Going Forwards

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 49:46

Thank you.

So hopefully you could get a sense of what you've put into the time here and to your practice, and hopefully you could get a sense of really appreciating that. It's really, really important to have that sense of appreciation, almost independent of how you assess the results from the perspective of the mind state right now. The mind state, the hindrances, not hindrances, and we judge this or that, how it's going, how I am, how my practice is, etc. Success, failure—but just independent of that to really be able to appreciate the efforts and the dedication and the consistency.

So I know certainly, as Robert said before he left and Kirsten before she went on retreat and Sari and I, we really, really appreciate what you've put into your practice, the efforts you've made, your willingness to work and play, your love of exploration, all that. And I hope that you have got a little taste, a little sense of the beauty of this kind of practice and a little sense perhaps of its possibilities, the possibilities here and the kind of art and magic that can be involved. I think I know at least some of you have that sense.

So I hope you got a little taste of the loveliness, and I know that for everyone it will have been difficult and it has been difficult and challenging in lots of different ways at times. And that's also part of what we need to appreciate in ourselves, our willingness to just keep showing up and keep working and playing when it's difficult in all these different ways.

We've talked about the difficulties that come when we have a desire or desires, an aim, a goal, a direction. The difficulties that come when we want to stay steady with a certain intention over not just an hour, but over days and weeks and then years or whatever. The inner critic, the propensity in our culture for self-measurement, self-judgment—this is all part of the difficult terrain that we have to somehow navigate, somehow relate to wisely with these kinds of practices. So really, thank you for all of that. It involves a lot. It's a big deal.

Transitioning out of the retreat—you know, you've all done lots of retreats before. It's a little bit different this retreat. It's different than, say, some retreats where you really close the senses and you're really looking, really narrowing down to a microscopic attention. Usually the transition from that kind of retreat is quite jarring, can be quite jarring, needs a lot of care, especially if you've been really slowing down.

But here, because we've had this emphasis on more openness of awareness, more inclusion of appreciation in the senses, that kind of trauma of sudden sense stimulation is usually not such an issue on this retreat. It shouldn't be such an issue. What may be more asking for a little more care is the heart.

Sometimes, again, in this context, the heart becomes very open, very sensitive in lovely ways. And so that needs some care as you move, take your journeys home, wherever you're going, as you encounter friends and family again, as you move through the coming days. Do we know how to take care of our heart? What does that really mean? That's a huge subject. What does it mean to take care of the sensitive heart?

Actually, I don't know—how was breakfast for you? Were some of you a bit buzzing after that? Maybe, maybe not. Yeah, depends again on what kind of retreat, but that's quite a lot of sense stimulation, suddenly talking and the room full of people talking, probably a lot of energy gathered over three weeks, quite loud. So what does that kind of buzz need if there is such a thing?

And in terms of caring for the heart, when you go wherever you're going, caring for the heart, caring for your relationships, the relationships with the people in your life and your loved ones, which means also caring about what you share or how you share or when you share and with whom.

So you might be super excited about what you've uncovered, discovered, or you might just want to vent after the retreat or whatever it is, but who am I sharing with? And is it the right moment? Are they in the right space? Am I in the right space? Why am I sharing? What am I looking for here?

Of course, sharing is really, really important. But sometimes we, like everything, we need to be attuned. Because if it's not the right time for this person, or they're not really a person who's actually that interested, or I'm wanting something, and I'm not fully conscious that I'm wanting something from the sharing, and I'm not clear that I'm with the other person—this is what I want. When I share, I would like you to listen this way, or I would like this kind of interest or that kind of interest or whatever it is.

That's also, you know, to care for that, which means to enter into that with awareness, responsiveness, attunement. This is also really, really important in terms of caring for the heart.

Why am I sharing? What am I looking for here? Sharing is profoundly important, but like all things, we need attunement. If the timing isn't right for the other person, or they're not genuinely interested, or if I'm seeking something through the sharing without being fully conscious of that desire, then I'm not truly present with them. When I share, I may unconsciously want the listener to respond in a particular way, to show certain kinds of interest. To care for this tendency means entering into it with awareness, responsiveness, and attunement. This too is essential for caring for the heart.

So hopefully everyone is returning to a full and engaged life of practice, both informally and formally, in terms of daily practice. This is primarily what I want to address now.

