The Dart: Understanding Vedanā

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 54:08

So tonight I was going to talk a bit more about vedanā, because when Vance introduced it so excellently this morning, I thought, well, in five minutes he said everything that needed to be said, but somehow I'll find an hour's worth in it.

It's actually such an essential experience. It holds a key place in several of the maps the Buddha spoke about that bring us into suffering on a moment-to-moment basis. And yet it's something that, until I heard about it from the Buddha's teaching, I never would have noticed. Would you ever notice it? To me, this is one of the more incredibly brilliant things about the Buddha—that he actually could have the clarity to see this arising, because vedanā happens so quickly, and then to see how it works, how it functions. So I'll talk some more about it because it's so fascinating, so often unrecognized. And it happens so quickly that even when we're thinking about it or kind of aware, we're often not going to notice it. So I hope you didn't make yourself crazy today trying to notice it, because it's arising in every moment of consciousness. Cut yourself some slack, but do notice it at times.

Vedanā is key—it is the second of the four foundations of mindfulness for that reason, as Vance described so well. It's a key link in the Buddha's teaching of dependent origination, how a moment of ignorance goes through these twelve links, culminating in suffering. That's a whole complex teaching I'm not going to give tonight. But in the middle sections, the six sense bases give rise to contact, which I'll talk about more. Contact gives rise to feeling. And this is how suffering works: feeling, vedanā, feeling tone, gives rise to craving. Craving can be going toward or going back. Craving gives rise to grasping—it hardens into reaching and grasping. That gives rise to becoming, which is even more settled in. And that gives rise to birth, birth as whatever the particular grasping thing was.

Ajahn Chah said once, going through the twelve links of dependent origination, it's not like a slow thing where you can kind of watch each one. He said it's like you fall from a tree and on the way down you hit twelve branches. I like that. He's so funny, Ajahn Chah. But it's like that—boom, and you wake up in suffering. That's how it works.

This is that central point where we can actually, with steady mindfulness, see how it works. This is what's so great about our practice—not trying to avoid it. Once we understand again and again and again, seeing how it works, that's when the wisdom, paññā, comes in, and we don't have to pick up the craving every time there's feeling tone.

As Vance also said, vedanā is kind of a key player in the arising in the mind of the three unwholesome roots: greed, ill-will or dosa, and delusion. Again and again, the Buddha speaks of these three

unwholesome roots as basically the source of suffering. They're unwholesome not just because they don't feel so good—they don't, they torment our mind—but often in the texts, liberation, nibbāna, is spoken of as the heart-mind that is free from greed, hatred, and delusion in a moment. So they're not just things that are a pain in the neck. They're actually the deepest level of torment, because the mind's non-recognition of their presence and the identifying with them and perceiving through them is actually what blocks our recognition of ultimate peace of heart and mind. They're roots of suffering, big time.

As Vance said, we see how pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral vedanā, unrecognized, lead into these unwholesome roots. That's a lot of what I'm going to talk about tonight, referencing a sutta of the Buddha where he talks about this, which I have found so helpful.

First, though, just to describe the situation we find ourselves in as human beings—or at least I do. One way the Buddha described the world, or our world as a human being, is simply the six sense experiences. So when he talks about the world, he's talking about seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and the whole mental experience. Very basic. All day our experience, again as Vance mentioned, is one of sense contact. Every moment of consciousness, there's some sense contact. Sight comes together with the sight organ that works, and there's consciousness, knowing at that moment. Those three come together—that's called contact, phassa. Now, how many contacts all day long? Every moment that we're conscious, there's sense contact.

And leaving aside vedana, because we're not normally going through life noticing that—but our habit is that some of these sense contacts we like. We don't think, "Oh, pleasant contact." We just like it. We don't even think that, but that's how it is. Some of them we really don't like. Obviously a mistake—somebody else's or ours. But that's how we take it. Many, many of them, as Vance said, we don't even notice. Nothing's happening. But there's never nothing happening. There's stuff happening all the time, but it's not worth our attention. Have you found yourself at all during this retreat waiting to be mindful for something worth being mindful of? There's always something happening.

