The Experience of Feeling (Vedanā)

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 58:16

This morning in the question and answer period there was a question about the experience of feeling—whether experience is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—and how to work with that, how to explore it. There's a lot to say about this topic, so I thought I'd take some time tonight to reflect on this theme with you.

This aspect of our experience we call feeling; the Pali is vedanā. The translation as "feeling" tends to confuse us with the notion of emotions, but the exploration of vedanā is much simpler than emotion. It is simply about whether experience is pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

All experience, every experience that we have, has this quality to it—whether it's physical experience or mental experience. A very simple process happens in our minds and bodies where there's contact with the sense base, whether it's sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, or the sense base of the mind. Based on that simple contact, the organism feels it as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

This is an aspect of experience that happens every single moment, and yet it is often not consciously seen, not really consciously recognized. Part of the reason is that the programming in our mind—the human programming, or actually it's more like animal programming—is to maximize pleasant as much as possible and minimize unpleasant as much as possible. So we very quickly react to this feeling tone without being consciously aware of it. We move right into doing something when we experience something pleasant or unpleasant. We start to try to keep, hold on to, get more of the pleasant; to push away, get rid of, control, fix, change the unpleasant. We're fairly automatically reacting to this aspect of our experience, but not consciously knowing that it's happening.

One of the Buddha's teachings says that all experience converges on this quality of feeling. By that I understand that when we're responding to experience, we're pretty much responding on that point of convergence. We are responding to the pleasant or unpleasant aspect of experience; we're not really responding to the detail of the experience.

For instance, around food, we might think we like particular flavors or tastes or particular kinds of food like chocolate. We think we like chocolate. But what we actually like is the pleasant experience. What we're actually responding to is the pleasant. This is one of the points the Buddha highlighted—that we are responding to this aspect of pleasant and unpleasant, like automatons running around looking for more pleasant, trying to get rid of the unpleasant.

So this aspect of feeling is like a springboard. We leap off of it into judgments, views, opinions, liking, not

liking, aversion, greed. It's a leaping point for us. The Buddha pointed to this aspect of our experience as being a really important place to pay attention to.

In his own understanding of his mind, as he explored and looked at his own mind, he described a process by which suffering, this dukkha, is generated in our minds, and this aspect of feeling plays a key role. He said this is really important—really important to look at this aspect, to be wise about it, to recognize that it happens to us. It's not that we're going to stop pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral from happening to us, but we can wake up to it.

The process the Buddha described, by which we end up in suffering, is a teaching called dependent origination, or codependent arising. The creation of selfing, the creation of suffering, is described in a set of twelve links—cause and effect processes in our minds. I'll explore just a little bit of this process because understanding how it works helps us see the benefit of exploring feeling, of exploring this aspect of our minds.

The Buddha recognized that based on our bodies and minds, we have these senses, and these senses receive sense impressions: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, contact in the mind. Every one of those contacts, every one of those sense impressions has a contact point, and with that contact with the sense organ comes a feeling.

Based on that feeling, he said, tends to arise craving. When something is pleasant, we like it, we want it, we want more of it. When something's unpleasant, we don't like it; we want to get rid of it. Based on that automatic programming, we act on that desire—trying to get more of what we want, hold on to it, feel like we've accomplished something when we've gotten it, or feel like we've failed if we don't manage to get it. We act on that wanting through a process of clinging and identification.

When we get the thing that we want, it becomes mine. Or if it's a state—for instance, we may have this idea that we want to become a good meditator, and that's a kind of pleasant idea in our minds for whatever reason—we act on that, trying to become a good meditator. Perhaps we have a good sitting and, lo and behold, we're born as a good meditator. There we are. That identification takes hold; we become a self there. We take birth into that identity. And then the suffering around that happens when the next sitting comes along.

And we're not so able to stay with our breath or notice what's going on. And lo and behold, we have ample evidence and proof that we are not a good meditator. And we feel like we failed. What have I done wrong?

So this process is generated, the Buddha says—this cycle, the leaping point of reactivity—begins from that feeling. That's a point where, when we can begin to see consciously how we are moving in this automatic program towards things we like, away from things we don't like, towards pleasant, away from unpleasant, when we see that feeling itself, there's that choice point. Pat talked about this choice point. And we can start to not have that program automatically react—that program of liking, of wanting, of needing, of

creating, of holding on to.

