Morning Instructions: Mindfulness of Vedanā (Feeling Tone)

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 1:01:49

Last night I referred briefly to that quality of mind, of feeling, that is the mental factor which tastes the pleasantness or unpleasantness or neutrality of every experience, of every object. In every moment there is a feeling tone. Feeling in this context does not refer to what in English we often call emotions. It means very specifically the pleasantness, unpleasantness, or neutrality that we taste and experience.

This particular elemental factor plays a very critical role in our understanding of the path. The Buddha singled out this factor in making it one of the four foundations of mindfulness: mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of feelings, mindfulness of the mind, and mindfulness of dhammas.

I want to speak very briefly this morning about how to incorporate mindfulness or awareness of this feeling tone in the practice. In the simplest way, you can notice when this feeling tone is very obvious. Something happens and you experience very clearly the pleasantness of it or the unpleasantness of it. When that aspect becomes very predominant, pay attention to it. Recognize it for what it is. It's not that "I'm feeling pleasant" or "I'm feeling unpleasant." Rather, it's the feeling—it's that quality of mind which is expressing its nature. Feeling feels. The feeling tone is that quality of mind that is tasting the pleasantness or unpleasantness. That's the job of feelings. So when we're experiencing very clear pleasantness or unpleasantness, simply recognize: this is feeling, this is pleasant feeling, this is unpleasant feeling.

The reason vedanā plays such a critical role in the path is that the Buddha pointed out that when feeling tones are not noticed, when we're unmindful of them, the habituated, deeply habituated tendency of mind is to cling to what's pleasant, to desire what's pleasant, and to have aversion or dislike of what's unpleasant. For most of us, that's the default position. Something pleasant comes, we want it, we like it. Something unpleasant comes, we don't like it. So it takes mindfulness, it takes awareness of the feeling tone to break that pattern of conditioning.

It's quite interesting to observe the mind and the experience when you're aware of the feeling tone versus when you're not. For example, when there's something that's quite pleasant and you become mindful—pleasant feeling, pleasantness—notice the quality of mind in that moment of being mindful. When we're just acknowledging, "Yes, this is pleasant," you will see that in that moment of mindfulness of the pleasantness, we're not pushing it away. We're mindful of it, we're aware of the pleasantness, but in being mindful, you may notice that in that very moment there is no desire, there is no grasping. There is the simple experience of and acknowledgement of pleasant. And so the mind remains free of that

conditioning to grasp.

Likewise with unpleasant feelings. If there's unpleasant sensations in the body or unpleasant emotions, unpleasant mind states, notice the tendency of the mind, the habitual tendency. Something unpleasant comes, immediate reaction of aversion, not liking, wanting to get rid of. This can be a very obvious movement of mind, or it can be a subtle level of contraction. Notice the habitual tendency of the mind to react to unpleasantness with aversion.

Then investigate. Really look at the mind in those moments when we're mindful of the unpleasant feeling. This is unpleasant. It's feeling, this feeling quality of mind which is tasting the unpleasantness of the object. And it's just doing its function. Feeling feels. Notice the quality of the mind when you're aware of this unpleasant feeling.

Here a note might be helpful, especially in the beginning as you're exploring. Maybe just a very soft note: "Unpleasant, unpleasant." And you may see that in that moment of awareness, we're experiencing the unpleasantness, but there's no aversion. There's no pushing it away. It's the simple acknowledgement: this is how it is right now.

As we explore this and investigate this with the wisdom mind, we begin to understand a very deep pattern of conditioning within ourselves that has tremendous implications for how we live our lives. We taste, we experience, in a very non-conceptual way, the possibility of freedom—where we're allowing these feeling tones to arise. They're coming by themselves. We're not inviting them. We allow them to arise, and with mindfulness, with awareness, they're no longer conditioning the patterns of grasping or aversion.

There's one little subtlety you might want to explore as well. Notice that there could be an unpleasant bodily sensation—some pain, discomfort in the body—and we feel it as unpleasant, but depending on the quality of the mind, there might be a pleasant mental feeling associated with the unpleasant bodily sensation. Notice the difference. There's unpleasant physical sensation, and then there may be aversion, dislike, self-pity, fear—all those things I mentioned last night—in the mind.

On the other hand, there might be pain in the body, discomfort in the body, and we're simply mindful of it. The mind is getting concentrated, clear, open, calm. There could be unpleasant physical sensation and quite pleasant mental feeling. It's interesting to explore this.

