Mindfulness of Feelings (Vedanā)

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:01:20

Happy Halloween.

This is a tradition here at IMS, the pumpkins. And it's a real act of love on the part of the staff. In the last few days they've been in the staff dining room carving pumpkins. It's been so much fun to see just how engaged they are, and how much they do this for you and for themselves as well, partly because the act of generosity feels good. It's a delightful part of the tradition here. I hope you all got to see them in the dark. But if you didn't, you get another chance at the chanting tonight.

This morning Greg spoke about an aspect of our experience that is present in every moment: whether our experience is pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. The Pali word for this is vedanā. As Greg mentioned this morning, it is the second foundation, the second establishment of mindfulness.

This very simple aspect of experience—the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality—the Buddha found important enough to emphasize that it gets its own foundation. He emphasizes it a lot in his teachings, this noticing of the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral aspect of experience, partly because of its relationship to craving.

When the mind is caught or doesn't understand the nature of suffering—when there is a kind of ignorance or delusion about how suffering comes to be—then when pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling arises, it will lead to craving. In the case of pleasant experience, it will lead to liking, wanting, greed. For unpleasant experience, it will lead to not liking, not wanting, wanting to get rid of—aversion. Neither pleasant nor unpleasant experience we often miss entirely. Or we space out around it. Or we get bored. We think it's unimportant in some way. We crave something other than that neutral experience, or we crave a kind of follow-on. I'll speak more about that later.

The Buddha pointed to vedanā as a very important part of our understanding. When we can start to be aware, when we can be mindful of the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality, then that awareness can short-circuit the seemingly automatic movement to greed, aversion, or delusion.

I want to read a little piece of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta on this aspect. I'll remind you of the phrase I spoke about last week: "One abides observing feelings as feelings, ardent, fully aware and mindful, setting aside desire and distress for the world."

This section of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta continues: "And how does one abide observing feelings as feelings?" This is acknowledging that the earlier phrase is shorthand, and with each of the establishments of mindfulness, the Buddha goes into more detail.

The instructions in this part of the text are really simple. I think Greg said it this morning, but it bears repeating: "And how does one abide observing feelings as feelings? Here, when feeling a pleasant feeling, one understands, 'I feel a pleasant feeling.' When feeling an unpleasant feeling, one understands, 'I feel an unpleasant feeling.' When feeling a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling, one understands, 'I feel a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling.'"

Pretty simple instructions. And yet the feeling which is arising in every moment of experience—every contact with the senses, every sight, every sound, every smell, every taste, every touch, every experience arising in the mind—has a feeling tone that arises with it. The feeling tone is conditioned on that contact. If the contact doesn't happen, the feeling tone doesn't happen.

Every moment of experience, this feeling tone is there. It's understood to be a universal aspect of every moment of experience. There's always a feeling tone present. And yet we often miss it, partly because it can be a subtle aspect of experience.

The neutral, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant, is a particularly subtle aspect of experience. And there's a range, at least in my experience. It's not like an on-off switch with pleasant. There's a range—maybe subtly pleasant or very pleasant, slightly unpleasant or extremely unpleasant. These feeling tones tend to bubble into our consciousness on the ends of the spectrum as they get stronger.

Partly too, we don't notice the feeling tone. "Feeling tone" is often the way we translate *vedanā*, partly to distinguish it from the word "feeling." It's not feeling as emotion; it's just this very simple aspect of feeling.

In our usual way of navigating the world, we are responding and reacting to feeling tone, essentially trying to create conditions where we accumulate pleasant and get rid of unpleasant. When we don't understand how suffering arises, when we're not clear about the process by which we get caught, then our usual tendency is this: when there's something pleasant, we like it and we want it. We want to hold on to it. There's greed around it. When there's something unpleasant, we don't like it, we want to get rid of it. There's aversion there.

Very often, with our habitual tendencies, we miss the actual experience of pleasant and unpleasant because we're so busy responding or reacting to it—trying to hold on to it if it's pleasant, trying to push it away if it's unpleasant. We leap over the pleasant or unpleasant in favor of doing something about it.

