Relying On This, Abandon That

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 54:58

Last week in talking about feeling tone, I ended up getting about halfway through the talk, so this week I'm going to finish that and then we'll see how far I go.

The halfway point was basically about a third or halfway through the section of the Satipatthana Sutta that describes the practice of working with feeling tone. Perhaps that's surprising because it's such a simple section of the sutta. I read last time that the section begins: "When one feels a pleasant feeling, one understands, I feel a pleasant feeling. When one feels an unpleasant feeling, one understands, I feel an unpleasant feeling. When one feels a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling, one understands, I feel a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling." We explored what that meant and how that might be helpful.

The sutta continues to further distinguish types of feeling tone by what the text calls—the word in Pali is a little hard to translate, apparently—samisa. There are two sides of it: samisa and niramisa. Roughly it means "of the flesh" and "not of the flesh." So the sutta distinguishes feeling tones into feeling tones of the flesh and not of the flesh. There are different translations for this: worldly and unworldly. Bhikkhu Bodhi in one version of his translation uses "worldly and unworldly," and in another version he uses "carnal and spiritual." One teacher describes it as feeling tones associated with the path of practice or not associated with the path of practice—the "of the flesh," the worldly feeling tones, not on the path, not associated with the path, and feelings associated with the path of practice.

I'll read this in one of Bhikkhu Bodhi's translations: "When feeling a worldly pleasant feeling, one understands, I feel a worldly pleasant feeling. When feeling a worldly unpleasant feeling, one understands, I feel a worldly unpleasant feeling." You get the drift. "And when feeling an unworldly pleasant feeling, one understands, I feel an unworldly pleasant feeling," and so forth.

So what is this distinction? Bhikkhu Analayo points to it as possibly being a kind of ethical distinction around feeling tone, with ethical meaning what supports the path of practice, what is onward leading. This begins to ask us to explore the kinds of feelings that we have in terms of what kinds of feelings are supporting the path of practice and what feelings are perhaps keeping us more habitually hooked in our usual modes of experience, our usual ways of wanting things to be a certain way.

This worldly or "of the flesh" feeling tone, my understanding is that it's basically feeling tones associated with our sense contacts: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch—things associated with our usual sense experience. Also with ideas that arise in the mind, thoughts about things. For example, there might be pleasant sensation associated with the taste of food. That would be a worldly pleasant experience. There might be a pleasant experience associated with the thought of food. That would be a worldly pleasant

mental experience. These are the kinds of feelings that we're familiar with in our everyday lives, and they tend to be what drives us to stay hooked into the sensory realm, the sense experience.

That teaching Rebecca pointed to on viparinama dukkha, the dukkha associated with pleasant experience—the gratification, the danger, and the escape—is a way for us to understand that the danger, the viparinama dukkha, is the danger hidden in pleasant experience: that tendency we have to crave it, to get hooked to it, to want more of it. That very being hooked to it, that very wanting, keeps us on this wheel of just having to get more of what we like and get rid of what we don't like. This is one way perhaps to understand what the worldly feeling tone is.

The unworldly feeling tone, my understanding, is feeling tones associated with wholesome emotions, those wholesome states of mind that lead us towards freedom, that lead us to let go of greed, aversion, and delusion. These are feelings connected with the path of practice, feelings associated with concentration, understanding and insight, feelings associated with generosity, the brahmaviharas. We're speaking about the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral aspects of experience, and many of these wholesome states—which Winnie spoke about the other night, the cultivation of the wholesome states—many of them have a pleasant feeling tone.

Happiness has a light and uplifting, very pleasant feeling. Happiness, joy—these are pleasant experiences. Concentration creates a kind of unified state where the unification is pleasant, and the happiness and joy that come with that unification are pleasant. The seclusion from the hindrances is very pleasant—the "bliss of seclusion," as concentration is sometimes called. The experience of being free from the hindrances is very pleasant. These would be understood as being the pleasure of the path.

