throw a hook and the hook lands in something—it's just not hooked by anything. It's unhooked. Not completely yet, I'll come back to that. It's not completely unhooked. But that sense of not landing, there's a kind of liberation in that. If I use the language "unhooked," you can feel the relative liberation in that. A hook is a kind of tether, a fetter, an imprisonment. So perhaps we could say the sense of liberation with that, the sense of freedom that comes with that, is a secondary nimitta.

Who's old enough here to remember The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy? For those who don't know, it was a series of books. I think I must have been a young teenager when it came out, and it was very funny science fiction. There were instructions on how to fly—a two-step instruction. The first step was: fling yourself at the ground. The second step was: miss.

In a way, that's what's going on in this jhana. Later on it might help you as an instruction, but probably at first it won't. What the ground translates as here, if we take the Hitchhiker's Guide instructions, is anything and nothing. Anything and nothing will constitute a ground that you want to miss. You understand?

There is a sutta in the Samyutta Nikaya where the Buddha gives an analogy. I think he's talking to Ananda, and he's giving the analogy of consciousness being liberated—liberated, unhooked, completely unhooked. The analogy he gives is sunlight rising in the east and coming into what starts off as a house in the analogy. He says to Ananda, "Sun rises in the east—where will the sunlight, which is consciousness, analogy for consciousness, where will the sunlight land?"

And Ananda says, "Well, on the western wall."

And the Buddha says, "Well, what if there isn't a western wall? What if there isn't an object for it to land on?"

And Ananda says, "Well, it will fall on the ground outside there."

And he said, "Okay, what if there isn't a ground outside?"

And then Ananda says, "Well, it will fall on the water"—which I guess is the water under the ground in some kind of cosmological system.

And he says, "What if there is no water?"

And Ananda says, "Well, then it wouldn't land."

"And if it's just so, that's consciousness liberated."

Now actually there, the Buddha's talking about the unfabricated, which is a stage ahead of even this jhana. But the analogy works very closely. We're almost there in this jhana. There's something almost but not quite analogous to the Buddha's analogy of nirvana, of the unfabricated, of what remains beyond cessation.

We could put it this way: it's not landing on anything, we could say we're not fabricating. There is not the fabrication at that time of any perceptions—all other perceptions have been unfabricated—except two perceptions. One is the very state, this sense of not landing, this sense of not quite perceiving and yet not quite not perceiving. That's sort of a perception. It's a sort of remnant, or just on the edge. It's the very perception of not really perceiving, but not really not perceiving. So that's one perception.

The other perception that remains is time. Now I'm telling you this, but it may or may not occur to a meditator in this state that that's still there as a perception. There's a sense of this not landing happening in time. It happens in this moment, and implicit in this moment—even though I'm so, so in this moment—there's still implicitly and experientially a past moment and a future moment. So this not landing, this state, is ongoing in time.

This unfabricating represents a very secondary perception, one that most practitioners wouldn't even notice unless they compared it with a completely timeless sense that emerges later. So I'm pointing this out to you now.

There are two perceptions we could say remain in this state: first, no perception of anything—not even nothing, for nothing would itself be a kind of something. There's no perception of anything except the state itself—this strange not-landing, this peculiar experience of not really perceiving yet not really not-perceiving either. And secondarily, there's the perception that this is all happening in time.

It's this latter aspect—though actually both are significant—the happening in time, that marks a fundamental difference between this eighth jhāna and a state of cessation or complete unfabricating.

In this state, in this jhāna, there's a sense of something—another way we could phrase it is a sense of something so ultra-refined that it's really on the edge of perception. That's one way of seeing what's happening. It's something so ultra-refined we can barely say it's a thing to be perceived—an object, a phenomenon, an experience, an appearance. It's so ultra-refined there's almost nothing left of perception as we understood it earlier.

As we said, secondarily there's a sense of release, of being released from perceptions. Ajahn Lee—I mentioned him earlier in the retreat; he was the teacher of the teacher of one of my teachers, a Thai monk in the early twentieth century—phrases it this way: the citta, the mind-heart, is in this state struck by its inability to decide if it's a perception or not. This captures something essential, though perhaps the translation makes it sound rather clunky, as if one is simply pondering the question. Something extremely subtle is happening here.

