

## **Orienting to This Jhāna Retreat**

### **Practising the Jhānas**

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Welcome, everybody. Really, really warm welcome to each and every one of you. I know that I know some of you, and there are some of you that I don't know and I haven't met yet, and I'm really looking forward to that. And especially, welcome to you, and a welcome to you if you're new to Gaia House. So welcome to the retreat. Welcome to Gaia House, to everyone. I'm really happy to be here, happy to be able to do this – more than happy. I've been quite excited actually for a little while. I'm really glad. Let me please introduce Sari. Some of you will know her, but many of you might not. Sari is with us, and at the end, if you can see, is Kirsten, who some of you will already know – and not Robert. [laughter] I will explain what's happening there. So we have Sari and Kirsten, but I'll come to that in a minute.

I've done a lot of teaching of *jhānas* individually, one to one, but I've wanted to teach a group *jhāna* retreat for, I think, about sixteen years. So finally, with some very strange sort of conditions that had to come together to actually allow this to manifest. I feel, in a way – actually, for many reasons – it's a kind of a small miracle that this is happening. Originally ... well, I'll come back to that in a sec. Yeah, many reasons that make it a small miracle that we have this time together, and this opportunity, and this chance for something that I think is such a beautiful realm of possibility for human beings and for meditation practice – such a treasure trove. So it's a really, really precious thing for me to be able to teach it, and I hope by the end of it you'll realize also how precious it really is.

It's partly a miracle because it's quite complicated for me health-wise at the moment. There are a lot of things I need to do just to be able to be here, etc. I have a lot of medical appointments over the time we have together. There's a lot of practical stuff, just getting my medicines in gear. Don't need to go into it, but a lot of stuff there.

Originally, I asked Robert to come and assist us, and he said, "I'd love to. I need to check with my employers." They came back and said, "Well, we won't be able to tell you until ..." – I can't remember when it was. So we said, "Let's just gamble; it'll be fine." [laughter] And it turned out that they said, "No, you can't have that time off." So Robert's going to join. Kirsten, it was her idea – the whole retreat was her idea in the first place, so we've got her to thank for that. There was a strange set of circumstances, and it was her idea. And Kirsten, very kindly, she had been planning to sit the retreat and have this time to nourish her own practice, so she very kindly stepped in to take Robert's place until Robert arrives, I think in five or six days or something. So at that point, Kirsten will be relieved of her teaching duties, and be able to just give herself to her practice, and Robert will step in. We'll obviously let you know. You may not notice because you might be so deep in ... [laughter] We'll let you know.

Another part of the small miracle is that Sari has a family, and a lovely little baby boy, a toddler, Eliel, and because of his young age, could only be here if *he* could be here, and that meant her partner Hongda needed to be here. So they are here as a family, and you will see them wandering in and out.

You will probably see and hear Eliel playing in the Gaia House grounds, and it's his playground, right? So those are part of the conditions that allowed this retreat, and I think it's actually a lovely thing, you know. It's a really delightful thing.

[inaudible question in background] Actually, ask the teacher. Ask the teachers. Seriously, yeah, because – I'll get into it – a lot about this practice is very individual, okay? It can sound formulaic or technical or whatever, but there may be reasons why exactly that sort of thing, at some point, might be really helpful, and actually not so helpful for others, or the same person at different times. But generally, he's going to be around. You'll see him, you'll hear him, and it's a delight.

[5:38] So tonight, quite a lot I want to get through, so I hope you all had a good rest, and are feeling bright and refreshed. I want to say mostly stuff about orienting to this retreat, and what that involves, and things to bear in mind during the retreat. So originally, part of what allowed this retreat to come up – I can't remember exactly – was that Gaia House was going to shut down for a period for some major building renovation works. Kirsten had this idea, and I can't remember exactly, and then they asked me, "Well, would you do *this* while that's going on?" And of course, "Oh, so Gaia House is going to be a building site with *da-da-da*, and you want me to teach a *jhāna* retreat?" [laughter] And I said, "Sure." Because – and I really want to emphasize this – it's okay to have noise. Right from the beginning we've got a different attitude. We're not coming in here, putting the blinkers on, putting the earplugs in: "Anything, everything – it's all bothering me. I just want to shut everything out." No, there's an attitude of openness and inclusivity. We do not want our *jhānas*, our *samādhi*, to be brittle. You know what 'brittle' means? It means something shatters very easily. We want it to be soft, pliant, open, open-hearted, etc. One of my teachers, Ajaan Geoff – some of you will know him – when he moved to Thailand to become a monk, he had hardly meditated before. He was in the monastery, and this monastery had just moved. In fact, they were building a new site for it. So where he learnt to meditate initially was a building site. And no one was like, "Oh, that's a terrible problem." It's just, "It's fine. What's the problem?" So a different attitude to all this that's much more about openness – not brittle. And so Eliel, Sari's son, that's all part of it.

When someone asked the Buddha, or in the context of his teaching (I can't remember exactly; he said it a few times): "What does *jhāna* depend on? What does *samādhi* depend on?" And he said, "It depends on happiness. *Jhāna* depends on happiness."<sup>1</sup> Now, he could have answered all kinds of things, and a lot of us would expect him to answer, "It depends on nailing your mind to something, and then you'll get to *jhāna*." Right? That's the way most people think about it. Or it depends on getting away from people who make noise, and being in, maybe, a sensory deprivation tank, whatever the Pali for that is. But he didn't say that. He said "dependent on happiness." So that's interesting, you know. That's really interesting to reflect on.

I have a sense that many of the things I will say tonight, it's possible that you may not realize just how significant they are. I know I haven't met some of you yet, and I'm already insulting you [laughter], but somehow we have to get the view right. We have to get the view right (the view is the platform), and the whole relationship right. So if I say something like that – "Oh, the Buddha said, '*Jhānas* depend on happiness'" – that should set you thinking. Well, I see some of you writing it down. It's important. Then I have to take that with me through the retreat, because that has implications on a moment-to-moment level, on a micro-moment [level], about your choices, about your attitude, about

how you're relating to whatever it is you're paying attention to at the moment – the breath or whatever it is.