The Buddha pointed out that not only is this feeling tone a universal experience, happening with every sense contact, but it is also present for everyone, including people who are fully awakened. This immediately puts a damper on the idea that if we become fully enlightened, we'll never experience anything unpleasant again.

The Buddha says: "An untaught worldling"—someone who hasn't met the Dharma or is caught in the views of needing to get what I want, needing to get rid of what I don't want—"experiences pleasant feelings, unpleasant feelings, and neither pleasant nor unpleasant feelings. A well-taught noble disciple

likewise experiences pleasant, unpleasant, and neither pleasant nor unpleasant feelings. So what's the difference between them?"

He goes on to say: "When an untaught worldling is touched by a painful bodily feeling, they worry and grieve, they lament, beat their breast weeping, and become distraught. Thus they experience two kinds of feelings, one bodily and one mental. It is as if someone were pierced by a dart, and then following the first piercing is hit by a second dart, so that person will experience feelings caused by two darts."

This is our habitual response to feeling before we learn the Dharma, before we learn about the value of wise mindfulness.

"In the case of a well-taught noble disciple, when touched by a painful feeling, they will not worry nor grieve or lament, will not beat their breast and weep nor become distraught. Only one kind of feeling is experienced, a bodily one, but not a mental one. It is as if someone were pierced by a dart but was not hit by a second dart following the first one."

What he's pointing to is this: when someone who hasn't met the Dharma is touched by an unpleasant feeling, they react with aversion—"woe is me, this is a problem, got to figure something out, got to fix it, got to get rid of it"—or they collapse in despair. When a person who has understood the Dharma experiences an unpleasant feeling, they simply experience an unpleasant feeling. It doesn't ripple on.

This teaching points to the difference between the unpleasant experience, or the pleasant experience, and our response to it. We might think that the unpleasant and the not-liking of unpleasant are the same thing, that aversion would automatically be there with the unpleasant. Likewise with pleasant—there's often a very quick follow-on of liking and then wanting. But that liking is different from the pleasant itself.

It is possible to experience unpleasant and have zero ripple in the mind of not-liking. It is just unpleasant feeling. It is possible to experience pleasant feeling and not have a ripple of liking in the mind. It is just pleasant feeling.

This points to our habitual movement from feeling tone—a kind of leaping. When our mind is in its ordinary state, carrying the view that pleasant is good and unpleasant is bad, that we need to have pleasant and get rid of unpleasant, we leap past the feeling itself.

When there is feeling arising in a mind state of ignorance and craving, the mind will leap off of that unpleasant or pleasant experience right into greed and aversion. When the feeling tone is not seen, it becomes almost like a launching pad into dukkha. So it's really worth starting to be curious about it. When that feeling tone is met with wise mindfulness, there doesn't have to be this automatic, habitual movement from feeling to craving to clinging to identification to suffering.

The feeling tone is understood to be associated with every experience that we have. Every physical experience, every mental experience, every sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, everything arising in our

mind—there's a feeling tone associated with it. This feeling tone itself is understood to be a mental process.

The aspect of vedanā is understood to be one of the five aggregates, the five processes of body and mind that make up the whole of our sense experience. These five aggregates include the bodily processes or physical form, then there's feeling—this pleasant, unpleasant, neutral aspect of experience. Then there's perception, the recognition piece we've talked about a little. There's mental formations, the intentional and motivating aspect of our experience. And then there's consciousness, the quality or aspect of our minds that knows things.

The Buddha divided up our experience this way. Everything that we experience will have these five threads coming together in some way. Every experience is a kind of weaving of these five threads. In the five aggregates, one process is bodily; the other four are understood to be mental processes. Feeling, the experience of feeling something, is understood to be put together by the mind. Perception likewise, mental formations likewise, consciousness. These are all mental functionings.