The Buddha, at one point in his journey, is said to have discovered and said to himself that he had gone through this exploration around indulging in pleasure, being indulged in pleasure as a child. Then in the path of meditative practice, he learned the concentration states and experienced a lot of pleasure there. But that wasn't what he was looking for. Those states of concentration weren't what he was looking for in terms of freedom from suffering, because he found that when coming out of them, the suffering was still there.

It hadn't transformed anything just to go into the states of concentration.

And so he began trying different practices. He began trying mortification practices—extreme, unpleasant practices—depriving himself of food, refraining from breathing for long stretches of time until, it is said, he felt like his head was splitting open.

He experimented with these different practices that were available at the time and found that they weren't the answer to his question: Is it possible to be free from suffering? Is it possible?

It is said that as he was practically nearly dying—the description of his body after doing these mortification practices tells us that he could touch his stomach and feel his backbone, that's how thin he

was—he realized, "This is not the way either. I'm going to die before I find whether it's possible to be free of suffering."

And so he began nourishing himself again.

After he recovered his health, he was reflecting on his life and on some of his experiences as a child. I think they arose spontaneously. He remembered this experience when he was a child, sitting under a tree watching his father, and he apparently—I don't know how old he was—spontaneously went into a concentrated state.

His reflection in that moment was: Is that kind of concentration something to avoid? Is it something to fear? Is that pleasure—that kind of pleasure—a kind of pleasure that is not supportive of the path?

And his mind answered the question: No, actually that kind of pleasure feels supportive, it feels helpful.

And he said, "I wonder if that's the way—exploring that kind of pleasure." And the answer he got was that he thought it was.

So he began a new kind of journey and exploration.

These wholesome qualities are on the path. We find them, along with the pleasantness that comes with them, as we practice. And we find, as Winnie was describing, that they are cultivated as we explore working with our difficulties. Even exploring being with anger and frustration and confusion—the quality of being present can create an almost pleasantness.

I've experienced seeing anger arise and feeling joy in the seeing of it. And that joy is this kind of unworldly pleasure, because the heart and mind are resonating with "this is the way, this is the direction towards freedom"—this kind of understanding, this kind of relationship to experience.

There are many kinds of unworldly pleasant experience associated with many of these wholesome emotions: the pleasure of generosity, the pleasure of ethical conduct, the recognition of the bliss of blamelessness, the gift of fearlessness.

And then there's even the simple happiness that comes—a delight, a pleasure—as we come into present moment experience. I know many of you have talked about this. Some of you have described it as the world seeming to sparkle. Just to open your eyes and take in your sense experience—there's pleasure.

This may seem like the pleasure of sense experience, but I think it's really connected to the wholesomeness of being present. We can be walking and see a pile of dead wet leaves and be in awe of that. That's probably not because dead wet leaves are inherently pleasurable to look at, but because the mind is so present that it's experiencing things in a different way.

This too is a kind of unworldly pleasure—the pleasure of being present. Things that wouldn't normally be what we would be drawn to become sources of wonder.

Sometimes we can tell the distinction here because—well, it can go either way. I have been on retreat and seen something like that, and it's like, "Wow, I need to take a picture of that"—grabbing onto it, feeling like I need to hold onto that.

We can and we do cling to these unworldly feeling tones. The unworldly feeling tones do not make us immune from craving and clinging to them.

Many of you have also described how, having some kind of experience—a sitting where things are particularly clear, for instance—the next sitting or the next day there's this craving to get it back, trying to make it happen again. "What did I do? How did I do it? I can't make it happen. I'm doing something wrong."

What's wrong with me? And so we cling. We can cling to these wholesome thoughts and these unworldly pleasant states. And then we suffer, and so we get the feedback that it's not helpful to cling to those either.

But this unworldly feeling, as the sutta describes, it's not just pleasant. What would unworldly unpleasant feeling be? I've wondered about this. I've explored what it might be. What are wholesome emotions that are unpleasant?

