

An Introduction to the Jhānas

Practising the Jhānas

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We're not too pushed for time, but I don't want to be too long. I want to talk about just an introduction to the *jhānas* and a little bit of an overview. Again, what are we doing here? Why are we doing it? What are we talking about? What's the area we're talking about? So again, just to start with a bit of vocabulary, there's this word *jhānas*, and I'll talk about that, of course. But there's also this word *samādhi*, which many of you will know. There's also the word *samatha*. *Samatha* tends to mean 'calm' or 'tranquillity.' *Samādhi* is more of an umbrella term – at least that's how I use it, and I think that's how it was originally used in the texts. *Jhānas* are a subset of *samādhi*, if you like. And *samādhi* – it's actually quite hard to define, but it's something like a state of harmonious well-being of mind and body. Mind and body are gathered, coherent, harmonious, in some state of well-being. Actually, even that's not *quite* accurate: "Well, in the formless *jhānas*, is there a body?" Well, there *is*, kind of, and you can still have pain somewhere, but it's not really overtaking. So it's hard to get an exact definition. But I use it as a kind of umbrella state. There are lots of 'insight states' we could talk about, for example, that are still states of *samādhi*. Because of the insight, because of the letting go, there's a kind of harmonization, a cohesion, a unification of mind and body and awareness and bodily experience – all that [is] cohered, unified, harmonized in some sense of well-being. And there are lots of different flavours of well-being, as we'll talk about. That's what I mean by *samādhi*.

The eight *jhānas* are a subset of that. And the Buddha described them – in fact, he talked a lot about the *jhānas*, a lot, a lot, a lot, way more than he talked about mindfulness, interestingly. I'm going to read you, quite briefly, the Buddha's description. He's talking to a bunch of monks:

What, monks, is Right Concentration? [This is the Buddha talking.] There is the case where a monk, quite withdrawn from sensuality, withdrawn from unskillful qualities [it's actually "withdrawn from *sensual desire*, withdrawn from unskillful qualities," the Pali], enters and remains in the first *jhāna*: rapture and happiness born from that withdrawal, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation [accompanied by thought]. He permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the rapture and happiness born from withdrawal. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture and pleasure born from withdrawal.¹

He describes it kind of technically, the *jhāna*, and then he gives a simile:

Just as if a skilled bathman or bathman's apprentice would pour bath powder into a brass basin and knead it together ...

In those days, they had bathhouses, and that's where you would go to have a bath and a wash. And there would be someone there who mixes soap powder with water to make your personal bar of soap

for your bath, okay? And so this person, this bathman has this soap powder and water, and it's a skill to get it mixed right, so that it's not just a liquid mess, but it's got enough moisture in it that you can give it a good rubbing and ... you understand? There's some skill in that.

[So this] bathman or bathman's apprentice would pour bath powder [soap powder] into a brass basin, knead it together, sprinkling it again and again with water, so that his ball of bath powder – saturated, moisture-laden, permeated within and without – would nevertheless not drip. Even so, the monk permeates this very body with the rapture and happiness born of withdrawal. There's nothing [no part] of the body untouched, [etc.]

That's the first *jhāna*. Basically, you've got rapture (and we'll talk about this), *pīti*, these nice, really nice physical feelings that are not coming from sensual contact. I'll talk much more about this. And you've got happiness, and that feeling is pervading the body. The mind is really settling down there and feeding on it, and getting into it, and really alive to that, the first *jhāna*. Second *jhāna*:

With the stilling of directed thought and evaluation [with the stilling of thought], he enters and remains in the second *jhāna*: rapture and happiness born of composure [born of tranquillity], unification of awareness free from directed thought and evaluation, [and with confidence, with this] internal assurance. He permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the rapture and pleasure [sorry, rapture and *happiness* – I have to 'doubly translate' here] born of composure. Nothing in the body remains untouched.

And then the simile:

Just like a lake with spring water welling up from within [you have to remember that this is a hot country, so this is an *appealing* image], having no inflow from east, west, north, or south, and with the skies periodically supplying abundant showers, so that the cool fount of water welling up from within the lake would permeate and pervade, suffuse and fill it with cool waters, there being no part of the lake unpervaded by the cool waters. Just so, the monk permeates and pervades this very body with the rapture and happiness born of composure. [And] there is nothing of that body that isn't touched [that way].

Third *jhāna*:

With the fading of rapture [with the fading of *pīti*], he [the monk] remains in equanimity, mindful and alert [this is different than what we usually mean by 'mindfulness' here] and physically sensitive to happiness. He enters and remains in the third *jhāna*, and of him the noble ones declare: "Equanimous and mindful, he has a happy abiding [a joyful abiding]." He permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the

pleasure divested of rapture [divested of *pīti*], [so that] there's nothing of his entire body unpervaded with that happiness divested of rapture.

So he's got 'pleasure' here, which – the Pali is *sukha*, so I mistranslated that. The simile:

Just as in a pond with blue, white, or red lotuses, there may be some of the blue, white, or red lotuses which, born and growing in the water, stay immersed in the water [their petals never come above the water; they're immersed in the water], and they flourish without standing up out of the water, so that they are permeated and pervaded, suffused and filled with cool water from their roots to their tips. And nothing of those blue, white, or red lotuses would be unpervaded with cool water. Even so, the monk permeates this very body with the happiness divested of rapture. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded with pleasure, [etc.]

Fourth *jhāna*:

Furthermore, with the abandoning of happiness [it says "happiness and stress," but], he enters and remains in the fourth *jhāna*: purity of equanimity and mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain [neither happiness nor pain]. He sits permeating the body with a pure, bright awareness, so that there is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by that pure, bright awareness.