So that program is a fairly automatic program, but it is not hardwired. Thank goodness it's not hardwired. The seeing of feeling with some degree of consciousness can help to short-circuit that program.

When we're not very conscious, we're in a kind of automatic mode with our experience. The Buddha says that delusion or ignorance is operating for us. We're not seeing clearly. We're not clearly seeing the nature of feeling. The ignorance, the delusion comes around a kind of belief. When there's pleasant experience, the delusion that gets activated is: having more of this will make me happy. That's how we're acting. So that delusion is operating for us when we're not clearly aware.

Around unpleasant, the delusion is that getting rid of this, fixing this, changing this will make me happy.

So essentially we're confused about reality because, as we've seen, as we're learning here in our experience and exploring what's going on, we're beginning to get, I think, that having what we want may bring some sort of happiness for a moment or two, but because of the inherent impermanent nature of pleasant, it's not going to make us happy for very long.

And with unpleasant experience—I think it was Wes who talked about the different personality types—I'll confess, I'm an aversive type. This is my mode of meeting the world. My way of meeting the world is to basically find what's unpleasant and try to get rid of it. That's how I find myself operating. And so the delusion around that, that it would make me happy, it's like: oh, look at this, here's this unpleasant thing, let me fix that, change that, organize it and get it just right—and whew, we're there for a moment. I got that fixed. But then what does my mind do? It goes and finds another unpleasant thing to fix. There's always something unpleasant out there. It's not possible to fix all the unpleasant things. So the delusion is that this will make me happy. It makes me happy for a split second.

This delusion that's typically present in feeling, in meeting our feeling—this is what propels us into this automatic reactivity. When we can bring some understanding, the basic understanding that nothing is worth clinging to, largely because everything is impermanent—things that are impermanent are unreliable, unsatisfactory, inherently unsatisfactory—and when that wisdom is joined with mindfulness, and mindfulness sees this quality of feeling tone, it naturally doesn't want to pick it up. It doesn't want to hold on to it. So that automatic program begins to decondition itself.

The Buddha talked about mindfulness of feeling, bringing our clear awareness to this aspect of experience. There's the teaching of the four foundations of mindfulness, which we've talked about a few times here. The first foundation is the body—all aspects of bodily experience. The second foundation is devoted entirely to this aspect of feeling tone.

It's a really simple instruction the Buddha offers us. I'll read the first part of this section: "How does one abide contemplating feelings as feelings? 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 feeling a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling, one understands: I feel a neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling.

Really simple. Not so easy to do, but very simple instructions. Just recognize feeling as feeling—as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

Feeling tone can be quite subtle. That's part of why this is a challenging instruction. It's partly unfamiliar to us, as I said, because we're so quickly responding to it. So it's a subtle kind of experience, and yet once we begin to get curious about it and look at it, it begins to be more obvious.

Feeling tone is associated with all experience, both physical and mental. But the feeling tone itself is understood to be something that happens in our mind. The experience of whether something is pleasant or unpleasant or neither pleasant nor unpleasant is understood to be a mental experience.

Now this makes sense for us when we are thinking about something like happiness. The experience of happiness has a pleasant, sweet quality to it, and we can understand that as a mental pleasantness. The experience of anger often has an unpleasant quality to it. There's also a kind of feedback loop that happens—when there's happiness, there are often light sensations in the body that may feel pleasant. In anger, there's the mind state of anger that is unpleasant, and also probably some physical experiences that are unpleasant.

The physical pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experiences are also understood to be mental, though. So when we cut ourselves with a knife and there's physical pain, that unpleasantness is understood to be something happening in our mind.

How does that work? How does that make any sense?

In an everyday way, one approach to understanding this might be to think about how our experience of whether something's pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral depends on context. Suppose you're standing on a busy street corner waiting for a friend. There are all these people going by, lots of noise, lots happening. Right around the time you've agreed to meet your friend, you feel a tap or a touch on your shoulder. That experience might perhaps be experienced as pleasant because of the context. You're waiting for your friend. You're expecting your friend. You turn expecting to see your friend with that tap on the shoulder.

Now imagine the exact same street corner, exact same situation, only you're not waiting for a friend, and you feel a tap on your shoulder. Might that be experienced as unpleasant? A kind of startle. You're not expecting to be tapped on the shoulder.

There's also a very interesting corroboration of this notion of feeling being mental in a recent study published in March of this year in the journal *Pain*. The study sought to understand how people perceive pain. I'll read a section of this.

