

Satipaṭṭhāna: Feeling, pt. 3 - Worldly & Unworldly Feeling

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 11/18/2014.

The last couple of weeks I've been doing a series of talks on the mental factor of feeling, *vedanā* in the Pāli language. We explored the three basic types of feeling associated with a moment of experience: the pleasant, the painful or the neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling. And we explored the not-self or conditional nature of feeling, that feeling simply arises as a result of contact occurring between a sense organ, a sense object, and sense consciousness (the knowing of the other two), not because there is an "I" in control and making it happen. We also explored instructions for practicing with feeling. Tonight I want to explore the two categories of feeling: worldly and unworldly or spiritual feeling. Then we'll look into the practice instructions for this aspect of feeling.

In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddha's teaching on the fields for establishing mindfulness, the Buddha says:

"When feeling a worldly pleasant feeling, *he* [one] knows 'I feel a worldly pleasant feeling'; when feeling an unworldly pleasant feeling, *he* [one] knows 'I feel an unworldly pleasant feeling'; when feeling a worldly unpleasant feeling, *he* [one] knows 'I feel a worldly unpleasant feeling'; when feeling an unworldly unpleasant feeling, *he* [one] knows 'I feel an unworldly unpleasant feeling'; when feeling a worldly neutral feeling [in other words, neither-painful-nor-pleasant], *he* [one] knows 'I feel a worldly neutral feeling'; when feeling an unworldly neutral feeling, *he* [one] knows 'I feel an unworldly neutral feeling.'"¹

By introducing the distinction between worldly and unworldly feeling, the Buddha is clarifying an ethical dimension in our experience and our practice. He is helping us to orient ourselves to the different consequences that these two categories of feeling have on our hearts and minds. So what is worldly feeling and what is unworldly feeling?

Worldly feeling is the feeling that arises with any of the six forms of sense contact—

eyes, sights and the knowing of them,
 ears, sounds and the knowing of them,
 the nose, odors and the knowing of them,
 the tongue, tastes and the knowing of them,
 the body, bodily sensations of pressure, temperature, movement, solidity/fluidity and the knowing of them,

and the mind, thoughts and the knowing of them.

So worldly feeling has to do with the experience of our everyday lives, the experience that comes with simply having a body and a mind.

Worldly feeling is the sphere that we normally look to for our happiness. We try to maximize our pleasant worldly feelings. We try to minimize our painful worldly feelings. And we don't have much interest in our neither-painful-nor-pleasant worldly feelings, other than being bored by them. We seek pleasant sights, good food, enjoyable movies, pleasant books, conversation and companionship, sexual pleasures and so forth.

But as the Buddha pointed out in the following quote, worldly feeling isn't a very satisfactory source of happiness. He said:

"...pleasant feeling arises in an untaught ordinary person. Touched by that pleasant feeling, ~~he~~ [one] lusts after pleasure and continues to lust after pleasure. That pleasant feeling ceases. With the cessation of the pleasant feeling, painful feeling arises. Touched by that painful feeling, ~~he~~ [one] sorrows, grieves, and laments, ~~he~~ [one] weeps, beating ~~his~~ [one's] breast and becomes distraught."²

While this may be a bit more dramatic than what we typically feel, it does point to our experience. When pleasant worldly or sensual feeling arises, if we aren't mindful of it we will typically get caught in wanting more of it. But no matter how successful we are at getting more of that pleasant feeling, sooner or later it comes to an end. We typically experience that ending of the pleasant as painful, to some degree. If we aren't mindful of the painful feeling, we typically get caught in aversion towards the painful feeling and lusting after more pleasant feeling. And then the pattern repeats itself, again and again and again. And each time this happens it reinforces the tendency for lust and aversion to arise in the mind and heart.

I think all spiritual traditions have some recognition of this cycle. They typically encourage us to renounce or let go of our attachment to, our craving for, sense pleasures. But one of the ways this is understood is to view the body, or all of the sense world, as something bad. This is the way of extreme ascetic practices, which the Siddhatta Gotama also tried before his Awakening, before he became known as the Buddha. In The Greater Discourse to Saccaka (MN 36) the Buddha describes some of the ascetic practices he engaged in as he was trying to free himself from the sensual world, and how he almost starved himself to death before he realized that this wasn't the way to peace and freedom.

And then, the sutta records him saying:

"I considered: 'I recall that when my father the Sakyan was occupied, while I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. Could that be the path to enlightenment?' Then, following on that memory, came the realisation: 'That is the path to enlightenment.'

"I thought: 'Why am I afraid of that pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states?' I thought: 'I am not afraid of that pleasure since it has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states.'"³

This story about entering jhāna, or the deep state of absorption concentration, is said to be a reference to when the Buddha was still a child. At that time he apparently just relaxed and let go so much that he un-intentionally moved into a state of concentration, that later as an adult, he recognized as jhāna.

The insight into the difference between worldly and unworldly feeling, and that unworldly feeling didn't need to be avoided, created the possibility of the Gradual Training.

The underlying principle is summed up in these verses from the Dhammapada:

If, by giving up a lesser happiness,
 One could experience greater happiness,
 A wise person would renounce the lesser
 To behold the greater.⁴

In other words, the Gradual Training is the path of gradually substituting a wholesome, unworldly form of happiness for a worldly form. And then substituting a more refined and subtle form of unworldly feeling and happiness for a less refined unworldly form, until even the most subtle forms of conditioned unworldly happiness are let go for the ultimate happiness of Nibbāna, the Unconditioned, the Deathless, or Freedom, among other names.

So unworldly feeling is the feeling we experience when we're engaged in wholesome activities that aren't seeking happiness in the sense world. Some examples of pleasant unworldly feeling are: the pleasure and happiness associated with acts of generosity; the pleasure and happiness associated with being kind; the pleasure and happiness associated with seeing things as they are; and the pleasure and happiness associated with a settled and unified, or concentrated, mind. An example of painful unworldly feeling is the pain and unhappiness associated with failing to fulfill one's spiritual aspirations, perhaps finding oneself angry when one wants to embody goodwill, or perhaps having an agitated and

distracted mind when one wants to have a unified mind and see deeply into the nature of one's experience. And one kind of neither-painful-nor-pleasant unworldly feeling would be the quality of equanimity associated with a moment of mindfulness, a deep insight or with the fourth jhāna.

Our practice with worldly and unworldly feeling is to meet each type of feeling, as the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta says, by knowing it. In other words, to meet it with mindfulness, to know it without any kind of reactivity, without holding on, pushing away, or simply not seeing it clearly.

As long as we have bodies, we will have worldly feelings, so the practice isn't to judge worldly as less than unworldly feelings. But it is to know which kind of feeling is present, and where that feeling might lead us. And to have the intention and to engage in the actions that lead us to greater freedom from unsatisfactoriness, and to greater happiness.

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Notes

1. MN 10.32. Adapted for gender neutrality from: Anālayo Bhikkhu, trans., *satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization*, Birmingham, UK: Windhorse Publications, 2003, pp. 7.
2. MN 36.8. Adapted for gender neutrality from: Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995, p. 334.
3. MN 36.31-32, *ibid.*, p. 340.
4. Dh. 290, Gil Fronsdal, trans., *The Dhammapada: A New Translation of the Buddhist Classic with Annotations*, Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2005, p. 75.