Practicing with Vedanā

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So as Leanne mentioned, I'd like to speak about the feeling tone of our experience, the vedanā of our experience. This is not about emotion in particular, but about a very simple, very specific experience: whether something is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

On the night of his enlightenment, the Buddha had insight into what he understood to be the main cause of our difficulty in life—the problem of suffering, the nature of dissatisfaction. We all experience this. We all experience suffering or dissatisfaction. We all experience this feeling of wanting something that we don't have, of having something that we don't want, of things simply not being the way we'd like them to be, of wanting to change them.

One aspect of the Buddha's insight around suffering is that he understood the cause of suffering to be wanting or craving, as he put it. But his insight went beyond the simple understanding that craving causes suffering. He actually uncovered a whole chain of conditions—causes and conditions—that lead us from our experience into suffering over and over again. He called this chain of conditions dependent origination.

I'm not going to go through the entire set of dependent origination this evening, but just talk about the links in the chain, the various steps or stages of causes that relate to this evening's topic of feeling tone.

Basically, because we have a body and a mind, we experience sense contact. We experience sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, and everything that comes into our mind. These are the six senses in the Buddhist understanding: our five usual senses plus the sense door of the mind. Each of these sense impressions has a particular flavor to it. It's either a pleasant experience, an unpleasant experience, or a neutral experience. Every single bodily sense and every mental impression has this quality of being either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

Once we experience that pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality in a very simple, normal kind of way, we either like the pleasant and want it, or we don't like the unpleasant and don't want it, or we perhaps don't even notice the neutral experience. So primarily what happens out of this sense impression of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral is that we in some way react to it, respond to it with this kind of either wanting or not wanting. That's the next link in the chain: wanting or craving.

From the craving, from this wanting, we kind of automatically begin to move—also in a very simple and natural way—to do something about it. We move towards getting the thing that we want or actively getting rid of the thing that we don't want. This movement of mind, this part of our experience, is called

clinging. This is where we've actually latched onto our experience in some way, either to grab onto it, to keep it, or to push it away.

Sometimes it's hard to understand what it means to crave something unpleasant. But the craving to get rid of something, the wanting to get rid of something unpleasant, is a form of clinging to it. It's almost as if we get stuck to the thing we want to get rid of. If I want to get rid of this thing, it's like I'm stuck to it with superglue, trying to push it away. That's the way in which it's clinging to the experience.

Once we've clung to something, there is a kind of identification that comes out of that—an identification of perhaps it being mine or not mine. There's this latching on and the identification: "Oh, this belongs to me." Whether it's a state of mind or a physical thing. If it's a physical thing, we might think of it as mine—my glass. If it's a mental thing, like a mood or an emotion, we might think of ourselves as being that emotion: "I'm an angry person" or "I'm a happy person." We latch onto and identify with these states of mind too.

This identification piece in this set of links of dependent origination is called becoming. And actually, in a funny way—or maybe not so funny—we like becoming. It seems like a very natural thing to us. We like knowing what we have. We like knowing who we are. Even if it's identifying with something negative, there's some piece of us that likes knowing who we are and what we have. So that becoming piece is actually something we're drawn to.

From this point, there's a kind of hit in that moment when we get what we want or get rid of what we don't want, and we know that we're the ones that did that. There's a moment of happiness, a kind of a hit of "Ah, everything's all right," even if it's just for a moment in that place of becoming.

But from here, in the Buddha's understanding of this chain of dependent origination, suffering is inevitable—if only for the reason that whatever it is we've latched onto is impermanent and will go away. For example, if I think of this as my glass, if I'm attached to it—it's a lovely glass, it's got a nice swirly pattern on it, it's got the right depth to meet your lip, it's just a very nice glass—but if I happen to drop it and break it, I might get upset about that because it was my glass and I really liked it. I really had an attachment to it. So the clinging and the identification, the clinging to and the constructing of a me or a mine around it, will lead us into some form of suffering.

Now, the suffering that arises might not be very profound or difficult, but it can also be quite profound indeed.

The Buddha realized how this chain of events is linked together, how one thing conditions the next. We start with our body and our sense impressions. From there arises feeling. From feeling comes the very natural wanting or not wanting. From there emerges the natural movement to hold onto or get rid of our experience. And then comes this identification. These things all happen in a fairly natural and normal way—it's almost as if we're built this way. It makes perfect sense that we move towards something pleasant and away from something unpleasant. Even a single-celled creature will move towards food and

away from some noxious chemical. So that makes perfect sense; it's not a particular mystery to us.

But the additional piece—the clinging and creating an identity around experience—that part is what leads us towards suffering. The Buddha saw that these things flow from one to another, that there's a tendency for one to move into the next, for one to condition the arising of the next, almost like dominoes falling over.