[9:47] So what I'm saying tonight, what does it have to do with the relationship with practice, and how important that is, and the relationship with *this* practice, and the relationship with the goal, and the whole conceptual framework? This is absolutely key. How are we going to listen? How are you going to listen to Dharma talks? Can you listen on your toes? Do you know what I mean by that? I mean just what I said – like if something comes out like “*Jhānas* depend on happiness,” I can kind of let that wash over me and “hmm.” Or, maybe it barely registers. Or, actually, “Hmm, that sets me ... maybe I should reflect on that, and recalibrate, and do something about it.” So that's what I mean by listening on your toes. Obviously sometimes I'm going to unpack things and elaborate and explain, but sometimes a bit more work from the listener, a bit more active from the listener is really helpful.

Okay. Let's start with just a couple of practical things. The daily schedule, as some of you might have noticed, is pretty open. There's not a lot on there. I don't know if you've seen it, but it sort of says “Breakfast, lunch, dinner,” I think. [laughter] So what that means is this hall is open twenty-four hours a day for the duration of the retreat, and you can sit in here, at any time, for as long as you want. Okay? Generally speaking, once you get into the rhythm, you might, for instance, be doing a walking period and then it's twenty minutes before lunch, and you know you have to have lunch at a certain time, because you're on lunch wash-up, let's say. You can still come in here for twenty minutes, you know – just whenever it is. If you have the time, though (and I'll explain this more as we go on), you probably want to give a sitting a bit more to see what happens, a bit more than twenty minutes – you know, forty, forty-five minutes, an hour or something, to see what happens. But basically, it's an open schedule. People will be coming and going whenever, except 6:45 to breakfast is everyone in here. You can arrive early for that, so you can arrive at 4:45 or 5:45, but once we hit 6:45, you can't come in or leave. Basically, it's a group sit. We want everyone here at that time just to cohere together. And what was the other one? 9 p.m., the same thing. Again, you can arrive early, you can stay much later, you can stay well into the night, whatever, but during that period – let's say 9 to 9:30 – you wouldn't arrive or leave.

Okay, we're going to start with the teachings, aim to have a block of teachings from 4 to 5:30, every day, in the afternoon. That's the aim, but we may change that. And we may change it either just a little bit – “Oh, we need to start at 3:45 today, or whatever it is, or 4:30, or whatever” – or we might change it quite drastically – in other words, “No, we're shifting everything to the morning.” Okay? So you need to keep your eye on the noticeboard, and just see. If it doesn't change, it's just 4, like it says, and it will probably go till 5:30, but partly, again, dependent on – I'm taking some new drugs that I'm not used to yet. I'm not sure how it's going to be. So it will depend on a lot of different things, but we'll aim for 4 to 5:30 every day. Okay? But check it. It means check until 2:30. It probably won't be changed for that day until 2:30. You understand? So up to 2:30, just check once in a while, so you know.

So ‘open schedule’ – what does that mean? It means that the onus of responsibility is on you guys. Right? It's on you to find a temporal structure and a practice structure that works for you. The onus is on you to be responsive and sensitive to your practice, and the needs, and the ebbs and flows, and the ups and downs, and “What is needed right now? Do I need to go out and do some walking? Do I need to sit longer with whatever is happening? Do I need to actually go for a walk, and open my mind, and

touch the beauty, and be touched by beauty? Do I need a cup of tea?” What it also means, having an open schedule, is that obviously try and be relatively quiet when you come in, but basically, people will be coming and leaving at any point, and so the job of the comer or the leaver is to try and be relatively quiet as you set up yourself and leave. And the job of the person who’s already here when there’s a comer and leaver is to be spacious. And it’s part of that, “We’re not into brittle *jhānas*. We’re not into brittle *samādhī*.” You understand? It’s cool. Someone’s coming to practice – how wonderful, right? This is really, really important. Don’t underestimate how much – particularly a *jhāna* practice – can get derailed into a kind of burrow tunnel of irritation, for example. When you set up goals, that can happen. So two jobs: for the person who’s here – openness, warmth, welcoming, non-brittle *jhānas*. The job for the comer and goer is, “Yeah, I’m relatively sensitive – people are practising.”

[15:54] Okay. So one of the interesting challenges of teaching a group retreat of *jhānas*, rather than teaching individually, is that you all are at completely different levels, have different backgrounds in Dharma in terms of what you’ve been taught, and different amounts of experience with the *jhānas*. It’s a roomful of very ... everyone’s different. How to teach a group that has different levels like that, and different backgrounds, and different experiences? As I said, I’ve taught a lot individually, and usually when I teach individually, I don’t even use the word *jhāna* for a while. And I might not even use the word *pīti*. We’ll talk about these words. *Pīti* means rapture or ecstasy or something like that. I don’t even use that. I’m more just listening to what the person is reporting, and if they use a certain word – “Oh, it feels bubbly” – then I’ll go with that. And then I want to really work with their vocabulary and their sense of things and their experience as it unfolds, and at a certain point, we introduce the *jhāna* language and framework and map.

That’s not really going to work for a group, so still there’s this challenge, how to do that. There will be interviews, and we’ll explain later tonight, I think, about the interviews, how that will work. Plenty of interviews, in fact, lots and lots of interviews – so lots of chance to really ask, and get a lot of feedback, get a lot of guidance about all kinds of things. But there will also hopefully be quite a few Q & As, so a lot of chance for you to ask in both the interviews and the Q & As whatever is pertinent and whatever is relevant to your practice now at that point. So in terms of this “you’re all at different levels,” take advantage of the meetings and the Q & As, because the teaching will be moving along at whatever rate, and it’s only going to kind of coincide at a certain point with where you’re at in your trajectory.

We’re open to teaching, we *will* be teaching, all eight *jhānas*, and we want to emphasize keeping them really alive. So it’s not like you do one, and then you forget about it, because “I’m just into the eighth *jhāna*” or whatever. We want to emphasize keeping them alive. What I want to kind of encourage is each of us to find the playground at your edge – your playground at your edge. I’m going to explain more what I mean by that as we go on, and tomorrow, etc., and other days, but it means, “Where is the edge that I’m kind of learning new stuff? I’ve mastered *this*,” and I’ll explain what I mean by ‘mastery’ – “I’ve mastered *this* before, and now this is my edge. I can kind of get it sometimes. It’s not what I really have, you know, what’s just no hope of doing. It’s at my edge.” And that becomes your playground. That’s where you hang out most, and that’s where you work, and that’s where you play, and that’s where you learn. So each of us needs to find where that playground is, right now, and most of your time, you will spend in that playground.