Just as if a man were sitting wrapped from head to foot with a white cloth, so that there would be no part of his body to which the white cloth did not extend, even so, the monk sits permeating his body with a pure, bright awareness. There's nothing of his entire body unpervaded by that pure, bright awareness.

So these are called the 'form *jhānas*,' the first four, and then there are four what's called 'formless *jhānas*.' We'll talk in a lot more detail. I just want to briefly give the Buddha's descriptions. Then, after the fourth *jhāna*:

With the complete transcending of perceptions of physical form, with the disappearance of perceptions of resistance [in other words, solidity], and not heeding perceptions of diversity [of many things, of manifoldness], he enters and remains in the sphere of infinite space [the fifth *jhāna*, infinite space].²

Then, sixth *jhāna*:

With the complete transcending of the sphere of infinite space, he focuses on 'infinite consciousness,' and he enters into the realm of infinite consciousness [sixth *jhāna*,

formless *jhāna*]. He enters and remains in the sphere. He sticks with it, develops it, pursues it, and establishes himself firmly in it.

That's a strapline, in this case: he sticks with it, sticks with that theme, develops it, pursues it, establishes himself firmly in it. After that comes the 'realm of nothingness,' seventh *jhāna*: the realm of nothingness. So space has collapsed, and there's just nothing, but not a 'nothing' in a space, not just an empty space.

And then the eighth *jhāna* is called the 'sphere' or the 'realm' or the 'base' of 'neither perception nor non-perception.' There's not even 'nothing.' It's very hard to put into language and to describe that, right at the limit of the possibilities of perception, neither perception nor non-perception. I'm not even perceiving 'nothing.'

So very briefly, those are the eight *jhānas*, as the Buddha described them. Some of those descriptions are very limited. We're going to have to fill that out, and we will do so as we go along.

Teaching is contextual, I find. I would say different things, I *will* say different things, dependent on who's in front of me, dependent on what my sense of what you need is, but also what your background is, and what you might have heard elsewhere. So if we're talking about the *jhānas*, which we are, there will be things that, actually, I wouldn't even mention myself or emphasize, if it wasn't likely that you had already heard this or that elsewhere, or read this or that elsewhere, and therefore, you might be assuming that "This or that is true," or "This or that is the case," or that "It therefore follows that ... something else." And I might not think that whatever that is, or the assumption coming from that is helpful. So obviously, I'm going to be emphasizing, in this retreat, teaching from *my* experience of the *jhānas*, and my experience *teaching* the *jhānas*, and what seems to me, after many years of teaching the *jhānas*, what seems, *to me*, to be significant. What opens that treasure? What is the treasure here? What are the treasures here? What makes a liberating difference?

I'm going to contradict myself a lot, okay? I'm going to say one thing, and then I'm going to say something that sounds like it's a complete contradiction. For example, I might say, and I *will* say, "These eight *jhānas* – it's really important that they're very clear and discreet, that there's a kind of quantum jump from one to the other." But at another time, I might say, "You know, the whole thing is really one continuous spectrum, and it's really not that discreet. So don't get too hung up on that."

I might say that some of us, some of you, maybe most of you, and maybe most people, really need to forget the whole question that goes on: "Do I have it now? Is this it? Am I in a *jhāna*, or am I out of a *jhāna*?" And focus, rather, on enjoying, on just really maximizing your enjoyment, and getting the most enjoyment in the moment, and developing what needs to develop to enable you to enjoy it more, and just drop that whole question: "Is this it? Where's the edge here? Do I have it?" Don't dwell on where that sharp definition is. So I might say that.

And then I might, and I will, also say something like: you know, when I, when *we* talk about *jhānas* as *we're* teaching it, we really mean something *breathtakingly* nice, *breathtakingly* beautiful, really a revelation. You know, if you've not experienced the second *jhāna* or the third *jhāna*, it's really a revelation. You might have had lots of happiness in your life, be very content, and all kinds of things, wonderful things happened which you rejoiced in, and lots of peaceful times, and nice holidays, and relaxing moments, and all that. We're talking about something of a whole different order. We're really

talking about “Wow, wow,” something very, very beautiful, something really exciting. And you *should* be excited. I *like* people to be excited about practice. It’s a good sign. It’s a healthy sign. [15:54]

I can think of quite a few instances over the years where someone’s come to me, and – I don’t know how to say this – they’ve been exposed to *jhāna* teachings elsewhere or whatever, and they come into an interview. Then they’re describing their experience or something, and they say, “So I think I broke through to the sixth *jhāna* yesterday.” And I say, “Oh, how was it?” And they say, “Yeah, it was nice.” And ... [laughs] No! That’s not ... that *can’t* be. It absolutely *can’t* be. Now, either they’re faking a kind of Buddhist equanimity: “I’m not supposed to be attached, so I’ll just say it’s nice, but secretly I’m like, ‘Wow!’” But in this person’s case, I genuinely think it just wasn’t that big a deal. So that’s not what we’re talking about.

So actually, those definitions *do* become quite important. We’re really talking about something, “Yes!” It’s really something else, you know? When there isn’t the excitement, when there isn’t that kind of “Wow,” it’s not going to make a difference to your life. This person’s describing something; it might have been a relatively new experience, but there was nothing in that experience, or having that, that was going to make much difference to her ability to let go, to her life, to her sense of existence, to her sense of self and world. It was just, “Oh, okay. That was the sixth *jhāna*. Tick.” Okay, I’m really interested in all this making a difference. So I might say that, “Look, it’s important that we’re talking about *this* territory and not [that].” And I might say, “Forget about all that, and don’t worry about the definitions.” I’m going to contradict myself a lot, and I reserve that right. [laughs]

I might also say, on the one hand, “Look, it’s not about just focusing more intensely or nailing your mind, your attention, to something for hours, and then expecting something to happen. It’s not about prioritizing the intensity or the steadiness of focus.” And I might also say, to the same person at a different time, or to another person: “More intensity, just more intensity to the focus. Energize that focus.” Most people, I think, it’s the first one: too hung up. I’ll explain this as we go along, today and other days. It’s too much thinking in the wrong way about what we’re trying to do. We’re prioritizing the wrong things. The priorities we’re making may be not that helpful, not that fruitful.