Again, we can think of this ultra-refinement and connect it with the whole spectrum of refinement I've discussed throughout the retreat. This provides a fruitful way to understand what unfolds through the eight jhānas—they represent a spectrum of progressive refinement, which is the same as saying they're a spectrum of progressive removal of what is gross. This is simply another way of describing progressive non-fabricating, progressive unfabricating, because we would expect the grossest phenomena to be what's most fabricated.

When we don't fabricate something, it gets removed and what remains becomes more refined. Then the next gross thing—when we don't fabricate that, it too gets removed, and we become yet more refined. Do you understand?

Thinking in detail: the first jhāna represents a refinement. What's been removed in the first jhāna? The hindrances—the grossness of the hindrances, which are indeed gross phenomena. In the first jhāna, this grossness of the hindrances is removed. We could say, to express the same thing, that the hindrances are not being fabricated.

In the second jhāna, there's a removal of thought—and we've had this challenge with vitakka and vicāra and how to translate those terms. Certainly discursive thought, that grossness, is removed. It's not being fabricated.

In the third jhāna, what is removed, what is not being fabricated? Pīti is not being fabricated. Pīti is removed. Though relatively subtle compared to the hindrances or gross bodily sense, it's now the grossest element present, so it's not being fabricated.

In the fourth jhāna, even the sukha is not being fabricated, so it's being removed. That's the gross element being removed, though by this point it's something very, very subtle.

In the fifth jhāna, even the subtle sense of materiality—remember we discussed these three levels of being: gross materiality in the kāmaloka world, the world of subtle materiality in the rūpa jhānas, the realm of subtle form in Buddhist cosmology—even this subtle form is removed. Even subtle materiality is not being fabricated. Even that relative grossness, which is actually very subtle, is removed in the fifth jhāna.

We can continue this progression. In the seventh jhāna, space is not being fabricated. In the eighth jhāna, not even nothingness is being fabricated.

You can see how this refinement, this removal of the gross, this not-fabricating, all works together.

So what happens after this jhāna? Now we're not even fabricating nothingness. We've gone beyond that. Is there some further non-fabricating that's possible? Which hopefully we'll explore.

Remarkable feature of this jhana. Very, very remarkable. And in practice, it can help you to find or notice or tune to—focus on, if you like—the most refined perception.

So again, you could do this in the state itself before it's quite consolidated and come together. Just tune to the most refined there. Keep tuning to the most refined. That will help consolidate it. The most refined, we could say perception, but it's not even quite a perception. The most refined thing, object—that doesn't really do it. The most refined sense, the most refined level, I don't know. Words really start to fall apart at this level. It gets really hard to put things into language, but the tuning to whatever is most refined there can help consolidate it if it's not already consolidated in a session.

So we can kind of refine the whole experience and move it into the more pure realm of neither perception nor non-perception by very gently, very gently looking for, very delicately looking for, listening for, attuning to, putting our antennae out for whatever is most refined. And that's a very subtle, sensitive,

delicate and gentle process.

And one can even perhaps start doing that in the realm of nothingness. When that's established, when you've got some experience with that, then maybe kind of looking for what's the most refined in there, ultra refined. And again, it may start, what would we say, maturing, purifying from that, moving on from that, just from that attending to the most refined level. And that amplifies it as we've talked about all the way through the retreat. So with experience that may work that way and may take you to the realm of neither perception nor non-perception.

So I was trying to find the sutta—well, anyway, I couldn't find it. But again, the Buddha says this is an escape. It's an escape, nisaranam. It's a release of awareness. Again, he uses this language a lot. It's almost a total release from perception, almost a complete not being hooked, not casting out a hook and finding an object, almost a total release from perception while there is still awareness. So we're not talking about general anesthesia or anything like that here.

And what I was looking for and couldn't find is there's some languaging. So remember we talked about how the Buddha talks about the jhanas as perception attainments. Do you remember this? I couldn't remember if then he says the highest perception attainment is the realm of nothingness. In other words, this one, because it's neither perception nor non-perception, actually doesn't qualify as a perception attainment. I couldn't remember if he counts this one as the highest perception attainment. It doesn't really matter. The principle is the same. I do think somewhere or other he calls this one, the neither perception nor non-perception, he calls it the summit of perception or the limit of perception, I think.

