Playing in the In-Betweens

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:04:39

Hi everyone. I am recording this from home. I got home and realized there were a few questions that I hadn't had time to respond to that I think would be helpful for people at later points in their practice. There were also a few other technical instructions that I think would be helpful for most people at some point as they go forward with jhana practice, along with a couple of general things. Most of what I want to go into falls into the category of working in jhanic grey areas.

As I mentioned, sometimes when the jhana opens for the first few experiences, it's very intense, very clear, seemingly effortless. One is very much in the jhana and might feel like there's nothing to do, nothing to improve on even. As one gains more experience in and out of that jhana and gets more familiar with that particular jhanic territory—whichever it is, whatever jhana we're talking about—then there do appear times where it becomes apparent in one's practice that sometimes it's very clear, very pure, a pure jhanic experience.

Other times we're sort of in the jhanic territory, but not quite—sort of para-jhanic territory, or kind of half in, half out, or on the edge. As I mentioned, there's mostly in, but some very subtle hindrances yapping quietly at the borders of consciousness, or there's an area of the body that won't clear up. It falls into that kind of territory—the grey area, working in the grey areas or transitional states. Not everything, but a lot of things.

Before that, though, there are a couple of general things, and then something about soul-making and jhana. So let's see how we do.

The first general thing is, again, to make clear that I would say it's more optimal for the way we're practicing jhanas to not fall into a sort of strict, unbroken rhythm of formal practice: sit-walk, sit-walk, sit-walk—45 minutes, 45 minutes, one hour, one hour, however it's divided up. Of course, sometimes that will feel like it's the most helpful rhythm at that time, but the key thing here is, does it feel like it is? Again, am I listening? Am I being responsive? Am I being attentive? Am I tuning my practice rhythm at the moment—right now, not for this retreat, but right now, for this morning, or this afternoon, or this evening? Am I tuning it to what feels best, what feels like it's actually most fertile?

Sometimes if you sit and the jhana's coming and it all feels really good, you can go way beyond one hour—way, way, way beyond. Just sit in an unlimited way. You run out of batteries, try again. Try to get the jhana again without getting up, maybe two or three times. Sit as long as you can—not with any forcing, but just sit as long as it works, as long as it feels good. The same applies to walking practice and standing practice, unless for some reason you only have 20 minutes or 40 minutes or whatever it is, and you decide

to just go 40 minutes to walk now. That's all fine.

Basically there needs to be this responsive attunement of the rhythms of our practice. We're really finding out, feeling into, getting a sense for and discovering what's the most helpful right now, and breaking out of a kind of rigid, tight, predefined, pre-set mold of a rhythm for practice and different postures. This is also part of what I mentioned because the day needs to breathe and there needs to be space for appreciation and beauty and a little bit of exercise and open-heartedness.

I'm reiterating that, but I also want to say that when some of you start exploring insight ways of looking as a huge stream of investigation in your practice, and when that opens up, I would say the same principle applies there. You can have times where it's sit, walk, sit, walk—very rigid and predefined. That's absolutely fine. But you also really want times where it's this more fluid, attentive, open scheduling that's much more responsive.

Again there, in the way that I would, or the way I most commonly teach insight practice—which is through different insight ways of looking, learning them, employing them, seeing what happens with them—we still want the day to breathe. We still want space in the heart and the soul for appreciation and beauty and to be touched and for open-heartedness. We also need space to notice the after-effects on perception. Whether we're doing jhanic practice as it goes deeper and they become more common—and we know to look for them and look out for them very gently without pressure—or insight ways of looking practice, there are again very potentially powerful, very noticeable after effects on perception there as well.

But there's another reason when we come to insight ways of looking, or practicing insight ways of looking. Partly the way that process works in this way of teaching insight meditation is not through the continuity, through the accumulation of a sort of power of mindfulness through just being completely continuous with the mindfulness. So sit, walk, sit, walk, unbroken, go to lunch, continue the mindfulness—it's a great way of practice. A certain intensity and this continuity of mindfulness will be developed hopefully that way, and through that continuity of mindfulness, it can illuminate certain things. So that's great.

An alternative approach emerges when we deliberately practice different insight ways of looking. Here I actually need the comparison. I need to practice this particular insight way of looking and then consciously let it go, comparing the difference in perception when I release it. Now I'm simply back to ordinary consciousness—not particularly trying to maintain any special awareness. Of course, there's still a way of looking because there's always a way of looking, but I'm not deliberately employing this or that specific way of looking.