Why all this contradiction? Well, because the nature of all things is that we can look at them in different ways. That’s partly what it means to say they’re empty: you can look at it like that, and it’s true; you can look at it like *that*, and it’s true. And those can sometimes even be opposites. But partly also just because different people at different times, or the same person at different times – sometimes they need to hear *this*, and sometimes they need to hear *that*, regarding the same issue. And it might be opposite. It’s always the case with teaching. It’s *always* the case. That’s partly why it’s interesting teaching a group. In a Q & A, I might say something, yet someone sitting next to that person might need to hear exactly the opposite.

Yesterday I used this word ‘mastery.’ I just sort of threw it out there. It’s a traditional word. I can’t remember what the Pali means, but let me say what *I* mean by it. I said we’re aiming, or I would like us to aim, or to think about ‘mastering’ each *jhāna*. What I mean by that is a few different components to that. I mean a really thorough familiarity with all the *jhānas*. If we’re talking about *any* *jhāna*, to say I mastered the second *jhāna* or whatever, it means a really thorough familiarity and intimacy with all of its aspects. A *jhāna*, actually, can manifest differently. It has different aspects, different flavours and tones within it. If I just dip in and dip out, I don’t get to see: “Oh, sometimes it’s like this, and it has

that quality, and *that* quality, and these different ranges of depths, etc.” Different levels within each *jhāna* – you can divide certain *jhānas* into different levels (and they’re almost discrete as well), manifestations, etc. I mean a thorough familiarity with all that. Also, by ‘mastery,’ I’m including in that meaning, really, a whole set of skills, a whole kind of artistry that’s involved with regard to that *jhāna*, in terms of working. I mean also, thirdly, that one can enter it at will. Let’s say it’s the third *jhāna* we’re talking about. You don’t need to go: “Number one, number two, number three,” or “Breath, number one, number two, number three.” You can actually just remember it. The cells and the *citta* just remember it, and you just have a subtle intention, and it comes back. Or second *jhāna*, or whatever it is. I’m just intending for it to come up, and there it comes.

So with a lot of practice, that’s what I mean by ‘mastery.’ That’s included. You can go directly from nothing to any *jhāna*, just with a subtle intention. It doesn’t need to be so much like, you know ... [snaps fingers twice] like that. It’s probably more like a fader switch, more like a dimmer switch, yeah? But that’s partly what I mean. It doesn’t need to be preceded by its preceding *jhānas*, doesn’t need to be preceded by its base, whatever base practice, springboard practice of *mettā* or breath or whatever you’re doing.

I also mean that you can access and sustain that *jhāna* pretty much in any posture, and when you’re going for a walk. It means you’re doing a loop around *there* for an hour in the lanes, and you can be doing that pretty much in the fourth *jhāna*, or whatever it is, if we’re talking about mastery of the fourth *jhāna*. I also mean that a *jhāna* – this is part of mastery again – that you can really sustain it and remain in it. I’m going to come back to this. There’s a word I want to use: ‘marinate.’ I’m going to come back to this. This is really, really important. We need to sit in a *jhāna* a long time. It’s doing a lot of work on the cells, on the being, on the *citta*. It’s fine to go through for two seconds on the way – that’s all fine, but the real work happens when we really just get in and sit there for a long time, and really let that change our habits, our mental habits, and our energetic habits. It’s really *doing* something different to mind and body, and that takes time, and it takes putting myself in it and staying there for a while.

‘Mastery’ also means navigating; I can move from that *jhāna* to any of the other *jhānas* that I already know, and I don’t have to go sequentially. Let’s say I’m working on my mastery of the third, then I can go from the third to the first, or from the first to the third, or whatever. Yeah? Or the second. So that includes what I call ‘leapfrog.’ I can ‘leapfrog.’ Yeah? This is partly what I mean.

[23:44] ‘Mastery’ might also mean that I can modulate. So again, if we go back to this idea that a *jhāna* isn’t really one thing – it’s a territory. It’s a realm. And like a lot of realms, it has different (as I said) flavours, aspects, regions, levels. And I can modulate, move between those different levels, and actually, eventually, also bring in other qualities to mix with it, like mixing cocktails. I can add a bit of this and a bit of that, and get an even nicer cocktail, or a different cocktail. In that process of learning to mature, it probably will be the case that what I originally thought was, say, the first *jhāna* – after I’ve gone through all that mastery process, by the time I finish, the first *jhāna* actually feels quite a bit different, and I understand something different. As Ajaan Geoff used to say to me, “Stick Post-it labels on them at first.” You know those sticky labels? They just come off. It’s like, don’t erect a whole sign that “*That’s* the first *jhāna*.” You say, “Okay, I think this is first *jhāna*, but let’s just put a Post-it label now.” We’ll go through this process, and they’ll change over time as you work on them. They also

change retrospectively. Once I get used to the third *jhāna*, the first *jhāna* is transformed indirectly by my repeated experience in the third *jhāna*, okay? We have to be a little bit easy, loose with the labels.

