The End of Time (The Cessation of Perception and Feeling)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:43:02

So I think if I remember correctly, when the opportunity came up because of the building works—and this whole retreat was Kirsten's idea—I'm pretty sure I asked, can we have a month? For whatever reasons, they said this is what we've got: just over three weeks.

I feel a little bit like I'm rushing at the end and running out of time, not quite having the opportunity to say certain things I wish I could share. I certainly wish I'd had more opportunity to meet with you individually—interviews, Q&As, and such. But as I said at the beginning, in many ways the very fact of this retreat has been a miracle. The conditions came together to allow this. So we're doing the best we can, and that's good.

I'm partly wondering how you're doing with these later talks, when I'm not really speaking at the level of your learning edge playgrounds anymore. How are they landing for you? In our modern or postmodern society, it's completely okay if this kind of material—these deep mystical states and openings—doesn't interest you. I genuinely feel it's really okay if you're not drawn to this. That's a perfectly valid relationship to have with it. Of course, some people will be absolutely fascinated and allured by it.

Someone might think, "I don't feel interested now, but it's probably because of my psychological dukkha. Once I've worked through that, then I'll be interested." It may be the case. But I would tend to guess that if you're not interested anyway, you probably never will be. It's not that a certain amount of healing or psychological clearing of the path needs to happen first. These territories are passionately interesting to some people and not so much to others.

The technical information I've been sharing in these recent talks—because I'm not really speaking to your learning edge playgrounds for most of you at this point—this technical material is really for later. As far as I can tell, it's being recorded, so it should be accessible to you if and when these territories do become your learning edge playgrounds.

But the big picture material and the conceptual framework will also be very relevant then, and it's absolutely relevant now. This bigger picture understanding is not stuff you necessarily need to write down frantically. In fact, it makes more sense to take notes on the conceptual framework than on the specific techniques for moving from the seventh to eighth jhana. You're welcome to write whatever you want, but I emphasize understanding the big picture and conceptual framework—that's what's relevant now.

What's also relevant are the reflections we've woven throughout these teachings on desire, intention, and our relationship with them. What is it to keep my intention on something I desire? How am I with desire? What happens within me around desire? These inquiries will be relevant when you're working with the eighth jhana or whatever it might be, but they're relevant now. These elements—big picture understanding, conceptual framework, our relationship with desire and intention—are more fundamental than whether one can move from this jhana to that jhana.

Sometimes we human beings have a habit of listening with misplaced priorities, without a developed sense of what's actually most important. Understanding the big picture and conceptual framework is actually rare—very rare.

Yesterday we talked about the realm of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. Today I'd like to speak about what lies beyond that: the unfabricated, the deathless, the asaṅkhata dhamma. Saṅkhata relates to saṅkhāra and usually gets translated as "conditioned" or "fabricated." So asaṅkhata means the unfabricated, the unconditioned.

Now, all this business about being rushed—that's not the end of the story for me. Opening to and realizing the unconditioned, the unfabricated, wonderful and important as that is, is not the end of the story.

For some people it is the end of the story, or for some maps of the Dharma it is. But even that is becoming quite rare in the Dharma world. Even any kind of importance given to this—I don't even know the word for it—the realm of the unfabricated or the unfabricated, this complete fading. That's actually getting rarer and rarer in many Dharma worlds. I think in the insight meditation world, certainly.

But in my book, it's extremely important, extremely touching, beautiful, liberating—but it's kind of like half the story, if you like. And the other half has to do with emptiness, which goes even deeper than the unfabricated. Now, unfabricated is important for emptiness, but emptiness, in its full understanding, goes even deeper.

I have written about and explained all this elsewhere extensively, and I'm not going to do it again today. This business about going beyond the unfabricated is in *Seeing That Frees*, in the chapters leading up to and then after the sections about the unfabricated, in considerable practical detail as well as conceptual detail. I've written and spoken about it, as I said, extensively—about the unfabricated, about how that opens up in practice, about what it means to go beyond it and how that opens up in practice, about the relationship of both of those stages to emptiness and liberation, and about the whole philosophy or the philosophical questions that are implicit in all that about reality and how we know what's real, how we can trust what's real. So ontology and epistemology.

I've written and talked about it extensively in where you'd expect to find it—in *The Seeing That Frees*, a book about emptiness and talks about emptiness. But there's also much of that material and many different approaches and even further elaborations of that material in talks about soul-making, in

soul-making Dharma talks, because it's actually woven into all that and has profound implications philosophically for all that territory.

I received a note asking whether there would be any space in tonight's talk to distinguish the terms dependent origination and emptiness, maybe also codependent arising and lack of inherent existence, as the questioner had thought of them as synonymous. The short answer is no. Unfortunately, there isn't quite enough time. I can say something very brief now, but it's all in that material. It's all there. I think it's really, really clear. I really took considerable trouble being really, really clear. Every word means something, implies something. Certainly in the writing, and obviously the verbal teaching is a bit looser.

This isn't a talk about emptiness primarily. It's a talk primarily about the unfabricated, but briefly in terms of this question: Part of the problem is that terms like dependent origination and emptiness get used in many different ways in the Dharma. Even in the insight meditation world, you'll find numerous different ways they are used. I would say the same term is understood at very different levels, which a person using it at a certain level might think represents the totality. That's the final level of understanding. But someone else might, or as I would put it, rank those as provisional levels of understanding. So it gets quite tricky trying to untangle all that.

But briefly, dependent origination—we could say, okay, this book is a dependent arising. What does that mean? Well, someone sat down and spent considerable time writing it. The paper had to come from trees. Someone had to cut down the trees and take them to a paper mill and make paper out of them. And then there was the ink, and the author had to practice and study extensively. All these factors—the book arose dependently on all those conditions. That's all really, really important and lovely and can give a beautiful sense of interconnectedness with everything, but it won't do that much for liberation.

The primary emphasis I place on understanding dependent origination is dependent on the mind, dependent on the way of looking. We've seen this when we talked about working with pain on this retreat. Here's the pain. It is a pain. It seems to—I'll weave in the other word—it seems to inherently exist. It just exists. It is what it is. It's a pain and it hurts. When I find I play with perception, I look at it in a different way, I find that, oh, it's become a pleasure. It's become bliss. It does not exist inherently as pain. It doesn't exist inherently from its own side, as the Tibetans say. It's dependent. It dependently arises.

It dependently originates. Primarily, the most important thing for liberation—and I would emphasize this—it dependently originates on the way of looking in the moment. Do you understand?

So we could say much, much more about these terms. Codependent arising is, let's say for now, just the same thing, and I'll weave it into the talk later. Lack of inherent existence is at one level synonymous with emptiness or dependent arising.

In other words, to say that this pain lacks inherent existence is—as many of you have seen for yourselves and felt for yourselves in meditation already—to say that this pain lacks inherent existence is just the

same thing as saying: without my looking at it in my normal habitual reactive ways, it does not arise and exist for me as pain. It lacks inherent existence. It lacks an independent existence. And that's just the same thing as saying it's empty. And it's just the same thing as saying it arises dependently, dependent on the way of looking.

