Mindfulness of Feeling Tone (Vedanā)

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We've been here for more than a week now. For those of you for whom this is a first month-long or two-month retreat, there's a somewhat different arc, as you may be noticing—a somewhat different arc of practice on a retreat of this length than on a week-long retreat, by which today you would be packing up and leaving.

In my own experience, during the first three-month course I did at IMS, ten days in I was feeling like I was just battered. My mind hadn't really settled. There was a lot of physical unpleasantness, a lot of pain in the body. I raised my hand in the hall and said, "You know, by this point in another retreat, I would have been really settled. I'm not settled—what's going on?" The teacher said there just seems to be something about the mind understanding the length of a retreat, and so it can take about a third of the length of the retreat to really settle in.

I breathed a sigh of relief, but since I was doing a six-week retreat, it meant I still had another week or so of settling in. But it actually relaxed me because I thought I was doing something wrong. So just taking in what's happening, everything that we've been pointing to—just keep going.

Tonight, the topic is a little more elaboration on vedanā, or feeling tone. Tara brought this into the morning instructions yesterday. The Buddha talked about this aspect of experience a great deal and pointed to the power of noticing feeling tone with mindfulness.

Every single experience has this quality of being either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. The Buddha really highlighted the value of noticing that with mindfulness, and it being the place where—essentially—feeling tone is the point. It's the point, the basis of reactivity. When we are reacting, when we are experiencing some kind of greed or aversion or confusion or mental agitation, the basis of that is usually not clearly seeing feeling tone, or the views underlying feeling tone. So the Buddha really highlighted this as an important aspect, and we wanted to take a little more time to land with this teaching.

This feeling tone is a part of every single experience of body or mind. Every sense experience has a feeling tone associated with it. Every mental experience has a feeling tone associated with it. There's the understanding that with the contact at the sense base—whether sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, or the sense base of the mind—with that contact comes feelings. With that contact also comes consciousness and perception. We'll talk more about those as we go.

These three mental aspects—perception, feeling, consciousness—connect with every single sense

impression we have. With this arising of consciousness, feeling, and perception, consciousness, feeling, and perception are all mental qualities, mental aspects, mental functions we could say. With every single experience we have, whether it's a physical experience or a mental experience, a large part of what is experienced in that moment is our mind doing its work.

There was actually a question that touched on this: "When I'm experiencing something that's materiality, like hardness in the kneecap, I see that as materiality. But pain in the knee seems more mental, and a lot of experience feels like it's mental, even if it's something physical like the breath. A lot of it feels like mentality."

It is. Every experience, every physical experience, has both physicality and mentality. Sometimes our mindfulness lands more to recognize the physical side of it—the hardness or vibration or pulsing or tingling, or pitch and tone in hearing, or form and color in sight. And sometimes the mindfulness, the awareness, is more interested in some of the processes by which the mind actually experiences these physical sensations.

The feeling tone—whether the experience is physical or mental, the physicality of hardness or pulsing or tingling or vibration, the contact with the eye door, contact with the ear door—the feeling tone associated with that, they come together. It's not like one happens and then the next thing and the next thing. They arise together. Feeling tone arises with the physicality. Consciousness arises with the physicality. The feeling tone is actually a mental experience. It's an aspect of the mind. Even in the physical touch sense, when we experience pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral in our physical realm, it's still understood in Buddhist psychology to be a mental experience. I'll talk about that more in a moment.

This feeling tone arises in dependence on the contact with our sense bases. They arise together; they're co-arising. But it's conditioned.

If the sense impression is not arising, there's no feeling arising with the sense impression. They come together. It's a basic aspect of our human experience, and yet we seem to miss it. When things are really pleasant, we can notice they're pleasant—but actually, not so much.

In my own experience, I discovered this in a funny way. One time I was driving a car and noticing that my mind was just tumbling forward into the future, completely tumbling forward. I was trying to bring it back: "Okay, come back, hands on the steering wheel, just be here." And it would just leap out into the future. It felt like anxiety. It felt like the mind was trying to figure something out.

After this happened a bunch of times—coming back, hands on the steering wheel, mind launching out again—I finally decided to ask, "Well, what else is happening here? What else is going on?" What I discovered was that I was really happy. I had not noticed the happiness, that pleasant quality. I had not noticed it. And I think sometimes what my mind did with that happiness was something like, "Oh, how can I keep this happiness? I've got to make sure this person knows this thing and that person knows that thing

so that I can have this happiness stay for longer."