Now, in terms of the teachings, let's say that playground is, "I'm just learning how to get into the first *jhāna*." Okay, great! That's absolutely fantastic. That's your playground. You need to probably be there for a while. And a few days later, you know, I might talk about the first *jhāna*: "It's great. It's right on target," and then you are still in that playground, and you need to be. And now the teachings have progressed, and I'm talking about the second *jhāna*. Fine, no problem. You stay in your playground. This is a different way than some of you might be familiar with, but I really want to emphasize that. You know, people are so different with *jhānas*, but really one month or two months of retreat time (that means you're doing nothing else but meditate) is not too much to learn one *jhāna*. Okay? So we have three weeks, which is a fantastic amount of time to really get a sense of territory and material and open new things, but in terms of the way I want to teach (and I'll explain why as the days go by), I want to emphasize this kind of playground idea. Pacing is really important. It's part of the art.

What's this going to mean in terms of listening to teachings? Does it mean you take notes about what might come, what might be relevant for you in four days' time, or two weeks' time? It's a little tricky, you know. But basically, you're going to get a lot of material, some of which is not relevant for you now. Then we could say, "Well, I'll listen to the recordings," or you could make notes. I mean, you can always ask, of course. But I don't know any other way of doing it, or any other way of doing it in a way that *I* would feel is fruitful. So everyone's going to have that issue at some point. If you've done *jhāna* practice before, as I know some of you have, and you think, or you have a sense, "Well, my playground is ..." Let's say you think, "Oh, my playground is the second *jhāna*," or "My playground is the sixth *jhāna*" – doesn't matter, whatever it is. Please, in the next few days, if you have a sense, "Oh, I know all the rest. This is where I'm at," please check with one of us, and get it sort of confirmed, if you like, because people mean very different things by *jhānas*, and people mean different things by 'mastery' and where we're at.

I will explain why I feel this is important, but just come and check. We may say, "Great. Okay, yeah, second *jhāna*, about there. This is what you need to do now. This is your playground." Or you might feel like, "Oh" – it might work both ways – "No, I only know the second *jhāna*," or "My playground is the sixth *jhāna*." And actually, we feel, "In terms of the kind of level we're talking about, or mastery we want, we reckon that around the second is your playground." So just come and have that kind of dialogue with us. Or it might be the other way around: you think *da-da-da*, and we say, "Well, no, that's cool. You've got that mastered. You can go on to beyond where you think you are" or whatever. But just check, because this idea of 'playground' is really important to how things are going to kind of ferment in a way that's going to be really fruitful – how the seeds are going to get planted so that they really bear lovely, nourishing, lifelong, nourishing fruit. So that's why I'm emphasizing this playground business, and I'll come back to it.

So you're mostly in your playground until you kind of get mastery of that level (and we'll explain what we mean by 'mastery'). You might do, let's say, it was the third one. You're still going to be a little time in the first and the second, if the third is your playground. And occasionally, the mind or you will just – something beyond it will open, and great, have a little fun, *occasionally*. But mostly, this is my playground; this is where it's delineated. I'll explain all this again, but we're not going to teach like, okay, let's say, it's the fifth *jhāna*, then every time I sit down I have to go, "Breath, one, two, three, four, and then the fifth" or whatever. You can just dive right in. Most of your time is in your

playground. And even if you think, “Oh, yes, that,” whatever, still there should be really quite helpful teachings pertaining to what seem to pertain to levels that are below where you’re at. So everything we have to say about really basic practice, working with the breath, or *mettā*, whatever it is, that should still be useful to you, even if you’ve gone beyond that.

So the way *I* would see *jhānas* is they’re potentially lifelong explorations. There’s so much gift available there, so much profundity of resource and beauty, so much subtlety to explore, so much to explore that you don’t find written. It’s not in the suttas; it’s not in a lot of other stuff that you find written. There are all kinds of possibilities here. So I want to invite you to have that really long view, and part of that long view is this playground business.

[25:20] If you’ve been on retreat at Gaia House before, or lived here or something, you might know that you can get to Newton Abbot *that* way, up towards Denbury on the lanes – it’s south. You might also know that you can get to Newton Abbot *that* way, north. You can also get to Newton Abbot *that* way, east. And you can also get to Newton Abbot *that* way, west. It’s just the way the lanes work around here. [laughs] Why am I saying that? Partly because I would say that first, I thought, “Well, if you can get to the first *jhāna*, then they’re all open to you.” But actually, I’d like to even modify that statement and say: “If you can get *pīti*, if *pīti* can arise, if this lovely well-being can arise, then the whole territory is open to you.” So the whole territory of the *jhānas* is open to you. What that means, practically speaking, is what’s really significant is, “How do we *get* that *pīti* to arise?” Or “How do we *allow* that *pīti* to arise?” is a better way of putting it. The lovely news is *pīti* is just like Newton Abbot. [laughter] Only in some respects! If you’ve been there, you might be relieved to hear that. Meaning that it doesn’t really matter how that *pīti* arises, and I would say *anything* goes. So any kind of (quote) ‘concentration’ practice that you might have heard of already, or that you *haven’t* heard of, or whatever. It might be an insight practice. It might be something else. It might be something that you describe to someone, and they’re like, “What the hell has that got to do with concentration?” or whatever. If it gives rise to that *pīti*, if it allows that *pīti* to open, it’s great. It’s good. We’ll give more details to what I’m saying now.

So there are all these different possibilities, and in the first few days of the retreat, a couple of things: I’m going to put out quite a few different possibilities of what I want to call a ‘base’ practice or a ‘springboard’ practice. So like breath, or *mettā*, or insight practices, or whatever, or different ways of working with the breath, energy body, etc. – these are what I might call a base practice to work towards getting into the *jhānas*, or a springboard into *pīti*, whatever. What that means is for the first – I don’t know – five, six, seven days of the retreat, there’s quite a lot of teaching. There’ll still be one session a day, hopefully, but there’s quite a lot of material, because I want to make sure that for someone that it doesn’t work to go *that* way to Newton Abbot, they have *that* way. And if you’re not sure, “Well, I don’t know, I’ve tried these different ones. I’m not sure,” then you can try a few things. This is really important. There will also be, amongst all that, all kinds of other information, teaching that should be helpful, but it will be more dense in terms of teaching in the first week or so.