So ‘mastery’ – I mean that for all the eight *jhānas*. Now, as I said yesterday, we are where we are. Each person, you’re where you are. And what we’re really interested in is your – what did I call it? – the playground at your edge, *your* playground at your edge. Because that’s the big picture: eventually I want mastery of all that, but we are where we are, and the way I’m going to get mastery is by playing in that playground that’s on my edge. That’s what’s going to give me mastery of that playground. And at a certain time, when I get that mastery, then the playground just shifts – either by itself, or I just have to a little bit shift it. And then I’m in a new playground. That’s my work. That’s my play. That’s my digestion, yeah? That’s the way I would like to think about this, or encourage.

The Buddha has a sutta – I can’t remember what it’s called, but it might even be called something like the *Stupid Cow Sutta* or something like that, the *Foolish Cow*.³ Very briefly – I’m not going to read it because it’s too long. But he basically describes a foolish, inexperienced mountain cow who is happily eating pasture in a field, and looks up and sees another field over *there*, and thinks, “Ooh, I bet the grass is nice over there! Let me go down there, and I’ll eat some of that nice-looking grass.” And because this cow is foolish and inexperienced and whatever else the Buddha calls it, the cow tries to do that, but actually is not very sure of its footing, even where it’s standing, gets stuck in some ditch or something between the field, can’t get to where it was planning to go – that other, nicer-looking pasture – can’t get *back* to where it was happily eating before, and is just stuck in this ditch. “Just so, monks,” *da-da-da-da*. The idea is: wait until you master that place before moving on. That make sense? Very brief. Yeah?

And now, a contradiction. [laughs] So that’s mostly the emphasis, *and* sometimes there’s really a kind of magic involved in all this stuff. Sometimes you’ll find, “I’ll just try it. Just try. Just try something.” You think, “Oh, I couldn’t possibly get *da-da-da*.” Just try it. Sometimes the mind will just do something that you think, “Wow, that’s amazing,” you know? So yes, mostly this idea about mastery and playgrounds, and *sometimes* – again, some people, at different times, it’s like, just *try* something that feels it’s beyond you. So, contradiction.

Once you really get into all this, and if you will, if you have the patience and really what boils down to the love and the desire, actually, if you have the love and the desire, the eros, and you do develop this kind of mastery, then it really begins to feel like the *jhānas* – they’re almost like dimensions of being, if you like. They’re beautiful, amazing dimensions of being, treasures, treasure realms, enchanted realms. And they’re there, and they’re available for us. And this becomes a part of one’s life, and a part of one’s sense of what existence *is* and what the cosmos includes. So they certainly give a sense of dimensionality to our own being, but they also become almost cosmic, in a way. And one gets to feel that they’re realms that are kind of ‘already there.’ They already exist.

There’s the tea bell. This is absolutely ridiculous. Should I just keep going? We’ll check in and ...? All right. And now you get to the juicy bit. You want it, yeah? [laughter] They really feel like they’re realms that are already there, as if they just kind of exist, like a realm exists. This begins to get obvious around the third *jhāna*. It’s much less obvious in the first or second *jhāna*. But after a while in the third *jhāna*, you really feel this is like an enchanted, paradisaical realm that is just sort of *there*, and I get the blessedness of being able to enter that, and hang out in that, and come out of that, etc. And it’s only that

we need to *find* them. They're *there*. Or they're like radio stations, like frequencies. I never listen to the radio, but you have these presets, right? You can put in Radio 1 or whatever it is, right? It's just like that. Or the old style, where you actually tune the ... thingy. Similarly, you might press the preset, and still it needs this fine-tuning. You know, the old ones used to have a big knob and a little knob that was the fine-tuner. Anyway, it doesn't matter; they're like radio stations. They're in the air anyway. So it begins to be, it's not like I'm huffing and puffing to make this *jhāna* happen. It's like they're *there*. And what we're doing is tuning to something that's already there. We can have this sense of them, is what I'm saying.

Or I used to feel like it was a bit like a wardrobe. It's like you've got your wardrobe of clothes, and they're all just lined up there. And you can reach in, and "Okay, today I want to wear my pink glitter onesie outfit," and it's right there. And I can just pull it and use it. They're all just available. So we begin to have this sense of them.

If you come to me at the end of the retreat and say, "Oh, it was fantastic. I never had any *jhāna* before, and I got to the eighth *jhāna*," I'll say, "Oh, what a shame," because – I mean, it'd be good, obviously, but actually, there'll be no way that you would have gotten into the way we're talking about with this playground and this kind of mastery. And this is – again, it's my opinion, my emphasis – this is what's really going to make a difference. This is what's really going to be a treasure that affects the being, okay? So going too quickly through, we're not actually getting that treasure and the maximum value. Or it's a bit like a tourist going on holiday, and you go, and in your mobile phone, you take the photo of whatever it is, and then you send it on your Facebook to your friends, and they 'like,' and you 'like' what they sent you. And it's all like, "Okay, been there, done that." But it's not the same as really being there and living it.

So they're not achievement badges. We really want something so profound, such a profound treasure. We want it to work on the being. We have to linger. We have to live there. We have to, as I said, marinate, absorb – not just *get* absorbed, but almost absorb the *jhāna* itself into our being, get to know it intimately, so that the cells, the mind, the habit patterns of mind, etc., and energy are affected. [32:39] And in that way it makes a really long-term difference to one's life, a long-term difference.

I remember talking to someone reporting after another *jhāna* retreat that they did, and it was their first time, and they said, "Oh, I had a great time." And they'd just whipped through all of them. But it won't be – and this is a while later now, and I can tell [for] this person, it hasn't become a profound resource. Okay, so they had a good time those ten days or whatever it was. Nothing has altered in their sense of existence. Nothing has altered from that *jhāna* practice in their sense of existence, of self and world. Maybe they didn't *want* anything to be altered in their sense of existence. Sometimes we get quite attached to our sense of how we think the world and the self is. We're attached to a certain view, etc., philosophy, whatever it is. This person had a good time, but so what? So 'marinate' means a long time, and many times, in one *jhāna*. It's part of the mastery, okay?