It's through this comparison that I learn about dependent arising. I'm not trying to accumulate so much mindfulness that I then perceive "the truth"—because there isn't one truth. Instead, I practice a way of looking, then I let go of practicing that way of looking. When I practice the way of looking, I notice what it does to perception, notice the sense of things. When I stop practicing, I notice there's a different sense of

things.

In this approach, we actually need a looser, rather less continuous schedule of practice. The intention can be continuous for long periods—that's absolutely fine—but there does need to be some kind of coming out of the insight way of looking, perhaps moving into a more normal way without deliberate intention, so that we can see through comparison the effect of the insight way of looking.

It's not that practice always has to be like that, but sometimes that's part of it too. There's less emphasis on continuity. When I practice this insight way of looking, I should see within ten minutes, twenty minutes, an hour—whatever it is—the obvious effects on perception.

The second general point concerns posture. As I mentioned on the retreat, eventually you can access jhāna and remain in jhāna in almost any posture. Posture becomes very unimportant. But before that time, before the practice has really ripened to that stage, posture is actually very important, particularly at the beginning.

I encouraged this in some of the early guided meditations—really sensing into the poise and balance in posture. See if you can develop a feel for, a sense of, the beauty in posture: the beauty, dignity, and nobility that posture reflects. Notice the balance between the citta qualities that posture manifests, expresses, and reflects—between openness, relaxation, and softness on one hand, and brightness, alertness, poise, and intention on the other.

There's also the sense of actual balance in posture and the way that when the mind encompasses the whole body and includes the whole body space in a very alert, open, receptive, sensitive way, the body and posture are very subtly affected. Subtle changes in posture can affect our ability to maintain that kind of pervasive energy body awareness. This is really, really important.

If you're not familiar with this, it's really worth taking time to explore, as I said at the beginning of the retreat. I remember Kirsten showing me a picture of her very young nieces—three or four of them, I think—meditating or trying to meditate. They were very young, between two and ten years old.

One of them, quite a young one, was very interesting. You could tell from the photograph that her awareness was spread throughout her body. They were all sitting cross-legged, copying Kirsten with their eyes shut. But the awareness was spread through the whole body. You could feel from the photograph the poise in posture, and also in the attention, in the awareness. You could feel the quality of attention and how it pervaded her whole body. It was very alive and present. Quite remarkable.

Posture and citta quality go very much together at first. It's really worth exploring this if you're not familiar with it.

I remember one of my first teachers in an interview many years ago. I was called in for an interview—I think I was one of the first people to be called. I thought, "Oh, why am I first?" I was a teenager, and he

said, "You're very out of contact with the earth," or something like that—"very out of contact with the ground." I had no idea what he was talking about, but it struck me as a serious problem. It sounded like a very serious ailment.

He had me sit and played with my posture a little. I was not really in contact with my body at all back then—had no training in that. I was probably quite disconnected, as most teenagers in that generation were, disconnected from my body. At a certain point, he was gently moving my shoulders and torso, and then he simply said, "There. There."

And really, it wasn't so much a visible kind of yoga-looking posture that he was responding to. He was responding to, he was feeling the way my posture helped my mind inhabit the whole body, the whole body space in a very natural and open and upright and alert way. And I think that's what he was picking up on. Of course, to me, it just seemed like some kind of supernatural powers at the time.

Now that I'm much more used to all this and teaching, and energy body is very much what I emphasize, I can easily understand how it's possible to have that kind of awareness with another person, how their mind and body are right now, and how their energy body awareness is, and how the posture is perhaps allowing, supporting, or limiting certain possibilities psychically, certain possibilities for the citta, or certain possibilities in relationship.

I remember working with someone in an interview, and they were in a very difficult space in their heart and mind and soul. I was asking them to come into presence, to be in relationship with me with an open heart and the sort of holding there, and encouraging them to open to their body experience as well. But I could tell that there was just something very, very subtle in how they were sitting and holding their posture. It didn't look like anything obvious—certainly nothing like being hunched over or contracted or some kind of obviously defensive posture. It was extremely subtle. But that was enough to prevent her from coming into a different relationship with herself and also from coming into a different relationship with me.

We played with that just a little bit, and it allowed the relational space, both with herself and with myself, to open up to possibilities that were just not available two minutes beforehand, five minutes beforehand. She had no idea.

