Feeling Tone (Vedanā)

Pascal Auclair · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 52:06

I'm actually going to try to give a serious dharma talk tonight. I want to build on what Rebecca talked about yesterday—the gratification, the danger, and the escape of sense pleasure. But the way I'd like to look at it is from the angle of feeling tone.

Feeling tone has been mentioned a lot in the last few weeks in the morning questions, and there hasn't been a talk given on the subject, but it's kind of there almost all the time. It's somewhere around the questions—for me anyway. I could feel it a lot of the time.

The Buddha said all things converge on feelings. So what are feelings? Just so we're on the same page: the feeling tone in Buddhism is something very precise. It's not an intuition, like when I have a feeling. It's not a touch, like when I feel something. It's this very precise thing that comes out of contact with the world.

I find myself here. I'm not quite sure why. But I know that I know what's going on. There is consciousness. There is mind and matter. There is body and mind. There are six senses. And with these senses, I contact the world. I'm impacted by the world. This contact between, let's say, the eye and light and form is almost like a pressing—something that presses. And the juice that comes out is what we would call the feeling tone.

It's either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—neither pleasant nor unpleasant. So it's always presented like this: three categories. But the reality of experience is a whole range. We know when something is slightly irritating versus when something is clearly unbearable. On the other end, we know when something is quite nice and then when something is really nice. That's the whole range. And then there's the in-between.

It's also both mental and physical. On the body, it's experienced as pain or pleasure. In the mind, we could say it's rather pleasant or unpleasant.

I've read different teachings around this. Somewhere I read that only touch, the physical sense, can experience pain and pleasure—that sight, sound, taste, and smell don't have inherently in them pain or pleasure. It's more what we make of them, the perception. For example, a dog sees a bone. I see a bone. The experience of pleasant and unpleasant might be extremely different. I see a Picasso painting. A dog sees a Picasso painting. So you can see that it's not in the object itself. It's in the encounter of the outside world with the inside world, pressing one against another, and then there's a juice that comes out. That is the feeling tone.

In the teachings, Myoshin, I think, last week talked about the feeling tone because it's one of the five

aggregates—one of the five rivers of what makes a human being. There's a river of feelings constantly. This arises with each experience. It's relentless. There is never a moment where there is no feeling. It might be hard to catch sometimes because of the neutrality of the feeling tone, but it's there all the time. It's a stream, a river. One of the rivers of being human is the feeling tone, constantly. Torture, pleasure, irritation—all the range is constantly happening.

And so let's talk about Dhammadina.

At the time of the Buddha, there was a man named Visakha. He was a rich merchant from Rajagaha. One night he came home after work, as every other night. I can imagine him coming in, putting his briefcase next to the door, and his wife was waiting for him in the doorway, but he just passed her, didn't look at her.

She was a little intrigued because this was unusual for him, but she didn't do anything about it. She served the meal—dinner, maybe shepherd's pie—and he ate without even inviting her to sit, which was something he would have done usually. She would have served and he would have said, "Would you join me?" He didn't. He ate alone.

Afterward, she said, "Honey, what's going on?"

And he said, "I just had a very strange day. I met this man. He's called the Buddha. He gave me some teaching, and life is not going to be the same anymore. I'm going, and you can have everything—because he showed me the way out of this human predicament. I'm not totally done, so I want to follow him. You can have everything. It's all yours."

She could sense that there was something going on, so she said, "No, thanks. I'm going too. I want out of this human predicament."

And so he gave her a lift to the nunnery.

She didn't stay very long in the nunnery. I think she went into the woods, and she had tremendous determination. She went through the whole teaching, all the way through to the very end, to liberation.

Afterward, she was a little intrigued about what had happened to Visakha, her ex-husband. So she went to check on him. He was about done, but not completely done—he was up to non-returner, which is the last stage before the fourth stage of liberation in this tradition.

They had a conversation. In one part of it, he said to her: "What obsession gets obsessed with pleasant feeling? What obsession gets obsessed with painful feeling? What obsession gets obsessed with neither pleasant nor painful feeling?"

And she says: "Passion obsession gets obsessed with pleasant feeling. Resistance obsession gets obsessed with painful feeling. Ignorance obsession gets obsessed with neither pleasant nor painful feeling."