So that's a very brief answer. Is that okay?

Now, so that you don't get quite confused—or rather more confused than you may already be—you should probably know that this way I'm about to talk today, and the way that I've written about and talked about other times, this way of talking about the unfabricated and this way of talking about the fabricated and this whole idea of insight ways of looking—being ways of looking, ways of relating in the moment that reduce clinging and through reducing clinging fabricate less, and the implication from that that a thing is therefore empty to a certain extent and a dependent arising, with the implications about its reality—all of that together is rare in the Dharma world.

The way I'm talking about unfabricated, fabricated, insight ways of looking, clinging, unfabricating, emptiness, dependent origination and the implications for reality—all of that together—it's not like you can just expect it to mesh neatly or nicely with other things that you will read and hear. I'm not saying it's better or worse, and you're welcome to prefer whatever you prefer or makes more sense. I'm just saying that if you're approaching something else with the idea that they must be saying the same thing, you're liable to just get very confused. It's completely up to you to gravitate to what you gravitate to, explore what you feel drawn to explore. But if you know that from the start, then you won't be trying to mesh things together which actually don't really mesh that well.

So it's rare in the Dharma, this way of talking about these things and this way of explaining things. And it's very rare, the whole conceptual framework that ties it all together—certainly with the soul making, but even all that tied together. And as I said, the understanding is very rare. So it's very rare for people to really understand this, yet.

There's a passage in the Pali Canon where the Buddha and Ananda are sort of hanging out. Ananda, remember, was the Buddha's attendant, so he probably heard—let's estimate—maybe ninety percent of the Buddha's teachings. Talks to monks, talks to nuns, talks to lay people, talks to kings and queens, talks to individual wandering ascetics, question and answer sessions, one-to-one interviews. Over many years he was just there all the time, pretty much all the time. And he wasn't thick. After the Buddha died, he became an arahant, so he wasn't someone incapable.

They're hanging out one day and the Buddha says something about dependent arising, and Ananda says, "It's so clear. It's so clear to me. It's wonderful, this dependent arising. It's just as clear as clear could be." And the Buddha turns to him and says, "Don't say that, Ananda. Don't say that. We're talking about something really profound here. Profound as a teaching, profound in its manifestation."

Just to contextualize this a little bit: this is an interesting thing as a teacher, because I feel I'm talking to someone and they're like, "Oh, I don't understand. I don't understand." And then self-judgment: "I'm so thick, I'm lost, I'm confused," and all this stuff. And actually they do understand. They do understand very well the beginnings of this thread.

Remember I was talking about this whole thing—emptiness, fabrication, dependent arising—it's just a thread. It's the same understanding I'm taking from the most basic level that my mother could understand, who has not meditated for ten seconds in her whole life and is not interested in anything. She can understand when she gets into papañca compared to afterwards: that was fabricated, that was less fabricated. There was something unreal there and there was something—she would just say—real here. It's the same thing. Papañca compared to normal consciousness. And you just keep following that thread.

And the person says, "I don't understand. I don't understand." Actually, you do understand.

You're on the right thread, and you need to know that you understand and keep going. So there are some people like that who need encouragement: "Actually, you do understand. Just keep following. Same inquiry. Just keep going. Don't freak out."

Other people are a bit more like, "Yes, yes, yes, I understand completely. I get it. It's wonderful." And you don't understand.

So the question is, which one are you? And are you able to know which one you are?

Again, put this in a little context. I would say one doesn't understand dependent arising and emptiness and all this business unless one understands that what dependently arises does not arise. And one understands that that is the case for many reasons. What dependently arises does not arise. What is unfabricated is not unfabricated. Unless one understands that, one hasn't really understood all this business.

What is unfabricated is not unfabricated. Unless one has also understood that when we talk about this fabrication business and ways of looking, we're not talking about "ah yes, it's because the brain processes things like this, or these are the neural circuits," et cetera, because we're not talking about something based in materialism or physicalism. Brains, neurons, neurotransmitter molecules and atoms—they are empty too.

Neither are we talking about the kind of complement in philosophy from materialism: mentalism. Everything is projected by the mind. The mind is somehow real and everything is projected by the mind. So unless one understands all that, one doesn't really fully yet understand this dependent arising business.

Unless one understands why there is no trauma. There is no trauma. But we can respect and care for trauma and heal it. But there is no trauma.

Unless one understands why there are no ways of looking, but at the same time, it's impossible to exist

even for a moment without a way of looking, but there are no ways of looking.

Unless one understands that things are not impermanent, but nor are they permanent. And one understands that there are no moments. There are no moments of time. One hasn't understood all this yet.

Unless one understands that there are many things and at the same time there are no things. And in a way there's one thing only, or there are many kinds of versions of one thing only. Or there are infinite things. All these are true. Many, none, one, infinite—and none of them are true.

Unless one understands that there is no suffering and there is no liberation. And unless one understands that emptiness too is emptiness. One hasn't fully yet understood dependent arising.

So if you're one of those people who think that you have... I could go on, we could go on adding to this list, but I need to... we're talking about something very profound and I'm not going to be able to explain it all today. Everything there, if you really read and listen and practice, obviously, it should actually all completely make sense in the heart through practice.

So this talk—I'm not going to go into the whole emptiness thing. We don't have time. In a way, it's only half of what I said. I'm just going to talk about the unfabricated a little bit. And it's only really a little of what's really a huge area and profound area of understanding and practice. I'm really going to talk about the jhānas and in relationship to the unfabricated.

And one more thing, you know, we're not... some of you are a bit new to this fabrication and fading thing.

So we should be clear: one isn't going to understand this business about fading and dependent arising and emptiness without practicing what I call insight ways of looking. One is not going to understand that without really practicing those insight ways of looking extensively and getting into them and really grappling with that and letting the beauty of it open up.

So jhānas are really not the best way to understand fading and emptiness. However, emptiness and fading is part of the best way to understand the jhānas. That's not quite a contradiction in what I said. Jhānas are not the best way to understand fading and emptiness, but fading and emptiness are part of the best way to understand the jhānas, along with what we talked about—development of sensitivity and attunement and deep resource.

Partly the reason I've been going on about emptiness and all that and ways of looking is because it forms the best and most coherent way of understanding the jhānas and placing them coherently in a much bigger picture of the Dharma—a picture which makes sense of a lot of possibilities, including soul-making Dharma, but even without soul-making Dharma.

Whether people use the word or not, I would say that certainly most insight meditation teachers use the idea of fabrication. They may use that word or not use that word. So when people talk about papañca, whether they use the word fabrication or not, they're suggesting that it's what we call a fabrication in both

senses. It's something that the mind has just concocted—that's another word. It's a concoction. It's a construction. And with this double meaning that we have in some languages, it's also a lie.

That contrasts with what usually implicitly is something unfabricated, something real or reality, something true or truth. Even if a person isn't using that concept, it's there woven into most insight meditation teachings. Fabrication is a construction, a concoction by the mind—and what is not real, it's a lie in some ways. So unfabricating the fabricated, or not fabricating, is just part of practice. It's part of what is conveyed in any dharma teaching, let alone just insight meditation teaching.