But then we can go beyond this, and hopefully we'll get to that tomorrow. We can even go beyond this, this much unfabricating, this limit of perception, this summit, this perception attainment, if that's what it's called.

There is, again, with the sense of refinement there and somewhat akin to the fourth jhana and some of the other jhanas, there's a real sense of purity here. There's something in the very refinement itself and the stillness. It's extremely pure. Again, these words don't quite capture it. The experience itself is so different than normal experience that words which we use for normal experience get quite clumsy at this point. But I think that's quite a good word. There's something very pure about it. It feels very pure. Refinement, purity, release. These are all part of the texture, let's say, of this realm.

And there is something, I think—and then these words start to sound really ridiculous—amazing and jaw-dropping. So it is amazing and kind of jaw-dropping, but the whole thing is, at this point, very, very delicate because of the refinement. It's very, very still. It's almost like one is awestruck with very little reverberation going on in the being because that would disturb things. So if one can have one's jaw dropping without much reverberation, one would.

But in the refinement, in the purity, in the release, there is something really amazing there, I

think—exquisite, beautiful. But these words don't really capture it. It's very different, as I said, from normal experience. We're really talking about something quite different. And in some ways, I think, in a lot of ways—at least that's my sense—in some ways it's quite different even than other jhanic experience. There's a kind of larger quantum leap here, I think.

The after-effects on perception reveal something profound. With regard to what's unfolding in both inner and outer worlds—how my mind is, how my body is, what I see, what I sense—there can arise in the aftermath a simple recognition: this is just what's happening in the realm of perception. All this.

My mind is foggy. My mind is clear. I have a pain in my tummy. I have a headache. This perception, that perception. It's just appearances—just what's happening in the realm of perception. This is profoundly different from experiencing "this is what's happening." Rather, it's "this is just what's happening in the realm of perception."

Through this understanding comes an even deeper relativizing of our phenomenal experience, both internal and external. And from this relativizing arises a truly effortless equanimity with regard to the things of this world—the eight worldly conditions of praise and blame, pain and pleasure, headache or no headache, whatever it may be. This effortless equanimity emerges partly from that after-effect on perception: it's just what's happening in the realm of perception. This relativizes everything.

These are just perceptions—whatever I'm perceiving, whether tummy ache, headache, foggy mind, this or that in the world. They're just perceptions. It's not that things are really otherwise—not that I have a foggy mind but really my mind is clear, or that some other state is more true. They're simply perceptions. No other perception is more true instead.

So how do we open this door? How does the door open for us?

One way, perhaps the safest and most reliable, is simply allowing it to naturally mature from dwelling as fully as possible, as wholeheartedly, attentively, and absorbedly as we can in the realm of nothingness. In time, it will mature.

At this point, the *sati, samādhi, sukha, ekaggatā* framework probably needs to shift. The *sukha* becomes less relevant because suffusion primarily pertains to the energy body experience. Perhaps we could speak of different kinds of suffusion, but the other factors become more important: absorbing into the nothingness, sustaining attention, maintaining the sense of nothingness, the intensity—which matters less now—and the enjoyment, which becomes very, very subtle. So perhaps *samādhi, sati, ekaggatā* rather than the full framework.

Working with this, entering it, abiding there repeatedly, at some point it should mature naturally.

The second possibility for reaching this dimension comes again from the *Ānañjasappāya Sutta*, where the Buddha describes insight ways of looking that lead to the immaterial realms. Having described the

approaches we explored yesterday regarding the dimension of nothingness, he continues: "Then again, the disciple of the noble ones"—again, that word *considers*—"employs, engages subtly an insight way of looking thus: all sensuality, all sensual perceptions, all perceptions of forms"—which includes perceptions of jhānic forms and experiences, the perceptions of fifth and sixth jhāna, perceptions of infinite space, perceptions of consciousness, and the perception of the dimension of nothingness—"all of these are perceptions. Where they cease without remainder, that is peaceful, that is exquisite"—namely, the dimension of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. "Practicing and frequently abiding in this way, his mind acquires confidence in that dimension."