So, contact. That's what's going on all day long. And mostly in life, without steady mindfulness, without our Dhamma understanding, the experience—we like it, we don't like it, we don't even think that—but our attention is, you can almost say, entranced by the experience and by our reactions to it. "Oh, what a beautiful sunset, that feels so nice," and then wherever it goes from there. To us, that's the experience. That whole thing. We're kind of entranced by it, by our reactions. And we tend to get involved in whatever the object is. And the object is very often mental—our moods, our emotions, our thoughts. We like it, we don't like it, it's good, it's bad, or whatever. And this is really how we live our life, not recognizing this habit.

So when we like something, it's pleasant. We don't notice that. When we don't like it, there's something wrong. Neutral, we don't notice. And really, I think almost all of the accepted worldview is that pleasant is the way it's supposed to go. I mean, not pretending—we know otherwise. It's just, this is where we have to

be honest and truthful with ourselves, because we see: unpleasant. We don't notice unpleasant. We just notice we don't like it. And as I said, something is wrong. People kind of giggle at that, but that's it.

You're having a really nice sitting, and then it all goes to hell in a handbasket. What did you do wrong? Because once it's pleasant, of course that's right, and it should stay that way. And if it doesn't, it's because you've done something wrong, or someone else did something wrong and messed up your meditation. But that comes to be kind of an underlying assumption—that we shouldn't have other experience. And when we are discontent, when things aren't going well, the response is how to get a better experience. And behind it all is one we like. Pleasant. That's just kind of a given.

And if you think it's not, just over the days, over the months, notice how that slips in the back of your mind. When you're feeling discontent, you think, "Well, the practice is going well. I know it's impermanent, blah, blah, blah." But there's this little discontent. Just check it out.

One time I was doing walking meditation at Shwe Oo Min. Fine, I was present, I was with whatever was going on. Nothing special was happening, but I was there doing it. And I just felt this discontent. So I thought, "What's the view in the back of the mind?" How it should be—that we don't quite recognize is there. And when we don't recognize it, it gets this little dart in. If you recognize it, it helps. So I said, "Okay, what's the view?" The thought was: it should be better. What should be better? Anything.

This moment should be better. There was nothing wrong with it. But you can't win with that one. Because it should always be better. It can always be better. That's the tendency to evaluate ourselves and the world, and it really becomes a guiding principle of our life—how to get it better.

Ajahn Buddhadasa said once—we've referenced him a few times; he was really a great scholar and teacher and quite a character—anyway, he said once: When you do something, when you make a decision, just do something and see why. He says, maybe it's an exaggeration, I don't know, check it out. But he said you'll see that ninety-five percent of everything you do is for pleasant feeling. You can throw away that number, but have a look. It's a little bit scary when we start to see it, and how far down the road we go with that.

Because what that does, as I think I said before, is that wanting is wanting. Wanting more pleasant—it's a maker of measurement, the Buddha said. It narrows our world to me and the pleasant experience, or to me and the unpleasant experience, or how to get a better pleasant experience. All the involvement is about me. And our life really becomes evaluating a sense of self, a sense of meaning from whatever object's happening and how pleasant it is or not. Maybe I'm simplifying a little bit. But honestly, I don't think as much as you might think I'm simplifying.

So it's challenging. This is the definition of saṃsāra. It keeps us leaning, looking into the next thing, the next thing. This one's pleasant, but it goes away. How to get another? Or it's pleasant—but notice, sometimes something's pleasant, pleasant, and then it becomes neutral. You've got to ramp it up a little bit

more. Look at media these days. Look at the intensity. I can't bear it, mostly. I used to like movies, but everything—they have to ramp up the intensity to an unbearable level, because we get dulled out. And neutral doesn't count. So even when things are good, they could always be a little bit better.

I think I mentioned that one of the Tibetan descriptions of saṃsāra is the urge to correct. You can always just fix it a little bit. Just a little bit, it could be better. And so we get focused on the object, focused on what it means about me. And we're tossed in our life between pleasure and pain, liking and disliking—like ping pong, back and forth, back and forth. And reactive to that, of course.

So in our practice, that's happening, but we have the capacity—the steadiness of mindfulness and the curiosity of Dhamma—to look and see what's really going on. Not just buying into the assumption.