The mind can miss pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant because it's so busy responding and reacting to it. Some part of our system knows it's there, but we just leap onto it and start thinking and planning and remembering and fantasizing and judging. So we often actually miss the experience itself of pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

The Buddha pointed to this as a key place. The habit around pleasant experience—the very human habit—is that we want more of it. We like it. We want to hold on to it. So we lean into it. There's a kind of greed associated with it. We're not really noticing the pleasant so much as wanting more of the pleasant in the future, missing that we're experiencing pleasant now. This is the habit of mind. It just wants more. It grabs on. With pleasant, we tend to want more of it, leaning into the future.

With unpleasant, we tend to not like it and want to get rid of it—different strategies for how we might do that. And with neither pleasant nor unpleasant experience, or what we sometimes call neutral experience, we often don't even notice it at all. We kind of space out about it.

In one teaching that many of you have probably heard, the Buddha is talking about this aspect of feeling tone and says that someone who has never met the teachings—described as an untaught worldling—experiences pleasant, unpleasant, and neither pleasant nor unpleasant feelings. And a well-taught disciple, someone who's heard the teachings and has practiced well with them, also experiences pleasant, unpleasant, and neither pleasant nor unpleasant feelings. So he asks, what's the difference between the two? It's a kind of rhetorical question, and then he goes on to answer it.

He says when an untaught worldling is touched by a painful bodily feeling, they worry and grieve. They lament, beat their breast, weeping and distraught. They thus experience two kinds of feelings: a bodily feeling and a mental feeling. He offers an analogy: it's like if somebody were hit by an arrow or a dart, and then immediately hit by a second dart. The feeling becomes much more painful if you're hit by two darts.

He goes on to say that a well-taught noble disciple, when touched by a painful bodily feeling, will not worry or grieve or lament, will not beat their breast and weep nor become distraught. Only one kind of feeling is experienced—a bodily one, not a mental one. It's as if they had been struck by just one dart.

This points to the truth that painful feeling is going to happen. Painful bodily feeling will happen. But the well-taught noble disciple doesn't have reactivity to that painful bodily feeling. They simply notice it as painful.

The reactivity to feeling tone—you know, the analogy of the two darts. I've never been struck by two darts, but I can imagine that the second dart would be far worse than the first. And it's like that with the mental reactivity to physical unpleasantness. It multiplies the painfulness. It multiplies—it's not simply additive. Our minds get really tied up when there's that mental reactivity to physical pain.

So the Buddha points to feeling tone as a kind of springboard from which reactivity arises. This is also explored in the teaching of dependent origination—an investigation of how feeling fits into the process by which suffering arises for us. I'm not going to give a full dependent origination talk this evening. That teaching goes through twelve links that condition each other, basically moving from ignorance to suffering—how we move from ignorance to suffering. But in the middle of that chain, there's a series of links very relevant to our topic this evening.

The teaching points to this: when we have a body and mind, we have our six sense bases. And with those six sense bases, we have contact. The eye receives sight, the ear receives sound, the body receives physical contact, the mind receives mind objects. With that contact, the next link is feeling arises. And again, this is a co-arising. The teaching is often called *paṭiccasamuppāda*, dependent co-arising, as one translation has it. So with the six sense bases having contact, contact and feeling come together. We have contact and feeling.

Conditioned on that is craving. This craving arises—it's a strong human tendency for craving to arise when feeling arises. With pleasant, we want more, the craving to have more. With unpleasant, we want less, the craving to get rid of. With neutral or neither pleasant nor unpleasant experience, we may just crave something. Sometimes when there's neutral experience, we just want something to happen. Or it may be that the mind just kind of detaches and goes into a sort of delusion, a place of not connecting.

With this craving, then there's clinging that follows—we want something and then we hold on to it. And with that clinging, there arise all of these views and ideas and patterns and habits in service of that clinging, to keep it, to have it be mine. This is becoming—a kind of identity gets born around that clinging, in service of maintaining it. And then suffering follows. Again, I'm being very watercolorish around this teaching right now.