We know this, don't we? We know this stuff—the wanting, the not wanting. But I still want to take a little look at it.

There was a yogi who reported that she was looking at a tree. It was a beautiful autumn tree with all the colors. Then she turned around and went back to her walking. She noticed that she was actually thinking about knitting a sweater when she finished retreat—an orange and yellow mixed-colors sweater. And she got it. There was so much beauty in the tree, and there was a kind of need to own it. Unfortunately you cannot own—especially if you come from Switzerland, you cannot possibly put a whole tree back in your suitcase. So the mind, kind of desperate for keeping this going, was devising, designing a sweater made of the same colors.

This wanting to keep the pleasant going.

Also, about this obsession with pleasantness: sometimes we sit and there's boredom, or there's not much happening, and then we find ourselves in fantasy—pleasant in relation to future. One time I was on retreat, I was sitting, and then I noticed that I had been gone for a number of minutes, thinking...

that I should actually live in my car. It would solve a lot of my problems. Because I was going to different retreat centers and monasteries, I thought it would be the perfect mode of transportation. I would save on rent, I would have all my things together, and live a very simple life. It would be my little place, and I would organize it. It would be easy to take care of. I had images of—yes, it would get broken, but I would wait for the guy to fix it, and there would be beautiful sun, and I would just practice while they were fixing my car. And I noticed that in all of this, there was only pleasantness. Neutrality had been completely removed, and unpleasantness too. The mind will do that.

I didn't have to do much work to convince myself it was a little crazy. But I hear yogis come talking about getting married and moving to India to save the children of India with their new wife. The mind will do that. Even if there's dysentery in the picture of the trip to India, it's beautiful, and we will go through this together.

So it's interesting to watch. And in terms of the past, what do we do with our memories? I have some memories that when I tell people about them, when I think about them, they were so perfect. Again, I've removed all the neutrality or unpleasantness. I remember an event being really the perfect holiday. And I can see—it's almost hard for me to believe that I do this—but I have to look very closely and say, I am actually removing all the unpleasantness of this experience. Anyway, it's for you to perhaps look at also.

In terms of aversion, if I think of the past, how much time I can spend rehashing an unpleasant event, trying to remove the unpleasantness of it. Like, "I should have said that. They said that. If I hadn't said that, they wouldn't have said... Next time I'll say... I can't believe they said that." I would like to fix, remove the unpleasant from the past. So my job is to come to terms. I heard somebody say, "Give up all hopes of a better past."

And if I think of the future and unpleasantness—the amount of time one can spend in the unpleasantness of fear, fantasizing how bad this is going to be, compared to the actual event that sometimes... Let's take an example that is very close to me. The time I could spend fearing a dharma talk can be about a week—a few hours, a day of fearing a dharma talk—when the actual dharma talk lasts an hour and is a really beautiful mix of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. So how is it for you in your experience? To see that, to really connect with that.

Neutral is difficult to see. One image that is used is that of a hunter following the footprints of a deer. The hunter can follow the footprints in the dirt and the sand. And then at some point, the deer gets on rocks and starts climbing, and the hunter cannot find the traces of the deer anymore. As long as the feeling tone is moving, as long as the footprints are in the dirt—the pleasantness or the unpleasantness—it's easy to follow. But when it gets on the rocks, we lose sight of it. And we find it again later when it goes again on the grass.

So one thing to do is to be aware of the end of pleasantness or the end of unpleasantness. To know that we're moving into a new phase for maybe a few seconds.

Something else I want to say about neutrality—it's very interesting. In this conversation that Dhammadina has with Visakha, at some point he asks, "In what way is pleasant feeling pleasant, lady? And in what way painful?" And she says something very interesting. If you're going to tune in to one place in this dharma talk, maybe that's the good place.

"Pleasant feeling is pleasant in remaining and painful in changing. Friend Visakha, painful feeling is painful in remaining and pleasant in changing. Neutral feeling is pleasant in occurring together with knowledge and painful in occurring without knowledge."

Okay, what is that?

She says neutral feeling when unnoticed is unpleasant, and neutral feeling when noticed is pleasant. How interesting is that?