So the mind, the citta, affects the body and the posture, and the posture affects the citta. And this goes very, very subtle and deep until it begins to be—states of openness and states of jhana, states of samadhi and all that become much more familiar and they're less dependent on the posture being like this or like that to enable them. But maybe for quite a while for some people it is quite posture dependent. So it's really worth taking the time to play with posture, even in what might seem like microscopically subtle ways. That was part of what I was trying to encourage at the beginning of the retreat.

Okay, so let's run through a few more specific technical things. As I said, most of these are relative to

things kind of going well but hitting some tricky spots where it's just not quite coalescing or coming together.

We spoke about how sometimes there can be pain or discomfort in the body, or a sense of contraction or holding or tightness somewhere in the energy body, the physical body. And we spoke about the possibility of actually taking that difficult spot—for example, if you're doing metta practice as your base practice—actually imagining the center of the metta there. The metta is radiating from that very difficulty. Or imagining the breath coming in and out there, or the energy, that being the center of the energy body and the center of the breath energy, if you like, or the center of the light, the white luminosity or golden white luminosity that might pervade the energy body. Just almost exactly where you'd least expect it, imagining that to be the center of what you're trying to encourage. And sometimes it can turn out, just as we'd least expect, counterintuitively to be the loveliest place.

But what I want to add now is that if the mind is fuzzy or foggy or woolly, the mind, the head, and if you're tired, a similar thing can work. Imagine light there in the head. The head feels dull or there's that kind of tiredness behind the eyes or just the kind of wooliness there. Imagine the light centered there if you're working with light as part of the energy body awareness. Imagine the breath energy coming in and out there or coming in or out through the top of the head, through the sides, the front, the back, whatever it is, or radiating, expanding out from that very wooliness.

So just the same principle, but applied to qualities of the citta. Same principle as we suggested with regard to bodily discomforts or blocks, we can apply to discomforts or blocks in the citta. And often they do feel in the head, so we just imagine them in the head.

Some of these are quite basic. Some will apply to working in the territory of any jhana. Some apply to later jhanas, and I'll go into that specific jhana. Some of them apply to working outside of a jhana, before even entering jhanic territory, or as I said, they might apply when the jhana's kind of going okay, but there's a little bit that's not kind of brought into the fold of the jhana, it hasn't spread there. So some of these things will apply at any level.

And we just mentioned pain, so again, we mentioned on the retreat, there might be—it could be any jhana, say second or first or whatever. The jhanic nimitta is there. I'm in the territory of the jhana, but it's not quite suffusing the whole body. And indeed, there's some place in the body where there's pain or discomfort. So it's in the jhanic territory, the nimitta has arisen, but it's not fully suffused and I'm not fully absorbed. Well, it's not always best to hurry to spread or suffuse the nimitta. That may be exactly the right thing, but sometimes just pause a little bit because we've got a few options.

Sometimes, you might find that the breath becomes very, very faint and light, almost like it's dissolving or barely perceptible. And this can actually be quite lovely and beautiful. But sometimes a person thinks, "Oh, I need to be really careful here. I need to manage this." There might be a little bit of fear arising: "What if I stop breathing?" or "What if something goes wrong?" This kind of worry or management mode

can actually pull you out of the jhāna.

So if you notice this happening—if the breath is becoming very faint and there's some concern about it—often the best approach is simply to trust. Trust the body. Trust the process. The body knows how to breathe. Even when the breath becomes incredibly subtle and light, even when it feels like it might disappear completely, just let it be. Don't try to manage it or control it.

Sometimes people think they need to take a conscious breath or check that they're still breathing. But this kind of intervention, this moving into management mode, often disrupts the beautiful stillness that's emerging. So instead, just relax into that faintness of breath. Let it be as subtle as it wants to be. Trust that the body will take care of what it needs to take care of.

This principle of trust extends more broadly in jhāna practice. When we enter these deeper states, there's often a natural letting go that happens—a release of our usual need to control and manage our experience. The more we can surrender into this, the more we can trust the organic wisdom of the process, the deeper and more stable our jhānic experiences tend to become.

Another aspect particular to working with the third jhāna relates to the quality of contentment and equanimity that characterizes this state. Sometimes practitioners find that while they can enter the third jhāna, it doesn't feel as dramatically different from the second jhāna as they might expect. The happiness is still there, but it's quieter, more subtle. There might be a sense of, "Is this really different? Am I actually in the third jhāna?"

