Mindfulness of Feeling: Vedanā

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:02:41

Tonight I'd like to explore in some depth the topic of vedanā, of exploring our experience through this perspective of pleasant, unpleasant, and neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

This experience of feeling tone is common to every experience that we have. Every single sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, every single arising in our mind comes with this flavor of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. It's a natural arising based on just contact with our sense experience. In fact, our brains seem designed to operate with this valence in a way to protect ourselves from the unpleasant and to guide us towards the pleasant.

It's an aspect of experience that can be easy to overlook. The actual experience of feeling tone can be easy to overlook because we're so busy responding to it. When something pleasant arises, we tend to automatically try to get more of it, to hold onto it. When something unpleasant arises, we tend to automatically try to get rid of it. And so while we're very attuned to the experience of pleasant and unpleasant, we're not necessarily conscious of it. Our bodies, our minds tend to react automatically, but we don't really consciously experience this flavor.

The Buddha pointed to this flavor of experience as a very important aspect of our experience to pay attention to, just because it is the springboard from which we react. In some ways we think that we perhaps like certain things—like certain flavors, or like the way certain things look, or like certain configurations of experience. But the Buddha points to something deeper: it's not necessarily the things themselves. For instance, I like chocolate ice cream. To me, chocolate ice cream is pleasant. And the Buddha says that's what we actually like—the pleasant. Our minds think we like the chocolate ice cream.

So the Buddha, in pointing to this, says this is the place from which our reactivity springs. Bonnie mentioned the other night this process of dependent origination and the way feeling leads to reactivity, which is very clearly laid out in this teaching. We'll probably talk about this more at a later time, this cycle of dependent origination. Tonight I'm just going to briefly go over the way feeling is embedded into this cycle.

Basically, as I just mentioned, every single experience that we have, every contact with our sense bases creates, produces this feeling tone. When ignorance is present—the whole cycle of dependent origination begins with ignorance and is predicated on ignorance arising—when ignorance, that is the not-seeing of how suffering is created, when ignorance arises with feeling, it leads to craving. From craving follows clinging, from clinging follows becoming, identification, selfing, and then suffering.

The key point I see in how feeling leads to craving is that it's not an automatic leap from feeling to craving. It seems pretty automatic in a way. When we're just going through our lives, we kind of automatically move toward the pleasant, automatically move away from the unpleasant. But this is happening in concert with ignorance arising in the mind, with not being clearly aware, with not understanding how suffering arises in the mind. When we are not seeing clearly, feeling leads on to craving, leads on to clinging, leads on to suffering.

It's a very familiar process and seems automatic in a way, but it's not fixed. It's not hardwired. This is why the Buddha highlights the importance of noticing feeling tone. Because with mindfulness and wisdom brought to that very experience, it can short-circuit the typical movement towards craving and actually lead in another direction entirely—towards freedom, towards liberation.

This highlights the importance of meeting feeling with mindfulness and wisdom. The second foundation of mindfulness is devoted to feeling. Out of four foundations of mindfulness, one is the body, attending to the experience of the body. The second foundation is devoted to this exploration of pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. It was that important for the Buddha to highlight it in a foundation of mindfulness.

I'm going to read you the first part of this, which many of you are probably familiar with: "And how does one abide contemplating 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.'"

It's really quite a simple instruction, although not necessarily so easy to effect, to accomplish. Feeling tone can be quite subtle. And when it's not subtle, as I said a few minutes ago, it's often overlooked because we're kind of automatically reacting to it. So it can take some time to begin to attune ourselves to this quality, to begin to get familiar with feeling tones.

This pleasant, unpleasant, neutral quality to experience is associated both with our physical experience and our mental experience. Every contact with the body, with all the bodily senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch—there's the aspect of feeling that goes along with that. Every contact with the mind, every thought, every emotion, every idea, belief, opinion comes with a feeling tone.

Even physical experience, physical pleasure and pain, is mediated through the mind.

So we have the feeling tones associated with physical sensation, and we have feeling tones associated with mental experiences—emotions, for example. Anger is usually experienced as unpleasant. Happiness is pleasant. Grief is unpleasant. Equanimity, perhaps, as neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Although there is one place where the Buddha describes whatever is not felt as painful as felt as pleasurable, and in some ways describes the experience of equanimity, the absence of pain, as being pleasurable.

