Q&A with Carol Wilson

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:00

So I guess you know today is Thanksgiving, which in this country is one of the big feast holidays, sort of a harvest festival. But literally, it is purporting to be about what the word says: Thanksgiving.

And I know in my kind of upbringing and generally moving around the world, it seems sometimes the Thanksgiving part is sort of lesser and it just becomes a time to get together. I guess the guys watch football. I just heard something on the radio, some commentator bemoaning that he didn't really like Thanksgiving because all people did was get together with your family who gets on your nerves and then watch football. I thought that was really sad.

So anyway, maybe Michelle mentioned this in her talk on gratitude, but something that I find very energizing and really helpful is to just take a few minutes and consciously reflect on all the things I have to be truly grateful for. I don't have to be feeling gratitude at the time—it doesn't really matter what I'm feeling. I just bring into my heart what I feel grateful for. And there's always so much more than I would have expected. Things that I hadn't even been thinking of for ages come popping up.

I find it really quite faith-inspiring and energizing because it in no way belittles the sorrow or the sufferings or difficulties that we experience. You know, that sense of, "Well, I have all this to be grateful for so I have no right to suffer"—about whatever things we're suffering about here, small or large. But it's quite the reverse. I find the gratitude opens up a sense of faith and connectedness that lets me bring more openness and compassion to my suffering and sorrow rather than thinking it should go away. So anyway, I just offer that if you feel so inclined.

We have a few moments for questions if you have any. Really, this is a time for questions about our practice here, what's coming up here, because this is where we are.

Question: Concerning feeling tone, when mindfulness is strong or perhaps pure, are there pleasant and unpleasant experiences, or simply neutral?

I think that's an interesting question. Interesting because from my own experience, I would reply that I still find pleasant and unpleasant experiences, but so toned down, so to speak, because there's no reactiveness of mind, that it does, for me, tend to merge towards neutral—sometimes hard to even tell.

But what I think is interesting is, again, this is from Ajahn Buddhadasa, and he does tend to sometimes go his own way in interpretation. But I found this interesting. He was speaking about dependent origination and the point of contact giving rise to feeling tone—pleasant, unpleasant—and that leads into the craving and clinging. And he claims that if we're very mindful and meet the experience right at the point of

contact, that pleasant and unpleasant feeling does not have to arise.

So I'm sure he's talking from his experience, and he even acknowledges that a lot of people don't believe him. I'm not saying that's what we should practice for or look for or expect or evaluate our practice by, but I just offer that as another opinion from someone who's quite learned.

Question: What determines whether something is pleasant or unpleasant? Is it the nature of what is felt, or the nature of the knowing?

What determines whether it's pleasant or unpleasant—the nature of what is felt or the nature of the knowing—is said to be karmic. For instance, one experience, say a sound, could at the same moment be experienced by one person as pleasant and by another person as unpleasant, or by the same person as pleasant one moment and unpleasant the next moment. So it's not the nature of the knowing per se, which is just pure awareness, but the karmic conditions that are coming together at that moment. It's a really subtle and interesting subject just to explore. Don't set up a view, you know—"You're doing good if it gets more neutral." Please don't. But just keep looking.

Question: I really appreciated your talk. I was wanting to know about emptiness—what is it? It seems to me when you describe those moments that we all have, of not clinging, not pushing away, those moments that are clean, so to speak—I think you describe that as emptiness. To me, that feels like a full moment, like a complete moment. And what feels empty to me are those times when I get strung out on an idea and then the pleasure of it goes away and I just see how there's no substance to pleasure.

To me, it's one of the reasons this is hard to talk about—because we get caught in semantics. And no word covers all the different aspects or manifestations of this. So yes, I too often experience or could say the emptiness when it's empty of the clinging or grasping of self. Also, there's alertness. There's wisdom in mind.

It is not diluted or zoned out. It could also be described as fullness—a total completion, an inner completion, contentment where nothing outside or extra is needed, nothing to push away.