Some of you may not be aware of this; some of you will be very aware of it, or a little less so. There are all kinds of opinions and arguments out there in the Dharma world about how to demarcate, "Is this *jhāna*? Is that *jhāna*? What did the Buddha mean? How do we define it, etc.?" Some of you will be kind of oblivious to all that. Some of you will be, you know, exposed to that – all kinds of opinions. "Do I have it? Is this it?" Different teachers saying different things, writing different things – who are

you going to trust? And why? If you *are* exposed to that difference of opinion, who are you going to trust? And why are you going to trust? Or which version, which definition are you going to trust? But more importantly, why? Or if I change that question, what *matters* here? What's important? There's all this charged opinion about this stuff. What actually matters here?

We *could* say, one *could* say: well, if your experience matches the Buddha's descriptions, as I just very briefly rushed through and read out, if there is an extraordinary opening to well-being or different kinds of well-being, if there's a really deep sense of different kinds of beauty, if there's a really profound sense of resource that's coming from that, if the practice of whatever it is you're doing brings, in an integrated way, insight and freedom, and it makes sense as part of the path in an integrated way, then *if* we need to make definitions and demarcations, that would seem pretty good to call that a *jhāna*, right? If it's all that. *And* I can still improve its quality. I can still say, "Okay, that's a *jhāna*," but I can still work on improving it.

Sometimes all these opinions and what we bring to these questions – I have another question, which is: can I be more intelligent than I am being in relation to these questions? Some of you have not even been exposed to all this stuff yet, so you say, "Why is he going on about that?" But some of you will be. Can I bring more intelligence to these questions? I'll say what I mean by 'intelligence' in a moment. But I mean more than scholarship.

So we're here. I'm teaching this. I'm giving a certain emphasis and a certain range. I would say, you know – I guess I've already said this: I teach *jhānas*, or the *jhānas* that we're talking about here are really breathtakingly extraordinary experiences. They lead naturally onwards. So there's a way, organically, that one *jhāna* will just ripen and mature into the next, just like what the Buddha described, and one has that sense as one's going through: "Oh, wow. Here I am 2,500 years later, and my experience – I can really get the sense of what he's talking about there." If there is a strong and deep building of confidence through these practices, and love of the path, if those are fruits too that you can feel, if freedom comes out of it and a capacity more and more to let go, to be okay with more and more, if transformation comes, if insight that liberates comes, and the insight that comes is congruent and integrated into the path – all that, it's like, that's the package that I want to encourage.

But also that there is – and here's that word again – responsiveness and intelligence. That's part of the deal too. Some *jhānas*, when some people describe them, they're completely unresponsive states. One is supposedly so deeply absorbed, one actually doesn't know where one's been, and one can't make any changes or responsiveness within that state. I'm going to come back to this. Why would I want something like that? It might *sound* better – because it *sounds* better, doesn't it? Is it? Can we bring intelligence and boldness to our questioning? Something *sounds* better. A lot of people are saying maybe it's better. *Is* it better?

So by 'intelligence,' I mean a certain boldness. I mean much more than scholarship: "Well, I go back to the Buddha, and this Pali word means ..." – that's all good, but I mean more than that. I mean a wisdom to discern what is essential. Right now we're talking about *jhānas*, but this actually applies to the whole of the path. Can I develop a wisdom to discern what is essential, what is important? What's important to know? What's important to understand? What's important to develop? And what is secondary? Oftentimes this faculty is not very developed in meditators. In my opinion, I find a lot of

students or whatever emphasizing, kind of mistaking what's secondary for what's primary, emphasizing what's not so important.

And what I said yesterday about listening on your toes – do you remember that? Everything that I'm saying, this should set you recalibrating, rethinking, reorienting: “What does that mean? What do I ...?” You know, please don't just be passive about it. This is actually quite a big deal. Do I have that wisdom to discern what's essential? What's secondary? Do I have a nose for it? Do I have a nose, an intuition, an intelligence? Can I develop a nose for it? Because sometimes, some of these arguments, it's like quibbling over what's insignificant, what's secondary. In the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, it says *parimukhaṃ*. The meditator, with the breath, sits down at the base of the tree and puts their attention *parimukhaṃ*. *Parimukhaṃ* means something like ‘around the mouth.’ So they say, “Oh! Okay. Well, the Buddha means this is really the place to pay attention.” And then people arguing about that – does it really matter? Is it really important? Does it make a difference? Does it make a difference if I keep the breath or my primary object? Some people say, “Absolutely. You can't let go of the primary object. If you're doing *jhāna*, you need to keep the breath. You need to keep the primary object.” We'll see, actually, that you can do it both ways. We'll come back to that.

Some people say, “It's only a *jhāna* if the senses close, if you can't hear anything.” Well, the Buddha didn't say that. And does it matter? Again, it *sounds* better. If I make the definition, “It's only a *jhāna* when the senses close,” that sounds like it's a better thing, right, than if they don't close? Would it? I mean, most people would say it sounds better. I don't know if it is. I think what I want to say is, can we bring a kind of discernment and intelligence to these questions? Which are important, and which are not? What's important? What's secondary? What fruits will I get from pursuing questions that are actually not that important? Taste the fruit. Be nourished by the fruit, by the juicy flesh of the fruit, and not worried about the pips and the pith of the apple, etc.

