

## Satipaṭṭhāna: Feeling, pt. 2

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 11/11/14

Last week I began a series of talks on the mental factor of feeling, *vedanā* in the Pāli language. We explored the three basic types of feeling:

1. the pleasant,
2. the painful or
3. the neither-painful-nor-pleasant quality

of a moment of experience. We also explored the first set of the Buddha's instructions for practicing with feeling as found in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Discourse on the Four Fields for Establishing Mindfulness. Tonight I want to explore the not-self characteristic of feeling, and then look further into practicing with this aspect of feeling.

When we begin to bring mindful attention to the feeling quality of experience, we may wonder what causes feeling to arise at all and why a particular type of feeling is arising at this time. Some people believe that we experience certain types of feeling simply because of our past actions. Actually some people believe that we get cancer or have bad things happen in our lives simply because of past actions. There's an interesting sutta about this belief in the Saṃyutta Nikāya, the Connected Discourses. This sutta describes the Buddha being approached by the wanderer Sīvaka, who was not a disciple but asked:

"Master Gotama, there are some ascetics and brahmins who hold such a doctrine and view as this: 'Whatever a person experiences, whether it be pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant, all that is caused by what was done in the past.' What does Master Gotama say about this?"

"Some feelings, Sīvaka, arise here originating from bile disorders: that some feelings arise here from bile disorders one can know for oneself, and that is considered to be true in the world. Now when those ascetics and brahmins hold such a doctrine and view as this, 'Whatever a person experiences ... all that is caused by what was done in the past,' they overshoot what one knows by oneself and they overshoot what is considered to be true in the world. Therefore I say that this is wrong on the part of those ascetics and brahmins."

In the next paragraph the Buddha says the same thing with regard to other possible causes: phlegm disorders, wind disorders, an imbalance of bile, phlegm and wind (each of these being part of the way the ancient Indians understood how the body functioned), change of climate, careless behavior, assault, and even kamma.<sup>1</sup>

So we begin with the idea that "what was done in the past" does not really explain the arising of pleasant, painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling. So what does cause these three types of feeling to arise?

In another sutta, the Buddha explains:

"Dependent on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises;  
the meeting of the three is contact;  
with contact as a condition there is feeling."<sup>2</sup>

In other words, when one of our sense organs—eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind—comes in contact with a sense object—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches (the experience of what are called the Four Elements), or mental events—and along with the organ and object coming together consciousness, bare knowing arises, then this is the condition for the arising of feeling. Feeling simply arises because there is this contact, not because of anything else. Said another way, feeling is dependent on contact. Without contact there is no feeling. When this moment of contact changes, feeling changes also.

Now the type of feeling we experience, may be influenced by our perception of the contact. For example, pressure to the body may be accompanied by pleasant feeling if we perceive it as pleasurable or having a pleasurable purpose, such as a massage or a caress by a loved one. But a similar amount of pressure, in a different context such as being held against our will by someone, might be perceived as painful and so would be accompanied by painful feeling. And perhaps in yet another context, say riding in a tightly packed car, similar pressure might be perceived as just pressure that is neither-pleasant-nor-painful.

So we can say that the occurrence of feeling is dependent on the occurrence of contact, but the type of feeling is dependent on the factor of perception, among other things. We have no control, no influence over whether a feeling will arise. Some kind of feeling will always accompany contact.

I referred at the beginning to the not-self characteristic of feeling. What this means is that feeling is not-self, *anattā* in the Pāli, because it arises dependent on conditions. It doesn't arise because there is an "I" that wants it to or doesn't want it to. Feeling is not-self because we have no control over it arising or passing. And so feeling is also not regarded as who I am, not regarded as what I am, and not regarded as mine. Coming to directly see and know the not-self nature of feeling is one of the steps in deconstructing our belief in an enduring, independent "I" that controls and guides our destiny through life.

Last week we looked at the first meditation instructions having to do with feeling in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. Those instructions were basically about bringing mindfulness to each of the three types of feeling, to directly know when they arose into consciousness and passed away. The instructions for this week aren't found in the sutta, but I've found them

---

quite useful nevertheless. I'd like to encourage you to investigate, or give attention to, three things.

1. Notice if it is true in your own experience that feeling always arises in association with contact at one of the six sense doors.
2. Notice whether it is true that you have no control over whether a feeling arises, that it simply arises when the conditions are right for the feeling to arise.
3. And notice whether it is true that how you perceive contact can affect whether the feeling is pleasant, painful, or neither-pleasant-nor-painful.

This isn't a complex practice and shouldn't take a lot of time, though it is useful to do it repeatedly. If you can see for yourself, directly in your own mind and body, that feeling arises and passes based on conditions, this can have a long-term effect much greater than it may seem in the present moment.

©Philip L. Jones, 2014

## Notes

1. SN 36.21. Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000, pp. 1278-1279.
2. MN 148.8. Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, trans. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995, p. 1130.