There's a little hint in the suttas. There's one place where it describes what's called the distress of renunciation. It says something like there's a kind of longing for freedom from suffering, that kind of movement or wish to be free from suffering as we experience dukkha. And maybe we've had a taste. Sometimes it comes particularly after we've had a taste of a different way, after we've had a sense of meeting dukkha just as it is and having that recognition of, "Oh, this isn't such a problem. It's just unpleasant experience happening," and the mind kind of settling and relaxing around it. There's an understanding that there's a different way to meet experience.

Having had that taste, sometimes when our minds go back to their habitual ways of relating to experience—the ways in which we are clinging instead of recognizing, "Oh, it's just something arising, it's just a thought arising, that's all that's happening"—that recognition is a place of insight, that kind of understanding. "Oh, it's just a thought arising." No reactivity in the mind around what's arising. When there's no reactivity in the mind around what's arising, that's a state of insight. And it doesn't last often. It's impermanent. And so we find our way back to our ordinary, usual way of relating to things. We start to experience again the habitual ways in which we cling, and we feel like we've done something wrong.

Partly because we have tasted it. Sometimes when we've tasted that flavor of release from suffering, when the habit of suffering returns, this kind of longing can arise. I've heard some of you talk about it. And while it can be mixed up with aversion or greed, there is often a piece of it that is connected with the wish for our own well-being, with the movement towards freedom. And so this is described actually as a wholesome unpleasant experience—this longing for freedom, the pure longing for freedom.

This is connected in a way with the state of mind of samvega, the motivation. This longing for freedom

motivates the practice. And so that's a piece of its wholesomeness, its motivation for keeping us on the path, as opposed to throwing up our hands and saying, "Well, I think I'll go back to watching all those movies instead."

There's another description of unworldly pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experience based in insight, based in understanding the impermanent nature of experience. Three different descriptions, very similar at the beginning. It says understanding things are impermanent and unreliable, understanding their nature to decay and end—sometimes joy arises. So understanding the impermanent nature of experience, sometimes we experience joy in that place. Sometimes we experience that, as Rebecca pointed to, when there's an ending of something that's unpleasant, there can be joy in that just because of the ending of the unpleasant.

But there can also be a kind of delight just in the seeing of—not because it's pleasant or unpleasant, but just in the seeing of this being doing its thing, witnessing this being's nature, the nature of the experience to be coming and going. It can sometimes be a very delightful experience when we touch into that.

And at other times, touching into that deep impermanence, that things are falling away, this recognition that there's nowhere to land, no place where there's a reliability where the mind can land there and say, "Oh yeah, that's where I'll be. That's where I'll be happy." Sometimes the seeing of the impermanence takes us to this place of longing for freedom, takes us to a kind of distress about the unreliable nature of experience, the impermanent, unreliable nature of experience.

And so sometimes the experience around impermanence can be received and felt as pleasant, sometimes as unpleasant, and sometimes as neither pleasant nor unpleasant—the place where sometimes we touch into that impermanent changing experience and the mind is just balanced.

There's equanimity in the mind—no particular feeling tone, just the understanding of the impermanent nature of experience.

As the mind moves into insight and understanding, different feeling tones can arise connected with these understandings. This is simply something useful to be aware of: unpleasant feeling does not always mean you're not on the path.

There's a teaching in one sutta that connects these feeling tones to a different way of expressing them. I mentioned it briefly earlier around the distress based on renunciation. Bhikkhu Bodhi makes the connection between worldly and unworldly feeling tones and another expression, which speaks about the joy, distress, and equanimity based on the householder life, and the joy, equanimity, and distress based on renunciation.

In that teaching, there's a fascinating way in which they're all linked together. In the Satipatthana Sutta, the text basically encourages us to notice when unworldly unpleasant feeling is arising. So this teaching in the Satipatthana, to me, helps us begin to distinguish those feelings on the path from those not on the

path—those feelings that tend to keep us stuck in the usual habitual ways of relating to the world, versus the feelings related to the onward-leading nature of the path. The Satipatthana Sutta offers just a distinction, an understanding of the difference between them.