But the way we toss back and forth—I remembered an example when I talked about this. I don't know, it speaks to me. It's from American football, which I know little about and care less. And for you Europeans, I mean football, not soccer. So I was watching the Super Bowl, which is the big finale, which again, I could care less. But I was with a bunch of friends, and that's what we were doing. And they cared. So I was watching. It was toward the end, a few years ago. Those football fans, I'm sure I'll get this wrong. Please, I don't want any notes about how I got it wrong. I'm just trying to make a point here.

So the Patriots were playing – that's New England, Tom Brady, very famous quarterback. And it was just right near the last two or three minutes of the whole game, and they were behind. They were about to lose. I don't have to go into how the game is played, but they cut to him because he wasn't playing at that moment – the defense was playing, so he was on the bench.

The look of total, total dejection, depression. He was practically crying. He looked completely down. And you just feel – this is the mind in unpleasant experience. This is the mind totally submerged in it.

And then some amazing thing happened. This is what I know I'll get wrong, but somehow I think one of the Patriots made an interception and ran all the way the length of the field. Some amazing thing happened, and they made a touchdown and won in the last two minutes, which never happens. And they cut to him, and he's screaming and yelling, so happy, jumping all around.

This is like two minutes. Completely immersed in each one. That's how we live our life. It's exhausting.

And given the chance, I'm sure he'd do it again. He'd go for more high, more high, and the highs are measured by the lows, and on and on. So you get the drift. This is how our life can go. Without recognizing how pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant affects all our reactions, we're just going to keep ping-ponging back and forth.

So now I want to talk a bit about vedana, feeling tone. I'll read through and keep commenting on this sutta, this discourse of the Buddha. I like it because of how he starts it. It's called the Sallata Sutta, the Dart.

"An untaught worldling" – he says that a lot; that's most of us – "bhikkhus, experiences pleasant vedana,

they experience unpleasant vedana, and they experience neutral vedana. A well-taught noble disciple likewise experiences pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral."

So if you're still secretly holding out the hope that when you get enlightened, unpleasant feeling is a thing of the past, hang it up right now.

So a well-taught noble disciple likewise experiences. What's the difference? What's the distinction that exists between a well-taught noble disciple and an untaught worldling? Interesting, no? Gets the attention. What is the difference if they're still experiencing sense contact and vedana in the same way?

This shows the Buddha didn't wake up into a different world, and nor will we. It's the same world with all the same junk going on. So what's the difference in terms of vedana?

"When an untaught worldling is touched by an unpleasant" – now he's using bodily vedana, bodily feeling, but it could be either – "bodily vedana, they worry and grieve, they lament, they beat their breast, they weep and are distraught. Thus they experience two kinds of vedana: a bodily unpleasant and a mental unpleasant."

Can you relate to that at all? At all, right?

"It is as if a person were pierced by a dart, and following the first piercing is hit by a second dart." Oh my God, my knee hurts, I can't believe it, it's so horrible – the two. "So that person will experience vedana caused by two darts. Similarly, with an untaught worldling, when touched by an unpleasant bodily feeling, they worry and grieve, lament, beat their breast, weep, and are distraught."

Sayadaw Tejaniya calls this "double dukkha." And that's what we do with unpleasant—it's wrong, it's bad, how do I get rid of it? We're entranced by that reaction. We totally believe it. We're totally caught up. And there's a whole storm we don't notice.

But this is where it gets really interesting to me, because he's explaining how these habits of sense desire, aversion, and delusion come about moment to moment. They're habits.

So, having been touched by that unpleasant vedana, they resist and resent it. Can you relate to that? Resist and resent it. Then in one who so resists and resents that painful vedana, an underlying tendency, an underlying habit of resistance against unpleasant feeling comes to underlie the mind.

Every moment of consciousness, if there's a moment of resistance, that's what's being practiced in that moment. It strengthens the tendency for resistance to arise in the next moment. If mindfulness is present, it makes it a little more possible for mindfulness to arise in the next moment. It's just cause and effect. It's just science.

So he's saying that resisting the unpleasant comes to be a habit that underlies the mind whenever there's unpleasant.