I find that most people flourish when they have periods in their life dedicated to exploring a specific practice or element of practice. Just as we've done here with jhanas, creating our playground—this approach applies to any practice. You might return home and decide to focus on metta practice, or any other dharma door. The key is establishing a delineated period—a week, a month, six weeks, three months—where you're intentionally exploring this practice in your daily sitting, perhaps also in informal

practice off the cushion. You have a playground.

After that period concludes, you review. If you're learning significantly and want to continue, you commit to another week or month. If it was beneficial but you're ready for something else, you establish another period with a different focus. Again, the intention remains steady and there's a playground—a learning playground.

While not universal, I believe people learn and develop much more effectively this way. Within that playground, creativity, experimentation, and playfulness are essential. You need to actually play in practice. With steady intention and the playground established, you can have fun, trying this and that, experimenting with different approaches—often very small, subtle adjustments.

This principle applies to all practice. We've discussed it extensively regarding jhanas on this retreat, but it encompasses all practices. Often people find they only make real progress on retreat, while outside of retreat they're merely treading water, putting in time without genuine engagement, sometimes even falling apart. Usually this happens because they're not allowing themselves to play, not permitting creativity within their steady intention and playground. Naturally, practice becomes dry, lacking juice or creative, playful input.

We can conceive of different practice streams. Much arises in our lives—at home, work, and elsewhere—and sometimes we react with, "Oh, this has come up, now this has come up," simply trying to cope with whatever emerges. While there's a place for that responsive approach, we can also establish what we're actively exploring. When we're investigating a particular practice and circumstances arise at work or in relationships, our current practice focus suggests specific ways of working with what emerges. Rather than merely sitting for a prescribed time and then coping with life's challenges, the practice determines how we meet what arises.

Just as on this retreat we maintained certain preferences for working with emotions—preferences that would be reversed on a retreat focused specifically on emotions—the practice shapes how we engage with what comes up.

Consider different practice streams: the whole insight ways of looking approach, samadhi and jhana practice, soul-making dharma, brahmaviharas, emotions and emotional awareness, emotional skillfulness, the entire realm of psychology and psychological inquiry. One might take specific elements of right speech and dedicate periods to exploring the expression of difficult truths, of what's challenging for someone to hear. Or focus on exploring generosity for several weeks. The possibilities are vast—the four foundations of mindfulness or a single foundation, or for those returning to activist engagement, discovering how to make that practice within intensity and hecticness.

Within these different practice streams, we cultivate our various playgrounds. Even within jhana practice, we maintain different playgrounds. Within insight ways of looking, different playgrounds emerge.

Someone asked whether it's possible to explain what I've previously discussed regarding skillful fabrication.

Now we're talking about unfabricating and what's the relationship between those two, and then what's the relationship between those two and jhana practice and emptiness and soul making. I've talked about that elsewhere. It's complex, but it's really important to understand.

I think for now, what might be important is just to think in terms of these different streams of practice—where my playground is—and listening and reading in collaboration with whatever my playground is. In time I begin to understand more the conceptual frameworks of each practice and how each relates to the other. Then we can have a big mandala of different practices that fits together very coherently to make something beautiful.

So it might be periods of jhana practice, for example, and you might feel after this retreat, "Oh, that's what I want to do." It doesn't have to be. If you choose insight ways of looking, if you pick up on this idea and want to choose something like insight ways of looking, then it's really good to do samadhi practice or brahmavihara practice in combination with or to balance out the insight ways of looking.

How much, what the ratio is—whether it's fifty-fifty or even eighty-twenty or twenty-eighty—you can experiment with that. But it also doesn't need to be in order. Like I said, it doesn't have to be "first I do my samadhi and calm my mind down and get my focus and then I do my insight."

I'm feeling wretched and restless and agitated and pissed off and confused. I could do my samadhi, or I could bring an insight way of looking to that. If it's working—because there's the release of clinging there—it should calm things down and then open things up, and then I can go to my samadhi. So don't get caught up in this whole idea that there's an order: "First I prepare my mind with concentration and then I do my insight." It really doesn't need to work that way.

If you're choosing different themes, there's the possibility of working together, making groups, connecting with each other and having themed groups where you practice together with a certain theme for a while—like an element of right speech or generosity. You go out and play with something in the week with generosity. You come back and compare notes and really see the power of that. You learn from each other. And of course, there may be groups where there is a teacher.