So this teaching points to the link where we have a habitual tendency to leap off of feeling into craving. And that happens when ignorance is present. Ignorance is at the head of the chain in the teaching of dependent origination—it's the thing from which the whole sequence follows. When ignorance is present, and we could offer one simple definition of ignorance: the view or belief that having pleasant and getting rid of unpleasant will make me happy. That's a very deeply conditioned view in our system. We don't think about it. It's not like we have to think, "I want pleasant, I think that's going to make me happy." It's so deeply embedded. It's embedded in our whole being—embedded in evolution, we could say. Even single-celled creatures move towards nourishment and away from noxious chemicals. So there's this movement towards pleasant and away from unpleasant built into the whole of our evolutionary system.

It's not to say that supporting our bodies with nourishment isn't helpful, or that we should sit outside in the cold and freeze. But what the Buddha points to is that it's not necessary to have craving in order to come inside if you're freezing outside. It just becomes natural: this would support this being, this is helpful for the support of this being.

In the days before he sat down under the Bodhi tree, the Buddha had emaciated himself, thinking that depriving the body of food was a way to freedom. At some point he realized, "I'm going to die and I'm not going to find freedom. This is not the way to freedom. Maybe food would be good." And so this was not craving. It was more the understanding that the mind wanting to move in the direction of letting go of craving, of freedom, needs to nourish itself. There's a nuanced understanding about what craving is.

But we feel it. We know craving exists in a visceral kind of way. In my own experience, when there's craving happening, there's some kind of constriction going on. We feel that.

When ignorance is present and the mind has this view—"getting the pleasant will make me happy, getting rid of the unpleasant will make me happy"—when that view is operating in the mind, feeling leads to craving. When pleasant arises, that view responds, "Yes, hold on to it. It'll make me happy. Ultimately make me happy." When unpleasant arises, the view motivates, "Yes, get rid of it. It's going to make me happy to get rid of that."

When that ignorance is operating, feeling leads to craving. That's why it's so habitual. It's so hard to see that view. We often miss the feeling tone itself. The Buddha actually pointed to seeing the feeling tone—then you might be able to see this whole process unfolding. He pointed to this over and over again.

We can see the feeling tone. And when we see the feeling tone with wise mindfulness, when we're actually present for that, it can short-circuit that habitual tendency because wisdom may be present instead of ignorance. "What is this feeling tone? What's going on here?" And maybe seeing that leaning towards, "Ooh, I need to hold on to that. I need to get that thing or get rid of that thing." Maybe seeing that happen as the mind opens to, "Oh, this is pleasant," or "This is unpleasant."

This really highlights the importance of meeting feeling tone with mindfulness and wisdom, with this kind of perspective we've been offering for mindfulness—curiosity. What is this experience? What is the experience of pleasant? Can I know that? What is the experience of unpleasant? Can I know that?

The Satipatthana Sutta, which I talked about last week with respect to the body, has a whole foundation on feeling tone. It's pretty simple. Here are the instructions—I'm only going to read the first part right now.

"How does one abide observing feelings as feelings?" This observing feelings as feelings is looking at them not as something to get rid of or to hold on to, but just to get to know, to understand them. The Buddha pointed to understanding our experience. That's this instruction: abide observing feelings as feelings. Just know pleasant feeling as pleasant.

"And how does one abide observing feelings as feelings? 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.

That's it. Know it as it is. Very simple sounding, but not so easy to do.

It can be helpful to explore and get familiar with feeling tones—perhaps taking some time to specifically investigate this quality of feeling itself. I know that Tara mentioned we don't have to go looking for it, but sometimes with something so subtle, it can be useful not necessarily to look for it, but to hold a space for it. Perhaps in this sitting, you might think, "I'll be available to seeing feeling tone." And then we can explore. There are some particular avenues of exploration that can be easier places to begin recognizing feeling tone, so it can be helpful to get familiar with it a little bit.

I'll speak about the nature of feeling tone itself. I mentioned earlier that it's a mental process. This may be easier to understand around feeling tones associated with mental activity—an emotion or a thought. That the feeling tone connected to mental experience is also mental made sense to me. Happiness, for instance, has a pleasant feeling tone. Anger often carries unpleasantness with it. Understanding those as mental felt natural.

But it was harder for me to really understand that physical experience—the feeling tone associated with physical sensation—is also a mental creation. Let me give an example that might help illustrate this.

Suppose you're standing on a busy street corner, waiting for a friend. People are walking by, people you don't know, and you're just standing there in the spot where you'd agreed to meet. Then you feel a hand on your shoulder. Someone has come up from behind you. That might be experienced as pleasant—the experience of the hand on your shoulder—because you're expecting your friend.