And then he goes on. Under the impact of that unpleasant feeling, one then proceeds to enjoy, to look for sensual happiness. Why does one do so? An untaught worldling does not know of any other escape from painful feeling tones except the enjoyment of sensual happiness.

That to me is such a powerful and poignant statement. If we look around the world, ordinary people who aren't paying attention—the only escape they know from unpleasant is to go find something pleasant, whatever it is. It could be something simple or something twisted, whatever that person finds pleasant. It's so sad. It's so sad that that's all someone knows to escape to.

So in one who enjoys sensual happiness, the underlying tendency to lust for pleasant feeling tones comes to underlie the mind. They do not know, according to facts, the arising and ending of these feeling tones. They don't see the impermanence, nor the gratification, the danger, and the escape connected with these feeling tones.

Only knowing how to go for sense pleasure, not understanding the impermanence, not understanding the gratification, danger, and escape—when one lacks that understanding, the underlying tendency to ignorance as to neutral feeling tones comes to underlie the mind.

Since feeling tones are arising every moment, how many moments are there of unaware practicing of these habits? No wonder the habits of wanting, of ill will and aversion, and of delusion are so strong in our minds. They arise so frequently. It's not something you're doing wrong. This is how our lives have been conditioned. It's impersonal.

And I appreciate how he's describing it. He's not saying you're a stupid jerk because you're doing that. He's saying this is what's happening when we don't understand.

So when such a one experiences a pleasant vedana, an unpleasant vedana, or a neutral vedana, they feel it as one fettered by it, as one chained by it. We're caught by the pleasant, by the unpleasant, by the neutral, caught because of the ignorance. Such a one, O monks, is called an untaught worldling who is fettered, who is chained by birth, by old age, by death, by sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. He is fettered by this suffering—this I declare.

You could say it's intense, but I say it's actually a fairly accurate description of a great deal of life without awareness.

So let me talk a little bit about what he's describing—that we don't know of any other escape, we don't see the impermanence, and we don't understand the gratification, the danger, and the escape. That's a nice way to talk about it.

First, just understanding the impermanence. Watch how with just a pleasant feeling or unpleasant feeling, our mind just takes off into story and sense of self and all of our life. It can just go wild.

This is from Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche, actually the older brother of Tsoknyi and Mingyur Rinpoche. He's

talking about renunciation as what he calls "weariness with samsara" – this endless cycling. And he's not saying we hate it. We're just saying, "Really? Again? Again? Again? Do I need to keep doing this?" And we don't.

He says, watch. Watch the fickleness of the mind. Do you know fickleness? Fickleness is often used in terms of when you're in a relationship and you're fickle – you don't really stay committed to one person. You go to someone else, you go to someone else. The mind is fickle. It isn't steady.

So he says watch how easily the mind is influenced just by a pleasant or unpleasant sight or sound into an immediate mood, into a whole world. Do you notice that? You're in a good mood, so that's pleasant vedana, which we didn't notice. We walk outside, all set to look at the sunset, and a big dark cloud comes, and it gets really cold, and suddenly we're miserable.

Do we notice? When we're mindful, we might, and then we can just laugh at it. But you see, that's a very simple example. Take a bad mood. Take your meditation tanking. Take something that's really spinning you out, a really difficult emotion. We don't tend to think, "Oh yes, that's an unpleasant emotion." No, no – it's me and this, and what can I do? A whole world.

And then it vanishes. It does, right? It's just gone. And do we notice? "Oh yes, unpleasant has vanished, and now it's neutral." It's like, "Oh thank god, it's gone, I got through it." No, no, no – a whole other world. That's what he's talking about.

We don't want to simply recognize, "Oh yes, pleasant feeling, unpleasant feeling." The Buddha said: "Before my enlightenment, oh monks, when I was still a Bodhisatta, it occurred to me: what is the gratification in the world? It occurred to me: whatever pleasure and joy there is in the world, this is the gratification in the world. That the world is impermanent, bound up with suffering and subject to change – this is the danger in the world. The abandoning of desire and lust for the world – this is the escape from the world."

"If, bhikkhus, there were no gratification in this world, beings would not become enamored with the world. But because there is gratification, beings become enamored with the world."