This is quite normal. The transitions between jhānas aren't always marked by dramatic shifts. Sometimes they're quite gentle and gradual. The key is to tune into the particular flavor of each state. In the third jhāna, there's often a sense of deep satisfaction, a profound okayness with things as they are. The body feels suffused with a gentle, steady pleasure that's less effervescent than the pīti of the first and second jhānas, but perhaps more deeply nourishing.

If you're working to develop familiarity with the third jhāna and you're not sure whether you're really there or still in the second, you can experiment with intentionally bringing back some pīti, some of that more bubbly, energetic happiness. If you can easily toggle back to that more energetic quality, then return to the quieter contentment, you're probably working skillfully with the distinction between these states.

In all the piti and sukha of earlier jhanas, it might be that we haven't noticed the breath. We've let the breath go, allowing the piti and sukha to become the primary nimittas—which is a completely fine way of working, as we've emphasized. But sometimes, not only does the breath organically become more sensible because there's greater calmness, it may actually help the third jhana to bring attention back to the breath.

At this point, the breath should be very, very subtle and delicate. As we said, the very movement of the breath is peacefulness. The very movement of that subtle, delicate, gentle breath is peacefulness

itself—like those strands of seaweed in the lagoon, just gently swaying. It's so subtle, they're moving peacefully. There's movement, movement of the breath, but the very movement is peacefulness. Sometimes deliberately returning to find the breath again—whether it emerges organically as we begin to notice and include it, or we consciously seek it—can help deepen and consolidate the third jhana when needed.

This brings us to a more general point, particularly as we enter the deeper jhanas where we encounter secondary nimittas. For instance, the secondary nimittas of release and relief are important ingredients of the jhanic mix. Any experienced jhana meditator will notice these qualities and should notice them. While they're not primary nimittas, sometimes attending to them can be skillful. When working in a jhana that's not quite coming together—when we're definitely in the territory but it's not quite coalescing or fully deepening as we know is possible—we can very gently and delicately, without pressure, look for these secondary nimittas of relief and release.

By noticing them and focusing on them briefly, even for just a few moments, we can allow the whole jhana to deepen or consolidate. This represents a very skillful, subtle movement of attention. We're working with what will help, almost taking that relief and release—or whatever the secondary nimitta is—and using it as part of the glue, part of the stitching to help cohere the jhanic experience.

For the fourth jhana specifically, we've discussed how there's often a brightness—white golden light—that's quite central. The stillness is the light, the light is the stillness. Sometimes this manifests as a vertical column of bright stillness through the center of the body space. Sometimes it feels all around you, sometimes it's not quite all around yet. You can imagine this vertical column of bright white light that is the stillness, the stillness that is the light, rising through the center of the energy body space.

One can begin to allow or even encourage that light to melt outwards from that central vertical column. In doing so, it dissolves the body into it, dissolves the body with it. This can be tremendously helpful at times.

Sometimes with the fourth jhana, particularly when that leaning forward occurs—that intensity of focus on conceiving the stillness and nimitta in front of us—it's helpful to feel that you, or the body, the energy body, is falling backwards into a jhanic realm. You conceive it as being behind you, but in addition to just conceiving it there, you actually fall back into it. This represents a different mode of attention—falling backwards versus probing forward or trying to penetrate something in front. It's different too from the vertical column that we expand outwards. These various approaches offer different modes of attention, different conceptions of the directionality of attention and the relationship between body, jhana, and nimitta.

Returning to the Buddha's description of the fourth jhana, what remains is nothing but this pure, bright awareness—wrapped in this cloth of pure, bright awareness. This connects to our earlier discussion about mixing cooking ingredients to move between jhanas. If I can turn up the sense of presence in the fourth jhana—and this will take me toward the sixth jhana, infinite consciousness, because presence is

consciousness and consciousness is presence—I begin to open that up. It's already there, already pregnant with it, already implicit in the fourth jhana.

Another way to understand this is through those cooking ingredients: I mix a bit of this, add more of that ingredient to this jhana, and it takes me to another jhana. We're adding more presence to the fourth jhana, but how? By tuning to what's already there.

So here it's different than cooking. The tuning to the sense of presence—when I notice it, when I tune to it, it amplifies it. So effectively I'm adding more of that particular ingredient into my cooking pot, and the fourth jhana will then change into the sixth jhana. I've turned up the sense of presence just by tuning to it and amplifying it. The tuning to it does amplify, and that turns up, and it goes to the sixth jhana.