These questions are related to – what is our conception, and what is our emphasis, what's the main point of *jhāna* practice? And again, if you read certain things, or if you listen to different teachers, either explicitly or implicitly, you're going to hear various views from different teachers and different teachings about, what is the main point here of *jhāna* practice? For some people, some teachers might emphasize, we're really changing the habit of *papañca*. You know what *papañca* is? The mental proliferation. The primary thing you're doing, and the primary point of *jhāna* practice, is to change that habit, and actually eradicate that habit of *papañca*. So the whole thing, really, the purpose is a movement to simplicity, to having or developing a mind that's simple, that doesn't get complicated and embroiled in *papañca*. That's one view. Now, that might be explicitly stated, or just, you have to kind of listen a bit more to the totality of someone's teaching and hear, “Oh, that's their thrust. Okay.”

Another person will say, “What's the point of *jhāna* practice?” And it's really that what you're doing is developing a kind of power in the mind that, like a laser beam, the attention can dissect phenomena, because in dissecting them, that's what insight is. I chop things. I see them really, really fine, down to the atomic details. And that's the point of *jhāna* practice, is to develop this laser-like attention.

And/or – there might be combinations here – someone might say, “No, what we're developing in *jhāna* is the ability to sustain unwaveringly the focus on something, unwaveringly hold the mind or attention on something.” The assumption there is, as if automatically, holding the attention on

something will reveal the reality of that thing, will reveal the way things are. If I can just stare at this thing long enough, it will reveal the nature of it. It will reveal the way it really is.

Now, sometimes this isn't explicitly said. You have to kind of hang out with the whole totality of a person's teaching, or a certain drift of teaching, and see, "Oh, that's the assumption. That's how it fits in with the whole path." Is that true? If I stare at an atom or, let's say, an electron long enough, just staring at it long enough will not reveal the nature of the electron. Or anything else – if I stare at an egg long enough. I have to *do* stuff with something. And certainly in quantum physics, the electron – it's only when I start doing different things that I start to encounter what's most interesting about the true nature of the electron. And I start to realize, "Oh, it's actually dependent on how I look, and whether I look, and what I do, and what's around it." So it's not just staring at something. Again, why am I saying all this? Because so much, we arrive at situations like this with the idea: "It's really about, how long can I stay steady with my attention on something?" I don't want to say that's unimportant, but I just want to shake up the sense of what we're doing and what's priority here, and what may be important, may be less.

Another context might be, someone very rarely, stage by stage, you go through eight *jhānas*, and then you go to the next stage, which is the experience of the Unfabricated. That's quite rare, but it's there. For me, I would say, as I said last night, there are resources that come with the practice of the *jhānas*, that really enable, really help us to let go. We say, "Let go, let go, let go, let go." Once I'm this rich in this beauty, once I have these treasures available to me, it becomes much easier to let go. I don't need the food to be nice. I don't need this or that. Who cares? I have so much, abundant – oh, my cup runneth over! – so much overflowing well-being, and delight, and pleasure, and happiness. I can let go of all kinds of things then. So that's one of the functions, this deep resource, as I would see it: I can let go of clinging to things.

I also, secondly, begin to understand the whole process of fabrication of perception, how the mind can fabricate less and fabricate more. And in moving through the *jhānas*, I begin to understand that. That's also one of the reasons, one of the points.

And a third reason is the mystical opening, the kiss of the mystic. For me, that's a really important point and reason. I want my sense of existence, my sense of world, of self, of other, to open up. And it will be in the impress and the opening of these beautiful realms and experiences. That's a point, for me. That's one of the main points.

Okay. *Jhānas* alone will not liberate one totally. They won't bring you to the end of *dukkha*. And I think probably, say, *most* Dharma teachers would agree on that. There may be someone who disagrees, but I don't know. But definitely, most people agree on that. *Jhānas* alone will not liberate totally. But I want to say, nor will insight alone. Nor will both *jhānas* and insight, the combination. So ... [laughter] Okay, let's end there. [laughter] Just kidding. No. We need the combination. We need the combination if we're really talking about big, wide, deep liberation, we need the combination of insight and *samādhi*, and as I said last night, we need the psychological work. We're a whole different species now than we were in the Buddha's day. Yes, of course, there's lots that's the same. The whole way we feel our self, the whole aspirations and what we consider normal in human relationship, with ourselves and with others, and what we want from life – I'm not going to go into that, but there's a whole range of psychological work that, if we're talking about liberation nowadays, for *us*, for you and me, needs to

include all that. So yes, *samādhi*; yes, insight; and yes, psychological work; and yes, the cultivation of virtues and the beautiful qualities – *mettā*, and generosity, and compassion, all those – those four together, let's say.

So why the *jhānas*, and why the mastery? Because they're part of that mix. [50:37] That's one reason: because they're part of that mix, and the *jhānas*, when they're mastered, will give more insight in relation to fabrication. They'll give more resources, etc. They'll give more of that. We open ourselves more to the mystic impress and the kiss of the mystic.

But one thing I really want to emphasize, and maybe a style or an approach that I want to emphasize: I would say, or when I thought and reflected, what do I really emphasize when I teach *jhānas*, apart from what I've just said? I would also say – and you may have heard it and be familiar with it – I would say, I would emphasize sensitivity, subtle discernment of different qualities of being, different qualities of heart, of energy, different frequencies of vibration and energy. Sensitivity, subtle discernment, refinement, attunement: these are the things that I would really like to emphasize, or bring into the picture of the way I would like to teach, and what I would like to communicate and kind of transmit.