Again, he's being very reasonable. He's not saying there's no such thing as pleasure. He's not saying there's no such thing as beauty. And he says, "the abandoning of desire and lust for the world." He didn't say abandoning the objects.

"If there were no danger in the world, beings would not become disenchanted. But there is danger, so beings become disenchanted. If there were no escape, beings could not escape."

But there is an escape, and beings can escape from the suffering.

So I want to talk a little bit about that, because I think sometimes it's perhaps a bit misunderstood. Bhikkhu Bodhi talks about gratification, danger, and escape—something mentioned frequently in the

suttas in different contexts. I like the way Bhikkhu Bodhi speaks about these three as three movements in an unfolding process of insight. It's not like something we have to get, but rather something we explore. As I think we've said before, hopefully everything we say is an impetus for you to explore, not to memorize. Memorizing won't help. So it's an invitation—three movements in an unfolding process of insight.

Gratification. There is gratification. There is pleasure. What does gratification mean? I looked it up in the dictionary: to satisfy or please, to give pleasure by satisfying desires or humoring inclinations. So pleasant experience is gratifying. What I pick up from the sense of gratification is that it feeds a sense of me appreciating what's happening.

In talking about the hindrances, the Buddha said once that what increases sense desire is unwise attention. You keep paying attention to the gratification of the pleasant. You're not just noticing it's pleasant, or "this is a lovely cup of tea." It's unwise attention to the beautiful aspect—"Oh, that's so nice. That's so nice. Oh, this feels really good. This feels really good." Unwise attention to that aspect keeps us spinning in the gratification, feeds sense desire, feeds the sense of me. Attending only to the pleasing sign, the pleasing aspect.

You know how sometimes it's talked about when you first get a crush on somebody—maybe not even really falling in real love, but a crush. Whenever you look at them, you don't see all the junky stuff and the dirty socks. Later you see that when the crush-eyes go away. But in that moment, you only tune in to the beautiful stuff. Even if it's not there, the mind is projecting it. That's unwise attention to the pleasing sign. "Ah, look how they walk. Oh, look how they sit." We all know that. We know that's all down the path to suffering, but that's never stopped anyone yet.

So noticing the gratification, that's all. Noticing how it works. Sometimes people think, "Oh yes, pleasant feeling. I get attached. It leads to suffering." So they try to shut down, not have pleasant, not experience pleasure. All pleasure is bad. Beautiful things are bad. That's just aversion. That's not helpful. But yes, there are times you shut the sense doors. You're so sucked into the beautiful thing, you might think of turning your attention in another direction. We can take some wise decisions. But understanding how gratification works—this is where coming back to notice that pleasant feeling matters. It's not all about how the person looks. It's like there's a pleasant feeling. There's seeing and a pleasant feeling. Seeing and a pleasant feeling. It's so nothing. A pleasant feeling just comes and goes.

And if we're noticing that every moment—pleasant feeling gone, let me look again so I can have another pleasant feeling—that's what we're doing. And when you stop getting that pleasant feeling from looking at that person, then it all goes in the wrong direction. I'm not getting a pleasant feeling. I need to go somewhere else, get a new pleasant feeling, look at someone else, look at something else—all for the sake of pleasant feeling.

But there is gratification in the world. And that's why we become enamored. But when we see and start to tune into just that pleasant feeling leading into it, it takes the mystery away. Maybe you don't want to take

the mystery away—you're welcome not to. We'll keep on going like we are. But if you bring in the steadiness of awareness, you'll see: oh yeah, pleasant feelings.

The danger—the obvious aspect of danger—is of course just the impermanence, just on that level. The impermanence of pleasant feeling tone. Also the impermanence of unpleasant feeling tone. Vedanā. The impermanence of everything, right? But leaning into any experience to give us happiness when it's based on having pleasant feeling tone is, of course, completely unreliable. So that's the obvious danger. And I think intellectually we can understand that. But we need to have steady attention where we can see: oh, that pleasant feeling tone's gone. And leaning into looking for another one—to see that change.