One of the things I hope before I die is that I will be able to make it clear in these different streams of practice who's a qualified teacher in this stream of practice or that stream of practice. I've only made very little headway with that, but I'm really hoping that will be possible. So you can know where to go if you want to explore this practice or that practice.

In the meantime, there is already an emptiness group running online that meets every two weeks. Sari is teaching with Nathan, and Juha will be one of the teachers once he returns from his three-month retreat, along with Susie Keeley and Yahel, who's a teacher in Israel. It exists and is very lovely from what I've

heard. For people who want to explore emptiness, you can learn a lot there and share together and benefit from that. Nathan will put up some information for that on the board afterwards.

Just in terms of jhana practice, the arising of jhana or the arising of samadhi depends on a lot of conditions. A lot of conditions need to come together. It's very possible off retreat. So it's not something that needs to be confined to retreat. If you find it's confined to retreat, then the question is: why is it confined to retreat? It's dependent on conditions.

Someone asked me, "Do I have to avoid orgasm in order to practice jhana?" Absolutely not. Where does this idea come from? Or "I have to avoid sex" or "I have to have a special diet" or something like that. What is it we have to not have? Entanglement—entanglement in the hindrances. It's not even that we need to not have the hindrance; it's entanglement in the hindrances.

When the Buddha says "withdrawn" or "in seclusion from the hindrances," it means withdrawn from entanglement, not entangled in whatever is going on in my life. That's the condition, more than anything else. So it's not that "I've got a busy job" or "relationships are tricky at the moment." It's how much the heart and mind are entangled. That's what makes the difference.

So it's certainly not true that one has to be celibate or not have sex or only practice Taoist non-ejaculatory orgasms or whatever it is.

There is that teaching out there, and it has its place. But sometimes people who are drawn to those approaches can become a little limited in their view.

Whether an orgasm brings energy or depletes energy depends on numerous factors. As lay practitioners, if sexuality is part of your life, you need to explore this territory for yourself. Whether sex and orgasm depletes energy or actually enhances it depends on elements like the quality of love present, the depth of soul connection, the degree of openness. These factors are far more significant regarding energy than the simple fact of orgasm, and much more relevant to jhanic availability.

Similarly with diet—you can get caught up in rigid ideas here too. We each need to discover what works for us individually. I speak as someone who has wrestled with a somewhat tormented digestive system for thirty-five years. Find out what works for you. Don't simply buy into theories wholesale. Don't avoid being within 150 meters of a clove of garlic just because some teaching suggests it. Discover if it's actually true for you.

Sometimes we encounter concepts from Ayurveda about sattvic foods—the pure, harmonious category. Don't develop what I call "sattvic neurosis" around all this. Experiment, play, maintain creativity and willingness to explore in practice, and also around the periphery of practice with elements like diet. This approach is really, really important. You can discover a tremendous amount on your own about all these aspects.

If all goes well, the recordings from this retreat should become available at some point. I hope they will prove very helpful—helpful now, as soon as you access them, and helpful for years to come. There is a tremendous amount of information contained within them. You may not realize it, but it's probably nearly impossible to absorb all that information just during these three weeks on your first listening. Many of the questions you would naturally have were already addressed, already given. It's simply too much information to process at once. So it's there, and it should prove helpful, I hope.

In terms of samadhi practice, don't forget about techniques like the counting with the breath that we explored right at the opening. It takes some time to become comfortable with it, but for certain people it can be a really potent practice, genuinely useful. It might feel quite awkward initially with the long breath and the counting, but something like that is truly worth developing. So consider all the tools that might be available to you.

One of the beautiful aspects of jhana practice—especially when we approach it with this emphasis on marinating and mastery—is that you could go away and not attend any retreats for a year, then return to retreat practice. It's rather like placing a bookmark in a book and leaving it on a shelf for a year; when you open the book again, the bookmark remains in the same place. Your playground, your edge of exploration, stays pretty much in the same location. This happens when I've practiced in the way we've emphasized, with mastery and marinating, staying with states rather than rushing through them.

This is truly a lovely quality. In other words, you don't need to feel rushed or maintain a somewhat tight attitude of "I need to keep up my jhana practice, otherwise next time I go on retreat, it won't be there." It doesn't need to be like that. There exists this kind of mysterious bookmark magic as well.

