

# *Vedanā* (1 of 5) Introduction to Feeling Tones

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## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

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This week, I would like to talk about the second foundation of mindfulness: feelings. The Pali word is *vedanā*, usually translated in English as feeling tones. This topic is, in some ways, a continuation from a couple of weeks ago when we did the first foundation of mindfulness: the body. *Vedanā* is sometimes considered one of the central practice topics in the teachings of the Buddha. It is phenomenally important. It is like the linchpin, the foundation for so much of the Buddha Dharma as well as for practice.

I believe *vedanā* is related to the English word “witness.” Or it might be like “wit” – someone who is clever has wit. It is probably similar to the Norwegian

word *vīte*, which means “to know.” The root of *vedanā* is *vid*, which means “to know” or “to experience.”

*Vedanā* refers to what is known, what is experienced, what is felt, as sensations, as feelings. We are focusing here on the sensations in the body. So it is the sensations that are known, that are felt. Exactly where the line is between knowing something and feeling sensations is not very clear, because these arise together and are closely connected. But we are talking about a way of knowing. It is a subjective way of knowing. It is what we know subjectively.

I want to give an analogy that can highlight the way in which this is so important. Perhaps you are responsible for a workplace, such as a factory, warehouse, or corporate building. Due to COVID, you want to be sure that you keep people at your workplace healthy. With people flying in from all over the world, there is no way of controlling who visits the building. How are you going to keep your employees safe?

The only way into the building is through the front door. So you set up a welcome station where you take people's temperature and give a COVID test, whatever it takes to be sure that they are safe to come into the building. If they are healthy, you allow them in. If not, they cannot come in. That way, you keep all the people in your building free from COVID.

There is a common place, like a funnel, doorway, or passageway through which everything goes. The wide range of human experience, all the things we can experience in the world, and the things that are going to happen to us go through that passageway as they come into our experience.

Everything goes through the doorway of feeling or feeling tones – the affective tone. This is a particular tone or quality of the things that are known, as we know things, as we experience things. They can be pleasant, painful, or neutral. Sometimes we say pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Unpleasant, the second feeling tone, literally means pain. It is anything from the mildest discomfort to intense pain. Pleasantness can be anything from the mildest pleasantness to intense pleasure.

Neutral is that which is neither pleasant nor not pleasant. In Pali, neutral is worded as neither pleasant nor unpleasant. For the uninitiated, it can seem like, “What’s the big deal?” It can appear dull and boring just to focus on things being pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. But it turns out that feeling tone is a common denominator or the door that everything goes through. Every experience has one of those three qualities.

So if you can station yourself at the door and watch everything that comes in, you do not have to let in things that are not healthy for you. You can let in things that are healthy for you. You can leave out what is unwholesome and bring in what is wholesome.

It gives you a vantage point, a tremendously important place, to stay healthy and well. It is easier to stay there and notice the feeling tones than to think about and analyze the complicated things of the world. That could take a lifetime to figure out. Or you could go inward and discover the inner life. It is also a complicated world of thoughts, memories, histories, and experiences you have had.

But everything, inner experiences and outer experiences – in the sense of knowing anything, feeling anything – goes through the door of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. So what's the big deal about that?

People who do not have a mindfulness practice often act automatically on whether things are pleasant or unpleasant; neutral, maybe not. If something is pleasant, there is an automatic desire for it – for more of it. If something is unpleasant or painful, there is a desire to push it away or not have it there.

It can be so automatic that we do not see that the two are separate. We experience something as pleasant and with that comes a feeling of “I want that.” If we are feeling something unpleasant, with that comes, “I don’t want that” – pushing it away. But these are actually two different movements of the mind.

When I was practicing vipassana in Burma, I sat a long retreat. There was a particular moment that taught me this lesson in a very powerful way. Most days, I would go see my teacher and talk about my practice. He lived in a little cabin. To the right of the door, there was a little altar. Usually, there was a statue of the Buddha on the altar. You did not have to pay any attention to it. It was on the way in to see him.

One day, a new wooden Buddha was sitting on the altar. My mind was very mindful at that point. I was able to track things more closely than I usually could. I saw the statue of the Buddha and noticed it was beautiful.

The first thing I noticed was really pleasant. I felt the pleasantness, the pleasure, of looking at it. Then I saw there was a desire to have it. But these things happened sequentially, clearly distinct from each other: seeing the Buddha, recognizing it as such, experiencing the pleasantness of it, and then wanting it.

When I saw that the experience of pleasure and the wanting were very distinct – two different activities of the mind – I thought: “Oh. There’s a possibility for freedom here. I don’t have to pick up the desire. I don’t have to get involved in it.” It was like: “Oh. Just a fleeting desire comes and it goes.”

The desire arose influenced by that sense of pleasure. But because it was so clear – the distinction between them – the desire had very little authority over me. It had no influence, just, “Oh, it’s a desire.” I saw that those two were different. And that was the beginning – the discovery – of a pause, a gap in experience, where there is a possibility of freedom.

It is possible to leave the pleasant alone. It is possible to leave the unpleasant alone and not get involved in the reactivity to it. We see clearly the pleasantness or unpleasantness and the desire or aversion that has come from pleasantness or unpleasantness. And because it is so clear, it might be possible to not get involved. It is just a desire; it is just an aversion – a blip in the mind. And we let it go.

But if the feeling tone (*vedanā*) and our reaction to it – our desires around it – are yoked together, we do not see them as two different things. Chances are we are already in the stream of desire. We do not have enough

strong attention to not be pulled – as if on automatic pilot – into the desires.

This can be quite intense in our lives. Something very unpleasant happens, and we immediately bark at someone. We see something very pleasant, and immediately, that is what we want. The compulsions are strong. It is not simply an innocent desire that we have. These desires sometimes come with tremendous compulsion. We say and do things that, later, we will regret. We realize that we were not free. Something inside us, which was not, in a sense, our choice or will, has taken over and pushed us to do things that we actually did not want to do.

To be able to slow down enough to notice pleasant experiences as pleasant, and unpleasant experiences as unpleasant, can give us a tremendous amount of choice – freedom. We can stop the automatic ways in which reactivity arises. We have choices. One is to do nothing – to let it be as it is. Another is to change gears and be careful not to automatically give in to our desires and compulsions.

In the teachings of the Buddha, *vedanā* is a kind of door, like the narrow neck of a funnel that everything goes through. To start paying attention to feeling tone is a powerful way to develop mindfulness, but also a way to discover freedom. Feeling tone – pleasant or

unpleasant – is mostly independent of our desires. It is just the nature of things. I will talk more about that tomorrow. But the consequence of feeling tone – how desires get evoked in response to them – *that* is where we are trying to discover our freedom, so there is no compulsion. There can be wise desire, appropriate desire, but no desire that we are compelled by. Compulsion is the antithesis of freedom.

That was the introduction. We will talk more about this in the next few days. In the meantime, you might want to see, study, reflect, and have conversations about the impact and influence that pleasant and unpleasant experiences have on you. What gut reactions do you have to feeling tone? What wisdom do you have about them? How does it work in your life? Thank you very much.