More than that, implicitly or explicitly, there's an ontology woven in. Ontology means a view or philosophy or belief about what is real. So when people talk about papañca, even if they don't use the language "real" or "fabricated," the way they talk and the jokes and the humor of it—it's clear like, "Wasn't that funny because it was completely not real, right?" So even if a person doesn't pull all this out, there are fabricated and unfabricated as notions that are implicit.

There's an implicit ontology, implicit view of what's real, and there's an implicit ontological hierarchy. Sometimes it's drawn out, it's made explicit. More often it's implicit—it's not actually talked about in this way, but sometimes it is. In other words, clearly the real is better than the unreal, is preferable, right? That's woven into it as well. And wrapped up in all that, there's a value judgment involved. It's better. This is a waste of time. This is ridiculous. This is worthless. This is even harmful.

Most of the time, that's just spun into the rhetoric, into the teaching rhetoric, sometimes verbally and sometimes not verbally. And it's not just in insight meditation. It can also be in pop versions of Zen. If you get a bit conceptual, you just get hit on the nose with a stick or whatever. And it's conveying something about what's real or not real, because reality is what's not bound up with concept. Very rarely is there actually a deep probing of the philosophical questions and psychological questions here. It's usually conveyed more non-verbally, non-philosophically.

So whatever kind of dharma we're talking about, not just insight meditation, that's an observation.

What is this unfabricated that people may be suggesting or pointing to or kind of is there implicitly without being named? And what is the fabricated? Again, whether they use those words or not.

Unfabricated maybe—we've touched on this—it's basically what is not papañca, as I just said. So when there's the absence of papañca, we are not fabricating. Or mindfulness reveals what is not fabricated. Mindfulness—less story, less view, less reaction, less conceptual involvement—and that mindfulness or bare attention reveals the unfabricated, even if one doesn't use that language.

It cuts fabrication. Does this make sense?

Or you may have heard someone say, "That's not an emotion. It's just some sensations. Really, it's just some sensations in the chest." And again, there's the "really," the ontological question, the hierarchizing,

all that. Or "all there really is—not really self and story—all there really is, is the process of the five aggregates in time, including those sensations arising and passing in the chest area." Or this vast primordial impersonal awareness is regarded as what's real, and the whole concepts or stories of self is regarded as not real.

So whatever language one uses, there is this something that's fabricated, something that's not fabricated, some ontological distinction and hierarchy there, and value judgments woven in with all that.

When I use the word unfabricated, I don't mean what is revealed by bare attention. I certainly don't mean what is there, visible to us, sensible to us when there is no thought. I certainly don't mean what's sensible to us, perceivable to us when we're calm, without papañca, without making a fuss in the world.

Rather, I would say it's what appears or what opens when there is no intention whatsoever and no conception whatsoever. I could also say no perception whatsoever. But I have to explain those words, because I don't mean by conception "thought." When I say non-conceptual, I mean much, much more than non-thinking. Concept to me is a much deeper and subtler thing, much more deeply woven into consciousness. And I'll come back to that hopefully in this talk.

And when I say no intention, I certainly don't mean—or I mean much more than—"I'm just sitting here being. I'm just being right now." Or "I'm not doing," or "I'm not making any effort," or "I have no plans," or anything like that. I mean something much, much more subtle than that. Much more deeply intricated, if that's even a word, into consciousness and how consciousness works. I'll come back to that later.

But let's go back to what I said before. There is, in whatever dharma we're teaching, woven into this some kind of idea of the fabricated and the unfabricated, with all these ontological hierarchies and judgments. The question is: where are we limiting the process of unfabricating?

For all these dharmas, there is a practice that involves unfabricating. Do you understand? And the question is: where are we limiting that? Where are we limiting this practice of unfabricating? Where are we drawing the line and saying, "Oh, that's it now. I'm done with fabrication," or "That was a moment of unfabricating"? Where are we limiting it? And why are we limiting it there or here or wherever we are? Where and why?

And why not leave it as an open question?

These are real questions. In other words, someone needs to come up with a really good answer for these questions, I would say. So I'm meaning something quite different by the Unfabricated. And we'll return to those questions at the end. I think they're very, very important.

But there are lots of texts where the Buddha describes Unfabricated, at least to my reading of them, that sound like what I'm talking about. There are texts where the Buddha's describing a state where all perception has ceased. So not even what we were talking about yesterday—the neither perception nor

non-perception. All perception of a subject, all perception of any kind of object, not even nothingness, not even a state of neither perception nor non-perception, all sense of time, all space, not even a present moment—all of that not there.

There are many texts in the Pali Canon. Something's interesting. A while ago, I don't know whether it's still the case, some people would say, "There's only one place in the Pali Canon where the Buddha talks about such a thing." It's not true. There are many, many places, and they're all different. It's not the same little passage getting reprinted. It's lots of different texts pointing to the same experience.

I should find one.

Let us exercise a little patience and explore this further.

That sphere should be understood, should be known. That dimension, that ayatana should be known, that realm should be known where the eye ceases and perceptions of forms fade away. There is no sight, no visual object. That sphere should be known where the ear ceases and the perception of sounds fades away. That sphere should be understood, should be known where the nose and smells, the tongue and taste, the body and perception of tactile objects fade away. That sphere should be understood where the mind ceases and perception of mental phenomena fades away. And by mental phenomena it doesn't just mean thought—it means any mental perception. So perception of a jhana, perception of the neither perception nor non-perception, perception of nothingness, any perception at all.

We're talking about something completely beyond perception of matter, completely beyond any kind of measurement, completely beyond any kind of perception, any subject, any object, any sense of time—even a present moment—no space, no nothing.

As I mentioned, there are people who claim there's only one passage about this in the Pali Canon, but actually in *Seeing That Frees*, if you're interested, there are many, many passages that in different ways describe such an opening and such a realm—place, whatever we want to call that. Some people really don't like this teaching. Some people really oppose such a teaching. That's always quite interesting to me.

Some people use some of those passages or use words like "the unfabricated," but if you listen to what's being said or if you follow the teachings, they're actually using "unfabricated" as synonymous with awareness—often vastness of awareness—and claiming that is the unfabricated, that is the ultimate, or that's the nature of mind or whatever. Occasionally, very occasionally—usually people who haven't been practicing that long, certainly not teachers; I've never heard a teacher say this—but occasionally someone construes the unfabricated as just things as they are, as seen or as sensed, as revealed with bare attention or mindfulness.

So sometimes people use either parts of these quotes or the word "unfabricated," but in quite different ways. Very briefly, if yesterday's language stretched language to the limit, here it's really gone beyond the pale.

The Buddha sometimes talks in positive language here. "There is," as I said—something, that passage we just read: "this should be known, that dimension should be known." It's as if it's a something that should be known.