In another text, the Buddha begins to explore what sounds to me like a stair-stepping process of how we learn to let go, how the mind learns to release its clinging. The sutta says that when we're experiencing worldly pleasant experience, we can transcend it by relying on unworldly pleasant experience.

What does that mean? The Buddha describes his own experience: "Before my enlightenment, when I was the unenlightened bodhisattva, I clearly saw how sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering and much despair, and how great the danger is in them. But as long as I had not attained to the rapture and pleasure that are apart from sense pleasures, apart from unwholesome states, or to something more peaceful than that, I recognized that I could still be attracted to sense pleasures. But when I clearly saw, as it actually is with proper wisdom, how sense pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering, much despair, and how great is the danger in them, and I had attained to the rapture and pleasure that are apart from sense pleasure, apart from unwholesome states, or to something more peaceful than that, I recognized that I was no longer attracted to sensual pleasures."

So that phrase in the sutta—by relying on the pleasure of concentration, by relying on the pleasure of wholesome states, or something more peaceful than that even—I think he's referring to the pleasure of Nibbana, of freedom, but also to the pleasure of insight, the pleasure of understanding, the pleasure of being present and seeing things as they actually are. By relying on that pleasure, abandon. By relying on this, abandon that. By relying on unworldly pleasant, abandon the attachment to worldly pleasant.

There's a whole stair-stepping that he does in the sutta, and I'm not going to go through the entire thing. I simply want to reflect on this phrase: by relying on this, abandon that. And perhaps describe some of the ways in which I've experienced this.

The joy of renunciation, the joy that comes with understanding, the joy that comes with concentration—these provide a deeper kind of pleasure that helps us understand that the joy and delight of sense pleasure pales in comparison. And so it becomes easier to let go of that neediness. When we've tasted something different, it becomes easier to release the less wholesome ways our mind has been relating to the world.

And yet then we may crave the concentration. This is what I was just speaking to. By relying on concentration or understanding—there are different ways in. I've seen in my own experience that sometimes, just by relying on mindfulness and wisdom and the understanding that comes from meeting dukkha, being with anger, being able to watch it and see it fall apart, a deep sense of ease and peace enters the mind connected with that seeing and understanding.

Yet then we get attached to that kind of doing. Steve Armstrong, I believe, coined this phrase: we have a

particularly good sitting, and the next day we're really struggling to get back to it. He said, "There's nothing like a good sit to ruin your day." That's the craving for that state. So that's not helpful either.

What we start to see is that there are times when we may be holding on to some kind of practice in order to let go of something more painful—picking up the metta practice, for example, when anger is really strong. Perhaps there's a recognition of clinging to the metta practice for dear life so that we can navigate, balance the mind around the anger. Then maybe the anger begins to weaken and fall away. There may be some clinging to that metta. Yet the clinging to a particular practice that helps us let go of some reactive, unwholesome state of mind—perhaps that clinging to the wholesome state, to the metta, is partly what allows us to release the unwholesome state.

By relying on this, abandon that.

But then we're going to at some point have to work on the clinging to the practices, the clinging there.

My own experience with this is that my early practice was so much around exploring anger and self-hatred. And there was some clinging to the practice, clinging to being a meditator. The very first meditation retreat I sat, I could see myself beginning to create an identity as a meditator. But there was a real usefulness to it for years—it helped the mind learn to work with and let go of those really deep patterns and habits around anger and self-hatred.

I wasn't at that point experiencing any suffering around the identity of being a meditator. I mean, I could see that I was identified. I heard the teachings about not being identified. And fortunately I didn't say, "Oh, I shouldn't do that. I shouldn't be identified with being a meditator," because then I wouldn't have done anything. Sometimes we may have to hold onto something in order to meet or work with much more challenging experience.

And then there was a certain point in my practice where that identity of being a meditator—where that sense of investigation was really a big place around the identification, the capacity that this mind has to look into experience and pull it apart and understand all of the different things going on. There was a lot of that kind of putting things under a microscope in my early years of practice.