All those qualities – sensitivity, attunement, subtle discernment, refinement, beautiful, beautiful capacities of the soul, so all those, plus this framework that I would like to give about the *jhānas* – they allow the *jhānas* or *jhāna* practice to then fit in very easily and congruently, and in a very natural, integrated way, into emptiness practices. They just work – we're talking about the same things: sensitivity, attunement, refinement, subtle discernment. We need all that in emptiness practices and the way they deepen. In Soulmaking Dharma practices, we need sensitivity, subtle discernment, refinement, attunement, all of that. In emotional work, whether it's with ourselves or with another person, again, we need sensitivity, refinement, attunement, subtle discernment. In healing as well, I would say, healing the emotions, healing the heart, those capacities/capabilities are also very much part of what I would regard as part of healing. In relational skill, sensitivity, subtle attunement, refinement – you see, those same kind of developments are actually part of *jhāna*, emptiness, soulmaking, emotional work, healing, and relational stuff. There's something very integrated here.

But as well as that, or more than that, all this opens – the *jhānas* themselves, and this kind of “Why practise them?”, what I'd like to emphasize – something to do with the beauty of existence. So if you ask me, “What's the point of *jhānas*?” I wouldn't say, “Yeah, so you can really stay steady with something, and then you can be clear about what it is.” It's something about opening more and more, or to more and more of the beauty, the beauties of existence, inner and outer. As I mentioned earlier, there's something of magic here. And again, that's what I would like. You start to feel yourself as something of a magician, a magician in these realms, a magician who can, let's say, conjure these realms, or who has access to these realms. There's something of magic in the whole thing. And there's certainly something of art. And so this is the kind of flavour, orientation, scope, feel, attitude, view that I would really encourage, and those are some of the reasons why. [54:46]

Related to all this, you can see that a person's emphasis or definition of a *jhāna*, of *jhāna* practice, depends on their idea of what insight is. If I've got that idea that insight is a kind of ‘drilling down,’ a drilling down through the strata or layers of rock, of illusion or construction, then what do I need? I need a sharp tool, a laser beam. So then the idea I have of *jhāna* practice needs to go with that idea of

what insight is doing. I view my *jhāna* practice as the development of this super-intense, super-hard sustained focus, and what I tend to emphasize then in the teaching of *jhānas* is more intensity, more sharpness, more concentration, more focus.

If I think of insight as *seeing clearly*, meaning seeing in more detail, then again, I tend to focus, I tend to think of the *jhānas*, and emphasize in the teaching of *jhānas*, something like that. Maybe I need to see in detail, for my insight, the process of aggregates in time. Maybe that's what I regard insight as: if I can just see the momentary arising and passing of the aggregates, the five aggregates in time, that's what insight is. And so my *jhāna* practice needs to set me up so I can see, like a magnifying glass, and very fine, and I can see that – *if* that's what I think insight is, if that's what I think ultimate reality is. You see? We're working backwards here, and it makes an implication on what we think a *jhāna* is, and then what we tend to emphasize within the *jhāna* practice.

Or again, as if I – I've said this before – if I can just *stare* at something long enough, the reality, the truth of it will be seen, because I'm just staring at it plainly. If that's what I think, if I think 'plain staring' reveals reality, if that's what I think reality is, something that is revealed with 'plain staring at, plain looking at' ... yeah?

Or I'm 'sharpening' my mind, so I just zip through eight *jhānas* back and forth, and then do some insight practice. I've sharpened Mañjuśrī's sword so I can kind of atomize things. There's a relationship here between the way the goal is seen, the way insight is conceived of, the way *jhāna* is conceived of, and then what we come to emphasize within *jhāna* practice. That's why I said, if I want a liberation that actually does have sensitivity in it, and attunement, and relational skill, and psychological awareness, and want to understand about emptiness as something very different, to do with ways of looking and fabrication, then I'm going to have to think about *jhānas* in a very different way. Or rather, it's better, it's more congruent to think about them in a certain way.

It's true: you can pick up certain phrases where the Buddha says in the suttas, "With his mind imperturbable," "With the *jhānas* you can cut through a mountain,"⁴ and all that. They're not that common, but they get extracted and then repeated over and over. And dependent on what you've been exposed to, you come to believe that's what's important: imperturbability, the unwaveringness. And actually, the Buddha just said it in a little phrase once or twice in the whole Pali Canon. And somehow, over history, it comes to get repeated by teachers, *da-da-da*, and that's what we think.

Or 'no thought' – we tend to think *that's* the most important thing. Now, I remember, after I'd finished a year retreat, and I went for a Dharma Yatra in France, and they said, "Well, will you come and tell the people about your year retreat?" And I said, "Sure, okay," and I think I just answered questions or something. I can't remember. But the first question was, "A year, wow. Did you ever experience a time when the mind stopped thinking?" It was the first question. So, "Yeah" – as if that was the most important thing. And how much, in our meditation, we get to think, "Oh, that's it." We measure it by how much thinking there is. "Is it going well? Is it not?" So these things are insidious, these meta-level views, and they get into the nuts and bolts of how I'm regarding *this moment* in the meditation. This moment, "Hmm, I'm thinking." Who *cares* if you're thinking? Does it really matter? Is the thinking making you miserable, or is it the view about the thinking that's making you miserable? Is that thinking even getting in the way of *samādhi*, and well-being, and bliss, and ecstasy? These

things are really, really important and insidious. Again, what does it mean to be bold? What does it mean to be intelligent? What does it mean to question these things?

So what happens if we start with the goal? Start with the idea – now, people will construe that differently: where we’re going, and what awakening is – but start with the idea, what is insight? It means understanding something about the emptiness of things. I’m rushing through this now. But there are only ways of looking. There’s no way, independently of a way of looking, that something really is. [1:00:47] There’s no privileged way of looking. There are just ways of looking. Things are empty. Insight is the practice of ways of looking that liberate, and ways of looking that fabricate less. I’m intending to talk about this in a lot more detail. I’m just going quickly now, sorry, because I’m rushed.