This is essentially the same instruction as for the realm of nothingness that we explored yesterday, but now extended to include the perception of nothingness itself. Very, very powerful. If you can develop facility with these kinds of insight ways of looking, they become extraordinarily effective.

Again, we're speaking of something very agile—not some elaborate thinking process or philosophical system, but a very light tincture in one's way of looking, employed again and again. Way of looking means way of relating, way of sensing.

One could practice this recognition—that perceptions are not peaceful, seeking instead what is peaceful—from within the realm of nothingness itself. You could begin employing this insight way of looking while established in the dimension of nothingness. Or actually, you can engage it from anywhere.

You could do it from right now, just whatever is in front of me—foggy mind, and so on. And again, I contradict myself constantly, saying so much about how this jhāna will depend on the one before it, and that will depend on the maturing of the one before it, and on and on. After you've gotten the hang of all this, sometimes there will be plenty of times when you sit down and the body feels funny, the mind feels blah, blah, blah. And you just start on that very discomfort of body and non-settledness of mind and non-clarity of mind. You just start employing an insight way of looking like that. And lo and behold, you end up in the eighth jhāna.

So it's all in the art, in the trust, in the confidence—primarily in the art. Also in the familiarity. That's much more likely to happen if you have some familiarity beforehand with the neither perception nor non-perception. But it's definitely not going to hurt to try such a thing. Don't get too locked on where it might end up. You're still practicing a very powerful insight way of looking—see what happens.

It will be, as we will return to, connected with the whole spectrum and the whole process of unfabricating. So whether I actually end up in the eighth jhāna is again less significant than what I learn through employing insight ways of looking and seeing what they do and understanding what they do and adding two and two together and getting four. That's much more important than whether I have achieved eighth jhāna and I get my eighth jhāna badge.

It could also arise or be helped by a similar reflection: just a perception, just a perception—which again

was exactly what we included in the list we gave out yesterday. It's just a perception. And again, that could be in and from the realm of nothingness. This too is just a perception, this perception of nothingness. And "just a perception" means again, fabricated, right? It's just a perception means it's fabricated. That's the fine print for "just a perception."

Or again, you can do that from anywhere. Again, I start with my body feeling not so good and the mind—just a perception. Whatever comes into consciousness, whatever perception there is: just a perception, just a perception, meaning it's fabricated, it's fabricated, it's just a perception. And that will start, if I'm doing it right, if I've got the art right of that insight way of looking, it will unfabricate. And because all this is related on the spectrum of unfabrication, it may open up the realm of neither perception nor non-perception. So I could do that from the realm of nothingness or actually from anywhere—from a very ordinary state of consciousness, even from the midst of the hindrances.

There are also plenty of other ways of looking that one could adopt or train on the object of the realm of nothingness. But I've talked about them elsewhere. I'm not going to mention them.

The slight risk in those last three I've listed—either "these perceptions are not peaceful," that one, or "just a perception," that one, or other insight ways of looking—is that they might, they could sometimes be so powerful that they even overshoot the eighth jhāna and you get even more unfabricated. It's possible.

So there's those four. Then there's, remember I said, I think it was very near the beginning of the retreat, I talked about how the jhānas end up being—the sense we can have is just that they're there already. They're in the air, they're frequencies, they're radio frequencies. And we can just tune our dial and find that frequency. So similarly with this, neither perception nor non-perception—it's kind of like a radio frequency or radio station. And when we have a memory of it, in other words, when we've gone in and out lots of times and really gotten more familiar with it, we can just from memory tune to that frequency again. And of course, that's very related to just the whole mastery thing—opening the door or the door to this realm opening through subtle intention. Very similar.

Someone told me a little while ago that their way of working was in the realm of nothingness, their way of moving from the realm of nothingness to the realm of neither perception nor non-perception was in the realm of nothingness to just introduce a little, very subtle sort of thought or intention really: Might there be perception without this object of nothingness? And it was just a kind of invitation. Might there be a kind of perception without this nothingness as an object? And that would help open it up for them.

It might be also that some people are able to find or then tune to and open to—I don't know what to call it—a level of the mind or a part of the mind, part of the citta that already right now, or so it seems, is not perceiving but not non-perceiving. It's already neither perceiving nor non-perceiving. Sometimes that's possible, and then it's possible to find the nowness in it, make that very alive, present—now, now, now—the sense of that happening now, and refine it in that way.

