

Satipaṭṭhāna (36) Non-Sensual Feelings

February 24, 2022

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

second foundation, mindfulness, *vedanā*, feeling tone, tonality, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, spiritual, worldly, not worldly, of the flesh, not of the flesh, physical senses, inner life, physical body, embodied, nonphysical, raindrops, lake, splatters, beauty, calm, spaciousness, equanimity, well-being, pivot, pleasure, pain

Gil Fronsdal

The topic this week is the second foundation of mindfulness, which is mindfulness of *vedanā*. I translate *vedanā* as “feeling tone.” It is often translated as “feeling,” but sometimes people then confuse it with emotions. *Vedanā* refers to the tonality – the tone of pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant – within which everything happens.

All experiences are felt through one of the three feeling tones. Occasionally, it may feel like they are all there at the same time. The instructions are to be mindful of when there is a pleasant feeling tone, knowing it is a pleasant feeling tone. When it is painful or unpleasant,

know it is unpleasant. When it is neither pleasant nor unpleasant, know this. To have a clear recognition that this is how it is.

The Buddha goes a little further and makes a very interesting distinction in the text. This is a very important pivot in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and in our mindfulness practice. The Buddha makes a distinction between feeling tones that are physical in nature and – if you are willing to go along – those we could call spiritual or of the heart.

Some people call them worldly or not worldly feelings. Others call them worldly or spiritual feelings. People translate these words differently. The Pali literally means of the flesh and not of the flesh. This translation does not inspire people much today, so translators are finding other ways to express it in English. Of the flesh, as I understand it, has to do with our ordinary senses: seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching (the tactile sense of the body).

For example, the weather was somewhat cold today. I might feel a coolness against my skin from being outside. The cold was unpleasant, but it was also invigorating and inspiring to be out there. A nice feeling arose, a delight in feeling the sharp crispness of the air and the coolness against my arms. I have a lot of wonderful associations and memories of being in the

cold, so a kind of inner smile happened. I felt delighted to be in the cold, even though there was a kind of unpleasantness in the skin.

There are two dimensions or domains of our life – the physical senses and inner senses. Many people live in their physical senses, which is a wonderful thing to do. The physical senses – the sensations of being in our body – are one of the great pleasures of mindfulness. But it is possible to overdo it by being too identified with, attached, or reactive to the physical body. In mindfulness, we are learning to be mindful and live in the body. The first foundation of mindfulness is learning how to be embodied in the physical body in a valuable way.

Being mindful of feelings of the flesh – feelings of the physical senses – one would know that. The instructions are:

When there is a physical feeling of pleasant, a physical feeling of unpleasant, or a physical feeling that is neither pleasant nor unpleasant – know that is the case.

There is no value judgment put on this distinction. We pay attention to whatever feeling tone is predominant.

The Buddha then says there is a category of feeling that is not of the flesh. I associate this with our inner life – the quality of our inner being. The quality of our inner

state can be independent of what is happening in the world around us.

The physical body is very much impacted by what happens in the world around us – cold, hot, illness, injury. All kinds of things can happen to the flesh, the physical body. But there is also what might be called the nonphysical. Exactly how to describe this, each of you will probably have a description that works for you. It is the distinction that there is a divide or separation between two different domains. The second domain – not of the flesh – belongs more to the spiritual, the mental, the psychological, and the heartfelt. It is the feeling of our inner life that is here, independent of what is happening around us.

For instance, we can feel content and peaceful even though the bus we are waiting for is an hour late. Some of our thoughts or fantasies are that this is going to be unpleasant, but we are not trapped in those thoughts. We are actually resting and happy to stay on the bus bench, just content to be there. The inner life is very content.

Before meditating, some people may be reactive to things. They may think things should be different. They may want their body to be different. After they meditate, there can be a sense of ease, peacefulness, or calm, which holds everything more easily and spaciously. That

place of calm and peace – where love, warm-heartedness, and inner beauty can reside – belongs to the world not of the flesh.

Here, the Buddha is saying:

When there is a pleasant sensation, experience, or feeling not of the flesh, know it as a pleasant feeling not of the flesh. When there is an unpleasant feeling not of the flesh, know it as an unpleasant feeling not of the flesh. And when it is neither pleasant nor unpleasant – know it as that.

There is a distinction between of the flesh and not of the flesh.

The *Satipaṭṭhāna* is pivoting now – one could say simplistically – towards the mind rather than the body. It is turning towards the inner life, where happiness and suffering reside more deeply, so that can be met and seen. We are not limited to the physical body and the physical experience. We begin opening to a deeper and deeper inner dimension of our life. And here, all we are asked to do is to notice: is it pleasant or unpleasant?

As people meditate, the inner dimension starts becoming bigger, more alive, and more of a reference point. As important as embodiment – being embodied in the physical body – is for some people, this other area is deeper. Some people have a connection to it. Because it is within the body anyway, they often

associate it with their body and think this is being embodied. It definitely can be that, but we are trying to make a distinction here that accords with the instructions.

As we settle and get calmer, more concentrated, and more connected to ourselves in meditation, the inner dimension begins growing. It then provides the material for the last two foundations of mindfulness: the mind and the inner processes that lead to suffering or happiness. So the switch from a focus on the physical body to a heightened sensitivity to this nonphysical, inner dimension of feeling is a very important foundation for what follows.

Nonphysical feelings can be a little more enduring than physical ones. The Buddha likened physical *vedanā* (physical feelings) to raindrops on top of a lake. A big rain is pouring down on the lake, and there are all these little splatters. Physical sensations of pain and pleasure will almost seem like little splatters – sparks that come and go, arise and pass – if you are really connected to them.

The inner dimension that is not of the flesh usually feels more enduring. It consists primarily of pleasant feelings. There can be feelings not of the flesh that are unpleasant. But in the teachings of the Buddha, he emphasizes the pleasure. That is the orientation. As we

go deeper and deeper in meditation, we begin to appreciate and feel the pleasant inner sensations that are there, and we make room for them.

As in today's guided meditation, this pleasure can become the orientation or the reference point for mindfulness practice, no matter what we are aware of. We are not only aware of pain. We are also aware of a certain pleasure, beauty, love, care, spaciousness, and equanimity, which support our awareness of pain or suffering.

We learn to not only identify with the experience of the moment in terms of pleasure and pain. We also start to identify with this inner place of well-being, calm, or equanimity through which we can more clearly know what is happening for us.

If this made sense, you might spend the day reflecting, thinking, feeling, and exploring your relationship to this nonphysical place within. It might be part of your body, but it is not sense-based. It is not triggered by the ordinary senses. It is independent of the ordinary senses. It is the inner place where your beauty resides – your inner beauty, love, goodness, settledness, spaciousness, joy, happiness, and calm.

Exactly what this nonphysical, inner place is for any one of you varies. Ask yourself, what experiences have you

had that touched it? In the course of your life, what history or reference points do you have for it? What have been the strongest reference points for it? How do you experience it in daily life? What is a useful way to stay more in touch with and closer to this inner place so that you do not lose track of it?

You might talk to some friends. You could share your experiences with them and ask about their own. Spend the day contemplating the nature of this inner beauty.

Thank you.