Of course, there should be a very strong sense of presence in the fourth jhana. The mind is almost spellbound, but still, we can increase things by tuning to them, increase certain factors within the jhana, and that can sometimes just help that jhana consolidate. As I said, it's very common for a fourth jhana with a lot of experience to get just a little bit dull. So just turn up that sense of presence. But if I really then tune into the sense of presence and hone in on that, I'm amplifying it. And that can take me to the sixth jhana.

One thing that I mentioned—the Buddha says, technically the breath stops breathing. In the fourth jhana, whatever we think about the so-called biological reality of that, that will be the meditator's experience. It's hard to locate a sense of breath in the fourth jhana. It feels as if the body has stopped breathing.

But be careful. Don't try to assess, "Is this the fourth jhana?" by keeping on checking whether your breath has stopped. That's not the right way. It's not going to be helpful. Just as checking whether thought has stopped is not going to be a helpful way of checking whether you're in the second jhana. Doing that kind of thing—checking "Has my breath stopped? No, it hasn't stopped yet"—is, in a way, reinforcing that pattern I talked about, this micro-pattern in our psychology, micro-pattern in the citta, the sankhāras of the mind, to just give attention to the negative, to look for what's not quite right, what's not quite measuring up.

Rather, just get into the stillness. The stillness is there. "Am I in the fourth jhana yet?" Just get into the stillness. Really enjoy it. Really be with it with a very alive attention. Really see if you can penetrate into that stillness. See if you can dissolve into that stillness. See if that stillness can dissolve into you. The mind, the body dissolving into the stillness. The stillness dissolving into and dissolving the mind and body. That's what we need to do, and it will mature into the fourth jhana, if there's that alive attention, and that kind of right attention with it, rather than just keep checking whether the breath has stopped.

Someone wrote me a note, actually, about breath. This person was obviously working around the territory of the second jhana, I'm guessing from the note. "It's a quick and possibly silly question. Does it matter if the breathing is through the nose or the mouth? A combination of a cold plus an enormous grin indicates probably the second jhana. Open-mouthed means I sometimes breathe through the mouth." So she had a

cold, and there was this enormous grin, and so she finds herself breathing through the mouth. But then she says, "And sometimes it feels like it dissipates the strength of pīti or sukha." Breathing through the mouth actually dissipated the pīti or the sukha.

So I would say if it's from the grin, you don't have to stop your grin. Grinning is good and fine. But probably it's the case that you can just very minutely move the position of your tongue against your teeth. And that will somehow allow you to keep grinning without the mouth actually being open, and then you can breathe through your nose, so that we can have a full grin. I have a hunch—pretty sure if the tongue is in a certain position, we should be able to breathe through the nose.

Because it may well be that when we breathe through the mouth, the breath isn't allowed to become more subtle. So what the Buddha calls the bodily formations, the breath, are not allowed to become more subtle. And with that the citta is kind of—it's harder for the citta to become more subtle. If we're trying to be in jhana, it's characterized by refinement of body energy vibration and the refinement and subtlety of the citta.

You have to be present for jhāna. So if we're getting in the way by breathing through the mouth, and that keeps the breath unsubtle, then it can be a problem.

So if it's possible—if it's not because of a cold, if it's just because of a grin—there are probably things one can do with the tongue to start with. This allows breathing through the nose, and then maybe, if one is ready anyway, it goes beyond the second jhāna. Continue with the nose breath, and the whole thing gets more subtle.

If it's a cold, or a bad cold, well, you'll probably just have to breathe through the mouth and put up with it for a while. However, as the citta gets more subtle—if it can, and it's still, you know, it's not completely prevented by breathing through the mouth at all. It's not complete; that won't completely block things. You should find, as the citta gets more subtle, the breath will get more subtle.

And then even with a heavy cold—so this might even take, you know, going, avoiding the breath at first, going via what you remember of energy body vibrations of different states, of different jhanic states, or just remembering a jhāna—but if you get in the territory where the citta is subtle, then the breath will become subtle.

Again, body affects mind, breath affects mind, mind affects body and breath. So if the citta can be kind of just helped to become more subtle, even if we have a bad cold and we're breathing through the mouth, the breath will become more subtle. And because the breath is more subtle, actually less air is being moved. And with less air being moved, you might find actually that even with a relatively blocked nose, a quiet blocked nose, you can actually still breathe through the nose, because we're not actually moving that much air, and the little amount of air can find its way through the blocked nose.