So there's a part, or it can seem there's a part or level of the mind that is, even now, not engaging in perception, is free of it, or is not interested in perceptions. It wants to be free of perceptions, perhaps, and again unhooking from perception—or perhaps it's already unhooked. There's a very subtle sort of hidden dimension, but finding that and then that can be amplified. Perhaps for some people that will work, and again that's something that could work from any state of consciousness, from a normal state of consciousness. Of course the grosser the state of consciousness, the more turbulent it is, the harder that will be to do. But sometimes you get surprised with these things. You get very, very surprised at what's possible.

So these last three that I've mentioned—either tuning to it from memory, or the subtle intention, or this kind of very subtle question "Is it possible to perceive right now without this nothingness, without this object of nothingness?", that one, or this kind of finding a level of the mind that's already neither perceiving nor non-perceiving—all of them imply and need, I would say, some confidence that there is this possibility of neither perception nor non-perception.

And the confidence helps these methods to work so that we can kind of fish for it. And we have confidence in our fishing. And by fishing, I mean an ultra-sensitive, subtle receptivity and attunement. And through that it can emerge.

So again, though, there's an issue here with some of these methods. If I employ an insight way of looking, perceptions are not peaceful. They're not peaceful. I want what's peaceful. That's not peaceful. Any perception is not peaceful. If I employ this tuning to a part of the mind that's actually not engaging in perception or interested in perceptions, and maybe some of the other methods—is there the possibility of aversion? Is there the possibility of aversion to perception? Which means aversion to experience, appearance, objects. Yes, there is.

So what we're talking about here again is so important to emphasize in these insight ways of looking. If there's aversion mixed in with it, it sends the whole thing in a very different direction. It stirs things up in a very different way. So what we're talking about is an insight way of looking that doesn't have aversion in it. The aversion needs to not be there.

When the Buddha talks about insight on several occasions and the way some streams of practice mature, he uses the word disenchantment, and that the practitioner becomes disenchanted with everything actually—with the whole world of phenomenal experience in the outer. There's a disenchantment with sense objects, disenchantment with mental objects, disenchantment eventually with the jhanas, disenchantment eventually with the formless jhanas, all that. So that word occurs relatively frequently.

Some maps of the way insight progresses or the stages of insight really emphasize this quite a lot and emphasize that a practitioner practicing very deeply goes through a period or even recurrent periods of extreme disgust and repulsion at everything—the whole world of appearances, inner, outer states, mental objects, physical objects, the whole is disgusting and repulsive to them. And there's a lot of agitation often

with that.

It may be that someone experiencing that sort of thing—it may just be that aversion and neurosis have gotten tied up in their practice. And one is deciding to view it as being on the edge of awakening and so forth. But actually it's just aversion. I'm aversive to my body. It's not great insight into Dharma or something. It's just there's aversion there. Or there's a kind of neurosis.

Sometimes there's a lot of encouragement for very high energy, high intensity, high intentness in practice with a kind of micro-sharp focus. All these things—intensity, energy, micro-focus building up with this teaching about disenchantment given primary place. Actually aversion gets mixed up in there and the whole thing just spawns cycles of dukkha that may have very, very little to do with liberating insight. But one might have heard that they have to do with liberating insight and so one just goes round and round in that.

Are they liberating? Is it liberating? Or are they dependent arisings? If I look a certain way, I get—there's a whole thing about playing with perception. If I look a certain way, I get a certain result. If there's aversion in my looking, I get a certain result. If there's neurosis and repulsion, I'm going to get a certain result—a result in my perception, in my sense of things. You understand?

In some circles, this is a really, really important thing to consider. Have to understand dependent arising, the dependent arising of perception. And if my whole mode of working in insight is not taking the inquiry into the dependent arising of perception—is not taking that as central—I've just got an idea. I'm going to laser beam through this and whatever I hit is closer to the bottom layer of rock and that's the truth. And eventually I'll reach that truth or reality. And I'm not inquiring into dependent arising. Do you understand what I mean by this?