Getting familiar with feeling tone is, I think, one of the helpful explorations of our practice. Because as we get familiar with it, we can bring mindfulness and wisdom to it, beginning to short-circuit the kind of automatic movement towards reactivity.

The easiest place, actually, I think, is in exploring our physical sensations, physical contact. The touch sense of our skin is very attuned to pleasant and unpleasant. The nerve endings are quite attuned to pleasant and unpleasant. And so it's an easy place to really begin to sense and feel into this quality. We can explore the unpleasantness of an itch, the unpleasantness of a painful experience in the body from sitting. We can explore the pleasant experience of the smoothness of breathing.

Just beginning to attune to that experience right now—what's the most obvious experience that you have? Can you tune in to whether it's pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant?

In daily activities, exploring this quality of pleasant and unpleasant can be really fun. I found exploring it in eating to be a really enjoyable experience. Just watching how the flow of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral happens, and how long it lasts. You put something in your mouth, like a bit of orange, and start chewing it. At the beginning, there's the burst of perhaps liquid and juice, tartness and sweetness coming together—this burst of sensation in your mouth.

For some of you, that may be pleasant. For some of you, it may be unpleasant. But just recognizing that experience, noticing: is it pleasant for you? Is it unpleasant for you? How long does the pleasant last? It's actually pretty short, how long it lasts.

You sit here before lunch just envisioning the pleasure of lunch. This is a way you can begin to explore the impact of thoughts and how they affect feeling tone. You've got the thought of lunch. It makes you feel good to think about lunch. You envision how great it's going to be to eat, and the anticipation feels pretty good. But when we actually get to lunch and start eating it, we get these little tiny bursts. If you're actually paying attention, the actual physical experience of pleasure comes and goes pretty rapidly.

I found in exploring feeling tone while eating that it was a very interesting place to see the conditioned nature of feeling. I was here, I think it was maybe my first or second three-month course, and for tea one evening they served apples and bean dip. That was our evening meal. It was just about this time of year, early October, late September. So the apples were quite hard and quite crispy. I put a bite of apple in my mouth and I was almost overwhelmed with pleasant. It was pretty easy for me to tell that it was pleasant—a pleasant physical experience in my mouth that also produced delight. It produced delight in my mind, which created a kind of lovely bubbly sense throughout the whole body. Pleasant bodily experience, pleasant mental experience, both coming together.

Then I put the bean dip in my mouth, and that had a completely different texture and flavor. It was interesting. I mean, it was pretty good. And then I put the apple in my mouth again, and that second bite of apple after the bean dip was even more pleasant. Something about the conditions on the tongue of having

had something kind of pungent and smooth contrasted with the tartness and juiciness of the apple really highlighted the pleasantness of the apple for me.

So I kind of got into this alternating—bean dip, apple—noticing the pleasantness, eating several bites of apple, noticing it wasn't quite as pleasant. Just playing with it, exploring the experience. And the more I ate, the more diminished the pleasure became. I found that interesting too, perhaps getting acclimated to the food. But it really showed me that the pleasantness wasn't inherent in the apple or even the combination of bean dip and apple. It came as a result of various conditions coming together. And by the end of the meal, it was just kind of an apple. Just a more ordinary experience.

The mental feeling tone, which I've talked about just briefly, comes with every experience of our mind: ideas, thoughts, emotions. Sadness, perhaps, is usually unpleasant. Happiness is pleasant. Ideas, thoughts, views, and opinions also have a feeling tone, although I think most thoughts—the bare thought—at least in my exploration of this, and I can't say it's exhaustive by any means, but the bare thought itself, just the arising of a thought, seems to be pretty neutral. It's the associations that follow, the ideas, the opinions, the associations that come with it that may be pleasant or unpleasant, that seem to create the feeling tone around a thought.

So you may think of a friend that you dearly love. The thought of the friend itself, the initial thought, may be kind of neutral. But then the mind starts contemplating associations, starts remembering things. Perhaps sometimes, depending on your mood, the things you remember may be the things that you enjoy about that person, and a pleasant feeling tone arises. Other times, depending on your mood or state of mind, you may be inclined to remember, "Oh, but they did that thing. Why did they do that thing?" And then an unpleasant feeling tone arises.

So often I think thoughts and feelings will produce a kind of emotion that then has a feeling tone to it. I actually think thoughts, ideas, and associations are a kind of leading cause of our perception of feeling in our physical experience. Much of what we think we experience as pleasant or unpleasant actually comes because we have ideas about it.

