

## Focusing on One Point (Intensity, Directionality, Subtlety) (Instructions)

### Practising the Jhānas

Rob Burbea

December 19, 2019

<https://dharmafeed.org/teacher/210/talk/60859/>

Teaching this retreat is a big stretch for me, just because of everything that's going on with my health, and what that needs, what that requires. I just had a meeting with a nurse this morning, etc. And as I said at the beginning, in a way, that kind of impacts the unfolding of the teaching. I have to be at the hospital at this time and all that stuff. So things are getting squashed together in one session, one long session, that otherwise, if I had a choice, I would pace them over, you know, morning, evening, afternoon sort of thing. That's just part of the deal. It's not perfect, but it is what it is. And in my experience doing/sitting lots of retreats is that often, when the conditions aren't perfect, that's often, for some weird reason, when the retreat is most fruitful.

The other thing about the teachings (and I said this, again, at the beginning) is that everyone needs different things at different times, and so I feel quite concerned, or anxious, even, just to make sure you all have what you need. But it's actually an impossible situation. So we're just unfolding things, and for some person, something that's said on day five, it would be, "I wish I'd heard that on day one," you know, etc. I don't quite know how else to do a group retreat. That's part of the territory here. That's part of the challenge here. Hopefully, still, it works, and it's helpful.

I want to try, I want to divide the teaching today into three sections, maybe four, depending on how we do for time: instructions, a guided meditation, and a short-ish talk, a shorter talk. Let's start with a bit of instructions, actually. Again, a bit of a context – just slight context. I was going to say this later, but I'll say it now. You could say all the *jhānas*, but certainly we can say the first four *jhānas* – by definition, they include, or even, I would say, what's really primary in them is that the whole body (as I said when I ran through those descriptions that the Buddha gave) really feels very, very nice, and different *kinds* of nice. And in a way, that's what characterizes each *jhāna*: the *kind* of nice that the whole body space feels. By definition, axiomatically, a really pleasant-feeling, nice, lovely energy body experience is part of where we're going in – actually, you could say any of the *jhānas*, all eight, in a way, because the absence of any sensation at all in the formless *jhānas* is actually very (in its 'acquired taste' kind of way) extremely pleasant. But anyway, the first four *jhānas* all involve a really nice energy body experience. So all the practices that we're doing are going towards that. That's what they're aiming for, just by virtue of – we're aiming for *jhānas*. As I said, *which* base practice or *which* springboard practice, whether it's working with the breath like *this*, whether it's working with the breath like *that*, whether it's *mettā*, whether it's something else, whatever it is – they're all intended in that direction. That's what we're trying to get them to do.

For, I don't know, *most* people, the first port of call in the niceness will be what we call *pīti*, and this pleasantness that I'll talk about as we go on. But basically, what you want at this point is to be narrowing down into one practice: one base or springboard practice that you feel is the one that feels best for you, and the most reliable, easiest, that well-being arises from that – physical well-being, mental well-being. And we keep that practice all through, even after you've got eight *jhānas*, because even when you know eight *jhānas*, there are going to be times when you need to go right back to your

base practice and use that. So that's your thing in terms of *jhāna* practice. Later we can add to it and have others, but basically, at this point, a lot of you, unless you're already well into the *jhānas* and know what works, like I said, and you already know it, and you just – “That's my base practice. I know that's what works best” – basically, you're still trying to find that, and narrow it down, and say, “That's the one for me.”

Now, within that, because (as I said) *jhānas* are, by definition, different kinds of really lovely states of the energy body, different flavours of really lovely states of the energy body, we can kind of, again, think backwards from “Where are we going?” We're going to some kind of lovely state in the energy body. I can get there in two ways. We're back to the whole Newton Abbot thing, kind of.

(1) Either I say, “Oh, if that's part of where I'm going, why don't I start with that anyway, and **start with the energy body experience**, and just help it in creative, responsive, sensitive ways to become nice – nicer and nicer.” I'm starting with something that's very close to where I'm headed anyway. That's one way of going about things.

(2) Another way of going about things is, for instance, **taking one spot, like at the upper lip or the tip of the nose or the abdomen**, and just paying attention to the sensations there, and really, really paying attention. And in time, other factors develop, one of which – it sort of comes *out* of that – is the *pīti*, which can then be spread into the whole body. So not better, not worse; they're just different. One is starting with something much similar to where you're going; one is starting with something that actually doesn't look that much like where we're going at all, okay? Because at some point, this (as I'll explain) will expand to a whole energy body experience. Not better, not worse, just different people find different things work better. But that's kind of what we're doing: either the direct route or the more indirect route. The more indirect route is more common, but *why* that is – you know, it's just how it is. Everyone's different.