To me, this is the most important thing. If I'm not thinking that way, I go back to what I said at the beginning: what's the conceptual framework? And is the conceptual framework set up to really liberate, or is it set up to take me in directions where I don't understand fully what is happening and what my experience is and why this experience arises now and why that experience arises at another time and why this experience arises or doesn't arise?

So we can certainly set up, and people do, a whole process of insight and stages of insight and there's very, very little consideration of dependent arising. It's almost like it's just a thing on the side.

To me then, dependent arising and emptiness are almost synonymous. Practically, until the very last levels, they're synonymous. If I'm not inquiring into that, if I'm not including that as the central theme and scaffolding of my meditative inquiry, then it's possible that whatever insights I have have very little to do with emptiness, as I would understand it anyway.

I remember coming across something once—I can't remember where exactly. There is a sutta in the Pali Canon, I believe, where two old monks are talking. It's not the Buddha speaking, I can't remember who it

is. These two old monks describe a process of stages of insight that unfold—they go through something like disgust, et cetera. There's no place I'm aware of where the Buddha describes that process himself.

But it may well be one of those things that's very, very emphasized in certain texts like the *Visuddhimagga* or the *Abhidhamma*. And then that gets taken—this one instance of these two old monks talking becomes, in some paradigms and models, *the* way insight unfolds. These are *the* stages of insight, as opposed to: this is what will happen if you look this way. This is what will happen if you conceive this way and look this way. And if you conceive another way and look, this is what will unfold, and so on.

So the stages of insight is *a* possible model of stages of insight if I look a certain way, usually prioritizing impermanence and micro-focus, et cetera. I'm mentioning this because I know some of you have run into this, and some of you probably have no idea what I'm talking about. It may or may not be useful at some point.

It is true—somewhere the Buddha says, basically, there are four ways to liberation. You can choose the path that is pleasant, a pleasant path that's long. Or you can choose a path that's pleasant and short. Or you can choose a path that's unpleasant and short. Or you could choose a path that's unpleasant and long.

But I actually think what I'm trying to say now goes beyond that. Because to me, if it doesn't include this inquiry into the dependent arising of my experience now, dependent on my way of looking—if that's not in my inquiry—the question would remain. I'm not saying it's impossible. The question would still remain for me: Does that path open up a full understanding and a really deep understanding of dependent arising and emptiness? That would be a question I would have.

I would say most definitely that insight and practice and the path can be mostly fun. I absolutely, definitely say that. Mostly delightful, mostly characterized by a sense of release and relief and some degree of liberation now as I'm practicing. I would say that.

And it's part of what I mean when I say: can we bring some intelligence to this? Can we bring some intelligence to these very basic questions, or intelligence to how am I practicing? It's really, really fundamental.

We talked very briefly about what's the definition of insight. Well, we can define insight in all kinds of ways—all kinds of people do. If you listen to enough Theravadan-based Dharma, there are lots of definitions of what insight is.

But one way, and the primary way I find helpful—actually I would like to keep a few ways open—but one of the ways I would particularly like to emphasize is: insight means ways of looking that reduce clinging, which means increased letting go. In the future, for the future, but also now, right now, and even primarily now. That's what insight is. It's adopting ways of looking that liberate and that primarily liberate right now.

That means all these insight ways of looking that we're talking about—we'll give examples of, and there's loads more we could talk about—they should feel liberating. They should feel like there's a relief, a release, a delight, a beauty, an opening, a peace, a joy that comes with them. If they're not, then they're not—and they can still be insightful—but they're not the kind of insight that I would like to emphasize, put it that way.

So if we define it that way, then actually the whole... and we kind of use that as, let's say, the primary understanding of what we're doing, then the whole path just—it does not need to be this whole contracted thing of sitting through pain and all these eruptions of difficulty. Do you understand?

So again, some of these themes carry over from these different jhanas. In a way there, with that insight way of looking that Buddha gave here: perceptions are not peaceful. I want what's peaceful. That is peaceful, the realm of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.

Other times the Buddha says—I couldn't find the whole quote, but it's very common, almost a stock formula—perceptions are *dukkha*. Perceptions are a hassle. He doesn't say quite that word, but perceptions are a boil. You know what a boil is? Like a big painful pimple, a big zit. A boil, a dart, an arrow, a cancer, a disease, and then he goes on. This is what perception is. It's extreme language.