But it's not that we're trying to make that happen. It's just that we're helping the citta to become, or

allowing the citta to become more subtle. Naturally that allows the breath to become more subtle, and effortlessly we will probably find that breathing through the nose, or nose breathing is happening, without us trying to manipulate that physically.

Okay, a couple of things, just to finish—two more things.

One is—so we talked last night about insight ways of looking that unfabricate and that potentially move through the jhanic stages in their process of unfabricating. However, I don't think in that practice the primary point or the primary aim is to necessarily learn a degree of skill that controls an insight way of looking to the degree that I can stop the elevator exactly where I want, at an exact jhāna. That's a, you know, that's a good skill. But it's not the most important thing there.

What's much more important—this is important to understand—what's much more important is that in that process of playing with insight ways of looking, we understand the principle of lessening fabrication. We understand the principle of unfabricating to whatever degree. Through this insight way of looking, there's less clinging. And because there's less clinging, there's more letting go, which is just saying the same thing. And because of that, because of dependent arising, there's less fabrication. And so the experience opens up, refines out in these different ways.

So understanding that principle of lessening fabrication through insight ways of looking is really, really important. Understanding how to fabricate less. And thirdly, understanding what exactly is involved in that subtle clinging.

So I use this word clinging in a very stretchy way. It means all the way from the most gross to the most subtle aspects of the relationship of the citta with phenomenal experience that we wouldn't usually think of as clinging. Really, really subtle. So that in the end, even avidyā—in the Mahāyāna, even avijjā, even ignorance—is a kind of clinging. Even believing, looking at something and the unconscious belief that it inherently exists, which is what most human beings do most of the time, most of their lives, with most of phenomenal experience. Just that unconscious, unnoticed, very common belief and assumption in the inherent existence of whatever is in perception and consciousness at any time. We could call that avijjā, but in the Mahāyāna they also call it clinging. It's a very subtle level of clinging, and I use clinging in that sense too.

So understanding the principle of lessening fabrication through insight ways of looking. Secondly, how do I fabricate less? How are we actually using these insight ways of looking and getting familiar with them and developing the art and skill of them? And thirdly, what exactly is going on here? What exactly is involved in subtle clinging? What subtle clinging is being let go of here? And what avijjā is being let go of here?

So avijjā also has a whole range of aspects, but also levels to it, from very, very gross—of course, complete, deluded thinking, etc.—to very, very subtle, and clinging as well. So what exactly is involved in subtle

clinging, subtle avijjā? That's what we're talking about.

And lastly, the fourth thing, to understand the implications of all that, the implications of the way less clinging, less avijjā fabricates—results in less fabrication right then in the moment, in the moment of looking, in the moment of relating, a way of looking.

In other words, understanding dependent arising and emptiness as we touched on to some extent in the retreat.

So all that—those understandings, those four understandings—are much more the point than being able to control and manipulate the jhanas, thinking "I'll be able to go exactly to this jhana and not overstep it to the next jhana" when I unfabricate through a certain insight way of looking. As always, the insight is more important than the somatic experience.

Now, I want to read you a fairly long note from someone on retreat. This is quite important, and for those of you familiar with soul-making, it's very important. For those who are not yet familiar with soul-making dharma but who may one day be, it may well be crucial. It's a bit involved and lengthy, but I feel it's really essential. It also expands our sense of how we might approach jhana practice, especially when we have some soul-making dharma and practice background.

This person wrote: "This has been a dukkha-ful retreat for me—lots of dukkha, so much pain and struggle around desire and sustaining intention and effort." These were precisely the kinds of challenges we were addressing and trying to open up and inquire into several times during the retreat.

She continues: "Your teaching on desire and soul-making the last few nights finally prompted me to try to go into the dukkha last night, to hold and sense it with soul, and to see what images of the path and self on the path might arise. There were several beautiful and meaningful images that came from sensing the dukkha like this, and it felt like they began to clarify what I want from practice, and to give non-pathologizing place to some long-standing and painful patterns in my life. I won't go into this now."

"What I want to say is that later on last night, there was a lot of frustration around, and I felt some confidence from the above-mentioned experience about going in through the dukkha. So as skillfully as possible, I let the frustration rip, naming all the smallnesses and solidities in myself that I'm utterly sick of, tuning to the power rather than the poison of this emotion or energy." We talked about this as well during the retreat. "I didn't sense self-judgment in it, just clarity and fire." This is really important.