Emptiness might not work for you as a word. It's just a word. We use emptiness to mean empty of the sense of self. And the way you were also using emptiness—seeing the emptiness of phenomena—is another aspect of it that I didn't talk so much about last night. Seeing the emptiness of pleasure, or the emptiness of anything that we cling to, because it's ephemeral and vanishes. The illusory nature, so to speak, of all experience, because it all goes. There's nothing to cling to. This is another aspect of emptiness, of selflessness, because there's nothing unchanging and self-referencing in any experience at all.

So that's why this is hard to talk about. I personally feel there are no words to use in any aspect of trying to speak about the truth—whether it's emptiness or selflessness or the illusory nature of phenomena. There are no words that can hold it all, because it's beyond words and concepts. We just try to patch it together the best we can and maybe point our awareness beyond the concepts. So it's tricky.

Question: Would we choose experiences that are more neutral if we're mindful?

I don't necessarily think so. That's like saying that somehow neutral is better than pleasant or unpleasant. Again, that's setting up one particular thing as better than another. For me, I find that choices, when I'm mindful and there's some wisdom present, come more out of a sense of the totality of the situation and what's most helpful or appropriate. Not so much about whether it's pleasant or unpleasant—that's sort of not the issue. It's about what seems appropriate. Sometimes what's appropriate might also be very pleasant. Sometimes it's not. That's just not how the decision is made, at least in my experience.

Have whatever kind of day you have. Just know it for what it is with mindfulness.

Question: Can you say something about eating meditation? For most people, certainly for me, there are a lot of thoughts about eating—before, during, after—about how much, how fast. Other than noting and feeling the body, I wonder if there are other ways of working with that.

You're right, eating is an extremely, sometimes very intense activity during the day for many people. It often comes up in interviews. A whole range of stuff can go on, as I'm sure you all know.

There really isn't a magic trick. But part of it, I find, is to go into the cafeteria first with a kind of intention—okay, let me really explore what goes on. Not an intention to somehow change anything. Often some of the difficulty that comes around eating is that people think they're eating too much or too little, or they're wanting to have less greed or less judgment or whatever. So it's a kind of setup before going in: I want to have less of this or more of that. And the eating experience becomes a struggle before it even begins.

So it's a combination of going in with the intention to be mindful, but also with acceptance—just the clear being with what is, without necessarily trying to change. A real acceptance.

Then I find in eating, as in all large activities through the day, that precise mindfulness helps. For example, standing in line, really feeling your body. Use the body sensations to come back to. Standing in line, really feeling the body, really grounding. As you reach your arm, you can note "reaching, reaching" as you reach for the plate. "Touching" as you touch the coldness of the plate and move it back. That helps to stay grounded in the present moment.

And in that grounding, if I'm touching the plate, I'm standing, and a lot of thinking starts, I see myself leaning forward, wishing the people ahead would hurry up—you notice that more. If you're grounded in just the sensations of standing, you notice when you start to lean forward, when annoyance starts to arise. And rather than "Oh, I'm bad, I should be a good yogi and be calm"—

Oh, annoyance, annoyance. Come back and feel the sensations of annoyance in your body. Notice the thoughts. Notice the seeing contact that gives rise. Seeing, it's unpleasant, they're going too slow, annoyance. So you can get closer and closer to the sense door contact. That's the kind of precision aspect

of mindfulness.

But in a situation like the dining room, we also need to bring in clear comprehension—the other aspect that goes with mindfulness of being aware of the totality of the situation. Sometimes you'll see someone going through the line looking so perfectly mindful, but so slow. And there's forty people behind them. It's not really a balanced mindfulness. Mindfulness needs to include clear comprehension of the whole situation. So it's like knowing when it's appropriate to go slow, knowing there's a whole situation. Then when you get to your place, if you want to take two hours to eat and feel every mouthful, that's fine. So it's kind of both of those.