But if you're on that same street corner and not expecting anyone, and you feel somebody touching your shoulder, it might be experienced as unpleasant. Same street corner, same contact, but the conditions around it are different. You may startle because you're not expecting to be touched in that situation, and so it's experienced as unpleasant.

The conditions surrounding physical experience create different experiences of pleasant or unpleasant.

There are actually some recent studies that agree with this. Science agrees with the Buddha that feeling tone is mental. There was a study examining how people perceived pain. It had two parts. In the first, participants experienced either a moderately painful stimulus or no pain, and they were asked to rate how unpleasant and painful it was. In the second setup, participants experienced either moderate or more intense pain. On a screen, they could see beforehand whether it was going to be moderate pain or intense pain.

In the first scenario, people said that moderate pain was unpleasant—it was painful for them. In the second scenario, not only did they say that the moderate sensation was pleasant, but the MRI of their brains also showed they were experiencing pleasantness with that moderately painful sensation, when

they saw it was not going to be the intense one.

Again, the moderate stimulus was the same in both parts, but the conditions around it were different. The researchers were surprised by this. They thought participants would probably find the moderate pain less painful, but they did not expect them to find it pleasant. They concluded that the likely explanation is that 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 an obviously negative experience like pain into a sensation that is enjoyable.

So the experience of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—the mind makes it, and it's very dependent on conditions.

Getting familiar with feeling tone, getting to know it: the easiest place to start is with the touch sense, the physical touch sense. These receptors of our physical body are very much designed to recognize pleasant and unpleasant. So the first place to be curious about pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral is in the physical realm, the physical touch realm. Those elemental sensations we were exploring—the hardness, the vibration, the pulsing, the tingling—there's the material aspect, and along with it is some quality of whether it feels pleasant or unpleasant to you in the moment.

At different times, I've seen that because of a view in my mind, sometimes a sensation—where I could tell it was the same level of intensity—

Sometimes it felt unpleasant, and sometimes it felt neutral.

One of the best places to explore this quality of feeling tone is with an itch—partly because itches have so much to reveal about what the mind does with experience. It's not just the itch itself; there's also the mind that wants to leap away from it. Itches drive us nuts.

So bring curiosity to the experience of an itch at the sensation level. For me, the sensation of an itch is almost like a little buzz. It appears, it's intense, and then it vanishes. It appears, it's intense, and then it vanishes. That intense sensation is unpleasant. What we often do, though, is fail to see the changing nature of the experience—that the unpleasantness is actually coming and going. With our minds, we pull it along, creating a kind of permanence to that sensation. We don't really see that it's there with a buzz and then vanishes, there with a buzz and then vanishes.

So we explore that quality of unpleasantness. Oh, there's unpleasantness. And then when the sensation vanishes, the unpleasantness vanishes. And my experience of that unpleasantness vanishing is itself a pleasant experience. There's a kind of fun way we can see pleasant and unpleasant following on from each other.

Explore the unpleasantness of experience, the pleasantness of experience. There may be times in the breathing, for example, when it feels smooth and easy. Or there may be a touching into a vibratory, light

energy in the body that's experienced as pleasant. As a way to get familiar with this quality, you could take some part of a sitting—or a whole sitting—and just be curious: here's what's happening in the body, and can there be a recognition of whether there's pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral around that experience?

Another prime place to explore this is in eating. Notice the pleasantness and unpleasantness around the flavors, the tastes. Notice the pleasantness and unpleasantness when you walk into the dining hall. The seeing of particular food—you might think, "Ooh, that food I like"—and so there's a pleasant quality. Now, that pleasantness is more a rising in dependence on the idea that we like it than on the seeing itself. I'll talk about that in just a moment. But just being curious: when you go into the dining hall, there's a stream of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experiences. You put food in your mouth, there's a stream of pleasant and unpleasant experience. And then neutral, as the food gets chewed up.

That first bite. I love playing with vedanā with chocolate. I don't think I ever knew before I started practicing just how pleasant chocolate is. Good chocolate is just—wow—the whole body goes into this kind of delight.

So yes, noticing the pleasantness. And what I've discovered with chocolate, for me at least—I don't know, my body may be particularly attuned to chocolate—but the flavor itself can be very intense. There's that initial hit of it, and then there's a kind of flood through the system around, I don't know, probably endorphins or something. There's just a flood through the system of pleasant experience. The pleasure of chocolate can last for several minutes. It's impermanent—it is impermanent—but it's quite amazing to watch how long the pleasantness lasts. And then what happens as it ends? The immediate, "Oh, can I have another one?"