At one point I was in India practicing with Munindraji. I was just in the bazaar with him, and that particular day I had a bad headache. I was telling him about it as we were talking, and he turned to me and said, "Oh, I hope you are enjoying it." At the time, of course, I didn't quite know what he meant. But with practice, we begin to see that possibility. There can be that pleasant mental feeling with unpleasant physical sensation if the mind is in a state of balance—if the mind is open, clear, calm, concentrated.

You don't have to think too much about all this. In fact, it would be advisable not to. Just let these words be like seeds in the mind, in the practice. Stay attuned to this feeling tone as it arises, whether it's in the body

or in the mind. Begin at times to recognize it for what it is: feeling, tasting the pleasantness or unpleasantness of a particular experience—a sound, a sight, a sensation, a thought, an emotion. Is it pleasant? Is it unpleasant? Notice it, particularly when it's predominant.

At times you can also investigate. If you find the mind is particularly reactive to something—if you become aware of strong aversion or strong grasping—as you become mindful of that and you have the interest to investigate, look a little deeper and see if in fact those reactions are the response to a feeling tone. See what happens if you then become mindful: "Oh, pleasant, pleasant." See if the grasping falls away as you become mindful of the pleasant. Or if there's strong aversion or resistance or dislike in the mind, and you become aware of that reaction, again investigate at times: is there something unpleasant that's conditioning that aversion? See what happens when you become mindful of the unpleasant feeling. "Oh, unpleasant, unpleasant." In that very moment, does the aversion fall away?

All of this is part of the ongoing exploration of our conditioning. The basic guideline for the practice is to keep it simple. Don't let all of this be a cause of confusion. Just let the words settle in and they will come at the appropriate time in your practice.

Sit and know you're sitting—very simply, relaxed, open, aware of whatever presents itself moment after moment. It can be sound. Notice how effortlessly the sound is known. It can be the sensations in the body, it can be the breath. Notice how effortlessly they are known. Experience is presenting itself moment after moment. Simply settle back and be aware of what's arising. Be aware of thoughts, images, different mind states. And if at times it's helpful, you can stay or rest on one object like the breath or sensations or sound as a way of stabilizing the awareness.

When you hear the bell, just be with the experience of hearing—the sound being known. Notice how effortlessly it's known. And be with the very impermanence of the vibration of the sound. It's interesting that when we're hearing a sound, it's so clear and obvious that it comes into being and then it vibrates—that flow of changing vibrations—and then it fades away into nothing. It's so easy and simple to be aware of that with a sound.

And really, everything is like that. We can have that same ease of awareness of just objects, experience arising, doing their thing for some time, fading away, and something else arising. Sometimes it's happening very quickly, and sometimes we may see it over a period of time. But if you're ever wondering what all this is about and what you're supposed to be doing, you might just think of the bell.

I sometimes think it might be helpful just to sit for the hour and ring the bell again and again. Because it so easily puts the mind into that quality of receptive awareness where we're seeing the impermanent flow of things. There's very little tendency of the mind to grasp at the sound. You're not trying to make it stay. You're not trying to push it away. It's so simple. And so everything—the sensations, the thoughts, the emotions—are just like that. The training, in a way, is this: Can we place our awareness in the same relationship to everything else as it is to the sound of the bell?

There are times, for a variety of reasons, when focusing on a single object becomes helpful. Sometimes the formlessness of choiceless awareness, where we're just resting in that openness with many different changing objects—depending on one's background and ability to stay with that—at some point it may feel like the mind is getting too scattered, getting lost in everything that's arising. There's not that sense of stability as with the sound, where it's so easy to stay present.

If you feel like you're getting lost or scattered and it's difficult to be in that open choiceless space, it's very helpful to spend some time just resting in one object to stabilize that quality of attention. Sometimes focusing on a single object helps in terms of sharpening the mind—it's like sharpening the blade of a knife. By keeping the mind on a single object, the quality of attention can get more precise. Sometimes it helps as a way of raising the energy. You may have noticed that at times, in this very open, choiceless way, it's really sharp and stable for a while, and then maybe the energy starts to dissipate. Bringing the mind back to a particular object to rest on takes effort, a certain quality of effort in the mind. And the effort creates energy. Just like when you're tired and you go out for a run or some exercise, the very effort to do the exercise brings energy. It's the same thing in the practice. In all these ways, focusing can be helpful.

On the other hand, we don't want the mind to become tight or fixated in a heavy focus. That's why the emphasis has been in the instructions to just sit and be with what's arising, so we learn about the other side—openness, receptivity, just being there as things present themselves.