The author of the study was Siri Leknes. To see how people perceived pain, Leknes and her colleagues

hooked up sixteen participants to a device that applied variable levels of painful heat to their arms. At the same time, the researchers measured their brain activity using MRI scans—magnetic resonance imaging. In the first setup, participants experienced a series of either slightly painful stimulus (about as painful as grasping a slightly too hot cup of coffee) or no pain. So they were going to either experience a slightly to moderately unpleasant experience or no pain at all. In a second setup, the participants experienced a series of either moderate pain (that same slightly too hot feeling) or intense pain. It doesn't say what the intense pain was like, but on a screen the participants could see what type of pain was coming up in the next series.

In the first scenario, the participants rated the moderate pain—the slightly too hot cup of coffee pain—as unpleasant. And I understand from what they said later that it also registered as pain in their brains, registered in the brain regions associated with unpleasantness. But interestingly, participants rated the moderate pain in the second setup as actually pleasurable when the alternative was the intense pain. During the moderate stimulus in the second setup, the participants' brain activity also showed less activation in the pain region of the brain and more activation in a region in the middle of the frontal lobes that's associated with pain relief than during the same stimulus in the first setup.

The explanation they give is that 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's comforting or even enjoyable.

So even the scientists agree that pain is felt in the brain. Pain is a mental experience. We're responding to this mental stimulus. There's the feeling tone associated with physical sense, and the feeling tone associated with mind experiences—anger being unpleasant, happiness pleasant.

Getting familiar with feeling tone, getting familiar with this quality of experience—usually the easiest place to begin is in the realm of the physical senses. In fact, our touch sense is particularly designed, apparently, to be very sensitive to pleasure and pain. The nervous system there is particularly attuned, so it's easier to begin experiencing feeling tone there. We can start exploring this in our meditation practice.

When there is unpleasant experience—the unpleasantness of an itch, for instance—this is a great place to explore unpleasant. As far as I know, nobody has ever died of an itch. So while they drive us nuts, that sensation being something with a fairly strong unpleasant quality, we can remind ourselves that it's not going to hurt us to sit there and pay attention to the itch. We can remind ourselves of that. We just get to watch how insanely reactive our mind is with this particular stimulus.

We can begin to tune into the unpleasant aspect of that sensation. Sometimes tuning into the actual unpleasant quality is enough to begin breaking that automatic cycle, that automatic reactivity towards aversion, hatred, frustration. Sometimes a simple recognition of the feeling tone can be enough.

Exploring the unpleasantness of itching, of other body sensations, just looking at what the actual physicality of the pain is—we begin to see that the reactivity to our physical unpleasant experience multiplies the unpleasantness. So what's going on there? There's the itch, which has an unpleasant quality to it. And then there's aversion, which has an unpleasant quality to it.

As is explained in the suttas, the Buddha says it's as if a man, having experienced being struck by a dart—so that first itch is like being hit by an arrow—then picks up another dart and stabs himself a second time. There's the physical unpleasantness of the itch, and then there's the mental unpleasantness of the reactivity. That mental unpleasantness of the reactivity is far more the issue. It's a multiplying factor. It's far more the reason for our feeling like we just can't stand this—that mental reactivity.

Sometimes looking at what the physical pain actually is, turning and checking out: okay, my knee feels pain. What is it? Well, there's a little tightness there, a little squeezing. When we actually look at it, we may find that the actual physical unpleasantness is nowhere near as great as we believed it was, because we were seeing it through the lens of aversion. The aversion multiplies that experience.

We can also attune to and get familiar with pleasant experience in our sitting. There can be very lovely experiences with the breath. The smoothness—sometimes the breath can just feel very smooth and pleasant. If that pleasantness of the smoothness and delightful sensations with the breath is not noticed, it can become a doorway through which we slip out into la-la land, just drifting off in the realm of "that feels good." So again, consciously being aware of feeling tone helps us stay present.

I talked about the double arrow around unpleasant experience—when there's something unpleasant in our experience and how the feeling tone plays into that, the aversion having an unpleasant quality itself and the multiplication through aversion. Well, what happens on the flip side? Why do we like getting what we want? What's going on there?