Or even when we simply say perceptions are not peaceful, there's again the danger of tipping us toward a dualistic conception—not merely an abstract intellectual philosophy, but a dualistic sense, a dualistic lived preference that turns away from this world.

And the world is perception. What else is the world if not perception, phenomenologically speaking? Appearance, experience, objects, phenomena—the world is perception. So if I begin to say perceptions are a boil, a dart, a cancer, are dukkha, I'm essentially saying the world is. We might find ourselves again tipping into a dualistic preference, turning away from the world in favor of this subtler realm free of perception.

Even the way of looking that sees perceptions as fabricated, as empty—this too, if we don't fully understand what we're doing and what it means completely to say something is fabricated, carries the danger of dualism.

Fabrication is an interesting word. In English—I don't know about other languages—a fabrication is also a lie. We say something "is a fabrication." The word itself is fascinating because it connotes an untruth. I use it partly because it carries this connotation, though if we take it deeply enough, we go beyond that notion of untruth. We take it, but hold it provisionally and move even beyond it.

So it has this derogatory connotation—fabricated, fabricated, fabricated. When I adopt an insight way of looking and say "it's just a perception, it's fabricated," there's this slightly dismissive quality: it's a lie, it's not true. Do you understand? But I need to understand more deeply. I need to understand dependent arising and emptiness more deeply—not just intellectually, but through lived meditative exploration.

I really need to feel this, see this, sense this, watch it work in action and feel its effects. When I do this, this happens and it feels like this—the intimate experience of that. When I take this far enough, it goes beyond any notion of duality or hierarchy. The whole understanding, when explored this way, of what it means to say something is empty or fabricated—it's not dualistic. It's almost the opposite end from dualism.

We get a sense of being so profoundly intimate with the world of experience—though that doesn't even come close as language. The word "intimacy" doesn't come close. Something even more intimate than the word intimacy can possibly connote. We participate in the co-fabrication of the universe, of the cosmos, of the world, of things, of life. But even that doesn't quite capture it because we have certain notions of what "participation" means.

We participate in the magic of the dance and co-arising of subject and object in a way that's—again, there's no word for the depth. "Participate," "intimate"—they come sort of close, but it's even deeper.

Language is based on notions of subject and object, and when they start falling apart or collapsing into each other—not into some oneness, for they're neither one nor two, subject and object, nor nothing, nor many things. They're not zero, one, two, nor many. Language is based on "there's this and that," subject and object. So the whole language of intimacy, of participation—language cannot cope at this deep level.

But if we speak of this profound sense of participation in the magic of co-arising—of subject and object, of appearances and awareness, of self and world—the magic of that, the beauty of that, somehow we're completely implicated, interwoven with that in the most gorgeous and blessed ways. This is very far from dualism.

If one goes deep enough into this same investigation, into fabrication and dependent arising, I don't lose sight of that. If I investigate fabrication just a little bit, investigate dependent arising just a little bit, I'm not going to get this gorgeous full blossoming.

Again, similar themes emerge. It should be the case with this realm of neither perception nor non-perception. And it should certainly be the case that the more we understand and open to the emptiness of the world—if our conceptual framework doesn't get in the way—remember how much depends on that...

You can have all these wonderful experiences—or frightening experiences, amazing experiences, strange experiences. But if I'm not taking care with my conceptual framework, my big picture, my understanding of what I'm doing and what's going on, those experiences can deliver very little, or actually deliver what is really not helpful.

So even more than the experience itself, the understanding and the conceptual framework matter deeply. But it should be that experiences at this level of jhana and deep emptiness—where one sees the emptiness of the world—actually somehow open up even further, increase our love for the world, our love and compassion for the world. It should work like that.

The heart, opening in that way, sensing things in that way, touched in that way, becomes tender, open at a whole other level. It becomes wonderstruck, touched with what I would say is a sense of the profound blessing of the magic of appearances. The profound blessing of that—whatever the word is that's more than participation. It's the profound blessing at the mystery of things, the mystery of appearances.

I think let's stop there, actually. Let's sit together for a bit.

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