Why do I spend proportionately more time teaching about the energy body and all that? It's probably partly because there are more possibilities there. It's more unusual, so people need to hear – most of you have probably spent a long time paying attention to the breath at the nose or the upper lip or the abdomen or something. So the energy body is more unusual, and there are more possibilities there. There is probably an infinite amount of possibilities in terms of how creative it becomes, how playful it becomes, how imaginative it becomes.

And I find, over many years of teaching, that for a lot of people who have had very little development or opening or joy from paying attention at one point, opening up to the whole body is often a revelation, and things really start to move then. As I said, though, it's not the case with everyone – at all. So we really want to find what works for you. This is so, so important.

If we talk now, the first section of today's teaching, I want to talk about taking a narrow spot, classic spots – rather than the whole body, the classic spots are, as I said:

(1a) **The upper lip**, somewhere between the top of the lip and the beginning of the nose, so that whole area there.

(1b) Or **the tip of the nose**, just inside the nostrils, *anywhere* around there, all that whole area. It really doesn't matter. The question is, when I pay attention to that location, where can I most clearly feel the sensations of the breath as they come in and out? And there will be sensations of the breath, the friction, really, of the breath moving across the skin or the tiny hairs of the skin there. Or there will be

sensations of, for example, the in-breath is slightly cooler, because of the temperature, than the out-breath. The body has warmed the out-breath. Temperature, sensation – you must have heard this a million times. That's one classic spot.

(2) Another classic spot is somewhere down in **the abdomen**. And what you're paying attention to then is, naturally, when we breathe in, there's the expansion, really, the rising of the abdomen as you inhale, and the falling, if you like, the falling back of the abdomen as you breathe out. And it's that sensation of the movement of the abdomen, those sensations that go with that double movement, rising and falling. And that's what you're paying attention to. And people feel it in different places, or it could be a slightly larger area. It doesn't matter. But what you're really paying attention to – there are more gross physical sensations, at first, than what we're talking about with the energy body. But those are the two classic places. Instead of primarily having this wider space of the whole energy body, we've got a narrower space. It's a narrower spot.

If I think of the word 'concentration,' and I automatically think of a narrow focus, this is just a prejudice and an indoctrination. It does not necessarily mean that at all. It cannot possibly mean that in Buddhадharma. It cannot possibly mean that. In fifth *jhāna*, infinite space, I'm *concentrating* on infinite space. That's the exact opposite of a precise point. So it *cannot* mean that. It might be helpful, for some people at some times, to choose a small point, and then, as I said, it goes through a whole process. But that's not what concentration can mean. It's not like concentrated laundry detergent or a concentrated sulphuric acid: "I've got *this* much in *this* amount of space." It's a complete misconstrual. May be helpful to do it that way, may be not helpful, but that's not what *samādhi* means at all.

So there's a small focus, and it may be very helpful, but I'm going to say, you've heard so much about working with the breath this way. I just want to throw out three or four things:

(1) One is, even though we have a small, narrow spatial focus, I would suggest it would be very helpful to have a background awareness of the whole body. So if I say – and some of you are far away – can you see my hand? Can you focus on my hand, even if it's not that clear? Can you focus on it? Can you focus on my hand and still have a background awareness of the whole room behind me, what's also in your visual field? Can you switch those visual fields, so what's in the background is more in your foreground psychologically? That's what I'm talking about. So when there's a small focus, it's really helpful to have the whole body sense just lightly in the background – not 50/50, maybe 10 per cent or 5 per cent or something like that. So primarily, I'm really getting into this one spot, wherever it is, but I'm always maintaining this whole-body background awareness. Why? Partly because, when I have a bigger space that way, it's a bit like a table. If a table has one leg, and it's a narrow leg, it's hard for it to balance. If a table has two legs, it's still [hard]. If it's three or four, and they're spread out, it's much easier. So something spread out helps to balance the concentration. That's one of the reasons why sometimes the energy body works (but we'll revisit this in different ways): so it can stabilize really well.

(2) Second reason is (and I'll talk more about this probably starting tomorrow), as we go on with all this, the factor of effort and balanced effort and right effort becomes more and more crucial, actually. It becomes more and more of a real investigation. And it's not the sort of investigation that we sort of *nail it*: "Ah, day four, I've got the effort thing right, and then I can forget about it." It will stay with you for the rest of your practice life. It's just part of the art of practice. What's the effort level? What's the

subtle effort level? What's involved in that? Where am I with that? Is it a bit too much? The whole thing just develops and gets more and more subtle, rather than something – “I've done that now.” So if we talk about developing the art of *samādhi*, we must include this kind of opening up the exploration, and the subtlety of the exploration, the subtlety of the experimentation, with effort levels. It's not going to be something you're ever going to get beyond. It's part of the art of it. And we'll return to this a lot.

