

# *Satipaṭṭhāna* (49) Five Heaps: Arising and Passing of Feelings

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## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

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This week we are discussing the second exercise in the fourth foundation for awareness. The first three exercises have to do with ways in which we select out of our environment things to cling to, react to, or get caught in. In any given moment, there is a vast sea of sensations, perceptions, and experiences. When human beings are born, we slowly start to make a process of selection. We zero in and pick up what is important to emphasize, which we gather together and construct into the different things that we experience.

We know that the brain is a constructing apparatus that takes in sense data and reconstructs it into our reality – the way we experience or know reality. Usually, there is a good enough relationship between what we see and what the mind constructs for us to find our way in the world. But this is a construction process, and sometimes it can go a little bit awry.

For instance, when I am hiking in the mountains near here and see a little stick or tree root along the ground, I often think for a moment it is a snake. My mind has somehow constructed a snake out of that root. I pass a particular tree with a gnarly growth on the trunk, which looks like the cutest little dog head sticking out. I always see that dog and smile. There is no dog there, but my mind somehow reconstructs it from the pieces.

So the mind constructs, and this is also partly a selection process. We select out of our environment those things that we want to prioritize – things that are important to us. For example, many years ago, I was looking for a futon couch. When I started paying attention to futon stores, I was surprised by how many there were. I had no idea – they kept popping up as I drove around. I had never really paid attention to them. But now that I was prioritizing them and they were on my mind, I was noticing them.

We tend to notice the things that interest us. When I go down the supermarket aisles, there is a tremendous amount of stuff that is a blur, that I have no interest in and do not really take in. While I am looking for something I particularly want, I can't tell you later what I passed by. When I know I am in the aisle where it is, I start searching for it, and then – “Oh, there it is.”

This selection process is very normal, but it also creates the places we cling to. The Buddha emphasizes five areas that we prioritize and preferentially select as part of the construction process. These are the areas in which we cling to self – to our own experience or a sense of who we are.

These areas are the five heaps (five groupings or divisions): five ways in which we group our experience into heaps of things, and prioritize them over others. The Buddha sometimes called this grouping a burden. He also referred to it very explicitly as a constructing process of the mind. To some degree, the mind constructs our experience of each of these five domains or groupings.

The first one is appearance, usually translated into English as “form.” It refers to the appearance of the body's physicality – the way it appears to us. The second one, which is today's topic, is *vedanā* – the feeling tones of experience: whether they are pleasant,

unpleasant, or neither pleasant or unpleasant. In the second foundation, the instruction for *vedanā* is to know pleasant as pleasant, and to know unpleasant as unpleasant.

In the fourth foundation, the instruction for working with *vedanā* is to know the inconstancy of experience: when pleasantness arises, to know that it is arising. If it persists, to know that it persists. Then, to know when it passes away. To know the arising and passing of feeling tones.

The analogy for this inconstancy is the peaceful surface of a lake. A gentle rain comes along, and drops fall on the lake and make little splashes, which become ripples and concentric waves that go out. The little splashes are there for a moment, and then they are gone. The after-effect might be the ripples and waves.

Our sensations are like the splash, and then there might be a ripple through us – the after-effect. If the rain is falling hard, it might seem like this is a constant experience. But if we look very carefully, we see that actually, in fact, there is just a moment of splash, and then another one, and another one – a lot of them happening all around.

In terms of the construction or selection process, some of us will prioritize whether we are comfortable or

uncomfortable. We navigate the world by looking for what is pleasant and what is unpleasant – avoiding the unpleasant and wanting the pleasant. We give priority to the sensual world and sensuality by seeking comfort and to be comforted by experience. We may not care much about our appearance or our ideas and stories about things. We are only interested in whether the experience is physically comfortable or pleasant. Of course, this is a matter of degree. But it is one way we prioritize and select.

For the Buddha, one of the five areas of clinging is clinging to the feeling tones of experience. The antidote to clinging is not to avoid feeling. But rather, the antidote is to see that the sensations that are the basis for the construction, the grouping, and the clinging are constantly arising and passing away, arising and passing away.

It is not necessarily easy to see this. But we are now in the fourth foundation. On the path, as we settle down and get concentrated in the mindfulness practice, at some point we are settled enough that, in that settledness, we become the calm surface of the lake. Then it becomes obvious that the sensations of pleasantness and unpleasantness are appearing and disappearing. In that seeing, it also becomes obvious that we are trying to hold on or cling to them.

It is fascinating how clinging gets highlighted when things are coming and going, appearing and disappearing. It is almost as if clinging is not quite successful when things pass away. In deep meditation, it is possible to feel the mind go towards an object, like: “I want that,” and by the time the mind gets there, in that fraction of a moment, the experience has gone away. There is a pleasant experience: “That’s nice. I want that” – and by the time we get there, it is gone, because it arises and passes so quickly.

In that process, not only do we begin to let go of clinging, but we also begin to appreciate the mind’s clarity. We see clearly. We see things very simply, in and of themselves. We see pleasant, unpleasant, and neither pleasant or unpleasant in a simple way that is not connected to our stories, to the past or the future, to our preferences, or to our fears about where the experience is going. There is clarity and simplicity. The feeling tone is just pleasant, or it is just unpleasant. It is coming and going; it appears and disappears. There is a rhythm to it. It pulses into existence and pulses out. Our awareness and perception of the feeling is moving and shifting around.

In this way, we begin to loosen the grip of clinging to feeling tone, and we stop selecting feeling tone out of the wider field of our experience. As we do that, at some point our attention becomes much more spacious and

allowing. Without that selection process operating, our attention is more choiceless and more available to whatever is happening.

So it's great to learn not to cling so much, and this is one of the ways that the Buddha taught. The benefit of doing this is that, as we cling less, we can love more. As we cling less, we can have more goodwill. Our hearts' care for the world can grow. We can care for ourselves more. These are the rewards and benefits of learning how not to cling.

Today the topic is clinging to pleasant and unpleasant feelings. Over the next 24 hours, you might observe how much you prioritize or select out of your environment. See how important it is for you to orient yourself. See what choices you make, whether things are pleasant or unpleasant. Is this a neutral thing or an interesting thing for you? Is this particularly strong for you? If you can see how important this prioritizing is, can you also see the ways that pleasantness and unpleasantness come and go through the day? What shifts for you when you see the feeling is coming and going, and you realize: "Oh, this is the way it is for now. Just for now. It will pass." Thank you.