This means that when I'm not attentive, things don't stand out. It's boring. And boring is slight aversion—very slight aversion. I'm not connecting, I'm not with things, so it's boring. I'm looking for something else, for sense pleasure. But when I become attentive, then neutral becomes pleasant.

I think we have all experienced this. First, instructions are given about following the breath, and it's like, what a boring thing. It's a neutral object. But suddenly, it's like, "Oh!" It becomes interesting. It stands out. The floor is neutral, unnoticed—it's boring. But then if I put my attention on the floor, I notice different kinds of colored woods on the steps. It's orangey. In my mind, wood was brown, but it's a little orangey. Suddenly there can be interest. It becomes pleasant to look at all the different patterns.

This is a rich area to investigate. And for me, a link that I see in there is that peace is an acquired taste.

People will report, "Nothing is happening in my practice." And that also speaks to our addiction to intensity. What would we choose, really, between sitting in front of a closed television on a Saturday night or watching something that we would think of as pleasant? For some people it's going to be a nice comedy, for someone else it's going to be the Dalai Lama teaching, for others it might be news about war somewhere. There's not much appealing in the closed television.

For me, there's a whole area of research in terms of neutral feeling and the potential that it has.

There's another conversation, between the carpenter Pañcakanga and Reverend Udāyī. They're actually having a kind of little fight over what the Buddha taught them. One says, "No, there are three kinds of feeling—pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral." And the other one says, "No, no, no, there are two kinds of feeling." "No, there are three. I know, I talked to the guy." "No, no, no, he told me there are two."

Carpenter Pañcakanga says, "Not three kinds of feeling, Reverend Udāyī, were taught by the Blessed One. It is two kinds of feeling that were stated by the Blessed One: pleasant and painful feelings. The neutral feeling was said by the Blessed One to belong to peaceful and sublime happiness."

That's interesting.

So Ānanda heard them arguing. He went to see the Buddha and said, "Well, one says this and the other says that." And the Buddha said they're both right. There are three kinds of feeling, and there are two kinds of feeling. And there are also six kinds of feeling.

I want to talk a little bit about that. It's very easy, actually. If you take pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral, you can divide these into two groups, and you get six. The two groups are worldly and unworldly.

So we have the worldly pleasant and the unworldly pleasant feelings. The worldly unpleasant and the unworldly unpleasant. And then the same thing for neutral.

What does this mean? At the time of the Buddha, in the ascetic milieu, there was a belief that self-inflicted pain was helping eradicate bad karma. The idea was that if I hurt myself in some way, if I inflict painful feeling upon myself, I'm calling forth all my bad karma and deciding how to use it up quickly, so I can get to the end of my karma. That was the belief at that time.

The Buddha went for that approach for a while. He tried that method, and it was not working out very well. He was actually becoming extremely weak and putting his own life on the line for this spiritual search.

And so one day he had this memory—you might know this beautiful story of the rose apple tree. He was thinking, something's not working here. The end of this path that I'm on is death. This path of self-mortification cannot be right. There has to be another way.

He surveyed anything he knew, anything he could put his hand on that could be useful. And then he

remembered. One time, when he was a child, there was a plowing festival. His father was a king, and he was there in the field where the farmers were plowing. The young prince was sitting under a rose apple tree.

In that moment he remembered, there was ease. There was contentment, satisfaction. There was not looking for something else, not wanting something else, not pushing something away. There were none of the hindrances. There was not a sluggish mind. There was not hyperactivity. There was just being under a tree—probably a feeling that time had stopped—and everything being in order.

The mind was unified. The mind was not split. There was no scatteredness. The mind was all together, very present for what was happening.

And he thought, this is not unwholesome. There's nothing wrong with that. This might actually be the way out.

That was the beginning of the middle path—where we don't indulge, as he had done before as a prince, in all the comfort of... in my mind there's always this "sex, drugs, and rock and roll." And there was not the other extreme of self-mortification. It was right in the middle. So he went for that.

This was the unworldly pleasantness that started to show up for him. He could no longer believe that all pleasant feelings were bad or unwholesome.

