Peter’s April 2023 Retreat Report

The focus and goal for this retreat was an experiential understanding of nimitta (nih-meh-tah), a mental phenomenon that precedes the experience of jhana (jah-nah), an extraordinarily intense level of concentration in the mind. The term nimitta was not an important one for the early Buddhist community, developing some centuries after the life of the Buddha. According to the English-Pali Dictionary, nimitta can be defined in several contexts:

* a sign or mark by which something or someone is recognized or identified or known or defined; a distinguishing mark or appearance; a perceived (enduring) attribute, predicate (especially that of permanence); an attribution
* an object or appearance or happening which is significant, which expresses more than itself; a sign, a significant appearance; an omen, a portent
* what one notes or marks; an object of thought or meditation or concentration; an image
* an internal/ appearance or total awareness; a mental impression (appearing as an early stage of jhāna, a sign of progress)
* a ground, a cause, a reason

Early canonical Buddhism places a high value on jhana cultivation, with no reference to nimitta phenomena. As the centuries went by, intense study of the Pali Canon created a more developed conceptual and experiential understanding of the Path to Awakening, and by the time the Visuddhimagga (vih-soo-dee-mah-gah), a primary reference text for Theravada Buddhism was created some 500 years later. By that time, nimitta was well-known as a quality of awareness that precedes the experience of jhana. Here is how nimitta is described in that text as the experience of a dedicated meditator:

the nimitta soon appears to him. But it is not the same for all; on the contrary, some say that when it appears it does so to certain people producing a light touch like cotton or silk cotton or a draught. But this is the exposition given in the commentaries: It appears to some like a star or a cluster of gems or a cluster of pearls, to others with a rough touch like that of silk-cotton seeds or a peg made of heartwood, to others like a long braid string or a wreath of flowers or a puff of smoke, to others like a stretched-out cobweb or a film of cloud or a lotus flower or a chariot wheel or the moon's disk or the sun's disk.

I experienced jhanas many years ago while practicing vedanupassana, as taught by S. N. Goenka, and it emerged during a retreat without any awareness of classic nimitta phenomena, of which I was already conceptually aware at the time. The characteristics of the 4 jhanas have been known since the early days of the Buddha but were highly defined by the time the Visuddhimagga was being distributed among the various Buddhist schools of the first few centuries of the Common Era. My jhana experiences were remarkable, and the validity of my attainments in that regard were acknowledged by Leigh Brasington during a jhana retreat I attended after those first experiences. After several months of being able to re-experience jhanas, my access to them faded and haven’t recurred since then.

I attended a 3-month retreat at the Forest Refuge in 2012 because one of the teachers who would be available for the first 45 days was Marcia Rose, who is an acknowledged teacher of jhana practices. I was unsuccessful at reestablishing jhana, and had brief intervals of experiencing one of the characteristic signs of nimitta, the feeling of sensation around the nose being uninterrupted and like cool water or menthol, but this didn’t lead to jhana.

I attended the retreat that was led by Shaila Catherine in February of this year and was inspired by her teaching skills to register for a 10-day jhana retreat in Georgia later this year, and my intention during this recent self-retreat was to cultivate the experience of nimitta in preparation for the upcoming event. I became much more directly aware of the various forms of nimitta during the retreat and want to share them with you along with my tactics for achieving this awareness. The following are comments about the practices I engaged in during this recent retreat:

I began sitting each day at 4 AM, first sitting on the cushion for two hours, then eating breakfast, walking briskly for 45-60 minutes, then 2 hours on a reclining chair, followed by 2 hours on the cushion. I would then eat lunch, go for another walk of the same duration, then alternate 2-hour sittings on the cushion and chair until about 10 or so in the evening, without supper. I don’t expect this to be considered as the standard of retreat practice; it is the routine I’ve developed over many years and retreats—it works for me, but you have to find your own routine.

At the beginning of the retreat, I wrote “May the Merits of This Practice Benefit Everyone I Meet” on the dry erase board as a persistently available reminder of the importance of bringing whatever benefits from the practice into my day-to-day relations.