"Out of this, a sense of space opened. And in that space, as I was breathing, I became aware of a very subtle sense of the energy body breathing with me. This was the language that came, and it had soul resonances. My sense of the energy body was that they were creatively and definitely other than me." Rather than "I am the energy body" or "it's part of me," the sense was that they were creatively and definitely other. In soul-making practice, we sometimes speak of this as twoness.

"They were taking up a space somewhat larger than my physical body, though overlapping with it, and I had a strong sense of their autonomy and intelligence. I've not really worked with energy body as image, rather than as the terrain in which image and sensitivity to image arise. But I've heard you speak to this possibility, so I really tried to lean into it, using the nodes of the lattice to tune and sense."

"What opened was a gorgeous sense of twoness with the energy body, and a sense that they were taking me under their wing, teaching me how to be in right relationship with them. I would say that my relationship with piti on this retreat and in general has been pretty dysfunctional—tight with self and grasping and aversion. When piti arose in this experience with the energy body last night, though, it felt like they were giving it to me. They were saying 'Here, try feeling this,' and holding it for me while I worked and played, taking the pressure off and coaching me to try different things."

"I found I could stay with intensities and subtleties I hadn't been able to stay with before, because now they were being given to me as gift by this beautiful, unfathomable other. It was freeing and energizing and humbling. So I'd be interested to hear any thoughts you have, and specifically around allowing or inviting a sense of imaginal other into the base practice."

"In some ways what unfolded wasn't all that different from the energy-body-based practices you outlined on this retreat, but there was a strong sense of being in tuneness with mysterious otherness that ignited and aligned my desire, intention and effort, where they've been quite confused or limp through much of this retreat. I still feel very far from jhana, but I feel like I've begun to see the possibility of writing something in relation to why and how I practice."

She added a postscript: "Actually, a couple more thoughts around intention. My intention in working with frustration was for soul-making rather than samadhi. It was a surprise to me when the piti arose. And even when it did, I'd say the intention continued to be predominantly for soul-making, for the beauty of that dimensional relationship with the energy body. In subsequent sittings, with the intention for samadhi, I've tried to invite that imaginal sense of the energy body, but they haven't come. So perhaps it's that this soulful experience with the energy body now becomes part of the fantasy operating in the background of samadhi practice"—this was one of the options I had mentioned, where we work with an image and then it goes down into the background as a fantasy to help support things—"or I can choose to pick it up more intentionally in soul-making practice?"

I wrote a quick note back suggesting she choose the second option: to pick it up more intentionally as soul-making practice with the intention for soul-making, not for samadhi. Something had happened here for this practitioner...

So here for good reason, some difficulty, some knots had developed over time around intention and desire and goal—those themes we had been dwelling on and returning to several times in the retreat. There was so much importance, so much need to give careful attention to these questions, to inquire into them, to find right relationship with desire, intention, goal, aim, direction. A kind of long-standing history of

dukkha and entanglement and difficulty existed there.

So actually, my sense was that here, much more helpfully, she should stay with the soul-making. Look, something extremely important and extremely beautiful had just happened—a real gift, a real grace that she could feel. Something that was perhaps the beginning of a much more profound and long-lasting healing.

If she thought she was on a jhana retreat, wanting to catch up with the others or whatever it might be, and rushed too quickly back to the samadhi intention, something wouldn't be allowed to ripen. To me, it sounded like it needed longer in that soul-making intention. That's what had opened things up. It was delivering something beautiful—the piti and the gorgeousness and so forth. Something was being healed. Something was also being ensouled: the dukkha was being ensouled, the energy body was being ensouled. Lots of things were happening that were really profoundly important, maybe more important than whether she attained such-and-such jhana right now, or even in the next month.

So that was my brief encouragement back to her. I really think that's important. I got a short response saying, "Thank you, wonderful, I'm so ready to put down the intention for samadhi." I don't know if I was hearing it right, but I was a little concerned getting that note.

There's a difference in making a choice. We've talked about how intention is really the primary thing that drives this or that practice, whether we're navigating a fork in the road between insight ways of looking and samadhi, or soul-making and samadhi, or whatever it is. The intention is really important for a number of reasons.

But there's a difference between an intention coming out of aversion and fed-upness, and an intention coming out of love and desire and a sense of grace and wanting something. Wanting soul-making is different than just really not wanting to be anymore with a certain intention for samadhi.

