

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 01-04-2016.

This is the third of a series of talks on the Five Aggregates Subject to Clinging, *pañc' upādāna-kkhandhā*, in Pāli. Tonight I want to focus on the aggregate of *vedanā*, which is most commonly translated as feeling, though some translate it as sensation, particularly S.N. Goenka and his followers.

The key questions tonight are:

- What is *vedanā*?
- Where and how do we know *vedanā*?
- Why is *vedanā* especially important in our day to day practice?

In the *Majjhima Nikāya* (Middle Length Discourses) sutta 44.22-23 Dhammadinnā, a fully Awakened bhikkhuni (female monastic), is recorded as having this dialogue with her former husband:

"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 [303] is neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling."<sup>1</sup>

That seems like a pretty good operational definition.

*Vedanā* is the pleasant, painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant quality that accompanies every moment of experience. So *vedanā*, feeling, is more basic than what we mean when we use the word "feeling" as a synonym for "emotion". An emotion is a more complex and longer-lasting thing. An emotion is made up of an enduring affect or bodily sensation, often accompanied by a thought or image, and having a feeling associated with it.

The Satipatthāna Sutta contains several practice instructions for working with feeling. This is the most basic, the place where we start:

"And how, monks, does a monk dwell contemplating feelings in feelings? Here, when feeling a pleasant feeling, a monk understands: 'I feel a pleasant feeling'; when feeling a painful feeling, he understands: 'I feel a painful feeling'; when feeling a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he understands: 'I feel a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling.'"<sup>2</sup>

So first we have to recognize what the feeling is at this moment. And as these instructions make clear, this isn't simply an intellectual exercise. We *feel* the feeling, and we understand that we are feeling it. And because we're meeting it with mindfulness, there is no reactivity towards the feeling, no grasping or pushing away or falling asleep.

As is often the case in Early Buddhism with its analytical approach to experience, from this simple model of feeling, we find other ways of approaching it. In the *Samyutta Nikāya* (Connected Discourses) 22.56 it is recorded that the Buddha said:

"And what, bhikkhus, is feeling? [60] There are these six classes of feeling: feeling born of eye-contact, feeling born of ear-contact, feeling born of nose-contact, feeling born of tongue-contact, feeling born of body-contact, feeling born of mind-contact. This is called feeling."<sup>3</sup>

So when there is a visual event in our experience, there is always a feeling associated with it. And the same for the other five forms of experience: auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, and mental.

We can use this to help refine our focus of attention when we are bringing mindfulness exclusively to feeling, or as it is expressed in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, "contemplating feelings in feeling." We might devote a period of time to being mindful of visual events and the feeling associated with them, or any of the other five types of sensory experience.

We can also differentiate between the feelings associated with worldly, sensual experience and those associated with spiritual development. In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta we're told:

"When feeling a carnal [worldly or sensual] pleasant feeling, he understands: 'I feel a carnal pleasant feeling'; when feeling a spiritual pleasant feeling, he understands: 'I feel a spiritual pleasant feeling'; when feeling a carnal painful feeling, he understands: 'I feel a carnal painful feeling'; when feeling a spiritual painful feeling, he understands: 'I feel a spiritual painful feeling'; when feeling a carnal neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he understands: 'I feel a carnal neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling'; when feeling a spiritual neither-painful-nor-pleasant

feeling, he understands: 'I feel a spiritual neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling.'<sup>4</sup>

So when there are feelings associated with the five physical sense doors, these are clearly "carnal," worldly or sensual experiences. But many, if not most, of the feelings associated with thoughts and mental images are also of this carnal or worldly kind. For instance recalling the pleasantness of a meal we had recently. Or recalling the pain of a difficult social interaction.

A pleasant spiritual feeling could be the pleasantness associated with a settled and focused mind. Or it could be the pleasantness associated with whole-hearted giving. Or the pleasantness associated with the development of an insight into the way something is in one's life.

An unpleasant spiritual feeling could be related to the recognition of having done something unwholesome, maybe not following a precept or not meditating regularly after having made a commitment to do so. Or it could be associated with the fear of doing something unwholesome. Or it could just be the unpleasantness associated with not making the kind of spiritual progress that one would like, maybe not being as calm and having as much goodwill as you would like with someone who is rude, or not becoming as concentrated as one would like, or recognizing that one is still caught in confusion.

A spiritual neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling would be when one has equanimity towards what one is encountering in this moment. It's not a matter of being disengaged and so not feeling anything. It's a matter of being connected, being engaged. But not feeling pleasantness nor pain about it. Recognizing that it is as it is.

In the dialogue between Dhammadinnā and Vishaka that I quoted from earlier, she points out that we have an underlying tendency, a habit pattern, to react to pleasant feeling by grasping after it, to react to painful feeling by trying to push it away, and to react to neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling by falling into ignorance or delusion towards it. These habit patterns are why it is so important to recognize feeling and how we're relating to it.

The Buddha offered a simile about the nature of feeling, to help us overcome these underlying tendencies:

"Suppose, bhikkhus, that in the autumn, when it is raining and big rain drops are falling, a water bubble arises and bursts on the surface of the

water. A man with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a water bubble? So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of feeling there is, whether past, future, or present internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near: a bhikkhu inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in feeling?"<sup>5</sup>

This simile points us to the final Satipatṭhāna instructions on working with feeling:

"In this way he dwells contemplating feelings in feelings internally, or he dwells contemplating feelings in feelings externally, or he dwells contemplating feelings in feelings both internally and externally. Or else he dwells contemplating in feelings their nature of arising, or he dwells contemplating in feelings their nature of vanishing, or he dwells contemplating in feelings their nature of arising and vanishing. Or else mindfulness that 'there is feeling' is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and repeated mindfulness. And he dwells independent, not clinging to anything in the world."<sup>6</sup>

When we see for ourselves the empty, impermanent, insubstantial nature of feeling, then rather than falling into ignorance and the habits of grasping or pushing away, we can simply be present with and patiently endure the feeling, waiting for it to pass away or vanish. When we're able to do this, we break the chain of causation that leads to the experience of unsatisfactoriness and suffering.

Initially we may only break the chain for a few moments. But over time we can learn to break it for longer periods of time by maintaining a continuity of mindfulness. And then ultimately we may be able to permanently overcome the underlying tendencies to grasp, push away or fall into ignorance in response to feeling. When we do it will be possible to live life with equanimity no matter what difficulties we encounter.

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### Notes

1. MN 44.22-23, Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995, p. 401, {PTS I 302-303}.

2. MN 10.32, Bodhi, Bhikkhu, trans. *In the Buddha's Words*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005, p. 285.
3. SN 22.56, Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000, p. 895-6, {PTS III.22 59-60}.
4. MN 10.32, *ibid.*
5. SN 22.95, *ibid.*, p. 951, {PTS 22 141}.
6. MN 10.33, *ibid.*, pp. 285-286.