The thing about keeping the whole body in the background is that, thankfully, awareness of the whole body will enable us to be aware when we're over-efforting. And if I'm really over-efforting, I'm going to cramp up my muscles, and I'm going to get a headache right between the eyes, and that sort of thing. Even as the effort becomes a little more subtle, it will be reflected – maybe not in the musculature, but maybe just in the tone and the contraction of the energy body. But basically, as an instrument, as an instrument of sensitivity to effort levels, this whole body space is really, really useful. It's going to tell me: “Oh, I can feel, there's just a bit of tension creeping into the energy body.” It's telling me: “A bit too much pressure. Just relax a little bit.” If I don't have that background awareness, it's much harder to be sensitive. So that's one thing.

(3) Then, I would say, let's talk about – again, we can think of developing concentration, *samādhi*, whatever word we're going to use, *jhāna*, as “Okay, what it *really is* is *staring really hard* and really unwaveringly at something, and if I can do that with enough intensity and enough unwaveringness, I will get into *jhāna*.” It's just not true. [16:42] If I'm doing that, and there isn't openness of heart, it's not going to take me to *jhāna*. I might get very good at staying with an object, and that's helpful. It's not going to take me into *jhāna*. So rather than think about it that way – we've talked about openness of heart a little bit; we'll talk about it some more – but let me emphasize three things: rather than just ‘hanging on’ to something, three things you can think about. And in a way, you could sum this up as saying, “Let's **emphasize quality of attention in any moment over quantity**.” In other words, *quantity* meaning, “How long have I stayed with the breath without losing, you know, going off in a thought or a sound, or whatever it is.” So very often, what happens is we get into this quantity thing. And one part of our mind is just really checking: “Have I had a thought yet? How long has it been? Have I been distracted yet?” And counting breaths, etc. It's not that that's unimportant.

But can we kind of re-hierarchize our priorities? And I would say *quality* of attention is much more important. That means, in this moment, with this part of this breath, what's the quality of my attention? And what's meant in that? What's meant by *quality*? A lot of things. I'm only going to say, I'm going to point to three things today: **intensity**, **directionality** (I'm not sure if that's the right word, but let's say that), and **subtlety**. Let's do that in the reverse order.

(a) As I said yesterday, again, we tend to think of *jhānas* and *samādhi* in certain ways. And undeniably, I would say it's the case that deepening in *samādhi*, and certainly deepening through the eight *jhānas*, is a movement of increasing **subtlety**. I cannot get away from that. Each *jhāna* is more subtle than the last one. Each *jhāna* is more refined than the last one. The whole deepening of *samādhi*, even before you reach *jhāna*, needs to be a deepening into more and more subtlety. It's not the case, though you might sometimes hear it, that each *jhāna*, the mind is more unwavering than the last one, as if that was the primary thing that's happening. It's not the case. You could have fifth *jhāna* – you're not quite used to it yet, and you're wobbling out of it, and second *jhāna* that's much more stable for you, or whatever, or breath is much more stable, and you're just learning the second *jhāna*, and it wobbles.

Again, it's like, let's get our sense of the conceptual framework. What's actually happening here? What's important? Therefore, what do I need to emphasize, work with, and pay attention to, and actually bother about? [19:51] So subtlety is a key element. As you practise with the breath, whatever way of working with the breath, or place you're paying attention – as it goes on, and the mind settles down, and the body settles down, the breath becomes more subtle. It *should* become more subtle. I mentioned this yesterday, I think. Also, if you're practising *mettā* or compassion – now sometimes, compassion, when you start practising compassion there are all these tears, and it's up and down, and the world's suffering. And it's great, and we need to expand the heart that way and have it go through all that. But as it settles down and deepens, actually, the compassion gets more subtle, and the *mettā* gets more subtle. It's less – I don't know what you would call it – like, certainly, fiery emotions or intense emotions; the whole thing gets more subtle. Likewise the breath or whatever object.

So there's this movement into subtlety. The object is actually perceived more and more subtly. As I said, we can get in the way of that, either by having a certain idea, or by doing something physically, like repeatedly doing that – what was it called? – ujjayi breathing, or whatever it is. There are many ways we can block that process, that natural process of subtilizing. When the object becomes naturally more subtle, for the *samādhi* to develop – I mean, already that means there's some *samādhi* developing; it cannot happen without that – but for the *samādhi*, then, to really keep developing, then the attention, the *quality* of the attention has to get correspondingly subtle. If my left hand here is going down, down, subtle, the object – whatever it is, breath, *mettā* – then my attention has to match it in subtlety. So in a way, the attention needs to get more delicate there. And that process of matching, of following the subtlety down, the attention-quality matches the object-quality – that process is, you could say, one of the most central things that's happening, one of the most central processes that's happening as *samādhi* develops. And as I said, the *jhānas* themselves are a spectrum. Or the eight *jhānas* are a spectrum of increasing subtlety and increasing refinement.