But he also saw that there are some weak links in this chain, some places where it's easier to short-circuit the pattern and avoid flowing from the natural sense impression into suffering. We can't avoid sense impressions as human beings—they're going to come into us. Cutting that one off is challenging, although it is doable if you get into very deep states of concentration. But in our normal everyday life, we live with sense impressions, and we live with this pleasant, unpleasant, neutral quality of experience. So is there a way that we can not move on into the wanting, the craving, the clinging, the identification?

The Buddha pointed to this link of the feeling tone—the pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—as being one of the key weak links in this chain. He taught that if you bring mindfulness to this weak link, if you actually recognize when something is happening that's pleasant or unpleasant, it gives you the possibility to short-circuit this automatic movement from pleasant to liking to wanting to grasping. It's possible.

It's possible to experience something pleasant without wanting it. It's possible to experience something pleasant and experience the liking, and not have that liking move into wanting. It's possible to experience something unpleasant, not like it, and not have that not-liking move into not-wanting. It's also possible to experience the pleasant and not have even liking arise—that's a slightly subtler version of this.

But the only way this can happen is when we see the feeling tone itself, when we actually experience through awareness, through consciously knowing and recognizing as it happens, this experience of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral as it arises. If we can do that and the wanting does not follow, we will not suffer over it.

The Buddha talked about mindfulness of feeling most prominently in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the discourse on the four foundations of mindfulness. This teaching describes or lays out four different frames or points of view into our experience that we can bring our mindfulness to. Of those four foundations, the second one is mindfulness of feeling. An entire foundation of mindfulness is devoted to this notion of whether something is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. I think that partly highlights how important this quality is to pay attention to.

I'm going to read you a little bit of that part of the sutta. It's brief. The Buddha uses the term *bhikkhu* here, which means monk, but it says elsewhere in the commentaries to the sutta that whenever the Buddha refers to bhikkhu, he's referring to anyone who's practicing this meditation practice. So he's speaking to all of us when he says this:

"When feeling a pleasant feeling, a bhikkhu understands: 'I feel a pleasant feeling.' When feeling a painful

feeling, he understands: 'I feel a painful feeling.' When feeling a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling"—that's the term for neutral feeling—"he understands: 'I feel a neither-painful-nor-pleasant experience.'"

That's it. Those are the instructions from the Buddha about how to work with feeling. When you feel it, know that you feel it. It's a pretty simple instruction, but not so easy to follow through on.

Typically, what happens to us when we experience something pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral is that we immediately leap onto it in some way and start to think about it. We like it. We want it. We start to plan how to get it, or how to get rid of it if it's something unpleasant. Very quickly we lose track of the fact that it's even pleasant or unpleasant—we're already in the stages of trying to figure out how to get more of it or how to get rid of it.

So stopping the usual momentum of the mind from spinning away from pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral is not easy. But it's helped immensely by recognizing or knowing that this quality of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral is worth paying attention to. Most of the time, we don't think of it as being worth paying attention to. We immediately think it's important to react to it or respond to it. Oh, there's something pleasant—

I need to get more of that. So we lose track of the fact that we've experienced something pleasant. Often we don't even notice it. We're already leaping onto it to do something about it.

This feeling tone is subtle in the sense that we don't usually consciously recognize it. It's not something that normally appears in our experience for very long, because we so quickly move on from it—thinking about it, trying to arrange our environment to either get more of what's pleasant or get rid of what's unpleasant.

But once we know that it's an interesting thing to pay attention to, a helpful thing to pay attention to, it can become quite clear. It can become quite obvious. If you bump your head getting out of your car, it's pretty clear that the experience of the bump is painful. If you're eating ice cream, it's pretty clear that the experience is pleasant. But we have to know to recognize it, to notice actually the pleasant quality or the unpleasant quality. And even when we do recognize it, it's hard to stop there.

When you start recognizing this feeling tone, you'll begin seeing this reaction, this chain of events that I described. You'll feel the bump on your head. You'll feel the unpleasantness. Then you'll start to see yourself reacting in some way—"How could I have been so stupid?" or whatever you go on to think. There's some kind of movement happening. It's not simply "Oh, there's an unpleasant feeling." Very few of us respond that way when something like that happens. We get angry, we get frustrated, and that represents a reactivity to the pleasant or unpleasant experience.

As you start to witness the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral quality of experience and see the reactivity begin to get born out of that pleasant or unpleasant experience, you're actually starting to see something very profound about the way the mind works. This is the way in which it leaps off of pleasant or

unpleasant, and this is what sets into motion the whole cascading chain that leads us into greed, aversion, delusion, identification, and suffering.