Feeling is understood to be mental, even the feeling associated with physical sensations. This might not be so intuitive, so let's explore that a little bit, because it points to something pretty important about feeling tones. The feeling tone is not in the experience. It's not inherent in a sense contact. There's a sense contact, and then processes in the mind, out of conditioning, put together the feeling.

Here's a study. I want to just say that the current psychological and neurological research agrees with the Buddha here—that feeling is mental. There was a study done about the feeling of pain, and the lead-off is: pain isn't always a pain. Sometimes it can feel good.

The way they did this study is they had two parts to it. In the first part, people were exposed to a series of stimuli that were either moderately painful or not painful. They rated the moderately painful stimulus, like a mild electric shock, to be painful.

In the second part of the experiment, they were exposed to either a moderately painful or a more strongly painful experience. They were warned ahead of time—shown a screen that told them what kind of stimulus was going to be coming up. And in the rating of this part of the experiment, the moderately painful sensation was rated as pleasant.

I'll read a little bit about this because the researchers were surprised by this result: "Interestingly, participants rated the moderate pain as actually pleasurable in the second setup, when the alternative was the intense pain. During the moderate stimulus in the second setup, participants' brain activity also showed less activation in the pain region of the brain, the brain stem, and more activation in a region in the middle of the frontal lobes that's associated with pain relief and pleasure."

So it wasn't just what they were reporting. Their brains were actually experiencing pleasure with this moderately painful stimulus. The researchers said, "The likely explanation is that the subjects were

prepared for the worst and thus felt relieved when they realized the pain was not going to be as bad as they feared. In other words, a sense of relief can be powerful enough to turn such an obviously negative experience as pain into a sensation that is comforting or even enjoyable."

This points to how conditioning affects whether we experience something as pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. I experienced a little bit of this myself on one three-month retreat—I think it was my first three-month retreat. It was during part one, where they had cut some of the apples, taken some of the apples off the tree.

They were freshly picked apples, and I had not had many freshly picked apples before. When I put this apple in my mouth, it was incredibly pleasant. That experience was very strong. The taste was there, but the pleasure was like bubbles of pleasure throughout my whole body.

That evening they had apples and bean dip, and there was something else—I can't remember what else there was. So I had a taste of bean dip. The bean dip had a completely different flavor to it. It was kind of pleasant, but nowhere near as pleasant as the apple. And then when I had a bite of apple following the bean dip, it was even more pleasant. Something about the contrast of the bitterness of the bean followed by the tartness and sweetness of the apple—it was like the pleasantness was even stronger.

And then as I went on, I noticed that more exposure, that expectation part—like in the experiment, something about the expectation affected the feeling tone. In this case, the expectation of pleasant seemed to diminish the pleasant. Over time, the subsequent bites of apple, the last slice of apple, it was kind of pleasant, but it was not that burst of rapture. It was like, "Yeah, that's a pleasant apple." A different experience, same apple, same tongue, different expectations, different conditions.

The feeling tone is not in the experience. It's not in the object. It is created in dependence on that contact, along with a whole host of other things going on—views and conditioning and beliefs.

So it can be useful to play with feeling tone, to begin to get familiar with it. The other day in the morning instructions I mentioned that sometimes when we give instructions, it's helpful not to try to do it too much because it might tie you into knots. I would say in this case, you probably don't need to spend the entire day looking at whether you can feel pleasant or unpleasant—that probably will tie you into knots. But on occasion, it can be useful to just be curious: What is the feeling tone here? What's going on? Is this pleasant or unpleasant? Spend some time familiarizing yourself with this aspect of experience, because it does tend to be a subtler experience that we don't have much practice being aware of. It can be useful to take a little bit of time and check in: Can I know the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral aspect of experience here?

Probably the easiest place to begin this exploration is in our physical bodies, especially the touch sense. The nerves of our skin are very wired into this part of the brain that feels pleasant and unpleasant, or interprets things as pleasant and unpleasant. So that can be a good place to check in. Maybe we

particularly gravitate toward or notice unpleasant experience in the body. Or maybe we're starting to notice a quality of pleasantness with the breath.