Insight ways of looking can also give rise to *pīti*. And by ‘insight ways of looking,’ I actually mean very specifically – some of you will know – the practices that I’ve written about in my book, *Seeing That Frees*.<sup>2</sup> So if you don’t know what that means, or you’re not familiar with it, just forget it. We won’t be giving a lot of teachings about that, but I’m just saying that right now.

Insight can be used – we’ll explain this again – as an occasional unblocker that unblocks the energy, that unblocks contraction and clinging, and allows well-being and *pīti* and *samādhī*. So that’s one way of using insight practice. Some people use it as their main thing. It’s the main thing that opens up *samādhī* and well-being and *pīti*. It unfabricates. Insight practices unfabricate. They lessen fabrication, and that’s very key. We’ll come to explain that more.

So if you’re not familiar with what that means, ‘insight ways of looking,’ and all that, just leave it, forget it. Here’s something: if you already know that practice X, whatever practice X is, reliably and easily for you, takes you into *jhāna*, or gives rise to *pīti* that’s kind of stable and you can work with it, if you already know that, stick with it. There’s no reason to change that. You’ve got something that takes you to Newton Abbot, and then you’re good. If you’re not sure, then try some of what we’ll be gradually offering in the next few days. But really, then we want to settle to one base practice, one springboard practice, okay?

The talks on this retreat, I’m mostly going to talk really about technique, in the broadest sense of the word – art, let’s say; the art of *jhāna* practice, the art of *samādhī* – and also about, as I said, view, the view and relationship and framework, how we’re seeing that. It’s so crucial. So I’m almost entirely just talking about that. There will be no big, new, philosophical conceptual frameworks that blow your sense of existence, etc. [laughter], unless some of you don’t already know how I would put the *jhānas* into a framework, and how I would see insight, in which case, then, it might be like, “Whoa, what’s that?”, because it’s quite different. But generally speaking, I’m not going to be doing that. I’m not going to be trying to do it. I won’t bring up really radical questions that kind of get you all agitated and turn everything upside down, etc.

So it’s mostly really just about the art of *jhāna* practice. What does that mean? I don’t know. It partly means, in relation to the stuff I said earlier, that you’re responsible for your inspiration on this retreat. You’re responsible for your sense of inspiration, because I’m not going to be telling any stories. There are no poems. There’s none of all that stuff.

The Buddha said, “*Jhānas* are dependent on happiness.”<sup>3</sup> Of course, *jhānas* give rise to happiness – I mean, tremendous happiness. And really, if you’ve not experienced the *jhānic* realm, it’s happiness, I think we can safely say, that you will not have tasted something like that before. It’s really, really extraordinary – something really, really remarkable, and that opens for a human being.

So *jhānas* bring happiness, but they also depend on happiness. So you’re responsible for your own inspiration. You’re responsible for your happiness as the basis of your *jhāna* practice – without stories, without poems, without interesting philosophy, etc. So how are we going to do that? Where does that kind of base happiness come from? I’ll say a little bit now, say a little bit later.

**(1) Appreciation.** So much about this practice is really about taking care of your heart. At every level and every direction, what does it mean to take care of your heart? And again, you may not realize just how significant some of this is. And if you haven’t practised this way before, if you’re used to very different ways of thinking of retreat, thinking of what it means to be a practice, you may not realize just how significant this is. What does it mean to be here in these days, together, in community, in a beautiful place in the countryside, and to make sure every day that the heart is encouraged to feel appreciation, and to reverberate with appreciation for your fellow meditators, for the Dharma, for the Buddha, for the beautiful nature, for the coordinators at Gaia House who set this up, for other helpers

(and I'll introduce them later) – all the conditions that came [together]? What does it mean to take care of appreciation, to be on retreat, orienting and supporting the heart to be in an appreciative mode? This is way more significant than most people would realize.

**(2) Gratitude.** This is all part of the same thing. Taking care of inclining the mind and the heart to gratitude, to seeing what there is to be grateful for and to feeling that gratitude every day, a number of times. You can do it formally. You can do it informally. It could just be woven into your natural way of being – hopefully it becomes that.

**(3) Beauty,** beauty is so important: the heart, the eyes, the senses are open to beauty.

**(4) Connection** – with each other, with nature.

**(5) Openness,** generally. Openness of being, openness of heart, love of the Dharma – these are the kind of things that nourish, that will allow that base level of happiness on which the *jhānas* can then be built or opened, whatever metaphor you want to use.

**(6)** In a word, *muditā* is the Pali word. Oftentimes it gets translated as sympathetic joy. I would prefer the translation ‘**appreciative joy**’ or ‘**spiritual joy**.’ It means it’s not just the joy in someone else’s happiness. It *is* that, and it’s all those things I just talked about as well. That’s what *muditā* means in its broader sense, and that’s, I think, how the Buddha meant it.

All that, while at the same time, your primary focus, and your primary intention, and you’re spending most of your time doing *jhāna* practice, working on that in formal practice. So yes, connection with nature is important. If then you feel moved by the great Devon God of Mud and Rain to create a great mud sculpture outside to express your connection, no! [laughter] Not on this retreat. Another time, great, and it might be, “Oh, it’s really soulmaking.” Another time, okay? Most of your time is in formal practice doing *jhāna*, doing towards the *jhānas*, but the heart is open, and you’re taking care of that nourishment.

Or similarly, connection with each other. It’s a silent retreat. I guess we’ll speak about that. So most the time it’s formal practice. Can I feel, can I have that openness, can I have that connection with nature, with each other, without having to kind of act on it so kind of, let’s say, disruptively? Open-heartedness, in a nutshell, the openness of heart, of soul, of being, easily outweighs, easily out-trumps, let’s say, focus or concentration, in terms of its significance for *jhāna* practice. Openness of heart, openness of being. That’s not to say focus and concentration is not important, but just relative importance.

[38:13] If you’re familiar with Soulmaking Dharma practice, one way of adding to what we’ve just said is part of what makes you happy here, while you’re here, is that you have a fantasy of the retreat. If you’re not familiar with soulmaking, just forget about this; it doesn’t matter. I’m not going to explain it. I’m just throwing it out very briefly. Just don’t worry about it. But you need a fantasy (in the good sense) of the retreat. You need a fantasy of yourself as a practitioner – you know, a juicy, soulmaking, beautiful image fantasy of yourself, something that’s operating in the background, a fantasy of the tradition. These *jhāna* teachings have been going for thousands of years, passed on from teacher to student, etc. Thousands of years. There’s a tradition of these arts, these beauties, these treasures being passed on – fantasy of all that. Fantasy of the whole tradition; it’s all part of it. That’s part of your happiness and nourishment. But on this retreat, it doesn’t become so dominant that you then go into a whole big imaginal practice about all that. Maybe occasionally, if you need to kind of recalibrate your



whole, “I’ve gotten into a real rut here or whatever it is, or I’ve gotten really tight” or whatever, but generally not.