There's actually a teaching in the Abhidhamma that refers to this somewhat, especially for the non-physical senses. The Abhidhamma says that the physical sense of touch

has pleasant, unpleasant quality to it. In fact, that's pretty much the way our nerves are designed—to produce pleasant and unpleasant in our physical contact.

But the Abhidhamma proposes, and I'm just going to put this out there because I don't know that I completely believe this, but I found it to be an interesting exploration in my own practice. The Abhidhamma proposes that the feeling tone of contact with eye, ear, nose, and tongue—the bare contact—is neutral. Any time we experience pleasant or unpleasant sight, sound, smell, or taste, it's because there's a mental association, a mental process going on.

Now again, I don't know that I completely believe this. In fact, the suttas talk about there being pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral associated with all of the senses. So it's interesting that the Abhidhamma brings this up. But in any case, I've explored it myself a little bit, and I found it to be a very interesting tool for exploring feeling tone.

For instance, one evening I was having difficulty sleeping. When I have difficulty sleeping—it's the middle of the night, I woke up with difficulty sleeping—I just got up to meditate. That's what I tend to do if I'm having insomnia in the middle of the night. So I got up to meditate. This was not on retreat; it was at home.

While I was sitting there meditating, I heard this very quiet tapping noise, just a subtle tapping that seemed to be coming from my wall somewhere. My experience was that the tapping noise was unpleasant. It would come and go, and I would notice the tapping and just recognize, "Well, unpleasant. Unpleasant sound is happening."

As I kept sitting, this tapping noise kept coming and going. At some point I recognized that when the tapping started, there was a contraction that happened in the body. The contraction was unpleasant. The physical contraction—tightening, tensing in the body—that was unpleasant also. So I was noticing that. I was noticing the unpleasantness in the body as well as what I perceived to be the unpleasantness in the sound.

At some point when the tapping came back, because it would disappear for a while and I would just be meditating in the quiet, I noticed a flash of fear—just the subtlest flash of fear as the tapping started. The fear was clearly unpleasant. And as I continued to observe, having seen the fear and the unpleasantness of the fear, I could see that the tapping sound was actually pretty neutral. I even experienced it as slightly pleasant, that quiet tapping sound.

So that was a real learning for me, to see how the fear had colored the perception of feeling. I think this happens to us a lot. I think it happens to us a lot that we're in a particular state of aversion, or as this example from the researcher said, expecting a strongly unpleasant feeling and being presented with a less unpleasant feeling, the mind interprets experience in a different way based on the climate of our mind, based on what we're expecting, what our predispositions are.

In terms of exploring feeling, it can be very interesting to actually begin to find or look: What is it that we're actually reacting to? What is it that we are feeling as unpleasant or pleasant? I think much of our reactivity actually leaps off of mental feeling rather than the actual physical feeling.

On another retreat I had a strong physical experience in the body which seemed to be pretty unpleasant. I was just exploring: What is the unpleasantness here? What is unpleasant about this strong experience in the body? And it came to me in a flash: It's out of control. I don't have control over this. That was really unpleasant—that idea, that mental climate of feeling out of control. And when I could see that that was

what I was really reacting to, I could tell that the physical experience, well, there was a strong experience there, but it was more the mind that was being reacted to, not the body.

This kind of exploration can be very interesting. The Buddha pointed to this in his famous story of the dart. He talked about how when an ordinary person is struck by an unpleasant physical sensation, they beat their breasts, they bewail, they moan. "Why me? Why am I having this unpleasant experience?" Thus adding a mental unpleasant experience to the physical unpleasant experience. And I'd actually say multiplying the physical unpleasant experience by the mental unpleasant experience.

So it can be a very interesting exploration if there's a persistent reactivity present for you. Check in and see if you can find what is being reacted to. What is it that the mind is either moving towards or trying to get rid of?

On another retreat, it might have been my second three-month retreat, I was doing walking meditation. I think I told a walking meditation story here earlier—this is a different one. I experienced so much aversion while walking that I really got to explore my aversion. I seemed to be averse to how close people walked to me. I was averse to the fact that other people were even there. I was just averse. But I used it. I used it as exploration.

I was doing walking meditation in the walking room right behind us, and I was pretty comfortable with the walking. People were spaced comfortably apart. Then somebody else came in and slipped in right next to me. Immediate aversion. Okay, there's aversion. What is it? I asked myself, what is it that I'm finding unpleasant here?