But I also hope that you've begun to recognize how important it is to engage with larger questions—meta-questions about desire, for example. What is your relationship with desire? What happens for you around desire? What gets included in your desire, and what exactly are your desires? These meta-questions about desire and about conceptual frameworks—I hope you begin to realize that these inquiries are important, and that these questions themselves become part of your practice. The exploring of relationship with desire, the exploring of relationship with conceptual frameworks, the exploring of conceptual frameworks themselves.

Even understanding that conceptual frameworks are important to understand—that recognition alone is something really major, truly significant. Without a coherent conceptual framework, dramatic experiences can simply be "wow" moments that don't actually liberate very much or prove very transformative. They're not as helpful or opening as they could be. It's the conceptual framework that gives power to the experience.

Without an appropriate conceptual framework, or with one that isn't quite coherent or seems incongruent—doesn't really fit together with itself or doesn't align with how you're practicing—this can create confusion or a kind of myopia in practice. You become mesmerized by individual experiences, but

they don't reach out and spread their transformative effect throughout your life.

Even more problematically, this can lead to a narrowing of what practice becomes. Some people have been doing the same practice for twenty years. Why?

Because there's no conceptual framework. They're not quite sure how that practice fits in with the rest of the Dharma or other practices. So the whole Dharma can shrink and the whole sense of what practice is can shrink.

So I really hope that you feel that you've learned not just about samādhi and jhānas and that sort of thing, but also about desire and your patterns with desire and having goals and aim and a direction and staying steady with intention. All that stuff mirrors our life.

Whatever we've bumped into here around desire, around feeling confined in a certain intention—I want to do this, I want to do that—feeling restless within it, whatever patterns around that, whatever problems we experience when we set a goal or an aim or a fear of doing so, all that on retreat just mirrors life. The same thing.

Inner critic, the difficulty to sustain singleness of intention, the wobbling, the ambivalence. Am I in the right place? Am I doing the right thing? I should be somewhere else. The doubt, the hindrances, becoming papañca and then becoming so convincing. This is life stuff. It's not just retreat stuff, meditative stuff. It's life stuff.

Feeling imprisoned in a form, in an intention, in a group, in a relationship—this is life stuff, all of that. So I hope that because we've talked about this, we kept returning to this, I hope that you can really see this. These elements are really important meta-elements in relation to practice, but of course, in relation to our life as well. As I said several times, they may end up being much more important than whether I attain this or that jhāna—how I am with these things, what I learn with these things.

There are all kinds of streams of practice, and within that, there are different playgrounds that one might have. As I said, there are groups, and sometimes we learn better with each other. So we might find a group where there's a teacher or teachers, and that's great, but also peer groups, working together, as I mentioned before.

I was thinking about this—I'm not sure if jhāna practice would work so well as a peer group. Maybe it would. I'm not sure. But my sense is it might be a little more tricky with people being in different places or progressing at very different rates. Again, because of lots of different conditions. But it might. Something to find out.

Something like emptiness or studying emptiness or soulmaking, for example, may work much better in terms of saṅgha groups together, study groups, practice groups together, peer groups together. And it might be that jhāna practice is more of a solitary endeavor. I don't know. But if you want to experiment,

find out.

Actually, it's interesting with regard to groups because I've stressed so much about the necessity of clarity with regard to what's the precise mix of my desires—so for my practice, for my life, for this retreat, or for a group that I go to, that I form or I'm part of. What exactly am I wanting? What are the confluences of my desires and my intentions?

So on a soulmaking retreat, for example, many of you have been on soulmaking retreats—there's lots of dyad practice or triad practice, relational practice in the retreat, lots of sharing of images and experiences, lots of intimacy that way, lots of relational practice. But then very easily, it might be that one feels very touched by that sharing and by that intimacy. And without realizing it, goes and forms a soulmaking group—let's form a soulmaking group together. Actually my desire is really for the sharing and the saṅgha, primarily, and less for the soulmaking.

What I really want is that sharing, which is a fantastic desire. It's a really important desire. I want connection, I want intimacy with other practitioners, I want that sharing. But if I've set up or am going to a soulmaking group and actually without realizing it—and without the others realizing it—I'm actually wanting saṅgha primarily and soulmaking maybe is just secondary, then because of the importance of what I actually desire, because of the determinative effect of what I actually desire in the mix, the soulmaking will not blossom so well because I'm actually coming at it wanting something else. Do you understand?