There's the idea, the experience, the thing that we want out there. It might be a pleasant object—good food or some actual thing. Or it might be some pleasant state we're going for: having somebody see us or recognize us, having a good report to the teachers or something. I remember having whole fantasies about walking into the interview room and reporting these great experiences. I had no idea what I was doing, but I was really into those fantasies.

So there's this pleasant idea, this pleasant thing that we want to get. If we get that thing, actually mostly what's going on is that we've got an idea in our minds that we want it, and our idea is that we will feel good when we have that thing. That's a pleasant fantasy. So there's the thing itself, which may be pleasant, but there's also this pleasant fantasy going on about how great it's going to be when I get that thing. There's that kind of multiplication of the pleasant happening there.

And in that whole process, there's also a wanting going on—the desire to have that thing. Now, that wanting itself, and this is something we begin to see as we start to really closely pay attention to our

experience, that wanting itself is unpleasant. It doesn't feel good.

Largely, we don't notice that the wanting doesn't feel good because we're so involved in our fantasy about how great it's going to be when we get it. So that's a delusion. That's a delusion operating. That's the delusion of wanting, actually. The delusion of wanting completely obscures the fact that we don't feel very good while wanting is happening. It gets us convinced that happiness comes from having the thing we want.

So there's that wanting. The wanting itself is an unpleasant experience. And yet the delusion of the fantasy is very powerful. This is largely why we stay caught in this pattern—because of that delusion, that fantasy multiplying the idea of the pleasant.

Now, when we get what we want, what happens there? We get the thing, perhaps. We get the hit of having what we want. That's pleasant. So we do get that bit of pleasantness. But what is that? Often it's quite a fleeting thing. Maybe we get that piece of chocolate, for instance. Check it out sometime: how long does the pleasantness of a piece of chocolate last? Not very long.

Check it out if you get, for a moment, what you want—somebody's good opinion. That feels good, to have somebody's good opinion. But how reliable are the opinions of other people? So again, the pleasantness of that is fairly fleeting.

What really does end up feeling good, the largest part of the pleasure of getting what we want—and check this out in your own experience—is the fact that the wanting goes away. The unpleasantness of the wanting goes away. When unpleasant ends, there's a pleasantness to that. And the pleasantness of wanting going away feels really, really good. We get hooked to that.

And so what happens to us is actually quite amazing. We get what we want and then it's like, "Oh, that felt pretty good. When's the last time I felt really good? It's when I got what I wanted. So what can I want?" Watch yourself wanting to want.

A good place to look at this is sitting in front of the Google box, sitting in front of the screen on the search engine. I find myself sitting there thinking, "What can I look up?" Trying to figure out something to get a little hit of "Oh, that's interesting information"—sitting there, trying to figure out something to want.

So this is how wanting works. And what wanting doesn't tell us, what the delusion of wanting doesn't tell us... I'll start on the other side first. The delusion of wanting tells us that you have to get the thing you want in order to have that satisfaction. The delusion of wanting won't tell you that if the wanting goes away, the suffering goes away. The wanting will go away because it's impermanent. If you have the interest enough to hang out with that unpleasant experience and not buy into its delusion, it will pass. And then you'll really get to see the freedom of that release, of that grip.

When wanting vanishes, it's like being freed from a vice grip.

So the whole process of how wanting and craving and the way we go about trying to be happy—it's all tied up with this pleasant-unpleasant aspect of experience. Getting familiar with this will really serve you.

So there's the feeling tone associated with our bodies, the physicality.

There's also feeling tone associated with ideas and thoughts, with beliefs. Something like "so and so doesn't like me"—often these beliefs, these ideas, these thoughts will generate some kind of emotion which has a feeling tone associated with it. The thought arises in the mind that this person doesn't like me, and a feeling of rejection arises, which is unpleasant. So thoughts, views, and beliefs can also be associated with feeling tone.

Actually, from my own experience, thoughts, beliefs, and ideas are a leading cause of feeling tone. Much of what we think of as physical pleasant or unpleasant, when we actually begin exploring the experience that we're reacting to, is not necessarily the physical but is something in our minds.

There's a teaching in the commentaries of the Buddhist texts that highlights this. I don't know if I completely believe this teaching, but I found it an interesting exploration. The teaching says that all of our physical senses, except for our touch sense—our touch sense, it says, does experience pleasant and unpleasant directly through the nerves, our skin will experience pleasant and unpleasant, the nerves are designed to experience pleasant and unpleasant—the other senses, this commentary says, sight, sound, smell, taste, are inherently neutral. If there's a sense of them being pleasant or unpleasant, it's because of an idea, of a concept, of a subtle reaction in the mind that's overlaid on that experience.