A great exploration around unpleasantness is if you have an itch. An itch is one of those experiences that is almost universally felt as unpleasant. It's a buzzing experience, in my experience. It comes and goes as I've explored and investigated it. It's like a little zinging experience in a very small location that goes zzz and then stops and then zzz. It's almost like a little mosquito underneath the skin. But from my knowledge, nobody has ever died from observing an itch. So while it can drive us nuts, it's a great place to begin to explore pleasant and unpleasant, and also to explore how it's impermanent, how it comes and goes with the sensation. The itch, at least in my experience, has this on-off quality. If we're exploring the unpleasantness of it, we'll see that when the sensation stops—that itch sensation will be on for a few moments and then off, then on and then off—if you are aware of the unpleasantness there, you'll feel also that the unpleasantness stops when the sensation stops. Just exploring that.

And then also exploring the relationship to unpleasant. This is another big piece of the exploration—not only to get familiar with the experience of pleasant, unpleasant, and neither pleasant nor unpleasant, but to get familiar with our habitual responses. When there is that unpleasant experience, what does our mind do with it? Usually it's averse. It wants to get rid of it.

It wants to reach up and scratch. It wants to fix it, to change it.

So noticing the aversion, and noticing too an important piece which, as I mentioned earlier, is that the aversion and the unpleasantness are different. They're not the same thing. The aversion is a response to, a reaction to, the unpleasantness.

What we might notice as we explore this is how, when the aversion is strong, there's a multiplicative effect. It's like the two darts. There's the unpleasantness and the aversion, and it's like they multiply each other. It's like ten times ten equals a hundred. The unpleasantness becomes ten times ten—a hundred.

Then you might see that when the aversion weakens, maybe down to three or four, then instead of being a hundred, it's like thirty—the experience of unpleasantness. We can see how with the shifting of the aversion, the overall experience of unpleasant changes. And how we attribute, in effect, that multiplication of the aversion with the unpleasantness—we attribute the entire thing to the sensation itself.

But as we see that shifting of aversion, we might begin to recognize: oh, actually the experience of unpleasantness here is not as strong as I thought it was. We begin feeling how the aversion amps it up. If we can actually connect with the actual experience of unpleasantness, we might find that it's almost an anticipation, or it's the idea of the unpleasantness, that adds to or multiplies with that sensation.

Sometimes it's the idea that this is going to last forever. So not only are we feeling the unpleasantness of this split second, but our minds are picking up: this is going to last for the rest of the sitting. We're picking

up the additional forty minutes and multiplying all the unpleasantness by forty minutes, experiencing that multiplication.

So noticing the experience, the unpleasantness, and then what the response is. The aversion and the greed tend to be in relationship to the pleasantness and unpleasantness. We might think that we're reacting to the itch, or we might think we're reacting to some actual quality of the object itself. But our system, our minds, are reacting more to the pleasantness or unpleasantness. It's a very basic part of our minds. It's a kind of normal or natural part of our minds too, evolutionarily. Even single-celled creatures move towards nourishment, towards food, and away from noxious chemicals in their environment. Single-celled creatures have this kind of movement towards what we would call pleasant and away from what we call unpleasant. It's in our evolutionary DNA, this relationship to pleasant and unpleasant.

And yet in our system, in our human system, a single-celled organism doesn't have any choice in this matter of moving towards pleasant and away from unpleasant. In our case, this is not a hardwired reaction. It is constructed in the mind. We can begin, in experiencing the pleasant and unpleasant, instead of reacting automatically out of aversion and greed, to act with wisdom and compassion.

It's not necessarily that we just sit there and let a painful experience continue. In sitting, sometimes we talk about how if there is a painful experience—if you're experiencing a kind of pain where there's numbness that continues for quite a while after you get up—that's probably damaging a nerve. We encourage people not to physically damage themselves. But that experience of unpleasantness, of feeling the pain, and the recognition that this is a painful sensation that is not helpful for the health of the body—the decision can be made to shift posture, not out of aversion, but out of understanding and compassion.