So what are these unworldly pleasant feelings? They are all the different things that have been talked about and that we experience here on retreat. I'm thinking of Myoshin's talk on the ten perfections just two nights ago. Generosity. Sometimes they're called not the unworldly but the spiritual feeling tones. And all of these have to do with renunciation.

The worldly ones are coming from the outside, from the gratification of the senses. The unworldly ones are coming from inside. That's one way we can recognize them.

Generosity as a pleasantness that comes from inside. Renunciation. Contentment. What are the other paramis? Blamelessness.

Patience. Not patience like gritting your teeth through something, but the deep, complete patience of acceptance. When we finally relax and let this be as it is, there's a pleasant feeling. It's the end of the fighting.

I even think of energy—when the energy is right, when we're putting exactly the right amount of effort. Or determination. Not determination like clenching, but think of the opposite, when there's no determination, when there's "I can't do this." The wholesome version is that quiet, clear sense of "I'm going to do this."

So these are some of the unworldly pleasant feelings.

There are also unworldly unpleasant feelings. What could these be? Sometimes there's this thing we call spiritual regret. When we see that we have done an action that was not beneficial for us or others, it's not pleasant to feel. But it's leading to the end of trouble.

So the unworldly points to progress on the path, as opposed to the worldly being a kind of regress. The worldly would feed the defilements, creating more of these tendencies of obsession with passion and irritation. The unworldly feeds us on our travels.

There's shame, spiritual shame or remorse. There is the suffering that leads to the end of suffering. There is irritation, and we connect with it rather than react to it. We're not producing more of the same. We're actually starving it—and that's unpleasant, but it's progress on the path.

And then the neutral unworldly feeling would come with equanimity.

So the worldly, the unworldly—that's the sixfold way of looking at feeling tones.

I'd like to look a little at feeling tones and point of view. This is an interesting area. The general belief is that point of view comes from rational thinking, from reason. But the Buddha said: take a good look to see if your views and opinions might not come from pleasant and unpleasant.

That's kind of not good news. When I first read that, I was a little dejected. If I was going to find that it was right, there was something very small about that—that my views that are so important, what I believe in, would be linked to pleasant and unpleasant.

We can look, for example, at the Buddhist teachings. There are many things said, ideas presented. And often we'll have this conversation about what is the essence of the teaching and what is actually cultural, what fit with the time of the Buddha and is not so relevant anymore. When we look at this precisely, we begin to see that a lot of what we call "cultural" and dismiss is often things that are unpleasant or uncomfortable, that don't fit with our culture. And "the essence" is often things that are quite pleasant to think of.

One example Joseph gave: in the teaching it says that there's more merit, more potential, when you give to somebody who's liberated or noble, very much on their way to liberation. There's more merit in this than giving to somebody else.

My view is that it's very important to give to people who are in need, and I'm not going to start asking questions, trying to find out how awake they are. If there's somebody who needs something, if there's a crisis somewhere in the world—that's where I want to give. So that's something I'm uncomfortable with in the teaching.

I can have the viewpoint and say, "Oh, that was probably added by the Sangha, the monastics. They needed requisites, so they probably said it's better to give to us. They probably added this along the way to make sure they would survive, so people would give to them rather than to poor people in the street."

I don't know. But this comes to looking at how our views might be shaped by what's comfortable for us. We can apply this examination to dismissing the whole teaching of rebirth because we weren't raised with it, because it's uncomfortable.

We can apply it to pretty much anything. I think I was raised with the idea that the bathroom door should be open when there's nobody in the bathroom—because you can see if there's somebody there or not.

And somebody else I live with thinks that it's more polite to close the door of the bathroom. It should always be closed. And so my viewpoint—is it based on reason, really? Or is it based on discomfort? I was raised a certain way, so it's unpleasant when the door is closed and I think there's somebody in the bathroom, so I don't go. Then I find out half an hour later that there's nobody in the bathroom. The door was just closed. And I really don't like that.

You can find other examples. One that I think of is: I strongly believe that there should be peace in a place where there's war. So that's getting a little edgy here. I don't know how you felt when I said that—that this could be based on a pleasant feeling.

I can see in myself, and this is the beginning of my research around this, but I can see that my wanting peace, my clinging to peace, my attachment to peace, that there should be peace over there—is it actually because it's extremely unpleasant to see the images that I see? So what I'm talking about now is the attachment to this viewpoint of peace, feeling very strongly about it. Why? Because it's unbearable. So we look at this.