I went through all the senses. The person didn't appear unpleasant in their body or face or clothes, so sight wasn't unpleasant. They didn't smell bad, so smell wasn't the problem. I wasn't bumping up against them, so it wasn't touch. Taste was out of the question. I went through all the physical senses, and it was like—it must be in the mind.

So I was just doing walking, curious about what was going on in the mind. I really hadn't seen anything; it wasn't obvious to me what I was reacting to. I was walking back and forth, thinking there must be some thought in there, something. And suddenly this thought popped into my mind: "He's weird."

Well, that's a thought. I still didn't quite get it. A little bit later, two or three passes later, I saw that my mind had constructed "he's weird" out of the fact that it was December, freezing cold, and the person had bare feet. Seeing that—just the ludicrousness of it—the whole unpleasantness, the whole aversion fell apart. And in the next pass of walking, spontaneous mettā was arising.

It can be fun to explore this.

It can also be really interesting to explore neutral. I've been talking mostly about pleasant and unpleasant. One thing I want to mention: after I gave the instructions on neutral, Joseph pointed me to something in

the Abhidhamma where neutral experience is described as such a subtle experience that often it's recognized in terms of the absence of pleasant and the absence of unpleasant. In my own experience, I have seen the felt sense of neither pleasant nor unpleasant, but it is rare actually to see that. I thought it was interesting that in the Abhidhamma they point to neutral as being recognized by inference—recognized in the absence of pleasant and the absence of unpleasant.

But in any case, as the practice deepens, we may find ourselves in periods where there is more neutral experience. I think this happens because our mental reactivity diminishes. As I was saying, much of the pleasant and unpleasant quality in our physical realm comes because we have ideas, opinions, views, judgments—underlying tendencies towards aversion and greed. As those begin to fall away, our experience becomes much more neutral.

But we're not simply unreactive to neutral. We have our own ways of responding to it. On one retreat at Spirit Rock, I was in a place where neutral was coming up frequently, so I was getting to spend time just noting, noticing—neutral is happening, neutral experience is happening. And I noticed that quite often, actually, when neutral experience would arise, the mind would get a little dull or lose interest in the neutrality. It would slip off into indifference or boredom.

So I could see that this was one kind of tendency of mind when there was neutral experience—just to disconnect, just to lose touch with the neutrality.

Another very interesting response I saw to neutral was this: I had heard in dharma talks that when things get more settled, experience becomes more neutral. So when neutral arose, I thought, "Oh, neutral! Maybe something good is going to happen." There was a little bit of leaning in—"Neutral... is something good going to happen? Is something good going to happen?" And when nothing good happened, my mind produced one of its most habitual tendencies: "You're a failure. You've messed up. You're no good as a meditator."

Out of neutral experience, my mind created one of its most habitual patterns—this kind of self-negativity, a kind of self-flagellation. Out of neutral experience.

Fortunately, on this retreat, I was seeing it. I could watch it go there, and I could smile at it. "Oh, look at that. Look what the mind is doing. Out of nothing, out of neutral experience, it creates this pattern."

I think neutral experience, as the mind starts moving towards it, can be a place where some of our most habitual tendencies kick in. Watch for yourself. What happens when experience is neutral?

The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta continues. After going through the beginning—simply noticing pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant—it says: "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.' When feeling a worldly neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling, one understands, 'I feel a worldly neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling.' When feeling an

unworldly pleasant feeling, one understands, 'I feel an unworldly pleasant feeling.'" Likewise for unworldly unpleasant and unworldly neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

The Pali term translated as "worldly" is *sāmisa*, which basically means something like "of the flesh." *Nirām isa*, unworldly, means "not of the flesh." The basic distinction being pointed to here, as I understand it, is that the worldly feelings are the normal everyday feelings that come with our senses—pleasant experience related to the taste of food, sights, physical contact—and also the pleasant or unpleasant experience related to ideas about those experiences. This worldly pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral arises at all six of the sense bases, not just the five physical ones. So it's not simply a mental-physical distinction being made here.

The unworldly feelings, sometimes translated as spiritual feelings—Bhikkhu Anālayo says these are feelings associated with the path of practice. The unworldly, spiritual, pleasant feelings are, for instance, the feelings that come as the mind gets concentrated. They're not dependent on things of the world. The unworldly pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experiences are described in one text as related not only to the deepening of the mind in concentration, but also to the feelings that arise based on insight.