Every single experience that we have—whether it's a bodily experience through one of our five physical sense doors or a mental experience through our mind—every single experience has this feeling tone associated with it. It's easiest to see with our bodily senses. Our sense of touch, for instance, is highly tuned to pleasant and unpleasant. It's also pretty easy to notice in taste, the things we find pleasant or unpleasant. So it's fairly easy to recognize this quality of pleasant and unpleasant in our bodily experience.

But the sense of our mind—everything that happens in our mind, moods, emotions, thoughts—also has this quality of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Thoughts themselves actually have a subtle feeling tone associated with them. But usually what we associate with the feeling tone of a thought is actually a kind of reaction. A thought arises about something, and then we react to it, and it's that reaction that has a feeling tone more than the thought itself, which probably has a more neutral feeling tone. The simple fact that a thought arises in our mind can be pretty neutral. It's the content of the thought and our reaction to that thought that carries the feeling tone.

This kind of experience—a thought and then the reaction to the thought—actually underlies a lot of what we think of as pleasant or unpleasant. Let me give you an example. One night I was trying to sleep. I had woken up in the middle of the night and was having difficulty sleeping, so I got up to meditate, which is something I often do when I have trouble sleeping. I was meditating and started to hear this very gentle, quiet tapping sound—just a soft tap, tap, tap. To me, that experience was unpleasant. I experienced that sound as unpleasant.

As I kept paying attention, I noticed that unpleasantness. And as I continued paying attention, I noticed that when I heard the sound, a little bit of fear arose. And that was definitely unpleasant—this feeling of contraction in the body. The fear had an unpleasant quality to it. But as I could just be with the fear, the next time the sound came, the next time I actually heard it, I realized that the sound itself was neutral or even slightly pleasant. It was the reaction to the sound that was unpleasant—the fear—which made me associate that fear with the sound. The sound became unpleasant because of the fear.

This kind of thing happens to us a lot with our physical sense experience. So it's very helpful to begin to recognize the feeling tone of our experience and start to see when there is some extra feeling added on top of what the actual feeling is.

Another sutta that I like states that all things converge on feeling. What I take that to mean is that essentially the feeling tone of our experience is where all of our responses are born. For instance, some people like blue, or they hate the smell of hot roofing tar, or they like a particular kind of car. We think it's the color blue we're responding to, or we think it's the hot roofing tar that we're reacting to. But actually, for some of us, the color blue is pleasant and the smell of hot roofing tar is unpleasant—and that is what

we're reacting to. That quality of pleasant or unpleasant underneath.

This feeling tone is like a springboard.

It's this narrow channel through which all of our reactivity arises. So that's what I take this to mean: all things converge on feeling. And if we can identify or recognize or be mindful of this feeling tone, we have an opportunity to not end up being so reactive to our experience. Instead of being whipped around by things all day, we can simply recognize, "Oh, this is a pleasant experience, this is an unpleasant experience."

So I'd like to talk for a few minutes about ways to practice with this feeling tone. The sutta I described simply instructs: when you feel a pleasant feeling, know that it's pleasant. When you feel an unpleasant feeling, know that it's unpleasant. But it's a little harder for us because initially it's difficult to even recognize things as pleasant or unpleasant—we're so conditioned to leap away from them.

So initially, in playing with or practicing with this feeling tone, it's helpful to actually consciously direct our attention to it. The easiest place to do this is in the sense door of the body, to check into our physical experience. What's pleasant? What's unpleasant?

An excellent place to explore this is in eating, because eating brings together all of our senses. We see the food, we identify it, we know what we want and don't want, what we like and dislike. There may be colors or forms on the plate that are particularly pleasing or displeasing. There's the smell of the food, which may be pleasing or displeasing. There's the contact of the food, the touch sensations of the texture in our mouth. There's the taste of the food. All of these things have pleasant and unpleasant aspects to them.

And you may find, for example, that something pleasant over time becomes something neutral or even slightly unpleasant. Chewing an apple, for instance—initially there's that burst of juice and sweet tartness in the mouth that may bring a sense of pleasantness, and the crunchiness, the texture, is pleasant at first. But you chew for a while, the sweetness dissipates, the juiciness dissipates, and it's just this pulpy thing in your mouth before you swallow it. It may be neutral or even slightly unpleasant, depending on your experience. The qualities can shift and change as we eat our food, and it's a very interesting place to begin really recognizing and noticing this quality of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral.

If it's a food that we like, we can also notice any mental experiences about it—any sense of, "Ooh, I want more of that. Is there more? Is somebody else taking the extra piece that I want?" All of the thoughts that arise around it, which themselves may be pleasant or unpleasant.