That putting things under a microscope was helpful for some time. But then there came a point at which that putting it under the microscope was actually experienced as suffering—that sense of, "Oh, there's something happening. Let me find it and look at it and figure it out." That was experienced as suffering because what was being observed was not the bigger, more major kind of suffering. That larger suffering had been obscuring the subtler suffering of the identification with being a meditator, the identification with being someone who could investigate well. But at a certain point, when a certain level of suffering falls away, we get to look at subtler levels of suffering, such as the suffering around the practice itself.

So sometimes I say we can let suffering be our guide. If you find yourself clinging to the practice a little while observing something very difficult, it's possible that this is serving you in that moment. If you're not

experiencing the suffering in the practice itself, and the suffering is more in whatever you're working with—the anger or the self-hatred, the confusion or the fear—then that subtle clinging to the practice may be a kind of craving that helps you overcome craving.

There's actually a phrase in the suttas that says exactly this. I was really happy to read it because it matches my experience. I'll paraphrase, since it uses words we haven't defined yet. It's Ananda speaking to a nun, and he says to her: "It is by relying on craving that craving is to be abandoned. There is a case where one might hear that such and such a person has become completely freed of suffering. And hearing that, one may have the thought, 'I hope that I too one day will become completely free of suffering.' And then at a later time, one abandons craving, having relied on craving."

By relying on this, abandon that. In this case, relying on a kind of craving toward wholesome states—that wish for freedom being a wholesome wish—the teaching here acknowledges that craving. When we rely on something in that way, because of how the practice is framed, as the bigger craving gets abandoned, we start to see more clearly. We're looking at craving. We feel the suffering of craving. We've abandoned a bigger craving—oh, here's some smaller craving. And we may even feel it more strongly. This exploration of where the craving is takes us deeper and deeper into subtler and subtler kinds of craving. We may be craving the practice, craving holding on to the practice, craving freedom, craving liberation.

There's another analogy that really speaks to this principle of "by relying on this, abandon that." Many of you have heard this analogy—maybe even all of you—the simile of the raft. In this simile, the Buddha describes coming upon a flood of water, where the near shore is dangerous and you need to get to the far shore to find safety. In order to cross this flood, he says, you can build a raft. Build it out of what's around you. Just build a raft. And using the raft, floating on the water, using your energy, paddling with your hands and feet—I've got this image of lying on the raft, paddling with hands and feet to get across to the far shore.

In this simile, the Buddha describes that the flood is basically the flood of suffering, the flood of greed, aversion, and delusion, and that the raft is the Eightfold Path. He describes that the raft is like the Eightfold Path, and so we use the Eightfold Path to cross the flood. By relying on the Eightfold Path, we manage to float on the surface of the water instead of drowning in the suffering, instead of drowning in the greed, aversion, and delusion.

We manage to stay afloat. We can't let go of the raft in the middle of the river. And perhaps we even have to hold on tightly to that raft. If there are rapids or big waves in the water, we may have to hold on tightly, even cling to that raft to get across. It's not useful to say, "Oh, clinging to the raft—I better not do that. Let's throw the raft away while we're in the middle of the river." So by relying on this, we can abandon that. By relying on the practices of the Eightfold Path, we can get across the flood. We do get across the flood.

And the teaching goes on. As you cross the flood, as you get to the other side, the Buddha asks: is it useful to pick up that raft and say, "Wow, this raft has been really helpful. Let me carry it around with me on my

head"? No, that's not useful. There is a point at which we put down the raft when it's no longer needed to support us in crossing the flood. And so the Buddha at the end of this teaching says that we need to abandon clinging even to wholesome states—how much more so to unwholesome states? And yet this analogy points out that we have to hold on, at least, maybe even cling to wholesome states while we're crossing the flood.

I think partly this is pointing to not picking up the teachings as a thing, carrying them around with us, saying, "I am a Buddhist. This is what I do. This is who I am." That's not relevant or necessary at a certain point. So by relying on this, abandon that. Eventually the teachings let us know there's a possibility of complete release of clinging.