And you're right, when you're eating, lifting, you might feel lifting. And then forty-five thoughts between lifting and swallowing. And we didn't notice chewing. Okay. When did you wake up? Swallowing. Right there. Note swallowing. Never mind the thoughts you missed. And if somehow in the swallowing you're feeling really tense, somehow those thoughts you missed brought up tension, then you notice tension, right? Then you don't have to retrace it all, but start where you are. You notice tension, tension, tension—just like that. It takes infinite patience and not any expectations.

A question arose about rebirth—why it gets mentioned so much if it's not relevant to our practice.

You probably should ask Joseph, because you might not have noticed, but I've actually never mentioned it. I don't mean to imply that I don't believe it's true or that it's not relevant. From my own experience, I can't remember my previous rebirth and I don't know the next. So for me, it's on the level of a belief. Deeper than a belief, I have a faith because it makes total sense, but I have no proof whatsoever. And I can't offer you anything stronger than that.

In some way, I have a faith that we just keep going, that rebirth happens because it doesn't make sense otherwise. If I didn't believe that, it would be sort of completely nihilistic—just do whatever you want and this is it. You've got to get out in this lifetime. Doesn't look good sometimes. I'm only talking from me. And I can experience karma within this lifetime, and it makes sense to me that it would continue, but I don't have proof for that.

And as far as belief goes, Joseph says you don't have to believe it because believing anything is only a view. Views and opinions are helpful at times. If we are attached to them, they're hindrances. They can block our freedom, our understanding. And if you're trying to create a view that you want to believe because maybe it would make you feel better, that kind of wanting it is what's going to lead to the obsession of mind.

I don't think something as subtle as rebirth is something we can simply decide to believe or not believe. It doesn't work that way. Somehow the belief has to arise from a faith that emerges from your own experience—and experience can mean many different things.

Personally, I think if rebirth or anything else you hear any of us say engenders a lot of confusion in your

mind, it doesn't mean it's right or wrong. But trying to think through it can engender doubt and obsessive thinking, and that experience is not helpful. Doubt is a hindrance. When the mind is caught in obsessive thinking, or wanting to believe something, or becoming upset by what we've heard—at that time of obsession, it's not helpful to keep trying to figure it out. It has simply turned into the hindrance of doubt.

So at that time, really note it as doubt, wanting, obsession—whatever it is—and put it aside. Many doctrines of Buddhism that twenty years ago I couldn't relate to, that made no sense to me—it was true, you don't need them to practice. You absolutely do not need any of these doctrines to practice. We only need to pay attention to what's happening right now, and out of that, understanding will come.

You don't have to try to direct your experience to meet some doctrine you've heard us say. Forget the doctrines. Just bring all your attention to being with present moment experience, and understanding and freedom will come out of that. Whether or not that ever results in being able to take the view of rebirth and say, "Yes, this is true"—if you can leave that aside and just really be with your experience, I think the faith and understanding will come that takes the pressure off of thinking, "Oh my God, only this lifetime—I'm going to make it or bust." A deeper faith will come where you see that is actually an irrelevant thought in some way. And that needs to come from your own experience—it will come from your own experience if you just keep looking.

So noticing doubt, doubt, doubt—any kind of analytical thought can turn into doubt. Just notice that, and recognize that now's not the time. Come back to this moment.

A student asked about working with aversion that seems quite strong—strong identification with a particular thing that keeps triggering the aversion, seeing thoughts of being the victim, but still feeling really caught in it. It could easily last all day. It's really suffering.

When that's going on with me, or any particular thing triggers us and seems to go on for a long time—whether aversion, sorrow, greed—we know we're seeing it on some level. There's some mindfulness, definitely. But it keeps getting triggered. Usually the trigger keeps happening over and over—not something that happened once three weeks ago, but at least the memory of what happened arising again and again.