I had one interesting experience with raisins. Raisins are kind of fun to play with this, because for the first ten seconds or so of chewing, I don't taste hardly anything. And then suddenly there's this burst of flavor. And then after a little while, still chewing the raisins, the flavor gets weaker, not so strong anymore. The strength of the pleasantness changes. You can just play with the flow of pleasant and unpleasant.

And then there's exploring with respect to our mind states, our moods, our emotions. Most of the hindrances—at least greed and aversion, ill will and sense desire—have a constriction in them. Now with sense desire, we may not notice the unpleasantness right away, because what's going on there is that the mind is thinking about the pleasantness of the thing it wants.

So it's kind of focused on that. When we want something, we're not experiencing the pleasantness directly because we don't have the thing. But we've got the idea in our mind: "If I get that thing, I'll be happy." And so the suffering of sense desire is often masked because we are fooled by the pleasure of thinking about having it in the future—the idea that it will be pleasant in the future. So we miss that sense desire itself has an unpleasant quality to it.

This is another useful and interesting exploration. When you notice the wanting, if you notice that the

mind is pulling and wanting something, feel the wanting itself. See if you can notice the feeling tone of wanting. The feeling tone of aversion is much more obviously unpleasant. The anger or frustration or irritation—there's already a tension in there; we can feel that as unpleasant more easily. But emotions, moods, and mind states all have a feeling tone associated with them.

Thoughts can also have a feeling tone—we'll talk more about thoughts starting tomorrow in the instructions. Views and beliefs can have a feeling tone or be associated with a feeling tone. So all of our mental and physical activity has a feeling tone associated with it, and we can get curious about what that feels like. What is the feeling tone?

I would say it's actually quite interesting to begin to recognize that much of our feeling tone is shaped by conditions. I talked earlier about the conditions around feeling tone—the standing on the street corner and feeling a person touch you. There are views and beliefs around that whole situation that will shape whether that feeling of somebody touching you is pleasant or unpleasant. In the study around painful stimuli, whether you could tell in advance if it was going to be more or less painful—there's the knowing in advance, the conditions of what the mind understands before the sensation, that shapes the feeling tone.

This happens all the time. Our views and beliefs shape how we feel, shape the feeling tone of experience—not just how we feel emotionally, but whether we take something to be pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. So much of what we think of as physical pleasant or unpleasant comes because we have ideas about the experience.

The Abhidhamma and commentaries to some of the suttas actually speak to this very directly. They say that while the touch sense base does have a pleasant and unpleasant aspect to it, and our mind door can have the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral aspect to it, the bare sense at our other physical sense doors—sight, sound, smell, taste—the Abhidhamma says that is inherently neutral. There's no inherent sight that is pleasant or unpleasant.

Now, if you cut yourself with a knife, our body is designed to feel pain. Our body is designed to recognize that as unpleasant and take care of itself, to heal itself. So there is the understanding of unpleasant and pleasant possibility at the physical sense door.

I don't know that I completely believe this teaching in the Abhidhamma—that taste, for instance, is inherently neutral—because I think there are some ways that certain tastes will make us gag. Some of the tastes that make us gag happen because of conditioning; I've had that happen. But there are certain flavors, I think, that are almost designed—it's like, "This is dangerous for the body." So I don't know whether this is actually true or not. But I have found it to be a very useful exploration in experience.

To begin to be curious: when there's a physical experience that we're taking to be pleasant or unpleasant, where actually is the unpleasantness or the pleasantness?

An example from my practice: I was doing walking meditation at IMS on a three-month course, so it was pretty deep into the retreat. Actually, pretty much right before this, Carol Wilson had given a talk where she said something like, "If you're noticing aversion, there's something unpleasant in your experience that you're not clearly seeing." And so I was doing walking meditation, happily walking along—lifting, moving, placing—very focused. The room was pretty full, so we were kind of close to each other. And somebody came into the room and slipped in next to me so that it was really tight.

Aversion just flared. I was immediately caught in reactivity: "How could they do that? What's going on?"

And then I remembered what Carol had said. Okay, what is it? What is unpleasant here? What's actually unpleasant?

I went through all of my senses. The person was doing a kind of funny walk, but it wasn't really unpleasant. I had to admit—it's just a funny walk. That's not what I'm reacting to. They weren't touching me, so it wasn't in the touch sense. They weren't making any noises, so it wasn't in the sound door, the ear door.