And there's another passage where he says: "Here, with regard to earth, the perception of earth has disappeared. With regard to liquid, the perception of liquid has disappeared. With regard to fire, the perception of fire has disappeared. With regard to wind, the perception of wind has disappeared." In other words, with regard to materiality—that was the physics of their day—with regard to materiality, the perception of materiality has disappeared. "With regard to the realm of infinite space, the perception of the realm of infinite space has disappeared. With regard to the sphere of infinite consciousness, the perception of the sphere of infinite consciousness has disappeared. With regard to the sphere of nothingness, the perception of the sphere of nothingness has disappeared. With regard to the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception, the perception of the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception has disappeared. With regard to this world, the perception of this world has disappeared. With regard to the next world, the perception of the next world has disappeared. Whatever is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, attained, sought after or explored by the mind—the perception of that has disappeared."

"Absorbed in this way, samadhi-fied in this way, one is absorbed dependent neither on earth, liquid, fire, wind; dependent neither on perception of materiality, nor on the sphere of infinite space, the sphere of infinite consciousness, the sphere of nothingness, the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception, this world, the next world, nor on what is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, attained, sought after, or explored by the mind—and yet one is absorbed. And to this one absorbed in this way, all the gods pay homage even from afar. 'Homage to you,' they say, 'you of whom we don't even know what it is that you are absorbed dependent on.'"

So it's something so beyond—and these gods are gods with very, very refined, subtle perception. It's gone even beyond that.

The point I want to make is that the Buddha's talking about it in sort of positive language. It's a something that we can perceive in a way. Other times he talks about it as if it's an object that the mind can know—the mind knows this object, as if in that language. Other times he talks about it as if it's a subject, as if it's consciousness released. There was that analogy I talked about yesterday of the sunlight not landing anywhere—it's completely released.

In those terms, talking about it in subjective terms, he talks about what remains with the cessation of the six sense consciousnesses: smell, sight, taste, touch, hearing, smelling—the five senses and mental consciousness. When that all stops, the cessation of the sixth sense consciousness and their respective objects of knowledge—smells, sights, tastes, et cetera, thoughts, or anything perceivable in the mind—what remains is consciousness without attribute, without end, luminous all around.

"Here water, earth, fire and air, materiality, have no footing. Here long and short, subtle and gross,

pleasant and unpleasant"—all kinds of discrimination or measurement or relativisms. "And nama-rupa"—nama-rupa is perception, attention, contact, feeling, body, awareness—"all are destroyed with the cessation of consciousness"—i.e., those six sense consciousnesses. "Here each of these is destroyed."

The first phrase there, "consciousness without attribute," translates from the Pali as vijnanam anidasanam. A more precise rendering, I believe, recognizes that nidasa means to point to something or to show something, making this "consciousness that does not point to anything." Again, consciousness that does not land, as we explored yesterday. This describes awareness completely released from any kind of object.

Here the Buddha speaks of this unfabricated reality in subjective terms, as a kind of awareness beyond any sense of awareness we might ordinarily recognize. Even the sixth sense sphere—awareness aware of itself—does not apply here. This transcends awareness aware of itself, awareness aware of nothingness, and even the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception. It has gone completely beyond, totally released.

Sometimes the Buddha describes this as a kind of object, sometimes as a kind of subject, but most often he speaks in negative terms—what the Western theological traditions call apophatic language, or the via negativa. You cannot say this, you cannot say that. No attribute you ascribe to it will capture its truth. The Buddha declares that where all phenomena are removed, where there is complete fading of all phenomena, all ways of speaking are removed as well. All possibility of discourse about it vanishes.

More often than not, the Buddha points to this mystery through negative language: the cessation of this, the fading of that, the unfabricating of this. The entire phenomenon is indicated apophatically, negatively—this mystery that lies totally beyond what the mind can grasp or understand through conceptual means.

This experience, this opening, this realization remains possible for us as meditators. I am absolutely not suggesting it is easy, but it is entirely achievable. Yet we are still left with fascinating philosophical questions.

One teacher remarked—I heard this secondhand—"You cannot go from meditative experiences to epistemology and ontology." In other words, just because you have had a meditative experience does not mean that what you experienced in meditation is real or trustworthy in any meaningful way. Simply because you enjoyed a pleasant meditation proves nothing about anything. You have merely had a nice experience. So what?

This raises a crucial question: Just because I have had a meditation experience, what does it prove about the reality of what opened to me? How can I be certain this points to anything genuine that I can trust epistemologically—that I can rely upon as knowledge pointing to something ontologically real?

I would respond: Fair enough. That is true. I cannot one hundred percent guarantee an epistemology based on meditative experience. No one can. What argument could possibly be constructed philosophically to do so?

But my question in return would be: Where does your epistemology come from? How will you prove your epistemology? What do you believe constitutes valid knowledge about reality? That is what epistemology means—it connects with ontology, the question of what is real.

Will you claim that this world of matter everyone agrees upon is real? You still must prove that. Simply pick up a few books on twentieth-century physics and begin asking, "What do you mean by matter?" The whole assumption that matter is something real begins to grow extraordinarily shaky.

Most people understand matter as Descartes and Newton conceived it following the scientific revolution. But consider the quantum revolution. Niels Bohr, one of the fathers of quantum physics, declared: "Everything we call real, everything we think of as real is made from things we cannot call real." This appears to be what quantum physics has revealed.

So when someone insists you cannot move from meditation experience to epistemology and ontology—to claims about reality—I simply ask: What is your epistemology? If they respond with belief in the reality of matter, I ask: What do you mean by matter?

And have you really investigated whether that's real or not in the way that you think it is? Or is your epistemology, your idea of what is real and what's trustworthy as knowledge, simply based on socially agreed-upon views? Something like: "Well, it seems most people in my society agree on this view, therefore it must be right. Because our society is very smart and we make all the right choices, right?" You haven't read the news recently, have you?

Or perhaps your epistemology is just the most common view that you choose as your idea of what most people believe. If we're talking about Descartes again—well, that was a long time ago, and philosophy has moved on. Western philosophy has developed quite sophisticated, profound critiques of Descartes and this idea that there's mind and there's matter, or whatever.

So I wouldn't disagree with this person who says you can't just automatically, unquestionably jump from a wonderful meditation experience that you've really enjoyed to claims of ontology and epistemology. But I would just turn it around and say: "Okay, well, where is yours coming from? What are we going to do?"

Some people say all that talk about epistemology and ontology—which I've talked a lot about in recent years—"we don't do that anymore." That's quite a popular view in modern Western philosophy as well: this post-metaphysical stance, this "we don't do metaphysics" kind of thing.

Actually, it's impossible. It's impossible to live in the world and be in the world without some view, some belief about what is real and what is not real, and what constitutes valid knowledge or valid judgment

about that. It's impossible to be a person and function in the world and make choices—even walk from here to teatime or go to the toilet—without some ontological, epistemological view operating. This has nothing to do with formal philosophy or whatever.

So there's always some epistemology, some epistemological position or view operating. It's unavoidable. And similarly with ontology, with claims about reality. This is really, really interesting.