Another danger is the addictive, delusory aspect. Again, not seeing the pleasant clearly, but just thinking, "Oh yeah, this is really what it's about. I feel good." And when we feel good, we can say, "Well, they talk about having a calm, balanced mind. That's how my mind is now. It feels good. I'm not suffering. It's calm. It's balanced because I've got what I want." And there's a moment with no wanting. That's why it feels pleasant.

Notice that. When there's not craving, or aversion, or delusion in the mind, it's really peaceful and stable. Notice that. Why does it feel good when we get what we want? Because the craving drops away. It's not about the thing. The craving in the mind, in the heart, is torment. But we get so confused—we mistake it for pleasure, or taking us into pleasure, you know.

So just the steady looking: the craving drops. You get the thing and you don't get the thing—it doesn't matter. The craving's gone. There's peace. There's momentary peace.

And the other danger, as I said, keeps us looking in the same direction. It keeps feeding the danger of going after pleasant feeling, avoiding unpleasant feeling, ignoring the neutral. It keeps us feeding the habit of the kilesas—of greed, hatred, delusion. It keeps those habits going. That's just what he's saying. And that is the real torment of suffering—of mind and body leading to our actions and thus creating more confusion and suffering in the world, in our relationships.

Just recognizing with awareness the inner instability and dis-ease that's present in our citta, our mind, our body, when there's strong kilesa—when there's greed, when there's ill will, aversion, when there's delusion—and not recognizing when we're identified. We're looking out, we're looking to the object, you know, to get it more pleasant. But what's the suffering? It's the presence of kilesa in the heart-mind.

All the teachings, in a way, are ways to help us understand this—to stop feeding these kilesas, these habits. To stabilize, to learn to recognize and trust the wholesome qualities of mind. And mindfulness, and the steadiness of mindfulness that leads into steadiness of samādhi, of clear seeing—these are the conditions that allow for this wisdom, this paññā, to arise. It's not that we, as an act of will, decide to stop doing this stuff.

That's just more delusion. But wisdom sees how things actually are, how they already are.

When we start to see and recognize—oh yes, look at that—this pleasant feeling leading into suffering, all this resisting the unpleasant, everything I'm doing not to have to feel unpleasant vedanā. Look at all the suffering! We start to see it. And not be afraid of unpleasant feeling tone. Not be afraid of losing pleasant. Not ignoring completely all the moments that aren't juicy enough to pay attention to. We start to see accurately. The wisdom comes in, and you might think, "Oh, what can I have another?" It doesn't matter. There's peace. Just for a moment, recognize those moments. It really feeds the wisdom.

So the escape—and that is how the Buddha described it—the obvious escape is not that you have to enter some gray world of no beauty, but the abandoning of desire and lust for the world. This is the escape.

Again, we so often conflate the desire, the wanting, with happiness that it's really quite common for people to say—and not just at the beginning of their practice—that they're coming up against some experience that's really beautiful and lovely. You can feel the clinging in there, but it feels so intertwined, as if the clinging is part of it. So we confuse the clinging for ease, for happiness. And people say, "Well, I don't want to keep on this path if it means giving this up." That's just another mind moment to explore. But look at it—we get so conflated with the clinging, the craving, with what's lovely and beautiful.

And yes, there's no way around awakening without also finding the willingness, the ability to be really present with the unpleasant. Equally present. That's really the mind of equanimity. That's what we're exploring here.

Honestly, I know you probably know this—maybe you don't—but I say this often: the really difficult parts of retreat, when you're still practicing, still being here, being mindful, those difficult parts are really the gift of the Dhamma. That's where the learning is going to come. Steve Armstrong used to say something about nothing ruining your day like a good sitting.

I have a good friend whose first retreat was all wonderful, wonderful, wonderful. I swear, for ten years afterward he couldn't get through a retreat because it was never all wonderful again. Because that experience feeds our misconception that it's all about nice and beautiful and wonderful. If that happened to you and you're just floating in bliss but without wisdom, without clear seeing, how do you think we learn what the Buddha's talking about here—about how the habits of greed, hatred, and delusion arise? Not by listening to me talk about it, not by reading about it, but by being it, by learning it, by really feeling and seeing how it happens.