These fantasies operate in the background. They’re almost subliminal. That’s what I mean when I use the word ‘fantasy’ as opposed to ‘image.’ They’re almost subliminal. They’re just kind of really nourishing and supporting, lubricating our whole sense of what we’re doing, giving moisture there, giving beauty and depth. So if you don’t know what that means because you’re not familiar with it, just forget about it; it doesn’t matter.

But you’re going to have to, because of the schedule, because of the teachings, because we’re not going to be at the front a lot – we’re not going to be doing, you know, every twenty minutes, piping up and say, “Can you feel your bum?” or whatever – you have to generate and sustain the energy without the teachers leading a lot of meditations, and with the open schedule. You have to generate the energy and sustain it.

What’s really helpful also is to open your intention. Why are you here? What’s it serving? Who are you serving? Your sitting, your walking, your standing, your showing up consistently in the hall, or people see you out there doing the walking meditation in the walking room, etc. – that’s a tremendous gift to each other. It’s so supportive when someone sees you showing up, again and again and again. It’s an inspiration. It communicates commitment. You’re helping each other by doing that. What’s my intention? Open the intention beyond just me and my practice and how I feel. Why am I here? What am I serving? Who am I serving? Don’t assume you are irrelevant. How common it is – one of the pathologies in Western culture (mixed with its opposites, often) is to just not realize how relevant we are, how we make a difference. Yes, *you*, as an individual, your presence, your character, your soul, your vibe. Don’t assume you’re irrelevant. Don’t assume you don’t make a difference. Don’t assume that in silence you don’t make a difference.

So open up the intention. This is really important. And again, it could be just a natural part. It could be something very brief. It could be something you do formally, again and again. And, then, of course, the intention for all beings: why are you here? Who are you doing this for? Who are you serving? What are you serving? Again, your happiness and your equanimity – you set a goal: “Oh, I heard about these *jhānas*. I want to get them,” and then it doesn’t go so well, and then we need equanimity with that. That’s the whole thing. We’re going to talk about it. Part of what gives us equanimity is I’m not just doing this for myself. I’m showing up when it is going really not well, and it sucks, and it’s raining again in Devon, and whatever it is. And I’m doing this for other people. That’s part of what keeps you steady through the ups and downs. Open up the intention.

Does everyone know what the word ‘inertia’ means? Anyone not know what that means? Okay. Well, inertia, briefly, it’s a thing from physics. So something that’s stationary, you need to work to make it move, and something that’s already moving, you need to work to make it change its movement – either stop or go in a different direction. So what I want to say is: watch out for inertia. *Watch out for inertia*. How often, especially – a lot of you have been practising for years, if not decades – and how easily we can kind of just do what we usually do. And we kind of avoid the effort or the discomfort or the disturbance of trying something new in practice sometimes. So there’s even a default, certainly a default way of working with the breath: “I just always do it this way,” or a default way of breathing. It’s unconscious. “I just always breathe. I don’t really pay attention to how I breathe,” and it’s a bit

uncomfortable to try and play with the breath and make it breathe differently. Or which practice we do: “I tend to stay away from *mettā*” or whatever it is. Or, as I mentioned earlier, there can be inertia about how we listen to Dharma talks. So I maybe always go into this kind of like ... [laughter] and it’s just like ... [laughter] You know, let it just wash right through. So maybe if you’re used to that, what would it be to listen on your toes, and really listen with a discerning mind? “What does that imply?”, and “Oh, what are the exact differences between ...? How is that different, what I just heard, to what I’m used to hearing, or what I think I know?”

One of the fruits of *jhānas* is malleability of mind. Everyone knows what ‘malleable’ means? It means shapeability. Actually, one of the most significant – we’ll talk about this – one of the most significant fruits of *jhāna* practice is malleability: malleability of consciousness, perception, mind. Like so many things, *jhānas* lead to malleability. Guess what? Malleability leads to *jhānas*. In other words, it’s a condition for *jhānas*. So malleability now is the opposite of inertia. You’ve got to get in there and try different things in your playground: “Oh, I’ve never played on that whirly swing before.” Well, get on it and give it a go. And that might mean something very subtle about what you’re doing, or it might mean a different practice, or whatever it is. *Jhānas* lead to malleability, malleability leads to *jhānas*. You won’t access *jhānas* unless you’re willing to be malleable, and you play and you play, and get into trying different things. You’ve got to be, in a way, practising on your toes, ready, responsive. We’ll talk a lot about this.

So malleability, on one hand. At the same time, with it, we want firm, clear, simple intention or resolve. It’s a kind of a complement to malleability. In other words, we are here to do *jhāna* practice. I’m very clear: that’s my priority. That’s what I’m here for, and that’s clear. It’s very simple. It’s complex what it *involves*, but the *intention* is simple, and it’s a resolve, and it’s firm. It’s clear, simple, and firm. Again, this is *immensely* significant. It doesn’t sound like a big deal. It will make or break your practice, dependent on some intention, if you’re not taking care of that. So when I say ‘*jhāna* practice’ (and again, I’ll elaborate on a lot of what I’m talking about here), I mean including the hindrances, including working with the difficulties. When I say ‘*jhāna* practice,’ I mean also working with the difficulties, the yucky stuff, the sludge, and slogging away through it, etc. I mean also, when I say ‘*jhāna* practice,’ the whole relationship with practice, the whole view of the self doing the practice, and trying to do the practice. I mean the whole relationship with goals and effort, the whole conceptual framework of all that, the self as meditator. All that is included in what I call ‘*jhāna* practice,’ not just the lovely bits about how to move from the second to the third *jhāna* or whatever.