So it's a very complicated area. And we cannot, I think—if you really, really care about all this—you cannot get away from such questions. When someone says to you, "Well, you can't just glibly jump from your meditation experience to claims about reality, or assume this thing that you've opened to is real," they're in the same boat regarding whatever they believe. They're just making their own glib jump, and it's easier for them because they're not questioning it, or not even realizing what they're assuming, or it simply hasn't been brought into question.

But there are profound, difficult questions here about epistemology and ontology. What is the reality status of this unfabricated that we might open to in meditation? What is the reality status of all this? I'm mentioning this—I'm not going to dwell on it now, as I've talked about it extensively elsewhere.

The meditative question becomes: How does this most wonderful of wonderful openings open? How?

As meditators, the Buddha says it's a fruit of jñāna—which means it's a fruit of deep insight. In other words, it comes about only through deep insight. We're not just talking about the state of samādhi or concentration.

You can get to the eighth jhāna just by concentrating. I start with my nostrils, if I'm using that method—I just concentrate, concentrate, concentrate. The first jhāna opens, I let that mature, let the mango ripen. The second jhāna, third, fourth, fifth, and all the way to the eighth. I haven't done any insight at all. I could have—as we said, the more I get into it, there are more insight ways of looking that open up these jhānas. But for this one, the unfabricated, I cannot get there without insight. It's not just a natural state of concentration that will open. It's not just a samādhi that will naturally ripen.

Again, this is all explained in *Seeing That Frees*—what kinds of insights and how we go about that. I'm going to give a very brief tour of a few possibilities, taking them from the Buddha instead of what I've said in *Seeing That Frees*.

Here he is talking—actually it's Ānanda. The first example is from Ānanda. He says: "There is the case where a monk enters and remains in the first jhāna. He notices that this first jhāna is fabricated and willed. It's fabricated and willed. It has intention in it. He discerns: whatever is fabricated and willed is inconstant and subject to cessation. Staying right there, he reaches the ending of the effluents." The ending of the effluents is just another term for complete awakening, complete enlightenment—the ending of greed, hatred, and delusion.

Looking at the Buddhist teaching on the three kinds of suffering, we see that "anicca dukkha" refers to suffering that arises from impermanence. Even experiences of happiness, joy, and love are considered dukkha because they cannot satisfy us permanently. The third category is "sankata dukkha" - suffering that arises from fabrication itself. This points to something deeper than mere impermanence: it recognizes that everything we experience lacks inherent existence and is, from a certain perspective, inherently unsatisfactory.

This understanding forms the foundation for the first method: taking a jhanic state - up to the realm of nothingness - or a stable brahmaviharic state like loving-kindness, and repeatedly viewing it as fabricated and therefore unsatisfactory. Through this sustained contemplation, clinging diminishes, and with less clinging comes less fabrication. Ananda's instruction suggests that developing this practice deeply can lead to profound realization - potentially all the way to complete awakening.

The second example presents a different approach. The Buddha declares, "I tell you, the ending of the effluent depends on the first jhana." Here, total awakening is said to depend upon this foundational meditative state.

The method is described precisely: A monk enters and remains in the first jhana, experiencing the joy and happiness born of withdrawal from hindrances, accompanied by initial and sustained thought. Within this stable state, the practitioner regards the phenomena connected with the five aggregates - form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness - through the lens of insight.

The practitioner sees these jhanic elements as "inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a disintegration, a void, not-self." This extensive list of contemplative adjectives might seem overwhelming, but these various ways of seeing can actually be organized into four fundamental categories of insight.

The practice involves examining the very factors that constitute the first jhana - the five jhanic factors themselves - while remaining within that concentrated state. This represents a sophisticated integration of samatha and vipassana, using the stability of absorption as the foundation for penetrating wisdom.

The many descriptive terms in the text—inconstant, stressful, disease, cancer, arrow, and so forth—can actually be organized into four distinct categories.

We can group them into the baskets of the three characteristics and one of emptiness or voidness. The three characteristics are dukkha, which means unsatisfactory. Terms like disease, cancer, arrow, painful, affliction, and stressful are all similar words expressing that these phenomena are dukkha—fundamentally unsatisfactory. This represents the first characteristic.

The second basket contains the second characteristic: impermanence. Here we find words like inconstant and disintegration—expressions of the second characteristic as an insight way of looking. I'm examining the jhana factors right here within the jhana itself. This requires sufficient sensitivity, malleability, and

attunement of mind to know the jhana intimately, then observe the individual jhana factors through these insight perspectives.

The third basket encompasses the third characteristic—not-self. When the text mentions "not self" and "alien," it points to anatta. It's not me, not mine. The piti is not me and mine. The sukha is not me, not mine. The ekaggata, the concentration—all of it is not me, not mine. We observe this through the insight lens of anatta, recognizing this truth again and again.

The fourth basket is "a void"—two separate words. This suggests these phenomena are not merely not-me, not-mine, not just anatta, but they lack phenomenal selfhood entirely. They are empty of inherent existence. The piti doesn't exist inherently. The ekaggata, whatever it may be, is void—empty of inherent existence. "Void" and "empty" are interchangeable terms here.

This is fascinating because the Pali word is sunya. Sometimes people tell me that the Buddha only discusses emptiness in two suttas with "emptiness" in their titles within the Pali Canon. Actually, there are numerous teachings about emptiness of phenomenal self throughout the Pali Canon—not just the anatta teaching about emptiness of personal self, but various ways the Buddha employs the word "empty," including different types of teachings about emptiness of phenomenal self. Here's one example: they are a void, an emptiness.

So we have four ways of looking: the three characteristics—unsatisfactory (dukkha), impermanent (anicca), not-me, not-mine (anatta)—and void or empty (sunya in Pali).

The jhanas provide excellent foundations for this practice because they offer stable objects. The etymology of jhana can be traced to a candle that burns steadily. Due to this steadiness—remember our two S's in the middle of samadhi—jhanas form ideal objects for practicing these insight ways of looking.

Additionally, because the citta in jhana is clear, subtle, and malleable, these states represent optimum conditions. As they say: location, location, location. They're truly excellent spaces and places for this practice.

However, everything we're discussing comes after you've thoroughly mastered and become familiar with jhana. Only then do you begin practicing these insight ways of looking. All of this represents a lengthy process of practice development, but it's incredibly beautiful, freeing, and gratifying. It simply takes time to develop all of this.

Earlier in the retreat we explored why jhana provides such an ideal foundation for this practice. Yes, we have a stable object and a clear, subtle citta, but already in the jhanic state there is less fabricating. We've almost defined the entire jhanic spectrum in this way. This means the self is less fabricated at that point.

And what do selves do? They go "me, mine, me, mine, me, mine, me, mine." They appropriate, right? So the habit of "me-mining" is already diminished. This makes it easier than usual in that space to simply see

things as not me, not mine. The anatta practice becomes more accessible.

It's easier to let go because of the well-being, especially if you're confident that you can return to this jhana. It's not "Oh my god, I had this amazing experience once and I must cling to it." Once you've entered and exited repeatedly, you don't get attached to jhanas anymore.