This teaching might be misunderstood to suggest that all we're supposed to do is sit there passively experiencing this flow of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. That's a training we do to begin to understand how our aversion and our greed are reactions to the pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. And yet there is this possibility—the Buddha, as he said, experienced pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. There are stories of the Buddha telling Ānanda, "I'm not going to give the dharma talk tonight. My back is in too much pain. I'm going to do some lying meditation. Would you give the dharma talk, Ānanda?" And I have to understand and assume that this was not coming out of aversion, but just out of understanding.

So noticing the experience, the physical experience, and what's the feeling tone. Noticing the relationship to it. You can also recognize and be aware of the feeling tone associated with mental experience. Some of these are easier than others. Happiness, for instance, does have a pleasant quality to it. A lightness, and the mind feels delighted, and that's got a pleasant quality to it. Fear also often has an unpleasant quality to it. Anger often has an unpleasant quality to it. So we can also be aware of the feeling associated with our mind states. Thoughts may have a subtle feeling tone associated with them.

Maybe not. Some thoughts may or may not carry a feeling tone. The feeling tone might be pleasant or

unpleasant, or often, particularly with thoughts, the feeling tone of the thought itself might be neutral. What often happens is that a thought turns into an idea or a belief or a view, and then emotions come in with that, and then there's a whole collection of feelings that arise in association with the thought. So thoughts can have very complex layers of different feeling tones associated with different threads of what's happening in connection with that thought. Sometimes in our exploration, we can't necessarily say that in this moment it feels only pleasant or only unpleasant. Maybe it feels like it's flickering between pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral with these experiences in the mind—our views, what we're thinking, what we're believing.

This is actually a big part of the conditioning associated with feeling tone. What we believe, what we're thinking, what's in our minds at the time something happens has a significant effect on how we experience something as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. The study I mentioned—the expectation of moderate pain versus very painful experience, the expectation of less pain creating a sense of relief—affects the feeling tone. So views, beliefs, agendas, and expectations are one of the leading causes of feeling tone, one of the leading reasons why we feel something as pleasant or unpleasant or neutral.

As an interesting exploration, I heard this teaching from the Abhidhamma, which is an early commentary on the suttas. The Abhidhamma gets very precise about things; it chops experience into little bits. It says that the feeling tone associated with our physical touch sense will be either pleasant or unpleasant, but will not be neutral. So our physical touch sense—the feeling that's constructed in dependence on our physical touch sense—the Abhidhamma says, is going to be pleasant or unpleasant. Now I have to say, right off the bat, that I don't know whether this teaching is true. I don't fully believe it myself. But I found it to be a very useful and interesting exploration.

So physical touch sense: pleasant or unpleasant. The other physical senses, the Abhidhamma says—sight, sound, smell, taste—neutral, will not be pleasant or unpleasant. And then there is the mind, where there is the full range of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. The understanding in this teaching is that any time we see something and interpret that sight as pleasant, it is not the sight itself that we're experiencing as pleasant. It's something going on in our minds—a subtle belief, a view, a perception that we interpret as pleasant or unpleasant.

Hearing this, I thought I'd explore it a little bit. Intellectually, it made sense to me in some way, because I know how the eye works. What happens in the eye is that light hits the retina and there's form and color. That's all the eye actually sees; the only contact that's actually there is form and color. There are no objects there already. The objects are created through perception, that mental experience. So if we're perceiving something, looking out and seeing a beautiful flower or seeing a decomposing corpse, from the eye's perspective—the pure sight—it's just form and color. It takes the mind recognizing it as a beautiful flower, as a decomposing corpse, before there is that quality of pleasant or unpleasant. The form and color is just going to be neutral.

This became an interesting exploration for me. When I'm taking some sense experience to be pleasant or unpleasant, what's going on in the mind? What's happening there?

There was a time, one night, when I woke up in the middle of the night and was having trouble sleeping, so I decided to meditate. This was at home. I had a spot in my room where I would get up and sit to meditate. I often found that if I sat and meditated for half an hour or forty-five minutes, when I went back to bed, the mind would be very relaxed and fall back asleep easily. So I got up and sat.

