

# *Vedanā* (5 of 5) Non-Clinging to *Vedanā*

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## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

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This will be the last talk on *vedanā* – feeling tones, the affective quality of our experience. All the different qualities of experience – all the different characteristics of it – are either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. We're focusing on the real specificity of a moment of experiencing something in the complexity of life. With many things happening in a swirl of complexity, there could be a combination of all those qualities that we can identify. But when we get quiet and still, and really tune into the details – the particularity of what it is – then these qualities are pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

One of the fascinating teachings of the Buddha is that people's philosophies, views of life, even their politics (although he doesn't say this) have at their base – or their root – a reaction to what's pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Very sophisticated philosophies, justifications for political systems, or views might have their beginnings in reactivity to things we find as pleasant or unpleasant.

This idea of pleasant and unpleasant that we're talking about here is not the raw pleasantness or unpleasantness of experience. There is no such raw thing because almost right away things arise: pleasant, unpleasant, or neither – along with our perceptions, evaluations, and associations with it. So that pleasant and unpleasant is sometimes referred to as liking and disliking. This movement of liking and disliking, of being for or against, is very deep. It's amazing – if we trace back the basis for our reactions in the world, it all begins with pleasant or unpleasant.

The teaching of the Buddha is that all these philosophies, ideas, and speculative views about life and the nature of life can have their roots in this simple thing: pleasant and unpleasant. What is most significant for people interested in becoming free is the way in which the ideas of self, identity, can also have their roots there. I'm not talking about the identity that we're born into, or that other people assume about us, or the

identities that come with being a human being, but rather the act of identification, the act of latching onto an identity.

All the different identities that we swirl in are relevant at different times. But if we latch onto an identity, cling to it, hold on to it, then we'll suffer. And this clinging to identity – clinging to ideas of self – has at its root a concern with pleasant and unpleasant. Pleasant and unpleasant can be a very deep conditioning for the movement toward “me, myself, and mine.”

One way it takes shape is when we identify with the feelings themselves. When the feeling tone of experience is pleasant, it's like, “*I'm* the one who's experiencing the pleasantness.” Or “I'm the one who's experiencing the unpleasantness.” “This is *my* pleasant experience.” “This is my unpleasant experience.” This very close relationship – wrapping ourselves around, clinging to, and having a sense of self in relationship to feeling tones – is one of the great sources of suffering.

One of the great possibilities for freedom is to allow the kaleidoscope of feeling tones – of how things appear and disappear as pleasant and unpleasant – to just come and go, and float in them, make room for them, or be spacious around them. Feeling tones, if you really tune into them, really get close to and feel them, are not

stationary. They're not fixed. They're actually quite fluid and changeable.

The analogy the Buddha gave for them is that of a big rainstorm. Raindrops are falling on a lake. There is all this spattering with little bubbles and splashing of lake water from the drops. Those appear ephemerally.

They're there for a brief moment, and then they dissipate. Feeling tones – whether things are pleasant, unpleasant, or neither – have that kind of ephemeral quality to them. If we can really settle back and open up the spaciousness of mind to intimately feel the kaleidoscope of changing sensations, then we can sometimes loosen the grip of self around the sensations and let go.

This doesn't necessarily mean letting go of philosophical views and ideas of what the self is. At the core, Buddhist tradition is about letting go of clinging – any kind of clinging. One of the means of doing that is to be aware of the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral quality of our experience. If we can tune into the changing, impermanent, inconstant nature of those feeling tones, we will be well on our way to appreciating that clinging to experience doesn't really work.

Sometimes what we cling to is not the pleasant and unpleasant, but rather the concepts and ideas we have of pleasant and unpleasant. That makes them

stationary. It seems like they last longer than they really do, and are more constant than they really are.

To discover non-clinging through feeling tones. Discover freedom in feeling tones. One way to do that is to appreciate the space around each feeling tone – the stillness, the silence within which the raindrops are splattering.

So, feeling tones: pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. Becoming aware of their ephemeral nature. Perhaps they don't feel ephemeral. Perhaps you don't see them or sense them as somehow changing – maybe flashing in and out of existence so there is continuity over time with some sensations, but in the moment, they're actually kind of flashing in and out of existence in a certain way. If you don't see it that way, chances are, you're living in your ideas of them, your thoughts of these sensations, your thoughts of what's pleasant, or your thoughts of what's unpleasant.

If you really turn the lens of mindfulness around carefully to the thoughts themselves, you'll see that thoughts, too, are insubstantial. Thoughts, too, are like raindrops that come and go. They are there for a moment and then fade away. That is, unless we hold onto them or somehow, in our clinging, we string a whole series of thoughts together so that they look like they're constant. But, in fact, there's actually a lot of

space between thoughts, if we don't string them together, if we just allow each thing to be there in its own uniqueness. In that space, there can be freedom – freedom of a mind that does not cling.

So those are my thoughts on the topic of *vedanā*. I hope that your weekend is pleasant and, in the pleasantness, you're able to see the inconstant nature of pleasantness – not holding onto it, not clinging to it, but learning how to enjoy with no clinging whatsoever. Thank you all.