Another good place to look at feeling tone is when strong emotions are present. Whenever there's any kind of strong emotion, there will always be some quality of pleasant or unpleasant underneath. It can be very interesting to simply observe, without any judgment, whether there's pleasant or unpleasant there. Sometimes you might be surprised.

For example, the feeling of excitement has qualities of pleasantness to it. There can be a lightening of the mind and a kind of movement of joy in the excitement. But there can also be an unpleasant agitation quality to excitement. So there can be both pleasant and unpleasant aspects to emotions that we might think of generally as pleasant.

Or take anger, for instance. On one retreat, I was observing anger quite closely. It was coming up a lot, and I got to the place where I began to see the anger arising right at the beginning—just the very inception of that anger. What I noticed was that mostly I had been experiencing anger as a very unpleasant sensation of heat and pressure. But what I noticed as it just started was warmth and fullness. And that was pleasant. That initial hit of anger was a pleasant experience.

I was rather surprised at that. But in some way it made sense to me, because anger is something that hooks us. And I think that initial hit of fullness and warmth—it's just a feeling of life, of aliveness—that is what hooks us in anger.

So we practice noticing the qualities of pleasant and unpleasant in our experience. If you're experiencing aversion, some kind of not-wanting, some urge to get rid of something in your experience—even if it's just a general feeling of aversion, you're having a difficult day of some kind—you might simply check and see: is there something unpleasant in your experience? For me, for instance, when I get hungry, it colors everything.

A lot of things become very unpleasant or difficult when I get hungry. That kind of gnawing experience of unpleasantness, especially when it's not recognized, can filter everything—like a gray glass placed over my experience. If it's not recognized, if I don't notice, "Oh, there's that hunger. I'm just hungry right now," then when I do recognize that experience, it becomes much easier not to be so reactive to everything else.

As you become more familiar with this feeling tone, as you become more attuned to the qualities of pleasant and unpleasant, it gets easier to work with it as the Buddha recommended: simply when there's pleasant, know that it's pleasant; when there's unpleasant, know that it's unpleasant. Then you can start to practice that true mindfulness of feeling. When something unpleasant arises in your experience, just know, "Oh, this is an unpleasant experience."

But it seems to be helpful initially in exploring this to actually look for the pleasant and unpleasant, because we do tend to just leap off of it so quickly. When you can notice this feeling tone and start to notice that the mind reacts and responds to it, you have the opportunity to actually witness the birth of this reactivity—to witness the whole chain of causes and conditions leading us into this reactive, clinging, suffering identification with experience.

In that seeing of the birth of this pattern, that is where the seeds of freedom lie. In seeing the pattern, we have an opportunity to not get caught by it, to not automatically respond in our habitual way. We can actually unwind this chain. This automatic chain can be unwound, and we can live much freer lives—not

being whipsawed by this quality of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral, as we are when we don't really see it and recognize it.

We have just a couple of minutes, but if there are any questions... Yes, the reference for "all things converge on feeling" is in the Aṅguttara Nikāya. It's in this book, the Numerical Discourses of the Buddha—Aṅguttara Nikāya 10.58.

Is it desirable to be neutral? And what does neutral mean? Neutral, as the description goes, is neither pleasant nor unpleasant. That's the technical term for it—when something is neither pleasant nor unpleasant, it's neutral. Things are what they are, in general. When experience arises, it has one of these qualities to it. Whether something is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral is essentially conditioned. We don't have a lot of control over that as it arises in our experience.

However, in our practice, what seems to happen is that as we continue to practice, we begin to see more things as they really are. We begin to see that most of our sense contact actually is on the neutral side. Sight, for instance—much of our sight is actually neutral. It's our thoughts around it that are pleasant or unpleasant, that we react to. So we begin to actually experience more and more neutral as we do the practice. This seems to be the direction that the practice moves.

That sounds perhaps like it might be flat or boring, but the quality of equanimity is essentially a neutral mind state, and yet it gives you such a sense of peace that there's a way in which it feels pleasant.

I'm going to read one last quote to end. I find it very interesting. The Buddha is talking about what's pleasant and unpleasant with respect to each of these three aspects: "Pleasant feeling is pleasant when it persists and painful when it changes. Painful feeling is painful when it persists and pleasant when it changes. Neither painful nor pleasant feeling is pleasant when there is knowledge of it, and unpleasant when there is no knowledge of it."

I'll just leave you with that to peruse. That quote is from Majjhima Nikāya 44, paragraph 24.

So it's nine o'clock and we need to finish. Let's do a little dedication of merit.

May the beneficial results of our practice together be offered to support the welfare and liberation of all beings everywhere. May all beings be happy. May all beings be healthy. May all beings be safe.

May all beings live with ease.

May all beings be free from suffering.

Thank you.

The quotation referenced is from Aṅguttara Nikāya 44, paragraph 24.

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