

Satipaṭṭhāna: Feeling

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 11/04/2014.

One of the most powerful factors affecting our behavior is the feeling associated with the things that we encounter. So I'd like to spend some time exploring this aspect of experience and what the Early Buddhist suttas have to tell us about it.

The Pāli word is *vedanā*, which is most commonly translated as feeling, and sometimes as feeling-tone, which points to the idea that feeling is associated with an object that we encounter through our six senses. Occasionally we even find it translated as sensations. This is usually done by someone practicing in the U Ba Khin/Goenka tradition of *vipassanā*, or insight meditation.¹ In English we often use the words "feelings or feeling" to refer to our emotions and our physical states — being happy, sad, hurt, angry, hungry, sleepy, etc. In the Buddha's teachings, though, the word "feeling" has a much more limited scope.

In the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, the Buddha tells us about feeling:

"Bhikkhus, suppose there is a guest house. People come from the east, west, north, and south and lodge there; *khatiyas*, *brahmins*, *vessas*, and *suddas*² come and lodge there. So too, *bhikkhus*, various feelings arise in this body: pleasant feeling arises, painful feeling arises, neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling arises; carnal pleasant feeling arises; carnal painful feeling arises; carnal neither painful-nor-pleasant feeling arises; spiritual pleasant feeling arises; spiritual painful feeling arises; spiritual neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling arises."³

So in this discourse the Buddha begins by offering us this lovely simile. Just as a variety of lodgers stay at a guest house for a while and then depart, we have a variety of feelings that arise in the body and mind and then depart. The feelings come and go just as lodgers do. And then the Buddha describes three types of feeling and two basic categories of feeling: The types of feeling are: pleasant, painful and neither-painful-nor-pleasant. The first category of feeling is bodily feeling, with the subset of carnal or sexual feeling, and the second category is spiritual or unworldly feeling. For now I want to just focus on the three types of feeling.

In another sutta, we find the bhikkhuni Dhammadinnā explaining in more detail these three types of feeling. Dhammadinnā was a fully awakened one and was declared by the Buddha to be the foremost bhikkhuni (female monastic disciple) in systematically explaining the meaning of the Dhamma in detail.⁴ Her questioner in this sutta is Visākha, a wealthy merchant who she was married to before she became a bhikkhuni. And as a bit of encouragement for we lay people, Visākha was said to be a non-returner, someone who had come to realize and embody the freedom of the next to the last stage of awakening.

This section of the sutta begins with Visākha saying:

"Lady, how many kinds of feeling are there?"

"Friend Visākha, there are three kinds of feeling: pleasant feeling, painful feeling, and neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling."

"But, lady, what is pleasant feeling? What is painful feeling? What is neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling?"

"Friend Visākha, whatever is felt bodily or mentally as pleasant and soothing is pleasant feeling. Whatever is felt bodily or mentally as painful and hurting is painful feeling. Whatever is felt bodily or mentally as neither soothing nor hurting is neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling."

"Lady, what is pleasant and what is painful in regard to pleasant feeling? What is painful and what is pleasant in regard to painful feeling? What is pleasant and what is painful in regard to neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling?"

"Friend Visākha, pleasant feeling is pleasant when it persists and painful when it changes. Painful feeling is painful when it persists and pleasant when it changes. Neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling is pleasant when there is knowledge [of it] and painful when there is no knowledge [of it]."⁵

Most of us don't have that much difficulty understanding and recognizing pleasant and painful feeling. And I think it makes a lot of sense that what is painful in pleasant feeling is when it ceases being pleasant; and that painful feeling is painful as long as it persists and pleasant when it changes. But neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling can be more problematic.

One of the difficulties is that it is often referred to as "neutral" feeling. And while it is easier to say "neutral" than "neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling", I think it isn't quite as descriptive, and this may make it harder to recognize.

We probably have more experiences each day that are neither-painful-nor-pleasant, than pleasant or painful ones. But we're really not trained or conditioned to recognize these neither-painful-nor-pleasant ones. A simple example of an experience that is usually neither-painful-nor-pleasant is breathing. We usually don't notice our breathing, except when it becomes difficult. When it *is* difficult, it is usually painful. Then, when it finally becomes easier to breathe, that has a pleasant feeling associated with it.

As part of recognizing neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling there is this further description that Dhammadinnā offered: neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling is pleasant when we recognize and know it, and painful when we don't recognize and know it. As I reflected on this it seemed to me that neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling is pleasant when we know it, because it is a peaceful state, a subtle state. The mind is not agitated when we experience it and know it as it is. We're quite willing and able to simply rest in this stillness.⁶ But neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling is painful when we don't recognize it, because then we tend to go searching for something else, something that feels more stimulating, something that helps us feel more alive or more soothed. And this very searching is a form of agitation that in itself is painful and leads either directly to another painful feeling state, or leads to a pleasant one that then at some point changes into a painful one.

It may seem that this has been belaboring what is obvious to you. But bringing mindfulness to the feeling tone of experience is, in the short term, one of the most powerful things we can do in helping to free ourselves from greed, hatred and delusion. So I plan to continue to explore vedanā/feeling over the next few weeks.

I want to end this talk this evening with the first set of instructions for mindfulness of feeling that the Buddha offers in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Discourse on the Fields for Establishing Mindfulness:

"And how, monk, does he in regard to feelings abide contemplating feelings?

"Here, when feeling a pleasant feeling, he knows 'I feel a pleasant feeling'; when feeling an unpleasant feeling, he knows 'I feel an unpleasant feeling'; when feeling a neutral feeling, he knows 'I feel a neutral feeling.'⁷

So the first step is recognizing the feeling tone of a moment of experience, and seeing it with mindfulness, so without grasping it, pushing it away, or ignoring it, but just seeing it, experiencing it, knowing it as "a pleasant feeling is present," "an unpleasant feeling is present," or "a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling is present." So what I would encourage you to do this week is to take a day for each feeling. Focus on noticing when it comes and

when it goes. So as you go through your daily activities, one day just noticing when pleasant feeling arises and passes. Another day noticing when unpleasant feeling arises and passes. And yet another day noticing when neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling arises. This is the first step in freeing ourselves from our deeply conditioned reactivity to feeling.

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Notes

1. Hart, William. *The Art of Living: Vipassana Meditation as Taught by S.N. Goenka*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987, p. 27.
2. Nyanaponika Thera translates khatiyas as members of the warrior class, vessas as members of the middle class and suddas as menials. See <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn36/sn36.014.nypo.html>, downloaded on 11/1/2014, 07:33.
3. SN 36.14. Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Somerville, MA.: Wisdom Publications, 2000, p. 1273.
4. Note 459, MN 44. Bhikkhus Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, trans. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995, p. 1239.
5. MN 44.22-24, *ibid.*, p. 401.
6. During the discussion Donna Strickland commented that perceiving neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling is often confusing, because when she perceives it, it is pleasant. But after hearing Dhammadinnā's teaching she understood that it isn't the moment of neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling that is pleasant, it is the moment of knowing it that is pleasant.
7. MN 10.32-33. Anālayo Bhikkhu, trans., *satipaṭṭhāna: The Direct Path to Realization*, Birmingham, UK: Windhorse Publications, 2003, pp. 7-8.