In the deep recognition of the impermanent nature of experience, there can be different feelings associated with that. Sometimes impermanence is experienced with very clear seeing—clearly seeing the arising and passing of experience—and that can bring a sense of joy, felt as pleasant. That would be an unworldly pleasant feeling.

Sometimes the experience of clearly seeing the arising and passing lands in a way that's almost like "enough already." Is all of this impingement never going to stop? And it can generate a sense of longing for freedom. This longing is understood to be an unworldly unpleasant feeling—not an unwholesome unpleasant feeling, but a longing for liberation that comes as part of the path.

Sometimes the clear seeing of impermanence generates a feeling of balance of mind, of equanimity, experienced as neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Again, a sign of the path deepening.

Bhikkhu Anālayo says that this distinction between worldly feeling and unworldly feeling points to an ethical dimension of feeling, where "ethical" refers to what leads us towards freedom, what's connected with the path, and what is not. The worldly feelings are not connected with the path—they simply arise, they happen. The unworldly feelings arise connected with the deepening of practice.

And so they can serve as guidance for us on the path.

Now I want to insert something right here, before you start thinking it's bad to have the regular kind of feeling. The Satipatthana Sutta says that whatever feeling is arising, it can be known clearly and serve as a vehicle for liberation. I think this distinction between unworldly and worldly feeling is pointing to the way that with worldly feeling, we tend to be caught in a cycle around it.

As I was describing earlier, with our feelings of reactivity in the mind, we can tend to orient towards seeing things as pleasant or unpleasant. If we're experiencing aversion in the mind—maybe you've noticed this—many things your mind lands on tend to be unpleasant. Out of that ground of aversion grows unpleasant experience.

There's a teaching that we have deep in our psyche these underlying tendencies to greed, aversion, and delusion. Even if they're not active in a moment, they are still in the mind in a way, waiting to connect, waiting for delusion to bring them to the surface. We talked briefly about personality types—some of us tend towards an aversive personality type, some towards a greedy personality type, some towards more of a delusive personality type. For me, I clearly see how that underlying tendency, that orientation towards aversion that this mind has, informs how I meet the world.

At one point, in my early experiences of choiceless awareness, I was doing a guided meditation with my teacher. He was asking me to just notice every experience—just notice the next most obvious experience, whatever it was, as we've done with some of you in meetings. What's the most obvious thing right now? Right now? Right now? The thing that stood out for me most at the end of that very first exercise was this: he said, "Well, that's choiceless awareness." And I said, "How can it be choiceless? It was all unpleasant." In my mind, I thought if it was completely choiceless, it would be a mix. Well, it was choiceless in that the habit of mind was choosing—and choosing unpleasant because of that orientation, that underlying tendency.

So the worldly feelings tend to be connected to those underlying tendencies and also tend to cycle back to them. If an unpleasant experience arises and it's not seen, it will tend to lead to aversion. If a pleasant experience arises and it's not seen with wisdom, it will tend to lead to greed. The worldly feelings cycle around with these underlying tendencies, feeding them and being fed by them.

Regarding the unworldly feelings, there's one teaching where a nun is talking to her ex-husband, and he's asking her detailed questions about feeling. Let me read this section to you. He asks: Does the underlying tendency to greed have to be abandoned in regard to all pleasant feeling? Does the underlying tendency to aversion have to be abandoned in regard to all unpleasant feeling? Does the underlying tendency to ignorance have to be abandoned in regard to all neither painful nor pleasant feeling?

And she basically says no. She points to this: When secluded from sense pleasure, one enters a state of jhana. This is accompanied by pleasure, and one does not have to abandon lust—the tendency to lust does not underlie that pleasant experience. One considers, "When shall I enter and abide in that base that the noble ones now enter and abide in?" In one who generates a longing for supreme liberation, grief arises with that longing as a condition. With that, one abandons aversion, and the underlying tendency to aversion does not underlie that.

So again, this points to the distinction between worldly pleasant, worldly painful, worldly neither pleasant nor unpleasant, and unworldly. This ethical distinction points to something important the Buddha

recognized in his own journey. An important discovery was that not all pleasure was to be avoided. Pleasure naturally arises as we deepen in the path.

Some ways that it arises: the happiness and joy of giving, the happiness and joy of ethical conduct. There is also a kind of happiness that comes in the very simple meeting of sense experience. Taking a walk and seeing the light on the leaves, and just experiencing the joy of really seeing that—that's a joy that comes with being present. It's connected with the path, that kind of joy. The pleasure of concentration, the pleasure of insight.

