

Vedanā (3 of 5) Inner Pleasure With Non-reactivity

July 7, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

pleasant, unpleasant, of the senses, not of the senses, nonreactive, reactivity, reactive, subjective, pain, cold shower

Gil Fronsdal

We are continuing to talk about *vedanā*, the Pali word for feeling or feeling tone. Feeling tone has to do with the subjective nature of our experience. When we feel something physical, such as the warmth of the sun, certainly our senses are activated. For the sake of this exercise, we might say that the senses on the surface of our skin are activated. But the feeling is a little deeper inside because it's the interaction of the sensation with our response to it – our evaluation and perception of it. The feeling isn't just pleasant in and of itself. Some degree of it is also how we receive it – how we meet it. So feeling tone is considered to be more subjective.

In our example, there is the physical level – the skin level. With feeling tone, this is something a little deeper

inside, what's more subjective. It's something only you experience. Someone standing next to you might also experience the warmth of the sun, but you have your own subjective experience of that warmth. Your experience of the sun's warmth might be a little different from the person next to you because as the warmth hits your skin and is felt subjectively, the subjective nature of it is partly the interaction with your mentality, your history, your associations, and your responses to it. The person next to you has a whole other set of those.

So we're starting to get into something very personal and subjective. We're beginning to take a movement deeper and deeper into this inner life, and this is one of the channels into it.

The feeling tones are pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant or unpleasant. It's simplistic because every experience has these simple qualities to it. Of course, pleasant can range widely from a mild sense of comfort to intense ecstasy. The unpleasant can range from mild discomfort to extreme pain. To reduce that to this very simple label of pleasant and unpleasant – the Pali is literally happy and painful – makes things a lot simpler and helps us to become freer more simply.

So if you go into an uncomfortable social situation – for example, people are arguing, terrible things are happening in a meeting at work – it can be very

complicated to figure out what's going on, understand the details, and what you have to do. Instead, you can take a moment and recognize: "This is unpleasant. I know how to be with unpleasant things. When things are unpleasant, I can open up, be still and quiet, and just feel the unpleasantness. I don't have to be reactive. I know how to be nonreactive. It's just unpleasant."

Simplifying it to that level – free of the drama and the associated stories – can provide an avenue or a doorway into relaxing, opening up, finding your balance, and becoming grounded in the situation, which might happen faster than trying to navigate the situation in order to feel that.

That is the same for things that are pleasant. "Oh, this is pleasant. I know about pleasantness. I know how to be present for it, to experience it without leaning into it or chasing it, just allowing it to be there, and to feel it." This is a very powerful thing to do if you want to start becoming free in the midst of your experience.

There are ways you can experiment with that, depending on how motivated you are, and how far you want to take it. In my early years of Buddhist practice, I worked on a farm at the Zen Center, and some of the physical work was painful. I had to carry heavy objects for a long distance, and after a while, it hurt to carry them. So I made it an exercise to see where I could find

equanimity and non-reactivity with the pain. Just to feel it clearly and recognize that it's there, but not get reactive to it, not take it personally, not have pity for myself, or get angry at the situation. Just to feel the simplicity of the pain.

So I wasn't intentionally hurting myself. But when these painful things occurred, I would take them as my practice until it felt like it was no longer appropriate. Then I would put down whatever I was carrying.

If you're motivated, another place to experiment with this is to take cold showers. I think that is probably pretty safe to do. See if you can stand under the stream of the cold water and find your equanimity, your non-reactivity, find your ability just to breathe easily and calmly, and feel the cold going over your body. Don't cringe, pull back, complain, or feel panic at the cold.

It might take a while to be able to stand there and just feel the cold and say, "This is unpleasant. Okay, I know how to be here." In the process of doing that, you might not get to some wonderful result, but you'll learn a lot about your reactivity. Maybe you'll learn to settle and quiet some of the reactivity around the cold shower.

These things – working with pain, working with cold showers, for example – is training to really understand our reactivity, to understand the option of being

nonreactive. In fact, some of the things that initially we would say feel very unpleasant can actually shift and become pleasant.

I've done the cold shower exercise, and after a while, I learned to relax more and more. I came to really enjoy them. It actually felt pleasant to take cold showers. But I needed to have the body begin to relax, soften, and be there. This is not a suggestion to live a life of cold showers, but to use this exercise to learn how to relax and open. Because what's more important in terms of Dharma practice is that with time we're connecting to something deeper than physical pleasure. We're opening to a deep sense of well-being or happiness.

To the people who can make a distinction between pleasure and happiness (happiness that can be there even when things are unpleasant), we are opening to the kind of pleasure that is considered wholesome. This is a kind of pleasure that is not directly connected to our senses being stimulated. It isn't because something nice is touching our skin, our tongue, our eyes, our nose, or our ears – a pleasant sound for example. It's also not because the world out there is telling us things that are pleasant to hear. For example, if someone says, "Oh, you're such a wonderful person," it is kind of an external stimulus that is stimulating something like your conceit.

There is a well-being that can well up from the inside. This is not because something is being stimulated from the outside or the inside (for example, we're telling ourselves stories or fantasies). So, to discover this place, to open, to relax, to be nonreactive – not so much for the purpose of being nonreactive, but to make room to start sensing and feeling the well-being, the pleasure that is not of the senses.

This distinction between “of the senses” and “not of the senses” – which is a little bit my vocabulary – is there in the Buddha's teachings on mindfulness practice. Wholesome experience that is not of the senses is something we open to. And if we really discover this, then we carry our well-being with us wherever we go. We're not so dependent on the conditions around us to be just right so that we feel at ease and peaceful.

The dramatic exercise of standing under a cold shower is not so that we learn to stand under a cold shower. It's to learn how to release and relax the reactivity we have to unpleasantness. Then we can discover that this non-reactivity gives us access to open and connect to something quite precious and beautiful – a feeling maybe of abundance, goodness, warmth, and safety that lives within. I'll talk more about that tomorrow.

Some people are very oriented toward their senses stimulating them. There is a whole other way to go

through life that is deeper, fuller, and more profound and sublime, which is this welling up from the inside out that is not dependent on outside in. And one of the purposes of meditation is to discover that.

Thank you. I'll continue tomorrow.