I see the practice as a very intuitive rhythm between the two. It's not that one is right and one is wrong. They're just developing the mind, or aspects of the mind, in different ways. At different times, different approaches are helpful. And it's really for you to discover for yourselves: When is it good to stay resting on a single object? When is it good to open and be in that more choiceless mode? Don't make one into right and one into wrong, because they're part of a whole. All these aspects are part of a whole.

As I said in the beginning, you want to keep it simple. Well, it's the mind that's not simple. The basic rule for practice is to be with what's predominant. That's always the easiest because what's predominant is what's calling our attention. So if you come here and there's a lot of agitation, or a lot of fear, or a lot of whatever, and that's the predominant experience, that's what you should be paying attention to. You're open to the experience: fear feels like this, agitation feels like this. You're just taking what is actually presenting itself. You don't have to look for anything special. You don't have to strive for any great subtlety. This is the predominant experience—let me be with it.

As you're with what's predominant—it might be agitation in the body, it could be agitation in the mind—first you recognize it. You become mindful of it, which is an important step out of being lost in it. You're actually mindful: this is what's here now, this is what's predominant.

Already you're freeing the mind from identification with it. Even though those are the states that are there, to the degree that you're mindful of them, it's fine. There's no problem. You're not lost in it anymore.

Then, from that platform of mindfulness—of those very states that are so predominant—from that platform of mindfulness, you might then ask the question: what's the attitude in the mind about them? That's all. Keep it just to that. And you look to see: is there openness? Is there acceptance? Is there aversion to it? That's all. Just that.

How many of you feel aversion in your practice? So I would like to make a recommendation to those of you who have this mind state arise: become an expert in aversion. Become a scholar of aversion. Get your PhD in aversion.

Aversion is arising. As you can see, it's a very predominant conditioning in our minds. We don't want to be struggling with it. We want to learn about it. Aversion is there. This is very deeply conditioned. It comes up a lot. Instead of fighting with it, instead of struggling with it, instead of getting into a whole hassle—oh, aversion—what is aversion like? What is its nature? It's not "I'm feeling aversion." It's aversion is aversioning. It's just that mind state doing its thing. Can we learn about it? It presents itself—fine. This is our chance to learn about aversion. Really explore. What is this experience like?

Then I'll give you just a little clue of what happens over time. Don't expect immediate results, but over time: when you're holding a hot coal, do you have to convince yourself to let go? Probably not. As we experience the quality of aversion in the mind, as we really get to learn it and are not getting lost in our habitual reactions to it, as we learn it and feel it and really see what it's like, it's let go of quite naturally—because it's suffering. So just let that happen. Let that happen from the wisdom of seeing it clearly.

There was a question about karma and who's owning it from life to life. I think we'll postpone that question. At some point one of us will give a talk on karma because it's important and it's an interesting question, one that comes up a lot. Basically, the question is: how do you reconcile the teachings of karma—of cause and effect, whether it's within one lifetime or from life to life—with the understanding of selflessness? If there's no one there behind the process, who is it that experiences karmic results? That question comes up a lot, so at some point we'll address it.

I want to say just one thing about what continuity means. Especially with this attitude of a more open awareness, where we're just with experience as it's presenting itself moment after moment, the way concentration develops in this style of practice is precisely through continuity. And so this continuity of awareness is an essential aspect of the practice. It doesn't mean forcing.

It doesn't mean tightening. It can be very easeful. It's almost like a dance, or like tai chi, where we're just going through the day receptive—receiving what it is that's arising. It can be the feeling of a step, or a sound, or a sight, whatever it is. But there is a real continuity at work.

What continuity means in this respect is—and you have to hear this in the right way—it means every step. It means every movement. It's just very interesting to observe, especially in times when there's a mass

migration from the dining room into the hall for a sitting, or after a sitting when going to a walking space. You can just see where the mind falls into that black lab consciousness, where the quality of attention is just not the same as when you're doing walking meditation or in the sitting.

Continuity means bringing that quality of caring attention to standing, to turning, to walking. And it doesn't mean always creeping along—you can be doing this at any speed. It's a question of whether one is settled back in the body and really attentive, easefully. It's not struggling. It's just there. It's being present. Or whether we're just getting to where we're going.

So watch the difference, and see if you can really cultivate this. It becomes a practice, and it becomes a habit after a while—this very easeful continuity through the day. And it feels great. It feels like, yes, I'm really being present.

So just play with that. Have a mindful day.

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