This one night, as the meditation went on, sometime into the sitting I began hearing a very quiet noise. It sounded like it was in the wall, just a little scratching noise—that kind of sound. My experience was that it was unpleasant. I noted that as unpleasant and went back to my breath or paying attention to whatever was present. Then the sound would come back and I'd notice it as unpleasant. At one point—the sound came back many times during the sitting—I noticed a subtle flash of fear. And the fear was definitely unpleasant. As I watched that and kept watching it, I began to see there were maybe some thoughts, even images, like the image of a rat in the wall. This was unpleasant. As the mind began to see all these different components—when the sound came back and I recognized that the mind was reacting to the idea that it was a rat in the wall with some fear—when I heard the sound again, I realized the sound itself was pretty neutral.

What was going on was that the interpretation of the sound was what the mind was reacting to.

This kind of exploration can be very interesting for us. What are we actually reacting to? You're sitting in the hall and you hear a noise. If there's aversion with that noise, is it the noise? Is it the sound itself? Maybe you're exploring, experiencing that sound as unpleasant. But is it the sound itself that's unpleasant? Or is it some idea that your mind has created that's unpleasant?

This was mind-blowing to me. I began to see that when I was averse to things, I was not averse to what was actually out there. I was averse to something my mind created. I started to feel so amused by this. The mind creates something and then hates it. Does it have to do that?

I would say that most of our reactivity—though I don't know whether this teaching that taste and smell and sound are inherently neutral is entirely accurate. Particularly with taste, I think there may be something in the taste itself, like those taste buds at the back of the tongue that kind of gag if something bitter passes over them. Maybe there's something inherently unpleasant there. I don't know. But I have found this teaching interesting in terms of curiosity about what I'm actually reacting to. What is actually unpleasant when there's aversion? When aversion is happening, there's a kind of curiosity: what is the mind actually reacting to?

At one point I was doing walking meditation in the hall just on the other side, the upper walking room. I experienced a lot of aversion in walking meditation. I had aversion to the people around me. Greg mentioned the other day that he appreciated when people moved over and let him squish in. Well, when

that kind of thing would happen, my aversion would go through the roof. I probably looked fine, but I was working intensely with my aversion.

One time a person came in and squeezed right next to me. This mushrooming of aversion happened. I thought, okay, Carol said that when there's aversion happening, there's something unpleasant going on. What is it? So I started getting curious. I went through all of the senses. Looking at the person—they were not unpleasant physically. Check, that's not it. They didn't smell bad. They weren't touching me. I went through all the senses. None of those physical senses was where the unpleasantness resided. Well, it must be something in the mind. But I didn't see it. I didn't really see what was going on there. So I just kept walking back and forth, asking: what's going on in the mind that there's something unpleasant there?

And then I saw a thought. The thought was: they're weird. My justification for that was that it was the middle of winter, freezing cold, and they had bare feet. As soon as the mind saw that—saw that this was what the aversion was about—the whole thing just collapsed. And in the next pass, there was mettā for the person.

Curiosity about this can be so powerful.

Exploring neutral is also tremendously helpful. Neutral is that place where we often don't even notice it. We kind of blow right over neutral experience. But as our meditation deepens, as our mind becomes more balanced with greater equanimity, there tends to be more neutral available. Partly this is because our minds, in their habitual reactivity, are constantly searching out pleasant and unpleasant. I definitely noticed this at one point.

One of my teachers asked me to just close my eyes and let my attention roam through my body, choicelessly allowing it to land on something. And he said, "Okay, and do it again. And do it again." I was doing this in silence, and he just kept guiding me. "What's the next thing your attention lands on? And the next thing?" He used the word "choiceless" there—just don't have it be a choice, just let it land.

When he stopped me in the exercise and asked what had happened, I said, "Well, you know, I wasn't searching anything out, but it couldn't possibly have been completely choiceless, because every single thing my mind landed on was unpleasant." Every experience my mind picked, every most obvious thing it oriented to, was unpleasant.