Can you notice points where it keeps getting re-triggered? Sometimes it's subtle—like it starts, you get into the aversion, then the trigger happens again and it just keeps going, spinning out of control.

I try to come in on whatever level I can at a particular moment. It takes, I feel, a great deal of patience and acceptance that this is happening. It means seeing if there's judging of oneself, thinking that this ought to stop—I'm seeing it, so it ought to stop. I find this is one of the biggest hooks that keeps things going for me: on some level thinking that because I'm seeing it, it ought to stop. By this time in the retreat, enough already—there's no excuse for this to be happening.

Really notice that kind of adds on top of it. It's like aversion to the aversion—multiple layers of regression. And it's actually not the original trigger sometimes anymore. These subtle thoughts of "this shouldn't be going on"—that's actually the aversion of the moment, if you know what I mean.

So I try to come in with attention wherever I can. If it's only at massive aversion, then I do stomping aversion meditation. *Aversion, aversion, hating, hating. I hate everybody and everything.* And just feeling that in my body. Very important to keep coming back to feeling the experience physically if you can in this moment.

A hundred million times pull out of the train of thought—whatever it is, whether it's about the trigger, whether it's this subtle "why is this still happening," whether it's trying to analyze—all of which takes you out of it. Just come back and feel the aversion for the hundred millionth time. *I know this already. I don't need to feel it now.* Feel it. That's what's happening.

Land in the middle of it over and over with as much acceptance as you can muster. *This is just what's happening.* Because what I find is the more I can do that, the more I can accept the whole sordid train of events, the more I land in the middle of it over and over, I start to see what is actually the hook of identification.

It might seem that the identification is with the whole story, but there might actually be one little piece of the experience that the sense of identification is really gripping around. It might be the unpleasantness of the trigger. The identification might be with a subtle thought: "This shouldn't be happening." It might be with a view: "My practice should be better than this by now." It might be that the trigger elicits an unpleasant physical sensation that we don't quite notice, and the aversion is actually being triggered over and over from that unpleasant physical sensation. Do you see what I mean? There are lots of different little pieces, but we have to start by accepting that the whole thing is happening, or we can't get to the more subtle levels of seeing the different component parts and where the identification comes in.

Yogini: Well, with me, the acceptance is really no problem. As soon as I get my balance, I try to just stay with it. What I needed to hear was that mindfulness—just because I'm mindful doesn't necessarily mean it's going to go away.

No. We get caught in that view.

Yogini: I think for me, if I see where I'm identified, great. But sometimes identification can go on so deep that I'm never going to get to it. It's not that crucial to see how I'm identified—that allows advice.

Although in some ways, I wouldn't say identification runs deep. I would just say it arises frequently, moment to moment. It's not some deep thing down there. It's just arising in a moment around a momentary experience. So it's not that it's necessarily so hard to see.

Actually, for me, I'll see the thing that's really hooking me. I can see the different pieces. And if some piece

comes up—it's like, "Oh, I'm really angry now"—I go, "Oh, that's where it's kind of poking at me." Just on that level, nothing more subtle than that.

But you make a good point. We think mindfulness often means it should go away, and that's not the case at all.

About aversion to physical pain—it seems like there's fear around it at times, and as she goes into the pain sometimes it gets worse. She could stay with it, stay with it, but it just seems unbearable.

There are many different ways of working with physical pain. And it's very important, as you said, to be not only aware of the physical sensation, but also of the mind's relationship to it.

It's true, sometimes when we move attention into an unpleasant sensation, it gets more intense. That's absolutely true. Sometimes that happens. And the point isn't to bring our attention to it to make it go away. So we see immediately if that was our point, because as soon as it gets more intense, we think, "Oh, pull back, this isn't working."

It's really important in working with pain to find a balance—being able to move into it very gently with calm attention, simply because that's what's happening. Explore the sensations with a balanced, equanimous mind, but notice when the mind is not balanced and equanimous. When there's fear, when there is aversion, when there's this kind of contraction, be able to note and notice that. In fact, in the moment of fear, that's the strongest experience perhaps, not the pain. And they're two different experiences, although they go together. So really noticing the quality of mind that's with the unpleasant, difficult sensation.