I determined to apply a rigorous protocol, repeated multiple times in the Satipatthana Sutta: *atapi sati sampajanna* (ah-tah-pee sah-tee sahm-pah-jahn-yah), translated as *diligent mindful clear comprehension*. This approach to cultivating the process of Awakening must be repeatedly applied to the practice of mindfulness of breathing meditation. if I wasn’t practicing mindfulness of breathing, I was repeating forms of a lovingkindness mantra with the same protocol. Because I have so much experience with sitting meditation, my internal process can slip into “autopilot”, that is, not sufficiently diligent, and more susceptible to mind-wandering. Being aware of the nature of mind-wandering without identifying with that arises and passes in awareness as essentially real but instead as the manifestation of impersonal mind conditioning operations is part of the practice of vipassana (vih-pah-sah-nah), insight into the transient and impersonal nature of subjective experience but is inappropriate for cultivating nimitta awareness.

Being aware of mind-wandering and resolutely redirecting attention back to direct breath awareness is key for cultivating concentration, and this requires atapi sati sampajanna with strong determination that is gentle and persistent. I realized during the retreat that there are two important realizations—the focus of attention can be anywhere around the nostrils/upper lip area, and there should be a strong internal emphasis on the quality of mental attention—distracted or focused, forced or relaxed, clearly aware or fuzzy. The goal is relaxed, alert, focused attention to the particular characteristics of attention in a designated area, persistently applied. The area I focused attention on ranged from the rim of the nostrils, through the upper lip, to the sensations noticeable along the inner gum line just above the front of the teeth.

When I consistently apply this rigorous approach to the practice, there is a very noticeable zone of sensory awareness—the upper lip is very “puffy” with sensation, the touch sensation at the front of the roof of my mouth is very noticeable, as well as the area just at the rim of the nostrils. The challenge is to maintain a high degree of interest in investigating these areas, disregarding any emerging commentaries. It is not as though the thoughts are “strong-armed” away, but rather the “signal strength” of them gets weaker and diminished in the ability to attract attention.

There is an art to maintaining interest in the simplicity and repetitiveness of meditation practice, and this is best accomplished during an extended residential retreat, which immerses daily routines into the practice of atapi sati sampajanna, which must overcome our strong conditioning to be externally prompted and caught up in a stream of internal commentary.

Several days into the retreat, which lasted from April 7-20, I became more aware of that feeling of cool, wet breath touch, right at the tip of the nostrils, and could sustain this for quite a while during a sitting, perhaps well over an hour. On the next to last night of the retreat I began to notice internal visual phenomena—the form of nimitta recommended by the Visuddhimagga teachings and many contemporary jhana teachers, including Shaila Catherine. What I noticed, with eyes closed, was a clustering like a fuzzy white cloud that seemed to emerge from the otherwise dark screen of the “mind’s eye”. This would hover in the center of awareness, and then slowly coalesce into a more dense and brighter internal image. I realize now that I have been aware of these phenomenal experiences off and on for years but didn’t “connect the dots” regarding what is was perceiving, believing that the nimitta should look like a flashlight beam viewed from many yards away, a pinpoint of light. What I had been reading suggested that this cloudlike cluster of brightness would become denser an brighter until it became that pinpoint of light.

Later on that night, after going to bed, I noticed other internally visual phenomena—it seemed as if in the blackness of my mind’s eye there were a multitude of stars twinkling in and out of existence. I recall being out in the countryside in Colorado one night and being astounded at the brilliance of the starry display without the common interference of atmospheric humidity and urban lighting I live in normally. The quality of my internal state of awareness was very undisturbed and uninterested in my normal internal chatter, very peaceful emotionally and with great ease physically, I could sit for long periods of time with a diminished feeling of striving regarding being erect—my body was in a relatively effortless groove of comfort and clarity.

While cultivating this understanding is important, the takeaway for me is increasing confidence in the teachings. Achieving jhana is the means to the end for Awakening. Jhana has always been understood as a way to clear the mind of distractions to a very high degree, then reemerging from jhana states to practice vipassana. I often experience a distinctive awareness of how jumbled up and turbulent my normal state of mind is when not in the atmosphere of retreat practice. This is not really a problem, not a necessary state of grace. I am more clearly aware of the jumble as the experience of the first two of the Four Noble Truths—the distress and confusion of dukkha, along with a more clear awareness of how craving and clinging operates to create and support dukkha. When I sit now, away from the retreat environment, my meditation practice not as conditioned by atapi sati sampajanna, but I realize that every time I become aware of distractions in the mind and simply return attention back to that area between the rim of the nostrils and the sensations of breath touching the inside of gums, I am momentarily reconditioning my mind for the next time I go on retreat, which I expect to be this October in Georgia with Shaila Catherine, cultivating a more concentrated and peaceful mind.