The Buddha suggests: Relying on this, abandon that. Relying on the pleasure of practice, relying on the pleasure of concentration and insight, abandon the pleasure of seeking happiness through sense pleasure. In a way, this is how the practice can unfold. Our minds, our whole organism, is seeking happiness.

We're oriented in our very organism to find well-being. Only our minds are so confused about how that well-being is to be found. They're deluded. The delusion, the ignorance that covers our minds has us believe that having the next hit of some pleasant sense experience is where happiness lies.

As we begin to see more clearly, the mind begins to understand that that happiness is all bound up with wanting and aversion, and that wanting and aversion is not the way towards well-being. It begins to understand the happiness of concentration, the happiness of insight, and through that can begin to let go of our dependence, our neediness for that kind of short-sighted happiness that we've lived so much of our lives running around trying to create. We begin to see that the pleasure of the sense realm pales in comparison to the pleasure that's available through letting go.

And it's helpful, of course, to recognize that we can cling to that unworldly pleasure too. We have a good sitting. It's just clear and settled and the mind is at ease. And then the next sitting it's, "How can I get that back? How can I get that back?" Steve Armstrong has a famous quote: "There's nothing like a good sit to ruin your day."

This usually happens after the fact. We have that sitting that's really clear, and then afterward we remember it. It's a thought arising in our mind: "That felt good. I remember that felt good." What we're actually clinging to is not the actual experience of that sitting, which is long gone, but the idea of it. I've seen myself cling to the idea of being able to tell somebody I had a good sitting, even though I wasn't having good sittings—I mean, what I was thinking of as good sittings. I was having some image of how great it was going to be when I could go into that interview room and describe all the impermanence I was seeing. I had no idea what I was looking for.

So what we are clinging to often around this unworldly pleasure is the idea, an identity that we've created around it—the identity rather than the experience itself.

The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta suggests simply: recognize feeling is happening. Recognize what kind of feeling is happening and that it is happening. It doesn't say one feels a worldly feeling and then tries to get rid of it.

It says one feels the worldly feeling and knows they feel a worldly feeling. It is the comprehension of that which is the important part—understanding feeling's nature.

I'm going to read you two quotes to finish that both point to how this exploration of feeling leads right to freedom.

The first one is from the Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving, Majjhima 38, and it goes through all of the sense bases. I'll just read it with respect to the eye: "On seeing a form with the eye, one does not become greedy for pleasant forms or averse to disagreeable forms. One abides with mindfulness of the body established and with an immeasurable mind. Having abandoned the path of agreeing and disagreeing, one experiences whatever feeling arises, pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant, just as it is."

I like that: having abandoned the path of agreeing and disagreeing. It's a very simple thing that we do around feeling—having abandoned the path of agreeing and disagreeing. One experiences whatever feeling arises just as it is. One is not delighted or pleased with those feelings and one does not appropriate them. Interest in those feelings ceases.

Now my understanding about what that means—"interest in those feelings ceases"—is that the interest in having certain feelings, the interest in "more of that please, less of that please," that's the interest that ceases. My understanding is that the interest becomes connected with interest in the impermanent nature of the feeling. So it's not saying don't be interested in your experience. I think it's pointing to a specific thing here: interest in having certain feelings ceases. With the cessation of interest, clinging ceases.

And then there is the famous teaching, which I think has come up several times, that the path in a nutshell is: nothing is to be clung to. That encapsulates the teachings. In a passage from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, the Buddha elaborates on what this means.

He's talking to Moggallana: "Here, Moggallana, one has learnt thus: nothing is fit to be clung to. If one has learned that nothing is fit to be clung to, one directly knows everything—directly knows all experience. By directly knowing everything, one fully understands everything. When one fully understands everything, whatever feeling is experienced, be it pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant, in regard to those same feelings, one dwells contemplating impermanence, contemplating dispassion, contemplating cessation, contemplating relinquishment. When one thus abides contemplating impermanence, dispassion, cessation, and relinquishment in regard to those feelings, one does not cling to anything in the world. Without clinging, one is not agitated. Being unagitated, one personally obtains Nibbana, freedom."

Understanding feelings' nature brings wisdom into the unfolding flow of our experience, leading the typical pattern of dependent origination to fall apart—freedom from suffering.

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