I didn't get a chance to find out or respond since it was right at the end of the retreat, but what I want to say right now is: be careful about these kinds of choices. Where there's been a habit of aversion or making choices out of aversion, or getting so fed up with a certain situation that we feel a lot of aversion and frustration, then the intention is coming out of that. An intention coming from aversion will have a different effect than an intention coming out of love for something, or eros for something, or responding to an invitation of an erotic-imaginal beloved other.

This is really, really important. I would guess that they will unfold differently. One could say, "Well, it's the same move—I'm choosing the soul-making intention over the samadhi intention"—but the dominant intention is slightly different. One is eros, and one is aversion. That probably will make a difference. I don't know if it was the case with this person, but the point bears making generally, because it applies very widely.

This is all part of getting wise to desire and eros and this whole territory. These meta questions are so

important—how we respond to them, how we hold them, and how we choose in relationship to them.

So that's all I wanted to add as a sort of postscript to the whole retreat. I hope some of that has been helpful or will be helpful at some point.

Actually, one last thing I forgot. Someone was asking about resources, and I had mentioned from the beginning of the retreat and emphasized the ability of jhanas—our practice of jhanas—to really form and open up for us a profound resource of well-being in our life, stressing their potential function for us as deep resources.

So just to elaborate on this a little bit and draw out some of the other things I've been saying, to make something clear here that this person is asking: if one only experiences a jhana once or twice or a few times, it might be that for some period after those jhanic experiences, if they're strong, there is a relatively short-lived sense of resource, of happiness, of well-being, of energy. The kind of unshakability that might come with that, even from just feeling so happy.

But the danger, as I think of it—

The danger, as I've alluded to already on the retreat, is that with only experiencing jhāna a few times, it eventually fades and disappears. It may then become, through memory, an object of attachment and duality—comparing what we experience now with those jhānic experiences. Rather than providing anything as a resource, this actually fosters suffering through the duality and attachment to memory.

Much more significant is when we're able to frequently practice and experience jhānic states—perhaps daily or a couple of times a day, whatever our busy lives allow. Maybe not even every day, but regularly enough that it functions as a more constant source, like a well that isn't going dry or a spring. There's a sense of replenishment it brings, of rejuvenation, of energy being restored.

This deep emotional well-being—of different flavors and kinds depending on what jhāna we're experiencing—allows us to stay steady and meet difficulties. It supports us in sustaining our creative projects, our work, even when there are challenges. It helps us maintain our service work, activism, or whatever we're engaged in through the ups and downs, through the knocks, through the slog. Sometimes this might be work that's not well paid financially, where we receive no recognition or encouragement, where no one else seems to notice. But this regular dipping in, drinking from these wells, these beautiful springs of cool, clear water, will definitely provide resource in our lives.

There's a second way I want to emphasize—it's implicit in what I've said during the retreat, but I really want to draw it out clearly. Long-term, repeated immersion and exposure to jhānic states—let's say second jhāna and above—will open and deepen our sense of what a human being is, what we are as human beings, and what other human beings are. It opens and deepens the very sense of the dimensionality of human beings.

Our sense of our own being becomes dimensional. As I said near the beginning of the retreat, the jhānas become almost like dimensions of human beings. They're also dimensions of being more generally, or cosmic being, especially as we go deeper into the jhānas. This opening and deepening of dimensionality encompasses not just our own being, but also that of the cosmos.

In addition to functioning as the resource I just described, this opening up of dimensionality means that even if, for some reason later in life, the jhānas are not accessible—perhaps due to certain life situations where we're unable to practice, severe illness, or medicine with difficult side effects that prevent clarity of mind, concentration, or mental energy—they still function as a resource.

Something has been seen and sensed and known by the being, by the citta, so that even after years, when the jhānas become inaccessible, they continue to serve us. One senses and knows something about one's own being, about human being, and about the cosmos. This knowledge, this sense of things, remains present even when one can't directly touch or see it.

It's imprinted on the psyche, on the citta, on the heart and mind so profoundly that it has opened up, changed, and dimensionalized our sense of things. One knows it's true, even when one can no longer access it directly. This knowledge acts as long-term support for the citta, for the soul, including when circumstances may be very, very challenging.

So there are two levels of how jhānas can function as a profound and helpful resource for our lives—for meeting life, opening to life, and serving what we want to serve in life.

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