[48:21] So malleability and clear, simple, firm resolve in doing *jhāna* practice. What that means, practically speaking, is it’s too much to then add, “Oh, great, three weeks at Gaia House. *Mettā*’s always been easy and familiar to me, and when I’ve tried breath practice, I always get this kind of constriction in my throat. Maybe I’ll use this retreat to see if I can clear up that constriction.” No. Okay? I mean, it may happen, it may not happen, but don’t make it an intention. As I said before, or to say what I said before in a different way, go with whatever practice is easiest for the well-being, the *pīti* to arise. Listen to what I’m saying. I’m not saying, “Go with whatever practice you feel you can stick with the object the longest for.” Go with whatever practice is the *easiest for the well-being to arise*. Okay? So I’m not trying to fix this constriction in my neck. I’m also not going to, “Oh, three weeks, I can also develop my yoga practice, and get into that, or perfect my lotus pose or whatever, or

kick my caffeine habit or whatever.” All of these may be really good things, but once we start expanding the intention that way, it actually, in a subtle way, starts to fray something.

Okey-doke. So I mentioned the hindrances, and I really want to stress this point (I’ll say it over and over): I’m including that in *jhāna* practice. By ‘*jhāna* practice,’ I mean a very big picture, including the times when it’s really not going well, and those particular difficulties, and how we relate to them, and how we work with them. They are – sometimes I call them – they are the dark, rich underbelly of *jhāna* practice: the hindrances, the stuff we really don’t like. They have their own gold, they deliver their own gold, if I work with them the right way. And I would dare to say, if you spent a whole three weeks, and you never made it to any *jhāna* at all, but you got wise in relation to the hindrances (and I’ll explain what I mean by that), this retreat would still be worth its weight in gold. Hindrances are life afflictions. They don’t just come in meditation. They affect our life, and to really know how to work with them, and to be wise in relation to them, it’s a tremendous, tremendous bonus, a gift, a benefit.

So that whole yucky side, the difficult side of practice, the hindrances, is just as valuable as the loveliness, okay? I’m not bullshitting when I say this. I really, really mean it. If we can find, open up some wisdom there, relate in a wise way – I’ll say more about this, but two principal things, what I mean by ‘wisdom.’ I’ll repeat it later. It means that we don’t believe the hindrances any more. We don’t believe the stories they spin. So if you can move towards not believing the hindrances, that’s massive in your life. That’s such a huge gift. If you can also move towards being okay with hindrances arising without it having any sense of implication about your self, or your worth, or your value as a meditator – in other words, you’re not taking them personally, not believing them and not taking them personally – if you can move towards those two kind of places or stances in relation to the hindrances, that is absolutely magnificently huge. It doesn’t sound so sexy, it doesn’t sound so glamorous and glitzy and whatever, but in terms of what it delivers for your life, it’s huge.

So I’m including all that. It’s part of the framework. And again, all this, what I’m saying now, implies something in your practice. It implies something about your intention. It implies something about your view. It implies something about your attitude. So it will make differences in terms of moment-to-moment stances, views, perspectives, relationships, attitudes, heart qualities, etc. Don’t let it be just me, “*Blah blah blah.*” This is part of you being on your toes. You’re translating this. [snapping fingers] What does it mean in this moment now? “Oh, yeah, that’s ...” What does it mean to just turn around the whole view, open up the whole view of what we’re doing? Because who has not heard a talk on the hindrances before? Who has not heard ten talks on the hindrances before? Who amongst has not heard a hundred? [laughter] What we want is to *change* something, and the way we – well, we’ll get into the hindrances more later on.

Let’s broaden this. From the hindrances, let’s open out right now to talk about emotions, and particularly difficult emotions, in the context of a *jhāna* retreat. Context, context, context. I really want to emphasize or offer a context for the whole of the path, and then place this retreat within that larger context, okay? To me, I feel, of fundamental importance – I feel really strongly about it – our whole path, the movement we make, the opening, the learning, the development we make on the whole path, it needs to include a development, a deepening of our psychological awareness, certainly in relation to ourselves, but also in relation to others. And that’s a whole big subject. To me, that’s part of the path. It’s part of the path nowadays much more so, and we can talk about this another time, perhaps. It’s

different than when the Buddha was alive. We have different psychologies. The whole sense of self is different. The implication is actually what liberation *is* is something different nowadays. I'm not going to get on a sidetrack by that, but we can pick it up.

What it means is, these days, liberation needs to include a certain depth and breadth, and capacity, and sophistication, and sensitivity with regard to what we might call psychological awareness of self and other. The whole path, for me, and the way I would teach and portray the whole path, is it must include within that emotional discernment and emotional capacity. The heart is big and can hold *a lot*. It has a range, a whole range, emotional range – all kinds of emotions, not just *these* kinds. That there's, in the emotional discernment that's part, to me, of what an awakened being has or does or is, that there's a tremendous amount of subtlety there with regard to the emotions and the discernment and the working with emotions. Also with regard to the emotions and the whole path: healing – that we are healing; we have healed; we understand that; we're capable of working with that. I'm just making a list now. We're perfectly happy regarding the emotions as 'real,' and having real causes, and relating to them and caring for them as real entities with real causes. *And* we're perfectly happy regarding them as thoroughly empty, and not real, and not being really caused by real things. There's a range of view, and we're skilled in many different approaches and perspectives regarding the emotions.

So this, to me, is the bigger context in regard to emotions on the whole of the path. Now we're on a three-week, or whatever it is, 23-day *jhāna* retreat. We're setting this retreat in context, in that much bigger context where we want all of that list of what I just said with regard to the emotions. *Now*, for this three weeks, our first choice with regard to difficult emotions – with regard to joy and things and peace, we'll talk more about this as we go on – but with regard to *difficult* emotions, our first choice is simplifying: psychologically simplifying, and letting them quieten, or encouraging them to quieten.

Now, if someone does that, if that's their *only* relationship with the emotions for the whole of their path, I'm not okay with that. I'm really not okay with that. But if someone doesn't know how to do that, and cannot move into that gear, I'm also not so okay with that. When we allow the emotions, difficult emotions, to quiet, when we simplify all their complexity – and their complexity can be beautiful and very important at times, but on this retreat, this is what we're doing on this retreat. This is our primary, our first choice way of working, of relating. When we simplify and quieten them that way, there's still care there. We're not being hard or dismissive or brutal in any way. There's still care there. So it's the first choice. It's not *always* – we're not always; there are some other options and second choices there. It's a temporary preference, set in a much bigger context.