It's not necessarily the most skillful thing to just stay with it, stay with it, stay with it. If we're staying with unpleasant sensation and the experience is, "This is unbearable, this is unbearable, I can't handle this"—that's not mindfulness. There's a quality of real aversion, of contraction, of fear in that, which is very important to notice and feel.

In fact, it might be helpful to move away from the pain, to reconnect with either your primary focus or hearing or something else that's happening, to re-establish a more balanced quality of awareness. And then move back to the difficult sensation with a more calm mind. You'll notice then, "Oh yeah, this is more equanimous." And you'll notice when the aversion starts to come in. Notice that, soften again.

I've had sittings where I could sit a long time with strong pain because the mind could go into it in a very calm way and not get really tight. The next sitting, the mind was tired. As soon as I touched the pain, it was gritting the teeth time. And you could sit like that, gritting your teeth and hating it for an hour, but look at what's being cultivated in the mind. Is that mindfulness? Is it equanimity? Or is it subtle aversion and willpower? That's not the point.

So it's either to keep playing, because you can often go into it, notice the aversion, and back out and give it

a bigger focus. You don't have to be precise when it gets tight. Really be within the field of the whole room, not even just your body, but the whole room. The pain is there, but there's this much more spacious quality of awareness that can help to ease it some. Go back and forth with that, noticing the mind states.

And of course, sometimes if it's at such a point that you just feel overwhelmed and moving would help, that could be an appropriate time to shift, if that's done with awareness of the intention and quite mindfully. So it's a process of balance.

For all of us, there are times where moving doesn't help, the mind is tight and constricted, trying to open up doesn't help. We're in aversion, and that's our practice. At that moment there's no perfect solution—it's going back and forth between it all.

Okay, time to walk. Thank you.

Are there any questions this morning about practice?

I'd just like you to comment about stomping. On Wednesday you mentioned it, and also at the beginning of the retreat you mentioned going out into the woods when you were very angry one time and stomping up and down. You described it as unskillful.

Did I? No, I don't think so. I mentioned stomping up and down in the woods when angry, and she says I said it was unskillful, which I don't think I would have meant. I certainly wouldn't have meant it was unskillful.

Is that the question?

She sees moving physical expression as being helpful. I certainly never meant to say, and I don't think I would have said, that stomping in the woods when you're angry is unskillful.

When I've mentioned stomping meditation, so to speak, I really mean it. When there's a feeling of anger, for example, that is so strong that trying to sit or walk very slowly downstairs—it just feels like the energy is so powerful. It feels as if you're going to explode or scream or do something unskillful around a lot of people. I've practiced it myself, where I go off where no one's around and I really am stomping up and down, and I am aware of anger. There is a modicum of mindfulness there, in a broad sense. Not like noticing the perception that gives rise to unpleasantness, that gives rise to anger—we're not on that level. But there's a feeling in the body that's unmistakable, and I feel my foot hitting the ground. You're present, and anger, anger. I might just be stomping, screaming inside, anger, anger, anger. And it calms down a little bit. So that's what I mean by stomping, and I don't think it's unskillful. It's much better than just imploding and trying to pretend you're sending loving-kindness to all beings. It's acknowledging what's happening. Sometimes I do find it useful to move the energy. It's so big there's no choice, so we walk more briskly, go where there's no one around.

Trish's question follows on this, talking about how Thich Nhat Hanh will say that by expressing anger,

we're sort of watering the seeds, and the anger gets stronger and stronger.