A simple example: if you see a rose, that might be experienced as pleasant. You see the rose and there's the noticing of pleasant experience. But what's actually happening at the eye door is blotches of form and color. The concept of rose is actually in our minds. And that's probably what we like—the idea of rose and what it represents.

I had a firsthand experience of this exploration through looking at my own experience. And this is largely what I want to encourage. Look at your own experience. What's going on? When you're feeling something is pleasant or unpleasant, begin to look at it, investigate it.

An example: one night I was having trouble sleeping, a kind of insomnia. So I got up to meditate in the middle of the night. While I was sitting there meditating, there was this really quiet kind of tapping sound, just a quiet, random little tapping happening. There was a sense that this was unpleasant. I certainly didn't like it. So there was an unpleasant quality that I was responding to, the feeling of not liking that sound. And I was just noticing it. I kept on noticing. It came and went, and when it came back, I got to watch the sense of reactivity arise.

I saw that when the tapping happened, there was a contraction in my body. The contraction was unpleasant. The physical contraction was unpleasant. Still I had the sense of the tapping sound being unpleasant. And then, again, just keeping watching it.

Now this kind of investigation, I want to highlight or point this out—this isn't digging. I wasn't trying to figure it out. I was just watching. How is it this time? Okay, here's this sound. What's happening in my body? What's happening in my mind?

The third time looking at this, there was the recognition of fear. Fear arose when that tapping happened. The fear was definitely unpleasant. There was a clear unpleasant experience. Now I hadn't seen the fear before. But when the fear was clearly seen and known, the mind recognized the tapping itself, the sound of the tapping, as being pretty neutral. The tapping itself wasn't unpleasant.

The idea of what it represented created some fear, which was unpleasant. And all of that became revealed through this kind of watching.

So this is again seeing how our minds create our suffering. How do our minds create the reactivity? Much of what we react to is constructed in our own minds. We think we're responding, reacting to what's out there, but actually what we're reacting to—what we're afraid of, what we like, what we don't like—is what's arising in our own minds.

It's quite freeing to see this. It sounds a little odd for that to be freeing, but it is freeing, and it's fortunate that this is the way our minds work. When our minds see—I was observing this—I didn't have to say in my mind, when the fear was seen, "Oh, now I can see that tapping is neutral." It just happened. So as the mind starts to see how it constructs suffering, how it's responding and reacting to this feeling tone, it also begins to understand how to find its way out of that reactivity.

You could play with this in the hall, recognizing what seems to be unpleasant for you. A rustling of somebody in the hall, somebody moving—what is actually unpleasant there? Is it actually the sound that's unpleasant? Or is it the idea that the person shouldn't be moving? Is that what's unpleasant? When there's something that feels unpleasant, check out what actually you're reacting to. You might come in and check out the sound. Is the sound actually unpleasant? Sometimes that can be a very helpful exploration if there's a kind of persistent reactivity. If you find yourself persistently reacting to rustlings in the hall, just begin to explore: what actually is the unpleasantness there? What are you reacting to?

On one retreat, I found a lot of reactivity when I was doing walking meditation—reactivity to the other people walking nearby. This was a huge part of my practice, exploring and understanding the aversion, the reactivity to the people walking nearby. And one time, after I had heard a talk—Carol Wilson had said, "If there's aversion happening in your experience, there's something unpleasant. You're reacting to something unpleasant. So what's unpleasant? See if you can notice what's unpleasant."

While I was walking, I was up in a hallway where there were a lot of people walking back and forth. We were all pretty well spaced in the walking hall. And then somebody else joined in right next to me, trying to narrow the lanes a bit. Aversion was born right there. Okay, there's the aversion. What's going on?

Having just listened to this teaching, I thought, okay, what's unpleasant here? Let's see. And I went

through all the senses. Is it sight? Well, the person wasn't actually physically unpleasant to look at. Okay, it's not the sight. Sound? Well, they weren't making much sound, so it wasn't sound. Touch? They weren't bumping into me or anything, so it wasn't touch. They didn't have an odor, so it wasn't that.

I quickly ruled all of the physical senses out, and it was like, well, there must be something going on in my mind. Kind of obvious, but it was a revelation in a way. What's happening? And I didn't know what it was. I didn't see it yet. So just walking and watching—what's going on? There must be some kind of thought happening.