So groups can fall apart. I've seen groups trying to set up, trying to set up, not really happening, not really happening. People are not clear about what they're going for.

And so it's not really getting off the ground. Or you set up a group about a certain theme, and it somehow just becomes a general dharma group or a general "let's just sit together because it's nice to sit together, and then we'll share about whatever." All of that's wonderful. And if that's clear, then that can be the primary intention.

The larger point—which I've said so many times on this retreat—is about the importance of being aware of what my intention is, because that will determine what unfolds. So some people in the group wanting soul-making, for example, and some people just wanting sangha, or primarily wanting sangha—that group is going to be frustrating, probably for both, but certainly for the people wanting soul-making. Do you understand?

Staying with that idea of soul-making: it's certainly true that soul-making practices will build and grow the sense of sangha. Absolutely they will. For sure they will, because of all that lovely intimacy and sharing. But it's the primacy of intention—our intentions and desires and what they are—the primacy of that in determining what's possible and what unfolds in a group.

Or again, it could be that we have a group, or even just my dharma practice, and the intention is because I

want to rectify my energy problems or my energy constrictions, or I want to heal my energy blocks—and not whatever the group was set up for: soul-making dharma, or this or that, or even just dharma in general. Again, that lack of clarity or lack of honesty about what the intentions are will have an effect. Same issues.

So this is all stuff to think about going forward. It's all, I feel, really important stuff.

But let's end now. I wanted to say thank you to my three helpers. So I see Nick here and Lawrence, but I don't know if Leah's here. She's not here. Well, it's ten to twelve. So yes, thank you to Nick and Lawrence and Leah, who's not here, because I certainly wouldn't have been able to get here every day, and we wouldn't have been able to do this without you. So it's really hugely appreciated.

And thank you to Sari and to Kirsten and to Robert, who's left again. Just so valuable—your help and your input and being there and working together. Couldn't have happened without you.

Why don't we just take a moment to dedicate from our practice together. So just as Sari led us beautifully before, see if you can open to connect with a sense of appreciation for your efforts. Just bypassing the whole question of success, failure, and how well you practiced or what you achieved. It's actually impossible to know quite what the fruits of our practice are and will be as time unfolds, as conditions meet other conditions, as what has ripened and matured and been worked on here ripples out into the world in so many different ways. It's impossible to know what the fruits are. It's impossible to assess, measure, or judge that.

Know that you have shown up. Know that you have been willing, repeatedly, to work through the difficult, through the challenging, through the lovely. That you've been curious. Can you see in that the beauty of your intention? Over and over. The beauty of your intentions. Countless moments of intention. Countless, countless. Rain into the sea. All those raindrops of beautiful intention, of willingness, of courage, dignity, nobility, effort, wisdom, responsiveness. All that makes karma. It has effects. We don't know. We cannot know all the effects. In the wide, wild mystery of things, we cannot know the course of all that water, all the ripplings out.

But somehow, in the mystery of interconnectedness, in the mystery of dependent arising, may the goodness and beauty of our intention, of our work, of our efforts—may it be for the benefit of those near and dear to us, those who are close to us in life. May it ripple out to touch them, to bless them, perhaps in obvious ways, perhaps in not obvious ways. May they receive the fruits and the blessings of our practice.

And all those beings whom we don't really know but who we encounter in our everyday movements in the world, living their lives, struggling as we do with body, with mind, with relationships. We don't know them. Brief encounters here and there. Somehow, may they too receive the blessings and the fruits of our practice. All beings we will never meet face to face, we will never encounter directly. Again, somehow—perhaps in obvious, direct ways, somehow in the mystery of things, in not so obvious ways, in

indirect ways—

May they too be touched, be blessed by the goodness and beauty of our intentions. May they receive the blessings and the fruits of our practice.

For those whose lives are caught up in war, living in fear, not in safety—may they receive the fruits and blessings of our practice.

For those tormented in mind and heart, not at ease—may they receive the fruits and blessings of our practice.

Those in the world living in areas of famine, of shortage, of scarcity—may they receive the fruits and the blessings of our practice.

And for all those beings, human and non-human, whose lives have become hounded by ecological devastation, who have to flee their homes, their homelands—may our practice be of benefit, be of support.

May all beings everywhere, without exception, receive the fruits and the blessings of our practice.

Thank you again. Go safely wherever you're going and practice with intelligence, with playfulness, with love and with enjoyment.

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