One tool the Buddha gave was this: You have a viewpoint. Just treat it as a normal event in the mind. What you do is put it through the Four Noble Truths machine, the grinder. Is there suffering here? Is there clinging? What is the cause of clinging? You apply right concentration, right mindfulness, and you look. Because sometimes viewpoints are left untouched—opinions are left untouched. But we take them in and we examine: what is the suffering?

Because ultimately, the viewpoints that we have, the opinions that we have—and sometimes it might happen here in this hall. You hear something from a teacher giving a dharma talk that you don't like, that you don't agree with, that you feel strongly about. It's either what they're saying or how they're saying it, or their age maybe, or whatever it is. And the views we have—they should lead us to a tranquil mind and they should lead to letting go for liberation to happen. So it's very important to look at this: Is this viewpoint I'm having helping me right now towards a calm mind, or not?

In conclusion, I would say that with feeling tone, we can keep it extremely simple. In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, it's one of the four foundations. It's given by the Buddha a whole chapter in the four-chapter book. It could have easily been placed in body and mind. The four foundations are attention to the body, attention to feeling tone, attention to mind, and attention to mind objects. Feeling tone would have been easy to place somewhere else, but he made a whole area just for it. So it points to its importance.

And the instructions are very, very simple. "And how, monks..."—that's us tonight here—"...and how does a monk live contemplating feelings? Here, when experiencing a pleasant feeling, he knows: I experience a pleasant feeling. When experiencing a painful feeling, he knows: I'm experiencing a painful feeling. When experiencing a neutral feeling, he knows: I'm experiencing a neutral feeling."

And then he goes on with the worldly and unworldly. When experiencing a worldly pleasant feeling, he knows: this is a worldly pleasant feeling.

So we start by noticing just maybe pleasant, unpleasant, neutral feelings. And then we can add the other dimension of worldly and unworldly.

I read a story some years ago about a monk who had been practicing for a very long time. He had grown weary of the practice, tired of not achieving what he wanted to achieve—the freedom he sought. So he made a determination: "I'm going to put all my attention on one place and one place only, and it's going to be on feeling tone."

The determination was strong, and he went for it. Only that. He was in the forest in Thailand, and he committed entirely to noticing feeling tone. Within two weeks, the job was done.

And that is because vedanā is so impermanent. Take just a little block of time and put your attention on pleasant feeling. You can do that as you go walking the loop—just notice how quickly it changes. It's beautiful... then oops, something in the feet, a memory arises. It goes so fast. The whole experience goes. But if you just stay on feeling tone, it's very interesting. It changes very, very quickly. That's the power this practice can have.

I'll finish with the end of the conversation between Dhammadina and Visākha.

He asks, "Now what, lady, lies on the other side of pleasant feeling?"

"Passion lies on the other side of pleasant feeling."

"And what lies on the other side of painful feeling?"

"Resistance lies on the other side of painful feeling."

"What lies on the other side of neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling?"

"Ignorance lies on the other side of neither pleasant nor unpleasant feeling."

"What lies on the other side of ignorance?"

"Clear knowing lies on the other side of ignorance." And I would guess that's for a practitioner.

"What lies on the other side of clear knowing?"

"Release lies on the other side of clear knowing."

"And what lies on the other side of release?"

"Unbinding lies on the other side of release."

Then he asks, "What lies on the other side of unbinding?"

And she says, "You've gone too far, friend Visākha. You've gone way too far. You can't keep holding on up to the limit of questions. I'm not answering anymore. If you want to know the whole story, go see the Buddha. He'll tell you."

So Visākha goes to see the Buddha and asks him. And the Buddha said, "Whatever she says, I would have said exactly the same thing, Visākha. Dhammadina is my foremost nun in terms of teaching."

This little teaching about neutral feeling—when noticed and when unnoticed—for me it was really a turning point in my practice. And it came from Dhammadina. And through her, it came from a friend, Andrea, a teacher who's going to be here later. There's a special flavor for me because two women practitioners I deeply respect gave me this teaching. I don't know—it's just nice. I like that.

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