Some of you, I know, have been working very hard recently as activists in different areas. Some of you, I know, in regard to climate change, in all kinds of things, Extinction Rebellion, and things like that – climate change, species extinction, whatever it is. And I don't know where you're at now. It's all very recent. It's all very much alive and in our faces. You may still be feeling that passion and that burning, and there may be grief. I don't know. There may be some grief around all that. It's around. It's up for a lot of people. I certainly feel it. It's really important. That passion and that grief are really important.

Some of you – certainly in this country, and maybe even in other countries – might be feeling grief, maybe even upset, at the recent election here. You may. You may not. Some of you – and again, I don't know – some of you may be feeling grief in relation to me and my situation, my health, and probably

dying, etc. And of course, there may be other things that you're feeling are impacting the heart right now – difficult to bear; there's a sense of loss, of things falling apart or whatever. Related to what I said before, I want for you that you have a really very wide and deep range of approaches for your soul. I want that for your souls, so that you're able to open to grief, and really open, but you're able to hold it and hold it well, hold it in a way that heals. I want that for you, and I also want that you can decide sometimes *not* to pick it up, and instead go for the positive, the joyful, the *jhānic* direction, the quietening of emotions, which happens in *jhāna* via joy anyway. You go through the bubblyness and the joy, and then things start to quieten. So here on this retreat – although I want *all* this for you – here on this retreat, as I said, the latter approach is primary, this quieting.

This is a big deal. There's no danger, I think, if you are not sure. There's no danger of not being able to find the grief later, okay? It's important to say this. If you have three weeks where you tend to make a certain direction of choice – not pushing it away, not shutting it down, just “I'm not so much going there” – there's no danger that you won't be able to find it later on, *if* it's authentic, say, grief or whatever, after the retreat. There's no danger that you're going to get locked in some kind of mode of relationship with your emotions or your heart that you're kind of locked into this mode of not feeling certain emotions. No danger at all. Okay? Three weeks, you can practise this malleability. There's no danger of those things. Again, we want the gift of flexibility, of range.

So I don't know, right now. Let's take a few minutes, okay? I just want to follow this up for a few minutes. If there is something that has affected your heart, *is* affecting your heart, something to do with loss – anything: it could be in relation to nature. It could be in relation to social situations. It could be a personal relationship or whatever, a loss or impending loss. If you have some sense of something is falling apart or potentially falling apart, some grief, some overwhelm, if there's something like that, let's take a moment. Maybe come into a meditation posture, just for a few moments together. I want to do something.

[1:03:25, guided meditation begins]

So it doesn't matter what it is. It also doesn't matter if there's nothing in particular. But it may be, as I said, that your heart is impacted, is finding it hard to bear what human beings are doing to the earth, to our own, the ecosystem, the planet that keeps us alive and sustains our civilization, what we're doing to the other species. It may be there's a personal loss, or the possibility of a personal loss, some relationship, someone you care about or love, or there has been that loss. It may be that you're feeling grief or dismay or anger at some of what's going on or what goes under the heading of political – but it's not really political, it's ethical: the rise of nationalism, racism; seeming corporate stranglehold on democracy; simply the prevalence of stupidity. Anything like that.

Just in your meditation posture, let the uprightness and the firmness of your posture help you. These are big deals, big movements, big changes, asking a lot of us. Let your posture help you – open, grounded, upright. So bring whatever it is, or whichever ones of those, bring them to mind. Just bring them lightly to mind. No need to get into a whole story. Just get a sense of what is happening, what might be happening, and how it affects your heart, how it affects your soul.

Let your attention and awareness include your whole body, the whole space of your whole body. That's your base, that whole space. Open up the awareness. You're letting that whole space be in touch with these challenges, these difficulties, these happenings, these developments. Upright, open. Just notice how your heart is right now. Whole body – keep that whole body space open. Keep opening the whole body. Don't let it shrink. It *will* shrink; keep opening it.

And feel your heart in response, or how it responds to these situations, whatever it is. Let there be a little spaciousness, a little softness around your heart's response. Whole body. But then, not so much emphasizing the spaciousness or the softness. Let that be there, but rather, how do I want to work? How do I want to live in response to this loss, this falling apart, whatever it is? How do I want to manifest in relationship to it?

I'm not talking about the practical details: "I'm going to do this. I'm going to sign up for that. I'm going to get a job doing this." I mean just the quality of being, the stance of being, the relationship, the resolve – heart, soul, being, whole body. What am I devoted to? With all this that I'm potentially facing, that we are potentially facing, what am I devoted to? It doesn't matter about the details. Can I get a sense of it in a way that makes a difference to my sense right now? It might be the Buddha. It might be the Dharma. Maybe you use the *rūpa* at the front of the hall, of the Buddha there. It might be a certain image that you've worked with, and that's what you're devoted to. It might be something a bit more abstract like goodness or beauty or love. Get a sense of what you're devoted to, so you're holding your body, your heart, the difficulty, and this sense of devotion.

Can you sense that devotion in the body and in the way it shapes the body, in the way it energizes the body, in the way the body forms itself around it, in the way the body aligns with that devotion? Connecting body, devotion. Heart, soul, body. Can you get a sense of how the sense of devotion actually energizes the body right now? Inner stillness. There's a sense of resolve there. Can you feel it in the body space? We're not going into practical details: "I resolve to do this every day. I resolve ...". More the *energetic* sense of resolve, of devotion. Can you feel in the sense of devotion in the body, in the sense of resolve, can you feel that there's strength there, and you feel it in the body? There's uprightness there.

Not suppressing anything here, but in this alignment of the heart and the mind, the soul, the being, the body, with what we're devoted to, in relation to what is difficult, the resolve and the devotion, the energization, the uprightness – this becomes a kind of minimum base of happiness. There's well-being in this state. Equanimity is here, well-being, uprightness, energy, etc. In relation to what we've said with this, certainly with regard to *jhāna* work, this kind of basis of strength, of stability, of a very base level of happiness there. And it transfers to our life, for our work or whatever we're doing. It builds, expands our capacity to serve. Of course, the *jhānas* do as well.

[1:12:21, guided meditation ends]

Okay. So you can just gently come out of that now. Do you get a sense of what I'm talking about here? Does it make energetic sense? Yes? So that was very quick. That's one possibility with difficult emotions, and as I said, there are so many other skills, etc. But this kind of thing, it's important, given –

and I know some of you have come from a lot of busyness in activism, etc., or whatever it is right now, and other things that are going on.

Okay. Kirsten or Sari. Which one of you ...?