And so just walking back and forth. And then suddenly this thought appeared in the mind: "He's weird." Okay, there's a thought. And I still didn't quite get it. Kept walking, and then another thought exploded in my mind. This was at Insight Meditation Society in December, and the person was in bare feet. My mind said, "They're in bare feet and it's freezing cold." This was my justification for "he's weird."

Immediately seeing the ludicrousness of that, the whole thing crumbled. The mind actually saw that it was reacting to a thought. That was what was so potent and powerful about that insight—it had nothing to do with the person. It was all a construct of the mind. The aversion was born because that thought was experienced as unpleasant. And when it was seen just as a thought, the whole thing fell apart, and in the next moment I was feeling nothing but mettā for this person. It just shifted.

So checking in: if there's a persistent reactivity present, what is it that you're reacting to? It might surprise you what you're actually reacting to. A lot of what you'll find is that it's something happening in your mind. And what an amazing thing to see. It's not bad news, actually. We take it as bad news—we blame ourselves or something, thinking we shouldn't have those thoughts. But it's just the way our minds work. And when it's seen for what it is, the mind begins to let it go. That's the good news. That's the really good news.

I've mostly talked about pleasant and unpleasant tonight, but I want to say a few words about neutral, because exploring neutral—neither pleasant nor unpleasant experience—can be a very interesting place. Often when things are neutral, we space out. We don't consciously recognize when things are neutral. We'll maybe quickly slip into boredom, not seeing the neutrality of experience. We're attuned to the highs and the lows—that's where we want to go. Even to the lows. We'd rather be depressed than feel neutral. We'd rather feel angry than feel neutral.

So noticing that subtle sense of "not good enough" or "not feeling something"—sometimes we have a sense that either the highs or the lows have an energy there that makes us feel alive or something. The neutral experience can be something we either feel is basically wrong, not where we're supposed to be, or we get bored with it.

Neutral can also be a place where we slip into the habits of our mind. When not much is happening—actually, I'll back up for a moment. One of the things we begin to see is that not much is

happening, there's not much in the way of highs or lows, not much in the way of either pleasant or unpleasant. And what's actually beginning to happen is that calm is arising. Peace is arising. This is a subtler kind of state. One of my teachers, Michelle McDonald, says we have to acquire a taste for neutral—acquire the taste for calm, for peace—because we're so attuned to the highs and lows.

In that place of neutrality, if we're not clearly aware of the neutral, it's very easy for our habits of mind to kick in, our habitual reactions and responses. For myself, one of my strong patterns was—well, it had a double side to it.

It either was "I'm doing really great" or "I'm failing." And I would go into that failure mode pretty easily. If I wasn't doing great, I was failing. What I began to recognize from that neutral place was that the habit of feeling like I was a failure could easily be launched.

So it went something like this. I was on a retreat and had learned enough about this neutrality to recognize and begin to sense—acquiring a taste for neutral—I'd begun to sense that this is a kind of deepening of the practice, when the mind begins to move into those more quiet places, the less reactive places. And so there was that sense of, "Ooh, it's neutral. Maybe something really good will happen."

So there I am, hanging out, and then there's this little leaning in. And when two minutes later nothing mind-blowingly amazing had happened, the mind said, "You failed." Out of neutral. Neutral experience. The mind would just construct its pattern.

This is a really great place to begin to see—when you're in this place of not much happening, watch what's coming up that's pulling you away from it. Watch what's drawing you away.

We're not trying to get rid of feeling. We're not trying to not feel unpleasant. We're not trying to avoid pleasant so that we don't cling to it. That seems to be something we think: "Okay, we see that pleasantness leads to that pattern of clinging, so I'm not supposed to feel pleasant." We get worried. We start getting afraid of pleasant experience because we see that we start clinging to it.

What we're trying to do here is bring consciousness to this experience of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. With wise attention, the habit of reactivity doesn't have a toehold, doesn't have a place to land.

I'll end with this poem from the suttas, slightly revised based on my own liking of particular words:

If one feels joy, but knows not feeling's nature,
bent towards greed, one will not find release.

If one feels pain but knows not feeling's nature,
bent towards hate, one will not find release.

And even neutral feeling, which is peaceful,
if in attachment one should cling to it,

one will not be free.

One who understands feeling's nature
in this very life will be free.

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