

Vedanā (4 of 5) Feelings With and Without Clinging

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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This is the fourth talk on *vedanā* (feeling tone). We have a capacity to recognize when things are pleasant, unpleasant, and neither pleasant or unpleasant. If we don't recognize this (and sometimes if we do), there can be underlying tendencies or habits of mind, drives of the mind, which can pick up almost automatically and maybe even take over.

In the presence of something pleasant, there can be a strong desire and wanting. In the presence of something unpleasant, there can be aversion, pushing away, and not wanting it. In the presence of what is neither pleasant or unpleasant, there can be confusion and

delusion partly because we are very oriented to looking for what's pleasant and unpleasant.

Always looking for pleasure can be a fundamental orientation for some people to find their way in the world. People who practice mindfulness sometimes start to see what is operating in their minds and hearts as they go through the world. It can be quite an embarrassment or a shock to discover how much we're motivated by pleasant and unpleasant, how much we react to that and search for it. Then we can appreciate when things are neither pleasant or unpleasant, there can be confusion about which way to go or what to do. Or there can be delusion, where we make up pleasant and unpleasant fantasies to fill in the gap, the vacuum, and make it understandable.

These fundamental drives, these underlying tendencies, can get triggered, can be awakened, or are waiting in the wings ready to step up in the presence of what's pleasant, unpleasant, or neither. If we can be aware of things being pleasant, unpleasant, or neither – really be aware with clear recognition (e.g., “This is pleasant”), which I talked about recently, it makes things a lot simpler. Not to be simplistic or reductionistic, but it gives us a very realistic and useful perspective that helps us to leave pleasant and unpleasant alone, and not have the automatic, underlying tendencies kick in and move along.

Situations can be quite complicated. If we try to react, respond, and figure out the complications, we could actually get pulled in and the desires and aversions might have an “in” to start operating. But by making it very simple – “Oh, that’s an unpleasant situation; that’s uncomfortable” – we don’t get pulled in or sucked in so that the desires and aversions sneak in through the back door. When we can see it clearly – “Oh, it’s unpleasant” – there’s a way in which clear seeing doesn’t make room for the underlying tendencies to come and get involved. Or if an underlying tendency does arise, it’s clear that it’s there, and we don’t have to do anything about it – just leave it alone. If there is a desire for more of something pleasant, we see, “It’s just a desire.” Or if there is an aversion to something unpleasant, we see, “It’s just an aversion.”

For some of us, desires are a dime a dozen. For others, aversions are a dime a dozen. But if we’re on automatic pilot or give ourselves over or yield constantly to desire and aversion, it can be an exhausting life. It’s not a free life. So to begin to clearly recognize “this is pleasant,” “this is unpleasant.”

Not having an open backdoor for desire, aversion, confusion, or delusion to come in and sweep us away is very powerful. As our compulsive desires don’t take over, there starts to be space for non-desire, non-aversion,

non-clinging, non-grasping, non-pushing away, non-hostility. This space that opens up is a pleasant space. It is a place where there starts to be breathing room for our inner life, breathing room for other energies, forces, or sentiments to begin appearing and bubbling up.

This allows for equanimity to be here. Equanimity is not a neutral thing. When equanimity is strong, it comes with a very strong sense of well-being. There's room for generosity, kindness, and love. There's room for delight, joy, and appreciation. There's so much more room for these good qualities of the heart when there is no clinging and no grasping of things.

The Buddha distinguishes the feeling tones that come along with our compulsive desires, aversions, confusions, and delusions. For example, if I win the California lottery and have a lot of greed for it, I could be very happy, joyful, or delighted for a while. But it's a joy that perhaps comes with a strong attachment and clinging to wealth and all the fantastic things I can do with it. I've read studies of people who win lotteries, and a year after they won these big pots of money, they're less happy than they were before. So the hope that goes along with compulsive desire and aversion – hope that it is going to fix us and do something for us, actually doesn't.

The alternative is to let go, this non-clinging. And there is joy, delight, and pleasantness that come with that. The Buddha makes a distinction between two kinds of pleasantness and two kinds of unpleasantness. The unpleasantness of letting go is to know that there is more letting go to do. Sometimes we feel a longing or that something's not quite right here. It can be a little unpleasant to still feel that we're contracted and tight because we now know something about freedom.

The Buddha makes a distinction between the feeling tones associated with clinging and the feeling tones associated with non-clinging in a few different ways. One way is literally. He says that the first is of the flesh, and the other is not of the flesh. I interpret "of the flesh" to mean the places where all our ordinary sense apparatus are operating – touch, taste, seeing, hearing – that our senses are stimulated. "Not of the flesh" means something welling up from within that happens independent of what's going on in our environment and independent of what's feeding or impacting our conceit or mental attachments.

If our mental attachments are challenged or supported, there can be an inner well-being that is not of the senses, but rather, it's the mental sense that is operating. Something is being stimulated like that. There's a beautiful quality welling up inside that feels almost like it's not of the flesh. It feels almost like it's

there for no reason. It is a natural feeling, almost like a natural wellspring of life. It is there for causes and conditions, but it has this feeling of being almost free of the ordinary causes and conditions of our life.

The Buddha called feeling tones “of the flesh” and “not of the flesh.” Some translators will translate it as “worldly” and “not worldly” – “unworldly,” which seems a little odd. Some people use “worldly” and “spiritual,” but I like “of the flesh” and “not of the flesh.”

Another way that the Buddha talks about *vedanā* is the feeling tones associated with domestic life and those associated with renunciant life. This usually doesn’t work very well for a modern English-speaking audience. But we can understand domestic life, on the surface, to be involved with all kinds of sensual pursuits. For domestic life, the clearest association with sensual desire is sex. There are a lot of concerns with sexuality. The renunciant life is not so concerned with sexuality. Domestic life keeps us busy with all kinds of pleasures and sometimes keeps us so busy we don’t have time to meditate. Whereas a renunciant life is not pursuing sensual pleasures but pursuing a deeper pleasure that is not of the senses, not of the world.

The word “renunciant” might have negative connotations for some English speakers, but the Pali word probably had a very different association in the minds of the

ancient people. Maybe we could call it a sacred life. There is the domestic life and the sacred life. It might be unfortunate to make a distinction between those two. There doesn't have to be a distinction between those concepts. A sacred life can be found in domestic life.

The Buddha is pointing to the pleasant and unpleasant experiences we have that are associated with clinging, and the pleasant and unpleasant experiences we have that are associated with non-clinging, non-grasping. The pleasant and unpleasant experiences that come out of non-grasping are more reliable and enduring. They are the ones that are more nourishing for something deep inside. They're deeply satisfying, but if you've never tasted that, it is hard to understand why they're so deeply satisfying. It feels so good to have access to something inside that is not dependent on the world being just right (e.g., everybody behaving in the way that you think they should).

Also, to know something about the deep sense of freedom that can come with non-clinging. And the pleasantness of that – where pleasantness seems minimalistic or reductionistic for how marvelous the experience of inner freedom can be.

So, being attuned to the distinction between pleasures that involve clinging and pleasures that involve non-clinging helps us to find our way. It is meant to be

inspiring and help us find more and more freedom, and not get caught in our clinging. Maybe for the next 24 hours, you might see if that distinction is something you can feel in your own experience, the pleasure that comes along with clinging and that which doesn't. Thank you