And luckily, you will have ten million opportunities. So if you miss one or two little moments of pleasant or unpleasant feeling, you'll probably have another one pretty soon. And you usually can't tell what you're learning at the time.

Sometimes I feel like our job as teachers is just to keep you going. Just keep you going. "Okay, it all stinks. It all hurts. Fine. Take a step. Notice the sensations." "Oh, you're really unhappy? I'm sorry. How does it feel? Pleasant? Unpleasant? You may notice." That's what we do. We try to be empathetic, but then keep

going, keep going. Because that's where the wisdom's going to come.

Mingyur Rinpoche says, you know, part of the escape is being willing, just in a moment, to put down that craving, that clinging, that lust for the pleasant, that fear of the unpleasant.

We start to recognize, at times, that we can feel pleasure—a sense of peace, as Mingyur Rinpoche describes it—that arises from the stability of awareness. This is awareness that is not dependent on the absence or presence of unpleasant or pleasant experience. Peace comes from the stability of awareness, the stability of knowing that isn't being jerked around by reactivity to pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. He says awareness itself is inherently calm.

This is something interesting to notice. And as the practitioner was talking about concentration and how this sense of calm and peace comes in—it's not only there. As I was saying, one of the real ways we experience calm and peace is when the mind is really present and awake and there's not kilesa coloring the citta. That could be just for a moment. One of the reasons the unified mind of wholesome concentration is so pleasant is because those kilesa are not activated. That's one of the reasons. But it's also that you can feel the stability of steady awareness, the wisdom that comes, and that inherent calm or peace when we're not being tossed around by the kilesa.

I say this to perhaps give a little more interest in exploring: How does feeling tone work? How does it arise? Let me see for myself. The absence of torments is really a powerful thing, and we can notice many moments of that.

So then, taking this into practice, into our mindfulness practice, I've nothing amazing and new to say except steadiness of awareness and, from time to time, tuning into vedana. I just want to say it's very subtle and quick. So often it's so quick that many people, when they experience aversion, don't even feel the difference between unpleasant vedana and aversion. It comes so fast. Or of course there's wanting—it's pleasant, it's wanting. They're so intertwined. So it does take a little steadiness to explore.

I'll offer some hints about times when you might investigate—not when you're all in an uproar about something, but when you're kind of interested, nothing much is happening. You might have a look and see. When something's going on that's maybe kind of easy to feel, often in the body, pleasant or unpleasant, maybe that's not overwhelming, that maybe is a little bit repetitive. You can just notice: you go outside and it's cold. It's cold. Once you get over that, just kind of feel cold. See, the mind goes right into aversion. That's where I go with cold. Maybe you like cold. Maybe your mind goes into aversion with heat and into liking with cold. Either way, it doesn't matter. But keep noticing—your mind goes off into story, but there's the cold again. Just keep coming back, playing around, coming back with a conscious awareness that this is a choice of wisdom. Just go right to the cold. Not even looking for it, but just right to the sensation itself. Again and again. Maybe it's right off into the wanting again. Maybe not. Sometimes then, just in little things like this, you can feel that subtle sense of pleasant or unpleasant. And it could change, either way.

Or when you're eating, perhaps the taste of the food is pleasant. Or you know it's pleasant because you're liking it, so you can assume it's pleasant. So explore. Take a bite and just really be there for that burst of flavor. Take another chew. See if you notice the pleasantness. I haven't noticed, but the third bite is just like mush, mush—no flavor at all, right? So you hurry it down to get to the next pleasant experience. Notice that. Mush, mush—unpleasant.

Something's still happening. Maybe it's more neutral. Watch and see. Or maybe the unpleasant is often a thought—"Oh no, the tongue wants some more." Often, what is giving rise to the vedanā is a thought, and we can easily miss that. So explore in ways like that.

I remember one retreat I was doing, walking meditation, pretty slow. I was doing this style in the days when it would take me literally half an hour to walk the length of one of the upstairs halls. So I was doing that, really into it. And a fly came, you know, and was walking on me. Not a biting fly, just a fly. This is where noticing intention becomes interesting—to move my arm up to brush the fly away would be three times slower than I just demonstrated it. Too much trouble. So I wasn't doing that. I was just noticing. Because the fly kept going and I was really present.