**Kirsten:** Thank you, Rob. So I also just wanted to say a very, very, very warm welcome. It's really lovely to sit with you here. I really, really enjoy it, and I'm so delighted, Rob, that after nearly two years, actually this can happen. So I'm really very touched and grateful and appreciative that Rob, after sixteen years wanting to teach this, finally has three weeks to do so. I'm really, really delighted – delighted to be here with you.

So here we are landing together. So Rob gave each of us five minutes, so now I'll try my very, very best.

**Rob:** It doesn't matter! [laughs]

**Kirsten:** So what I would really like to speak a little bit about is how we create this container together. It's really so lovely for me to sit in this hall, and already having a sense of being welcomed in this vessel of Gaia House. These important gifts – at least in me, something feels really welcomed, you know? I can relax already a little bit. Can you sense this, just arriving here?

And also really appreciating what Rob alluded to here, that we all are participating in this. We are all contributing. We're all participating to enhance, to make this vessel even more beautiful. And we're all needed, we are all needed in this. We are all active ingredients, important ingredients, needed ingredients – welcomed and appreciated ingredients. I really want to welcome you all into this.

I think one very beautiful, beautiful ingredient is all those shared intentions of non-harming; this shared celebration of our moral sensibility, one could say – our ethical consideration. I think this is something uniquely human, you know. This is something that makes us human. So really inviting the explorations, the examination. This territory of moral sensibility, one could say, is a way to celebrate our humanness. It's a way to celebrate that – what is precious in the human heart.

And traditionally, of course, as you all know, these moral sensibilities, this intention of non-harming, is expressed in the five precepts, and I just will name them in a moment. I really just want to name them. I really want to just bring them into the room. I want to make them part of our *maṇḍala* here. And of course, you all are aware that they are somehow just headlines or gateways to actually very powerful, actually quite unfathomable explorations of what it may mean to be alive.

And as Rob said before, when we were speaking shortly up in the teacher wing, they're a great foundation for *samādhi* – a way we can appreciate our heart, we can appreciate each other, and this precious gift of safety, safety to each other. Listen, step into it. Really see if you can step into this beautiful intention – or this beautiful pathway of intentions they actually evoke. That takes a training, to not intentionally harm or kill another human being. When you resonate with the beauty of this intention, this point of reverence, we together, here, undertake a training to not take what has not been freely given, and to respect each other's property, and respect all that is given to us. We undertake the training to not harm another with expressions of our sexuality. This doesn't make one's sexuality wrong, or is a moral statement, but we give each other the freedom not to look at each other in this way, so that we can be at ease in this way with each other. We undertake the training to not intentionally hurt ourselves and others with our words. And of course, this might be mostly internal

speaking, but we pay attention: how do we speak in our practice, to ourselves and to each other? And we take a resolve to not take any substances that cloud our mind, because we really want to explore the depths of what is possible for this human consciousness. We want to explore, we want to inhabit, we want to really know it deeply, what is possible here. And of course, this doesn't mean that you stop taking any medication, you know. Of course, look after yourself. So how does this ring with you?

And when Rob was speaking, and I was just sitting here a little bit, first of all, to see already this appreciation in your faces. I don't think it's a projection. When Rob came in – you know, just a lot of appreciation to be here with us and with him. And then also maybe having this sense for a moment to appreciate each other in our intention, in our precious gift, that people can actually feel safe around us – this precious gift of the intention of non-harming. And delighting, you know, to be welcomed in the community where this is a shared intention, but also I think, really, really important to delight in the goodness of your own intention. To delight, that your heart actually feels really moved to incline itself in this way.

Thank you. I'm really looking forward to practice with you, and may you all have a wonderful retreat with delights and joy.

**Sari:** Hi, everyone. It's really lovely to sit here together, and I felt so much appreciation listening to Rob, and being here together, starting and embarking on this journey together. A really, really warm welcome from my side as well. And at the same time with appreciation, I can feel a sense of a little bit of wobbliness, sitting for the first time on this side in the hall of Gaia House, instead of that side with you. But seeing all your friendly faces brings so much encouragement, and I feel a sense of support and friendliness and heartfulness in the hall. So I'm very much looking forward to our time together, journeying through the territory of *jhānas*, and all the exploration and sharing and learning together.

I was just wishing to say a few words about silence. Silence, that is such an essential part of this retreat container, and also so much supporting what we are doing here together as we're exploring the mind. And as we're creating conditions for the *samādhi*, for the silence of the mind also to deepen, and hopefully, the silence can be, at the same time, a resource for us, really deeply nourishing our heart and mind – can be almost like a companion on the journey for us, hopefully. And this is also something that we are cultivating and creating and nourishing together, the kind of part of the container that we can be offering ourselves the silence, and offering each other the silence – a gift of silence which can really help ourselves and each other in becoming more sensitive. It's really so supportive. And hopefully, we can still enjoy each other, and feel each other's support, as it was talked about; that we can support each other in the silence, and feel a sense of community. It would be so much more difficult to do this retreat by ourselves at home.

So we were thinking that there would be a practical way to support our exploration, a practice of supporting silence, and we are very much offering this possibility, and also encouraging you to hopefully make use of that. And we will be bringing here a basket where you're very much invited and encouraged to bring and leave your mobile phones for the duration of the retreat. So you could bring the phone and mark it with your name, and we will take care of the mobile phone, and you will surely get it back in the end of the retreat. This could be actually also part of this ritual of simplifying and



renunciation, and letting go, and also for the sense of creating the condition that can support ourselves and each other to make the most of this journey.

So this basket will arrive here, I think, right after, but it will be at least available until tomorrow morning.

**Nathan:** It's there.

**Sari:** It's there. Thank you, Nathan. And you're very welcome to bring your little friends there and leave them with us. I'm really, really, really happy and grateful to be sharing this journey together, and meet you in the interviews, and wish you all a very, very fruitful retreat.

**Rob:** Thank you. So we've already been sitting for a little while. I'd like to do a guided meditation, but I think we probably need to move a little bit, so why don't we take two minutes, and just move your body however you feel like you need, whatever's going to be good, because we're probably going to be a little bit longer. We're going to sit. So just shake it, wiggle, stretch, whatever it needs.

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<sup>1</sup> SN 12:23.

<sup>2</sup> Rob Burbea, *Seeing That Frees: Meditations on Emptiness and Dependent Arising* (Devon: Hermes Amāra, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> SN 12:23.