(b) Let me say these other two. What did I say? I said **directionality**. What do I mean by that? I'm not sure if it's the right word, but something like this: let's say you have the breath at the upper lip, nose. Very easily, as human beings – well, I'm not sure how universal this is, but it's very easy. One way to construe the attention – in other words, to have a sense of the attention 'here' somewhere, oftentimes in the head, and it's 'going towards' the object. So if the object's a visual object, certainly. Or it's 'going towards' the sensations. Here's the attention, and it goes towards the sensations. And that's great. It's probing them and, you know, not *attacking* them, but going towards them kind of in this more probing way. Let's put it that way.

But we can also (and I know many of you know this) construe – and by 'construe,' I don't mean just an idea. I mean a sense, an actual sense, a perception of 'receiving' the breath, which in a way, of course, the body *is*. The breath, as air, comes in, and it's 'received.' But the mind can also feel like the sensations are being received. So this is something we can play with: the directionality, if you like, of attention. And this is something you can actually play with. All this boils down to: what's helpful right now? It's not the case that one of these directions is always going to be, for you, better than another. The whole thing is a dance. The whole thing is like riding a bicycle. "Oh, it's always good to lean to the left on a bicycle." No, it's good in *certain* situations to lean to the left. In other situations, it's good to lean the other way, or right in the middle, or whatever it is. So all this – again, it's stuff for you to

play with, moment to moment, to have this sense of: *you're* the artist, *you're* the improviser, *you're* the person with your hands on the clay, on the wheel.

(c) So subtlety, directionality – the other one is **intensity**. This is kind of a hard one, but I think it's really important. It's like, as you pay attention to X, can you get a sense of actually dialling up, or down, the intensity, the energy of your attention? Again, you might think of it like, that probing gets more. That's one way of thinking about it. But it might also be just like a lamp going up, or a sense of energy – it's dialling up, there's more energy, I'm *really* present, I'm *really* alive there. But this, again, you just think, "Oh, well, more is better." Not always. It's an interesting thing. So if we take all these factors together, and you think about, "Okay, well, subtlety – what allows a subtle attention?"

Sometimes it's a *delicacy* of attention that allows to go into subtlety, and not so much *intensity*. If you think about – I know there are some fantastic chefs in the room, in fact, but let's say someone's cooked this amazing meal. It's exquisite, and you're tasting it. And each mouthful – you know, sometimes when you put food into your mouth, the flavours reveal themselves, kind of, not all at the same time. Have you had that? And sometimes some of them are mixed at the same time. What kind of mode of attention do you go into, if it's really exquisite, and especially the chef's there, and they want to know what you think? There's a kind of delicate poise in relation to the taste-attention, the gustatory attention. So this is delicacy. I can't kind of go in there, you know, ramming in there. It's not the right kind of attention that will reveal those subtle, exquisite qualities, if it's one of those really subtle dishes.

Or listening: when you listen for something, a sound that's faint amid background noise, there's a quality there of – you know, you're not squeezing something. You're not squinting. You're not pressuring something. It's more like there's a kind of poise, and it's almost like you're attentive in a way that your antennae pick up something. [27:17] So if you just, in a way, pay attention to how you pay attention in these kinds of situations, you might learn something. We might learn something about what I'm talking about here.

Now, what's also interesting is that, for example, if the breath is the object, or the *mettā* is the object, the delicacy of the object, as the object becomes more delicate and subtle, actually, it *can* (not always the case, but it *can*) become more delightful. So the delightfulness of the object often goes with the delicacy. But I would certainly say that the delightfulness of the attention increases with the delicacy of the attention. In other words, I think, as human beings, we like paying attention in a delicate way. We actually like that. It feels good. As that begins to happen more and more, part of the job here is to enjoy that. Okay, it might very, very not a big deal. But that's part of [it]: can I get intimate also with this delight? Can I include it? Can I enjoy it? Which is, again, a very different thing than "Am I still thinking? How long have I gone since my last distraction?"

So, that's the first block of today's teachings – a smaller point, and when you're using a smaller point like that, there are a few things to bear in mind, there are a few things you can play with. I mean, there's more, but that's okay for now. And as I said, where we're going is for this whole body space to be very pleasant, in different ways. But we can still use something that doesn't look that much like that. We use a small point, and for some people, that's what works best. As you get into this one small point, it will tend to grow. That's also one of the signs that it's getting deeper. It's almost like, "Oh, this upper lip area kind of feels like it's about as big as my head now." That's very normal. So it will grow

anyway, and in a way, that's part of the whole thing moving towards the whole energy body thing. I'm just mentioning that.

Okay, I think that's all I wanted to say about that piece. Why don't we pause there and do another one, yeah?