I would say that is true, and I would make a distinction between the two things we're talking about here. When I talk about stomping, as I said, it's still with some mindfulness. I'm not stomping saying, "Right, that person who made me angry is wrong, I'm right, let's get it going, let's do something." That is nurturing the seeds of anger. That's being caught in the story, identification with right or wrong, "I should be angry," or hating yourself for being angry. And it's expressing it physically but not with mindfulness—it's feeding it. I would call that watering the seeds of anger, and I've seen that in myself.

One time, I remember on a retreat, I was very angry at someone over something that happened. I was feeling the anger, and it felt mindful, but there was real identification. I just kept going over the story: "Yeah, I should be angry, and that was wrong of him to do." At one point, I noticed the anger was just getting stronger and stronger each time I recommitted to the fact that I was right to be angry. "I deserve to be angry. This is really a rotten thing to have happened." That's definitely watering the seeds of anger. I could feel it sprout.

Stomping is different. It's bringing mindfulness in on whatever level we can, but to the experience of anger itself. Yes, anger is present. Don't pretend it's not present—that's not mindfulness. Thich Nhat Hanh also says you have to treat your anger with gentleness, with kindness, like a younger brother or sister. You can't treat your anger with violence. There's always something for both sides, but it's about finding the balance in mindfulness of truly acknowledging what's happening.

With total acceptance and non-violence, if anger is happening, we need to truly acknowledge it. We can't pretend it's not there. But with mindfulness, we're simply acknowledging anger itself—its presence, its physical expression in the body, the pain, the images in the mind—what's happening in this moment. Feeding it, watering it in the way Thich Nhat Hanh spoke of it, is getting really identified with feeding the story, keeping it going, acting it out, and then actually doing something out of the space of "Yes, this is justified." Or its opposite: "I hate myself."

Do you see the difference? One approach is bringing in mindfulness in whatever way we can—whether precise or vast, it doesn't matter. The other is simply diving into the experience and saying, "Yes, let's really get going on this anger." This is our delicate balance in practice: not to suppress, not to pretend that something unpleasant isn't there, and not to fan the bonfire and let it really take over. It's a balancing act that we're all dancing all the time. It's tricky.

A question arose about awakening: Is awakening a state that one reaches, or is it a state to be constantly maintained? Is awakening something we're all experiencing moment by moment? When one is awakened, does one still practice?

There are many different ways this could be answered, so please don't think I'm giving a definitive answer. There's a Tibetan saying I like: it's easy to become awakened, but it's hard to stay awakened.

Sometimes I think it could be said like this: first of all, awakening is not a state, not something to be maintained. That would imply a conditioned state—that if you set up the right conditions, you can hold those conditions and that state will remain. Forget it. There isn't any such state. In a way, the whole talk about becoming enlightened can imply we're going somewhere, and when we get there—plop—here we are, all the work is done.

When you read the suttas, the arhats seem to be in that state. Perhaps so. None of us here are there, and it's not the sense of anyone I have met that they feel their work is finished, that there's no more need to practice, that they've got it.

My experience is on a much more different level from the arhats—we won't even talk about it in the same breath—but there's a sense, not of some state to get to, but of a recognition of something. It's not even a thing. It's what is always true, what we truly are, only we don't recognize it. The potential of recognition is here now, always. It's not somewhere else. It's never somewhere else. The whole problem with craving is that it takes us away from right here, which is the only place and time to recognize our potential of awakening.

I personally feel that recognition is possible in many moments, and we forget, we lose it, we can't remember. The times when there's an insight of anything—"Oh, that's so obvious! That's so true!"—we've all had that. "I'll live like this now, forever." It's so clear. And how long before the next moment comes along? Even though it was so clear, we can't by will make it happen again.

So that's the dance. I think it's the dance. The whole practice is one of constant re-recognition and letting go. But there's no state to maintain.

Another question arose about thoughts—when you have one thought that leads to a whole series, as they do, and you wake up to find yourself at the end of the series, how useful is it to trace the thoughts all the way back to the first thought that triggered it?

