

Satipaṭṭhāna: Feeling, pt. 4 - Reactivity to Worldly Feeling

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 11/25/2014.

Over the last few 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:

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

We explored the worldly and unworldly categories of feeling, and the not-self or conditional nature of feeling. We've also looked at some of the instructions for practicing with feeling.

Tonight I want to explore our reactivity to worldly feeling and what it leads to.

In one of the more well-known suttas, the Buddha talks about how being reactive to worldly feeling leads to our suffering.

"Bhikkhus, when the uninstructed worldling is being contacted by painful feeling, he/she sorrows, grieves, and laments; he/she weeps, beating his/her breast and becomes distraught. He/She feels two feelings—a bodily one and a mental one. Suppose they were to strike a man or a woman with a dart, and then they would strike him or her immediately afterwards with a second dart, so that the man or woman would feel a feeling caused by two darts. So too, when the uninstructed worldling is being contacted by a painful feeling ... he/she feels two feelings—a bodily one and a mental one."

...

"Bhikkhus, when the instructed noble disciple is contacted by a painful feeling, he/she does not sorrow, grieve, or lament; he/she does not weep beating his/her breast and become distraught. He/She feels one feeling—a bodily one, not a mental one. Suppose they were to strike a man or a woman with a dart, but they would not strike him or her immediately afterwards with a second dart, so that the man or woman would feel a feeling caused by one dart only. So too, when the instructed noble disciple is contacted by a painful feeling ... he/she feels one feeling—a bodily one, not a mental one."¹

OK, there's a lot here, so now I'd like to un-pack it a bit.

First, who is the Buddha referring to as an "uninstructed worldling" and who is an "instructed noble disciple"? An "uninstructed worldling" is really anyone who is not meeting a moment of worldly feeling with mindfulness. So whether we've never heard of the Buddha's teachings, or we've been practicing for decades, if we meet worldly feeling without knowing it as a worldly feeling and with a tendency to react to the feeling, then in that moment we are acting like an "uninstructed worldling" even if we aren't. An "instructed noble disciple" would be someone who first, is meeting a moment of worldly feeling with mindfulness and without any reactivity. But, also someone who has, to some degree, committed to following the Buddha's practical teachings about feeling. So we might respond in a skillful way, even if we aren't really a follower of the teachings.

Then the Buddha tells us that the uninstructed worldling experiences two kinds of painful feeling, physical and mental, while the instructed person only experiences the physical. This isn't about the noble disciple having some kind of supernormal powers. It is about a part of our practice that makes a crucial difference in our lives.

The gist of this part of the sutta is that if one has trained the mind to simply be mindful of the feeling associated with an experience, then there is no mental or emotional suffering. There is no sorrow, grief or lamenting about the physical pain. One doesn't weep, beating one's breast or become distraught about the physical pain. There is just the inevitable experience of pain associated with the physical trauma or injury, whatever its nature. This is something we can test out for ourselves, just noticing what is possible when we maintain mindfulness of a moment, or a series of moments, of pain.

This also requires some degree of understanding that physical pain is an inevitable part of having a body. It is part of the unsatisfactoriness of having a body. Lots of the time we don't want to accept this. We think that if only we could find a pleasant experience, then it would all be ok. But then this keeps us caught in the vicious circle of seeking a pleasant experience to avoid the pain, then experiencing the pain of the pleasant going away, and seeking another moment of pleasant once again and again and again.... Or to use the Buddha's words, we get caught in sorrow, grief and lamentation again and again and again.

When we're mindful of the feeling, and we have the courage to endure it without reacting to it whether it is painful or pleasant, then we increase our ability to be with life as it is. We stop going to war with the way life is, at least for that moment or series of moments. And of course the more we are able to do this, the more we create the seeds, the patterns in the

mind, to be mindful and present for other moments of pleasant, unpleasant and neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling.

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Notes

1. SN 36.6, adapted for gender neutrality from Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000, p. 1263.