I used to say it's like in this country - thank goodness for us - I'm not going to get super attached to water. I mean, there's water here, though I don't know how old that bottle is. But if I want water, I know I can go to the tap. It's simply there. When I don't know there's a tap I can turn on and off, then my relationship with water becomes very attached and difficult - understandably so.

But once we can move in and out of jhanas, we can actually let go quite freely within them because it's a well-being we become less attached to, more familiar with. We trust it can come and go, making it easier to release there. And as I mentioned, impermanence becomes obvious. These are additional reasons why jhanas are prime spaces for this work.

Here the Buddha is speaking, telling us that the ending of the effluents depends on the first jhana, then continuing through all the other jhanas up to the realm of nothingness. I would say it probably becomes easier with the third jhana simply because there's much more stillness there. What we're discussing at this level requires considerable stillness, spaciousness, and subtlety. If there's too much piti bouncing off the walls and creating turbulence, this kind of work can become more difficult. Theoretically, I think it's possible from the first jhana, but it's probably much easier from the third jhana onwards - though not past the realm of nothingness.

In neither-perception-nor-non-perception, you need to actually perceive things. You need to perceive what the jhana factors are, to make things clear. But in neither-perception-nor-non-perception, that's partly what defines the state - it's almost like not quite perceiving anything. Again, I've mentioned that only a Buddha can do this work in the realm of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, not an Arahant, not anyone else.

The Buddha goes through the same process with all the jhanas. I've missed a section here - he regards whatever phenomena are connected with the aggregates there. I made an error earlier - this passage concerns the aggregates, not the jhana factors. So the five aggregates present in the jhanic state: body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations or fabrications, and consciousness.

He regards them through one of these four ways: dukkha, anicca, anatta, or sunya - suffering, impermanence, not-self, or emptiness. Having done this, he turns his mind away from those phenomena because there's a letting go. Having done so, he inclines his mind toward the property of deathlessness, the amata - what is deathless, the unfabricated.

"This is peace, this is exquisite - the resolution of all fabrication, the ending of all fabrication, the relinquishment of all the paraphernalia of being, the ending of craving, dispassion, cessation, unbinding,

nibbana."

And again, it says staying right there - in other words, remaining right in that space - one reaches total liberation. But if there's some attachment to their insight, which is after all quite an extraordinary level of insight, if they're somewhat attached to it, then they reach only as far as the non-returner stage. According to this teaching, they're reborn only in the pure abodes, the highest heavenly realms. In those realms, they will come to full awakening, there to be totally unbound, never again to return from that world.

So this covers the first jhana through the realm of nothingness. Then the Buddha states: "Thus, as far as the perception-attainments go, that is as far as gnosis-penetration goes." This confirms what I said before - you can only engage this kind of insight practice up to the realm of nothingness, because beyond that, you're not really perceiving anything clearly enough to work with the aggregates.

Now, the third passage. Are you comfortable with this level of detail? Here the Buddha speaks about Sariputta, one of his chief disciples, saying: "Monks, Sariputta is pandita" - which can be translated as wise or skilled. The translator here renders it as "of great discernment."

It's actually *maha-panyo*, of great—you could say wisdom, you could say discernment, you could say insight. You could also say, and what I'd like to put the emphasis on because that's what the passage is talking about, is that Sariputta has great skill in insight ways of looking. That's exactly what the passage is addressing.

Sariputta is wise and skilled of great insight, of deep insight, of wide insight, of joyous, rapid, quick, penetrating insight. Note the joyous. Yes, joyous. This insight way of looking approach, as I said yesterday, is a joyous way of practicing insight. There's no way it can't be. I mean, maybe a little bit here and there, but basically because you're looking, because you're relating in a way that unbinds right then, you feel that taste, you feel it in your body, in the consciousness—some degree of unbinding, some degree of release from suffering, and therefore it is joyous.

So why is he all that? Because there is the case where Sariputta enters and remains in the first jhana. Whatever qualities there are in the first jhana—and then he lists again the jhana factors, the five jhana factors which we've had. And then he lists things like contact, feeling, perception, intention, consciousness, desire, persistence, mindfulness, equanimity, attention. The list could go on a little bit.

He ferrets them out one by one. Known to him, they arise. Known to him, they remain. Known to him, they subside. He discerns. So this is how these qualities, not having been, come into play, come into being. *Evam*, this is how. Such is the way they do.

Remember we had this brief discussion—I think Andrew asked about the Satipatthana Sutta and how it can so easily be read and heard and translated as a teaching on impermanence, missing this *how*. So this is how these qualities, not having been, come into being. And how, having been, they vanish.

He remains unattracted and unrepelled with regard to these qualities. Independent, detached, released with an awareness rid of barriers. He understands there is a further escape, there's a further *nissaranam*, and pursuing it he confirms that there is. And that further escape is the second jhana. And then he goes through the same thing all the way up to the realm of nothingness.

Here's a jhana—what makes up this jhana? Sometimes when we're practicing jhana, we for the most part want to not differentiate, not deconstruct it. We want to see it as one homogeneous yumminess and just throw ourselves into that vat of homogeneous chocolate yumminess. Yes, that's how we want to relate to it. I don't want to be deconstructing it, seeing its gaps and impermanence. I don't want to be deconstructing in terms of its constituent elements unless I'm doing that so I can work on one of them—like my wattle and daub building has got a bit of a hole in it and I need to sort of focus on that bit and kind of push it back or bring something in. I'm not deconstructing it if I've got a samadhi intention, unless it's for the sake of shoring it up for the samadhi.

But now we're in an insight way of looking. We are really interested in the discerning, in seeing what's going on here, what are the elements here, and bringing into play an insight way of looking which changes my relationship with those elements very, very powerfully, very potently.

All this is extremely subtle, but it's absolutely doable with practice. So I put so much emphasis on this sensitivity, attunement, et cetera, taken to extraordinary levels, but absolutely possible. And if I can do that, then the whole thing begins to unfabricate, unfabricate.

In this example, he's going stage by stage through the jhanas. I think I said the other day, what might happen is a bit like an elevator shaft. Sometimes the elevator will just go, and you're just at a floor or in the area of a certain floor. Somehow, somewhere I'm around the seventh jhana, whatever it is. Sometimes it goes all the way. But here, there's a kind of stage by stage. He's stopping at every floor.

This word "void"—we've already explained that. There's many ways of understanding emptiness, as we said in response to the question on the note earlier. So we can understand if I'm looking at a jhana factor or something like attention or even the intention to pay attention or something like *vedana* or something like consciousness—there's many ways to understand its voidness, its emptiness.

In other words, there's many possible subtexts if I'm using that way of looking: empty, empty. One of them though could be fabricated, which one might have already understood. I see that when I practice letting go, this fades. Therefore it's fabricated, therefore it's empty of inherent existence.

But the key thing here, as we said, is the *how*—how something arises, how these elements arise, and not just the jhana itself, but the actual elements. How is it that consciousness arises? How is it that consciousness fades? How is it that a sense of contact or a perception—which remember means experience or appearance or phenomenon—how is it that it arises and how does it fade?