I understood in that moment that it was a conditioned kind of habit of the mind. This mind has had a tendency towards aversion. And what does an aversive mind do, actually? It searches out the unpleasant so that it can get rid of it, so that it can fix it. That was like a revelation to me—to see that this mind is not just receiving information neutrally, like a camera and a microphone. It's filtering things in based on habit, based on a habit of aversion in this case.

Some of you may have more of a habit of greed. You might walk into a room and immediately think, "Oh, I like that plant. Look at these pumpkins—they're so cool!" There might be a tendency to gravitate towards

the pleasant. We all may have an underlying tendency in one direction or another. But as the mind gets more equanimous, these underlying tendencies weaken, and we start to be more in contact with the neutral. This begins to be a whole new terrain to explore.

A couple of things from my own experience exploring this terrain of neutral. One thing I began to see is that when the mind got more into a place where there was neutral experience—not a lot of pleasant or unpleasant—if the mind was present, able to be with it, there was quite a bit of continuity of mindfulness. But if the mindfulness weakened from that place of neutral, the mind would orient to its most familiar habits.

I was doing walking meditation and experiencing quite a bit of neutral, just noticing the experience. I'd also heard my teachers say this is a sign of equanimity. So I was thinking, "Ooh, this is good." I was leaning into the experience, anticipating that maybe something really good would happen—something I was looking for as proof of something or other.

I was just experiencing neutral and more neutral and more neutral, and nothing "really good" happened in the way my mind expected. When nothing really good happened, the mind immediately went into, "You're a failure. You screwed up. You don't know how to do this." This was one of my big patterns—this self-negativity, a self-hatred kind of pattern. "You're a failure, you're no good." Out of nothing, out of neutral experience, this is what the mind created, partly because that was a strong habit of mind.

Fortunately, this time I did see it. I saw that first thought—"you failed"—and I could see the movement towards the whole pattern of "I'm no good, I'm a failure" that would cycle into self-hatred. But seeing it, it could fall away.

So exploring what's happening around neutral is valuable as well. Sometimes neutral can lead to boredom. Nothing's happening, and we want something more pleasant—or even some highs and lows. That's what we've been attuned to. As experience gets more neutral, there can be a sense of, "Is this all there is? Is this what I'm supposed to be doing? There must be something better that's supposed to be happening."

So the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* suggests simply recognizing what kind of feeling is happening. When feeling a pleasant feeling, one understands when feeling a pleasant feeling. When feeling an unpleasant feeling, one understands feeling an unpleasant feeling. Simple. It doesn't say try to get rid of unpleasant feelings. Judge unpleasant feeling. Just know it. It's there.

It's said in many places in the suttas that there's an emphasis on understanding the impermanent nature of feeling. This is understood to lead to freedom—understanding feeling as it arises, persists, and passes away. So that's another piece of the exploration, to be curious about. Notice the impermanent nature of feelings.

We can also, through that, understand that it's unreliable—this kind of attribution of reliability to pleasant

and unpleasant. As an aversive type, I would get stuck to unpleasantness, trying to get rid of it. It would be like if this table were something unpleasant, I'd be stuck to it with superglue, trying to push it away. Other people may have a different response to unpleasant. They may, knowing unpleasant, kind of go, "Oh, this is unpleasant. Let's find something pleasant." So there are different responses.

But as we begin to understand the impermanent nature of feeling, the very kind of attachment with superglue to something unpleasant almost creates a solidity to it. The aversion is creating a kind of solidity to that unpleasantness. If we actually look at the unpleasantness itself, we'll see it's coming and going. It's not a reliable place to stick to something trying to get rid of it. Likewise with pleasant—it's coming and going. It's not a reliable experience upon which to hang our hopes for happiness. It is just a fleeting experience.

So familiarity with feeling tone, noticing its conditioned nature, noticing its impermanent nature, its unreliable nature—this will support the mind letting go of its habitual activity of craving the pleasant, craving to get rid of the unpleasant.

Let's just sit for a moment.

Thank you for your attention.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.