What that means is that what we practise, and what we’re left with at the end of practice, is *malleability*: malleability of perception, malleability of view, malleability of way of looking. This is a goal and a starting point in practice – more than agility, more than the ability to move quickly between the *jhānas*, actually, to really shape the view, and let the view and the experience of things be shaped, through a whole range, and feeling the impact on perception.

The Buddha called the *jhānas* “perception attainments.”⁵ But we very rarely hear that, because again, what historically gets emphasized is “no thought, imperturbability, laser-like” ... yeah? But actually, just as commonly, he called them “perception attainments.” And what on earth is a perception attainment? So this I would like to emphasize: perception attainment. We’re training certain perceptions, and to think of it that way, more than “I’m training my concentration.” Again, I’m going to contradict myself and say, “Train your concentration,” etc. But what if we think about it as training certain perceptions? And that has a significance regarding emptiness that I will come to.

So we’re developing these resources, we’re cultivating virtues, we’re developing our psychological and emotional skills, and we’re training certain perception attainments. If I want my awakening, my liberation to include – and some people don’t care – but *if* you want it to include the beauties of sensitivity, attunement, deep intelligence, responsiveness, pliability, malleability, discernment, subtlety, how do we need to think about the *jhānas*, and what we emphasize, and how we practise them? And if you decide that you don’t care about all that stuff, then that’s fine. You can think about them differently.

Yes, definitely, we *do* want to increase and develop our focus and our concentration. But we also, and oftentimes more importantly, are interested in this development of deep, profound resources, of training the perceptions (*what does that mean?*), the relation of that with emptiness understanding, and the development of all these lovely, lovely capacities and capabilities of attunement, sensitivity, subtlety of awareness, beauty, magic, art.

Okay. I’ve finished, but we haven’t talked about walking meditation yet, have we? No. So, we’ll need to expand this gradually. And again – I’m just going to be very brief now – it’s because you’re all in different places, with different histories. If you’re familiar with energy body, walking meditation is with energy body awareness. Actually, if you’re already familiar with *jhāna*, then you can start: here’s one end of my walking meditation path. I’m standing. I stand as long as it takes to get, let’s say, whatever it is, the *pīti* or the well-being, the happiness. And I just hang out there. If it’s nice, I’ll hang out. I won’t even walk, okay? I’m just standing, and I’m in that. Okay? That’s quite an advanced stage already, if you can just get there. I’m just mentioning that. And then, if I do that, then I walk, and I’m concentrating in the whole body space on the *pīti*, on the pleasure. I don’t care about my feet. I don’t

care about the sensations. I'm walking back and forth with the pleasure, and that's what I'm concentrating on – if you're there already; most of you won't be.

If you know energy body already, same deal. Okay, I stand, feel my contact, etc., all that, and then open the space and just, what's the feel? What's the texture? What's the vibration of the energy body? And then I walk back and forth with that. And I have to find the pace of the walking that enables me to sustain that and get into that experience. Yeah? So it might be really fast. It might be really slow. It might be in between. It might change as I'm doing the practice, yeah? And if at any point I want to stop and stand and just get it back again, just stop and stand and get it back again. And I might spend five minutes at the end of the path. It doesn't matter. What helps me get that energy body awareness, and helps me get into it and in touch with it?

If you're still not quite sure what the energy body is, then see if you can just walk up and down with a whole-body awareness, okay? So just the sensations in the whole body. In other words, in terms of our choice, the least preferable is just the sensations in your feet, okay? It's fine, it's good, and if that's what you want to do or all you can do, that's great. But there's a kind of a movement here, with maturation.

Okay, last thing. The rhythm in the day of formal practice, sit-walk-stand – we're going to say more about this, much more, later. But basically, again, it's up to you. What feels like it's helpful right now? So if you're sitting, and it feels good, and you feel into it, sit longer. You don't have to sit forty-five minutes. You could sit just as long as it feels like it's productive and fruitful, and you're having a good time. If then you begin to *not* have such a good time, see if you can just work with it. Play your edges. See if you can expand it, okay? But basically, you're following what feels fruitful. And if you're out walking, and you're just really into it, and it's going really well, just stay walking longer, or standing, or whatever, right? So there's a kind of rhythm that's individual and variable, and you're responsive to it, yeah? You have to be sensitive and responsive. Okay?

And then there's this – you know, we talked about going for walks, and if you do yoga or qigong or whatever, also time to just chill out and have a cup of tea. The day needs to breathe. In this kind of practice, the day needs to breathe. So sit, walk, sit, walk, sit, walk – may not be that helpful. It might be helpful for other practices. On this kind of practice, the day needs to breathe, and we need to be responsive. Different rhythms at different times – what's really working right now? What's supporting right now? If this is the first time you've not had a fixed schedule, then set yourself a fixed schedule, you know, if you're feeling at sea, and just go with that. But as time goes by, you'll begin to be more fluid, and it will be more responsive. Okay? Sorry so long.

Let's just sit for one minute together.

[silence]

Thank you, everyone. Enjoy tea. There's no need to rush, because it's only you guys or whoever it is doing the clearing up. So take whatever time you need, and the whole thing just rolls. We're on an open schedule, yeah? But the hall is open all the time, so enjoy tea. See you tomorrow.

¹ E.g. AN 5:28.

² E.g. AN 9:35.

³ AN 9:35, *Gāvī Sutta*, or the *Cow Sutta*.

⁴ AN 6:24.

⁵ AN 9:36.