It can be interesting. Overall, I don't know how useful it is. I have found it at times interesting just to see how far we can get, how really disconnected we become in our thoughts from present moment experience. Finding yourself on the coast of Mexico in your imagination and wondering how you got there, then tracing it back to the fact that your little finger was cold—that can be interesting once or twice, just to see the way things work in this mind.

Or if I'm waking up in the middle of something very emotional or difficult, sometimes tracing it back reveals something: "Oh, there's something difficult happening here and now, and I've projected it into this thing that happened ten years ago." That I sometimes find useful or interesting.

But I really want to qualify this, because it can turn into a kind of "how can I amuse myself" mind game—let's trace back all the thoughts. And it is ultimately just more thinking.

there isn't any perfect way. And it's all going to be precise and it's all going to match up perfectly. And if we could not really let go of thinking it's all going to be perfectly matched, always precise or always general or whatever.

Sometimes, and this is my opinion, only my opinion, we can get a little sidetracked into trying to make the reports so precise and perfect that more emphasis gets put on trying to describe it accurately to the teacher. Yes, it needs to be somewhat clear, but too much emphasis and energy and concern and desire can go into trying to make the report accurate. I don't think personally that that's as useful as being precisely with your experience. That's where the understanding is going to come.

So I would say, in terms of which is the priority, the precision with the experience is primary. And then sometimes when we describe it to teachers, it may sound general or not quite adequate. That's okay.

The other thing is that sometimes the experience is quite precise. And we don't always know. There may or may not be a sensation in the right or left part of the nose. In some moments, at some times, with some levels of concentration, there isn't that much data there. There's just, there's smelling.

So don't assume that the experience always needs to be precise. It may or may not be. Sometimes there's just a general knowing of smelling without a lot of detail about what's happening. And that's what's happening. If you look and there's not a lot of data, that's what the experience is. Sometimes there is a lot of detail, and then that's what's happening.

One more thing about the labeling: the labeling is really not meant to stand for or capture the experience in all of its intricacy. It's just meant to support the mindfulness. So if the label is general and it's doing its job of pointing the attention, of pointing the mind, of cultivating the simple knowing of what's here, that's enough. The label has done its job. It doesn't need to capture everything.

And I found for myself there are times when you can be with a sensation and you just know it's burning. And you can tell it changes to tingling. You're not thinking about that so much. But there are times, as Steve said, where you might almost be in a pre-verbal state where that part of the mind that's very verbal, very rational, very adult, isn't working so well. Maybe somebody noticed that during this retreat. And when it's not, don't worry about it.

To be really with the sensation, there are times I'll just note "sensing," because it's not worth moving away from the experience to try and find the perfect word. So if I'm in a state like that—first of all, none of us is Sayadaw U Pandita. We're not going to challenge you harshly for coming in and not describing whether you felt the sensation in the left nostril or the right nostril. You can say, "I felt I was with it, but somehow today the words were not clear." And that's actually a clear perception. When you can say that, it's different from coming in and saying, "Well, I don't know, it was some kind of sensation, I wasn't really there with it." Those are two different experiences, and you can describe them differently.

It's not always going to be so precise. And you don't have to later make up some precise words in order to

tell us about it if that isn't really accurate to your experience. Most important is to just try and convey your experience as close as you can to how it was at the time. Words will not always be so accurate, because we're really trying to convey something that's beyond words.

And in the same vein about smelling and hearing—you're right, "smelling" and "hearing" is not that precise, but I think it's helpful because it is bringing our attention to the process. Which is the point. So if I'm just noticing "smelling," it's not as precise as "acrid, bitter odor that reminded me of a chemical explosion in the fourth grade." But it is more important to be with the smelling aspect, with the process. Actually, being a little less involved in the content is fine. All that's really happening is the six sense experiences. So just resting a little more generally is really okay. It's really okay. And don't worry so much about getting it precise to describe it, either to the teacher or to yourself. Sometimes the words aren't there. It's really okay.

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