I went through all the physical senses, and it became clear—the unpleasantness that this reactivity was springing from was not there. It must be something going on in the mind.

I didn't see much at that point, but I kept walking. At some point I noticed a thought: "They're weird." Okay, there's a thought. I didn't quite see that I was reacting to that thought—I didn't see it as unpleasant so much. I just thought it was true.

I kept watching what was going on, and then I saw another thought: "They have bare feet and it's freezing cold out." This was the justification for believing they were weird.

I could see just how ridiculous the whole thing was. It was like—oh my gosh, this aversion is arising from a thought, a belief in the mind that's completely ridiculous. That's where this aversion was coming from.

In the next pass of walking, the aversion was gone, and I was spontaneously doing metta for the person. I did not have to try to let go of the aversion. The seeing clearly—investigating where the unpleasantness actually was, recognizing how the belief of "weirdness" was constructed—that was enough.

This investigation around where the reactivity is actually springing from is tremendously useful. We might be sitting in the dining hall hearing somebody do something, or sitting in the meditation hall—this is classic. You're sitting and somebody rustles next to you, and there's aversion. Is it actually the sound that's unpleasant? Or is it an idea that the person should not be moving, that they have the gall to move when they're sitting next to me?

So much of the time, we are reacting to the unpleasant quality of a thought in our own minds. The vast majority of our unpleasantness is created in this way.

When we react to something in the physical world, like the rustling of sound, the teaching of the Abhidhamma points us toward recognizing that it's not really the sound we're reacting to. This is what I feel that teaching about the neutrality of our physical senses is pointing toward.

When we see something and we like it—we see a flower, for instance—what's being seen is form and color. What we are liking is the idea of the flower in our mind. That's what's pleasant.

This is very useful to understand and to begin to be curious about. It can be seen. We can begin to recognize that when we like something or want something, the question arises: where is the actual pleasantness?

It's largely a construction of our own minds that we think something is pleasant or think it's unpleasant.

Another useful exploration is around neutral experience. What happens when experience feels pretty neutral, neither pleasant nor unpleasant? We tend to like the highs and the lows. We like being excited about things. We actually even sometimes prefer major drama to neutrality. So be curious about what happens with neutral. It can lead to boredom. When it's not clearly seen, the mind can get bored, thinking something more exciting should be happening.

My exploration around neutral has been interesting. I've found, at least for myself, that when there's neutral experience, that's like a place where our habitual patterns are likely to show up. When things are pretty quiet, not much going on, our mind will just reach out for some habit to bring in.

I was doing walking meditation at one point and experiencing a lot of neutral, actually recognizing there was neutral. I had also heard some things in the hall that when it gets really neutral, that may be a place where the mind is going to go to Nibbana. That's what I believed—that some major amazing thing would happen if I spent a lot of time in neutral. That was the belief I had created. So I was spending a lot of time in neutral, and the belief was, okay, this is really good. It's good that it's neutral and something good is going to happen.

Nothing good happened. It stayed neutral, and the mind went to its deeply conditioned habit of believing that I was a failure. That's what arose: you're a failure. Fortunately, in this situation I saw that this was coming out of the neutrality and the idea that something good should happen. When that didn't happen, the belief that you're a failure arose. I could just smile at it and say, wow, out of nothing, the mind went to "you're a failure." Out of neutral experience.

So this exploration of feeling tones is really fruitful. I would say don't make a huge project out of it, but bring curiosity about it from time to time.

One of the ways these teachings work—one of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, would give a talk like this. He would talk about perception or feeling tone or something, and I would go off and try to do it and give myself a headache. I'd come back and report my experience, and he'd say, "Are you trying to do that?"

I said, well, yeah, I thought you were telling me to do this. He said, "Nothing I say is anything for you to do. It's information that is like Dharma rain."

This talk is just Dharma information. The very listening to and taking in this information has an effect. At the next sitting or maybe sometime tomorrow while you're practicing, something of this talk might arise in the present moment. There may be, "Oh, maybe feeling tone could be available. Maybe that could be something to explore." It's not something you necessarily have to pick up to do. These talks are often more like explorations of things that can be seen, not necessarily instructions for what you should do next. If you happen to have a curiosity arise about exploring feeling tone, play with it for a little while. See what happens. Playfulness in practice and lightness in practice really support us.

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