This is the deepest level of dependent arising. Dependent arising is a teaching you can take on many

different levels.

At a certain level, it begins to deconstruct, which is why I could say at the beginning: what dependently arises does not actually arise. At the deepest level of understanding dependent arising, what dependently arises does not arise. But there's a whole range of levels.

At the deepest level where it still just about makes sense to talk about arising—let me see if I can explain this very briefly. Again, it's explored in *Seeing That Frees* in quite careful detail. We're speaking of a very deep meditative state. We don't even need to put a jhāna name on it—just somewhere in that territory where there's a lot of fading.

No sense of my story, no sense of my personality and all my neuroses and my whole complex me. There's just the simplest possible self. What might be the simplest possible self? Just a sense of consciousness. Just a sense of consciousness. No story, no personality, just an awareness. Just subject in the barest, most basic sense. Everything's faded and that's all that's left.

And with that, all that's left is a very, very simple object. That could be the realm of nothingness. It could be something in that territory—some very, very empty state in terms of object or what's being fabricated there as an object. Subject at its most basic level, we might say. Object at its most basic level, we might say.

And there's a third element that goes with these, that always goes with these. No subject, no object; no object, no subject. But they need a third element to stand together, to construct something: time. Time doesn't mean remembering the past or planning for after the retreat—completely beyond all that. It means just a sense of the present moment. Just a sense of a present moment.

Now implicit in a sense of a present moment—I would say implicit without any thinking—is a subtle sense of a future moment and a past moment. It goes with our sense of time. So this is the most basic tripod. Three legs propping each other up. They need each other. Generally speaking, there are always exceptions, but generally speaking, take away any one of these legs and the other two come tumbling down. The other two get unfabricated.

So this is the most basic perception. This is way down there at the low end of unfabricating. Here's the crucial point about conception and intention. I would say this barest subject, this most subtle subject, most unconstructed subject with an extremely unconstructed object and the barest sense of time—it still has pregnant within it conception and intention.

There is the sense of subject recognizing something as other than it. And subject, through saṅkāra, karmically is invested. None of this is thinking. There is an investment. This subject, this thinnest subject, is invested in some way or another with this object. I like it. I want more of it. This is not linguistic—"I like it, I want more of it." I want it to stay around. I want it to increase. I want it to decrease. I want it to go away. I want to keep it just as it is—some intention on the subject's part in relation to the object.

Do you understand? It's what subjects do. This is karma. This is saṅkāra.

This is the wheel of samsara at the most basic, basic level.

There's a conception of time—I'm not thinking about time. And there's a conception of an object—I'm not thinking about an object or a subject. But it's woven into the very perception. There's a conception of subject, object, and time. And woven into that, there's an intention, some intention or other to do with what happens in time, some investment on the subject's part to do with the object about what then happens in the next moment.

So implicit in a sense of a present moment, the bare sense of time, is implicit a sense of a next moment. And there's investment in what will happen in the next moment for this subject. So there's already clinging there. It's wrapped up in the most subtle intention and the most subtle conception. This is this most basic tripod. This is propping up samsara.

These three—coming back to that, coming back to the question on the note—they dependently co-arise. It's not like first there is a subject sort of sitting around, drumming fingers, waiting for an object and waiting for time. Or that there is time waiting for—which is also quite interesting if you know something about very recent developments in physics—but they arise together. We're even saying they arise together. We're really at the edge of what language and conception can express, because arising is something that happens in time. And now we're talking about the arising of time itself.

They arise together, they go together. Language—exactly at this point—this is the limit, I would say. This is the limit of conventional language in terms of how deep we can go with understanding the arising and passing of things and dependent arising.

They arise together. They are not separate. Subject, object, time. They're not three things. Nor are they one thing. Nor are they nothing. No things. Nor are they many things. Nor are they infinite things. Really. You could see them in all those ways. But really, they're not any of those things.

So typical avijjā, typical ignorance delusion believes in this conception. There is a subject, there are objects, and there is time. That basic conception is avijjā. Out of that basic conception comes inevitably these intentions in some way or another for the next moment in regard to this object, or I want a better object or whatever it is. Not talking about any thinking at all. It's so, so subtle. That's basic avijjā, propelling samsara, propelling the wheel of dependent origination at the most basic level.

In the conception, in this most basic conception, is the avijjā. Wrapped up with it—not even out of it, but wrapped up with it—is this stream of saṅkhārā intention. That's another intention as what fabricates. I'm invested, I'm clinging, I'm pushing, I'm pulling in the most, most subtle ways.

When we understand what's happening here, understand they're not three, understand they're not one, understand it's not nothing. When we understand how this arises through this conception and through the

intention and the clinging. At the moment we understand that—or rather let's put it this way, when I am meditating and I bring that understanding and I use it as an insight way of looking, I take this: this is what's going on here. There's a conception of subject-object-time and it propels, it's wrapped up with, or wrapped up with it is this movement of intention, of clinging, very, very subtle.

When I understand that, and I plug that in as a way of looking, I understand what's going on, therefore these things are fabricated. These subject-object-time are fabricated. They're not unfabricated. Time is a fabrication. I understand how they arise together.

Then we could say, okay, at that moment our avijjā is much, much, much less. In that moment of employing that insight way of looking.

Does that make sense?

Looking at the foundation or the first link of dependent arising - avijja - we've just decreased it radically at that point. So we're not pumping into the wheel of dependent arising. We're not pumping the liquid into samsara. Samsara means "to flow" - sara, to flow into that flow. We're not pumping the liquid in because the avijja - that squeezy liquid box thingy - has got no liquid in it, or very, very little liquid in it.

And then our tripod collapses. Unfabricating. Total unfabrication. No time, no subject, no object, no present moment, no awareness in the usual sense of what we mean by awareness - or any big vastness of awareness or something like that.

So as I said, we're talking about something very, very subtle, actually very, very doable if I approach it in the right way. "Thus he trains himself." And that probably takes a while, but it's really, really possible.

The Buddha said - I'm paraphrasing; he probably said it much more elegantly - but it's something like: no matter how long your legs are and how long you walk for, you'll never reach the end of the world. No matter how long - even if you lived forever - you'd never reach the end of the world. But without reaching the end of the world, you won't know liberation. Without reaching the end of the world, you won't know liberation.

So he's talking about this - the end of the world. In other places he defines the world as basically the six senses, what appears in the six senses, including the mind. So you could say, philosophically speaking, all this has relevance as what we might call a phenomenological approach, a radical phenomenological approach in philosophical language.

And yet it's still the case that a person might go through all this business and open to the unfabricated as an experience, and yet not take it - or decide not to take it - as implying anything at all with regard to the world. It only implies something about the mind's relationship with the world and the world of experience.

So then they maybe conclude: I experienced the unfabricated, and therefore there's no rebirth, because

I've severed my infatuation and my ties and my clinging with the world. There's no rebirth in the world. And from that kind of understanding, we do get a very - or it's possible to get a very - dualistic view: there's the unfabricated and there's the world. And not much more is understood about the world from that viewpoint. So one could view it that way.