As I mentioned earlier, I feel like we do have to recognize the suffering of clinging to wholesome states. That will be something we need to work with at some point. We'll recognize it. The whole way the teachings are framed is so beautiful because we're always looking at where the suffering is, where the clinging is, where the most obvious suffering and clinging are. Initially it's at this grosser level, and then it becomes subtler. And yet we're always looking at that and exploring the possibility of letting go. That letting go happens not because we decide to let go necessarily, but because understanding develops as we observe what it's like to cling. So that's the practice.

We recognize that clinging is happening. That experience when we're suffering from having had a good sit—a good sitting that has somehow ruined our day—what's the clinging there? The mind having an idea that this experience isn't good enough. Some agenda that something else should be happening. There's this idea that the sitting yesterday meant something, and that its not happening now means something else. All different ways in which our mind is tying itself up in knots, trying to get back to something, as opposed to recognizing in the first place: this is what's happening. There's clinging happening—wanting that state back. And if you look, you're not clinging to the state. You can't cling to that state. It's not here. You're clinging to some idea in your mind. You're clinging to a thought. It's amazing what our minds will cling to.

So we can see what's happening right now. There's a thought in the mind that some other thing would be better, and the mind is holding on to that. Being with that, noticing that, we feel the suffering of it. And it's not a mistake to feel the suffering of it. This is part of how the learning happens.

It kind of feels to me that there's this movement, this direction our system—our organism—wants to move in: the direction of well-being. Very naturally. And there's just been a fundamental misunderstanding about how that's possible.

The mind has all kinds of ideas and views and opinions that obscure or get in the mix in terms of this movement toward well-being. It's as if the system is moving toward well-being, and our thoughts interject: "Oh, this is how we should get to well-being—get what we want, get rid of what we don't want." Our thoughts, habits, and conditioning co-opt that natural movement toward well-being into a set of behaviors that actually keeps us caught in suffering.

Our minds are fundamentally confused. Really.

As we start to turn toward experience and look at it directly, we see: this is the experience of suffering. When I'm wanting something to hold onto or wanting to get rid of something, the experience of the wanting or the aversion—the greed or the aversion—is already suffering. We fundamentally jump over that to: "It's going to be great when I get that thing. It's going to be so great when I get rid of that thing." And we are missing completely that we're suffering right now.

What the practice does is point out that suffering right now, in the greed and the aversion. This is not a mistake. This is actually how the practice works. As our system gets better information, it starts to recognize: "That's not helpful. That way lies suffering. Let's let go of that." The wisdom of our system begins to help the mind let go of the suffering. We don't do that ourselves.

There are times in our practice where we do have a sense—we see, "Yes, that's catching me up. Maybe I should set that aside." But this deeper kind of letting go happens because the mind is understanding at a very deep level: that way lies suffering. It's just not going there. This is a movement of our system, our organism, wanting to move in a wholesome direction. When it gets the information about greed and aversion and delusion, it starts to let that go.

The path of letting go eventually releases all of these ways in which we cling. The Buddha expressed the possibility that it's possible to be completely free from clinging, completely free from craving, completely free from suffering. And in that place, there's the putting down of the path.

It's an interesting image, the putting down of that raft. Our normal minds might think, "Well, if we put down the raft, how do we do anything? How do we orient our minds?" The understanding is that wisdom, love, and compassion will orient the mind toward wholesome action, naturally.

There's a teaching in one of the suttas that describes how someone who is fully awakened possesses the Eightfold Path—actually, the Tenfold Path. There are two more factors that relate to freedom: right understanding and right liberation, right release. This possessing of the path is understood to be simply the natural effect, the natural consequence. We don't have to try to be ethical at that point. We don't have to pick up the path. It's living us, we could say.

The expression of someone who has crossed the flood, released greed, aversion, and delusion, is to live a wholesome, ethical life with freedom.

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