So then I just started noticing the little feet. And because it kept going and my mind was pretty present, that's when I really saw—oh, the unpleasant! And I really saw the difference between unpleasant and aversion. It's not the same thing.

Now, a very smart teacher says, and so I have to acknowledge he may be right—so keep looking, don't just believe me—he says that as soon as we label vedanā as unpleasant, there's already a tinge of aversion. So look and see how it is for you. For me, that little experience with the fly, I don't think there was. I could tell the difference. But we're all different. Look and see.

Something repetitive that's going on that's really pleasant, that's unpleasant—you can see when you notice the vedanā, and then when you go off into the story about it. Just exploring, not to get it right, but to see how this works. This is really where the freedom comes in.

This is from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. You've heard this: "When feeling a pleasant feeling, one knows: I feel a pleasant feeling." That's it. "When feeling an unpleasant feeling, one knows: I feel an unpleasant feeling." Okay, what do you do when you feel a neutral feeling? "I'm feeling a neutral feeling." That's it.

If you're looking for more, then we're looking for some gratification, some juice, and that's what we don't want to give up. That gratification that feeds that sense of me, that makes me feel so alive.

Just a couple more things I want to read. This is again from the Buddha, giving instructions: "Having seen a form with mindfulness muddled..." You know what muddled means? Just all murky and unclear. "Having seen a form with mindfulness muddled..." I know that never happens to any of you, but should it... "Attending to the pleasing sign, one experiences the pleasing thing with infatuated mind and remains tightly holding to it."

Which could be something as pleasing as the sight of two more brownies on the plate. Pleasing sight. One holds to the pleasing thing with infatuated mind. "Many feelings flourish within, originating from the visible form, from covetousness and annoyance as well." Which could come up. "And one's mind becomes disturbed."

The visual, the brownie—I want it. There's only two and those two people are getting it. All this stuff flourishes, comes up from a pleasant sight. One's mind becomes disturbed. "For one who accumulates suffering thus, Nibbana is said to be far away."

In that moment—remember, it's all only moments.

Now contrast this: when clearly mindful, steadily mindful, one sees a form. One is not inflamed by lust for forms. One experiences it with an unattached, a dispassionate mind and does not remain holding tightly. "Oh yes, pleasant sight, two brownies." One fares mindfully in such a way that even as one sees the form, and while one undergoes a feeling—pleasant feeling tone—suffering is exhausted. In that moment, suffering is let go of. It's not built up.

"Exhausted"—she's not saying you pushed it away. It's exhausted because it's not being fed. This is where the kilesas in the mind... it's not that we have to hate them, but they're arising moment to moment. The kilesas, the wanting, the suffering, is fed by that attachment to the pleasant and by that leaning into it. When we don't feed it, it's exhausted. It goes out. This connects to the image of nirvana as a flame going out because the fuel isn't feeding it anymore. Just in that moment.

"While one undergoes a feeling, suffering is exhausted, not built up. For such a one, Nibbana is said to be close by."

You see, that's what the Buddha is saying. It's really all happening in the moment.

I want to end with a little shift, some words from Pema Chödrön, putting this into more day-to-day language:

"The essence of life is that it is challenging. Sometimes it is sweet, and sometimes it is bitter. Sometimes your body tenses and sometimes it relaxes and opens. Sometimes you have a headache and sometimes you feel 100% healthy. From an awakened perspective, trying to tie up all the loose ends and finally get it together is death, because it involves rejecting a lot of your basic experience. When we wake up, we can live fully without seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. We can live fully."

We think we're living fully holding on to pleasure and avoiding pain, but this is really what's blocking full life. We can live fully without recreating ourselves when we fall apart. We can let ourselves feel our emotions as hot or cold, vibrating or smooth. We can give up on being perfect and instead experience each moment to its fullest.

That's really the escape. We're so lucky that we're learning there is an escape, that we're not caught, that

the only thing we know how to do isn't simply lust after pleasure.

May the calm and peace that arises in our own hearts and minds when we're free from confusion be shared with all beings. May our practice be a cause, a condition for all beings to awaken from suffering and confusion.

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