One could also hear all this - and I think sometimes people do, or partially read about it - and view it as a kind of what we call in philosophy "mentalism." In other words, all this world is just... there is no materiality. Materiality is an illusion, and what's real is the mind, and the mind projects this world.

But we're going beyond that. There are lots of critiques of having that partial understanding. It's the mind, awareness, consciousness, and all the elements of the mind that make up the mind too - they are empty too. One can come to see that they are empty too. All of them - all the world and the mind and the elements of the mind - all this, they're like... Sariputta gives an analogy of two sheaves of corn or wheat or something. You know, like in a field after the farmers do their harvesting, they might prop two sheaves of wheat leaning on each other.

The whole thing - mind and world, the elements of the mind - they prop each other up. That's also partly what dependent co-arising means, like the tripod. They're not really separate things. They're empty of being really separate things. But they're not one thing.

What I've described here very briefly - kind of rushing through - what I've described here is not only beautiful as a practice, but profoundly liberating for people's lives. Maybe, let's say, most people. But we go back to the epistemology question. I'm still left with: well, how do I know I can trust this? What does this mean?

I'm not going into the epistemology thing right now, but for some people it's convincing enough. That's totally convincing and that does it for them. There will be people who don't like this approach for different reasons, or just would find, when they hear about it, they just don't find it convincing - this whole idea of less fabricating and exploring that meditative journey of less fabricating.

So there are other approaches to emptiness that are possible. And again, I've written about them in *Seeing That Frees*. They're what I call analytical meditations, or what are called analytical meditations. Very different from this business about insight ways of looking at fabrication. But through these analytical meditations, you can come to understand it's impossible for something to have inherent existence. It's just another way into emptiness.

Going back to something I said at the beginning: if a person says - again, fabrication, whether they use that word or not, whether I use that word or not - fabrication, what we mean by it, is an important concept.

Fabrication is an important concept. Seeing papañca as fabrication, and then seeing dukkha as fabrication, letting go of it, and then one is with the unfabricated. So papañca—in the common sense of the word, when the Buddha uses it, he means something much more subtle, I think. But anyway, we'll

keep it at that.

So fabrication is an important concept because we see, for example, the difference between the papañca mind and the mindful mind or the mind of bare attention. But someone might say, "Fabrication is an important concept, but I'm not really interested in all this mystical, deep talk of the unfabricated. That's all irrelevant to life. What's that got to do with life? This business about the unfabricated—it's only for some people."

I would say, are we not then making an artificial distinction or drawing an arbitrary line between everyday life and the mystical? Because again, as I said at the beginning, why? Why have I, why have you, why has a person drawn the line about what is fabricated where they have drawn it? Why there? First of all, where exactly have you drawn it? And why there?

The principle of fabrication—the principle of clinging, the principle of the relationship between clinging and fading—it's the same and it's one spectrum. As I said, my mom can understand. There's papañca. I have to explain to her a bit what clinging means at that gross level. And she understands, "Oh yeah, when I just calm down a bit and relax a little bit, then it all fades." Basically, it's the same principle. There was the fabrication. Then I let go of the clinging and the fabrication—the papañca—faded. It's the same principle.

It's one spectrum all the way from that to what we've been talking about this evening. It's one spectrum. There's one principle, actually a really simple principle running all the way through. It's only perhaps that preconceived, unquestioned ontological assumptions—assumptions of views about beliefs about what is real—are somehow dragged in to what's actually one spectrum, what's actually a coherent system. And then these preconceived assumptions about reality just make a division in that spectrum. And I end up dividing the spectrum and actually making it a bit incoherent.

Okay, last thing. Again, someone might say—and we talked about this yesterday a little bit with the realm of neither-perception-nor-non-perception—"What's this totally transcendent, unfabricated got to do with me? What's it got to do with life? What's it got to do with my life? It's so transcendent, so removed."

You know, life is contact. Life is experiences. Remember, that's what perceptions mean. Life is the senses and what comes to us in the senses. Life is emotions, it's heart, it's story, it's self. And even if it's not self, it's at least the flow of the aggregates. That's life. What's this got to do with life? What's it got to do with me? Why should I be interested in this?

Already in the fourth jhana we talked about the quietening of emotions, and that's part of life. In the jhanas we're getting used to this unfabricating. Again, it's one way of understanding what's going on. It's probably the most helpful way of understanding what's going on in the jhanas. They're not—for the hundredth time on this retreat—they're not states of deeper concentration and ability to keep your mind unwavering on one object.

So already in the fourth jhana there's a quietening of what we might view as life, and there's hopefully a kind of opening to the beauty of this which is sort of halfway or a lot less like life than we think, than we're used to thinking. So what's it got to do with me?

Again, we talked about this before, it may be that a dualistic understanding and a dualistic sense of the world and the sense of things comes out of all this. There is the unfabricated, this wondrous mystical release and opening and something that is completely beyond conception, completely beyond perception. There is the unfabricated and there's the world of the fabricated. And they're really different. They have no connection. And this is clearly better than that. And I don't want to be reborn. I just want to, whatever the word is, dissolve, unbind. Nirvana means unbind—that's one of the etymologies. Vana, like a vine, like you wrap things in vines. Nirvana, I just want to unbind in that, not be reborn.

So it could lead to a kind of dualistic understanding. Absolutely. Could, doesn't have to.

Sometimes what happens for a person opens to this kind of experience and then it's as if that unfabricated then can be, at least at times, a sense of it shining through the world of experience, the world of matter, the world of phenomenal reality. The light of the unfabricated shines through. The song of the unfabricated blows through. It casts a light on this world. It casts its light on this world. Or it is the light behind and through the phenomenal world. Or it gives a kind of space and context to this world and the comings and goings and the ups and downs of this world. So that's much less dualistic.

We have to be careful though because remember we talked about the after effects of perception on perception. By now it should be clear there are many possibilities for what could be perceived as shining through. It could be the joy of the second jhana as some people have reported very beautifully. That can shine through or the third jhana or the realm of this or that. So there is this possibility, I think, of a sense of the unfabricated shining through, but we have to be careful in our discernment. Is it the unfabricated or is it something else?

But a third possibility is again what I've touched on before and I think we talked about it yesterday. Again it's like through all this I go further. I go further than the unfabricated. I don't stop there. Wondrous as that is. And I go further in my understanding of emptiness and dependent arising. And I realize through that, I sense through that in my being, in the fibers of my being, in my consciousness, I sense through that—again we run out of language, whatever the words might be—for something, for participation so profound that it's beyond the word participation. For an intimacy and an involvement so intimate and involved and close and deep, that it's beyond what we usually mean by words like intimacy and involvement. Participation, intimacy, involvement in the mystery of things, in the mystery and the magic of appearances.

And then there's sacredness everywhere. There's holiness everywhere. There's this beauty of emptiness everywhere without any duality.

So people take this different ways, but there are possibilities here, different possibilities.

Let's have some quiet together.

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