Exploring Vedanā - Feeling Tone

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 51:01

Tonight, I'd like to explore a quality that we've spoken about quite a lot in the last weeks: the feeling tone of experience. In Pali, this is called the vedanā of experience—whether our experience has this quality of being either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant, often called neutral feeling tone.

The other night, Guy spoke about the second noble truth, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth that craving is the cause of suffering. But in his discovery of this second noble truth, the Buddha discovered something that went beyond this simple statement that craving causes suffering. He actually discovered an entire chain of causal conditions that lead us through our typical reactivity in our lives. Sally spoke about this some last night—the chain of dependent origination, or sometimes called dependent co-arising.

I won't cover this in complete detail tonight, but I really want to go through the links of this chain that are relevant to tonight's talk on the feeling tone of experience.

Basically, because we have a mind and a body, we have these six sense doors: the five usual physical senses and the sense base of the mind. Through these sense doors, we experience contact with objects. We experience sight, sound, smells, taste, and touch with our physical senses. And we experience emotions, moods, mind states, and thoughts with the sense door of our mind.

Each of these sense impressions has a flavor to it. This is the feeling tone of experience. Each of our sense impressions is either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. So this feeling tone is very simple, very basic in our experience.

Based on that feeling tone, when something is pleasant, we typically like it and we want it. We want to get more of it. When something is unpleasant, we don't like it; we want to get rid of it. If something's neutral, we probably don't even notice it.

Eating ice cream is pleasant. We tend to like to eat it. We eat more and more of it, and then at some point we get full. If we start to overeat ice cream, our experience becomes unpleasant, and we tend to stop to avoid the unpleasant. It's kind of like we're this simple automatic machine, this very simple automaton that tries to increase pleasant experience and decrease unpleasant experience.

Based on the feeling tone, this wanting arises—either wanting to have or wanting to get rid of. And we usually, often automatically, react to that wanting by reaching out to either grab onto what we want to have or to push away the thing that we don't want to have. This is called clinging. Whether it's the movement to hold something to us or to push it away from us, it's called clinging.

Once an object is clung to, typically some kind of identity forms around it. It becomes mine, or it becomes me. This might take an obvious form such as "this is my sitting spot," or it might take a more subtle form such as "I'm the kind of person who likes to hike in the woods." It can take a range of manifestations, this quality of becoming.

In terms of this chain of causal conditions, we like becoming. There's something about that crystallization around something that feels good, that feels right. There's something we like about a sense of knowing who we are or what kinds of things define us. We like this brief moment of satisfaction, this becoming. Sometimes it takes the form that we feel like we're in control or that we know something.

From this point of becoming, according to the Buddha, even though we've just experienced this moment of satisfaction, suffering is inevitable. This might result from the obvious form of separation from something we consider mine—like if you have a beautiful vase that you're very fond of, and it breaks. There can be a feeling of sadness or loss, or perhaps anger if somebody else has dropped the vase. We might experience a feeling of loss if a relationship ends or at the death of a loved one.

But the suffering can also result from the fact that that moment of satisfaction we get when we have something, when we crystallize around it, doesn't last very long. That moment fades. And then there's this sense of wanting more, that "wanting to want" that Joseph talks about. We actually think that happiness in our lives consists of stringing together these little moments of happiness, these little moments of satisfaction. But this is a form of delusion. It's a form of ignorance.

So in our untrained minds, this kind of suffering that results when a moment of satisfaction ends, or when we experience separation from something we love, usually leads us towards ignorance. This ignorance then conditions our habitual patterns of greed, aversion, and delusion, and these patterns condition how our mind perceives other experiences. The cycle goes around and around.

Basically, mind and body condition our sense bases, which condition contact, which conditions feeling, which conditions craving, which conditions clinging, which conditions becoming, which conditions suffering, which conditions ignorance, which conditions these habitual patterns of mind. And so this goes round and round in our experience.

Sally talked last night about this chain of dependent origination, and she mentioned that it is not deterministic. It's possible to move out of this habitual cycle of samsara, this wheel that keeps samsara going. It's possible to exit this chain. She talked about one way of breaking the chain between suffering and ignorance—that with wise attention to suffering, with the understanding of suffering, we can move away from ignorance towards faith and on towards the transcendent dependent origination that she spoke about.

But there's another link in this chain that the Buddha recognized as a weak link, and that's the link between feeling and craving. This is the movement of the mind from pleasant to wanting, from

unpleasant to wanting to get rid of, from neutral sensation to not noticing—or maybe we could say, not wanting to notice.

If we bring mindfulness and wise attention to the feeling tone of experience, just to whether it's pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, we can actually short-circuit this movement of the mind towards wanting. It's possible to experience something as pleasant without wanting it. It's possible to experience something as unpleasant without wanting to get rid of it. If we can simply notice this pleasant or unpleasant without the movement towards wanting, the suffering will not arise. This is the movement away from suffering.

But the only way this can happen, the only way we can see this cycle break, is if we can actually see the feeling tone of experience—to bring mindfulness to whether our experience is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

The Buddha described mindfulness of feeling most prominently in the Satipatthana Sutta, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. The feeling tone of experience, this vedana, is the second foundation of mindfulness. It's given an entire foundation all to itself. I think that highlights the importance the Buddha placed on this quality of mind. This very fine, very simple quality of mind is an entire foundation of mindfulness.

I'll read you the instructions, or a part of the instructions, that the Buddha gave. He's speaking to his monks here, to bhikkhus, but in other places in the commentaries it says that the term bhikkhu refers to anybody who is practicing the Dhamma. So this is speaking to all of us:

"And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating feelings as feelings? 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, he understands, 'I feel a neither painful nor pleasant feeling.'"

It's that simple. But it's not easy.

The part that's not easy is that we really need to recognize that we're feeling pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experience. Usually when we experience something pleasant or unpleasant, we're quickly either moving towards it or away from it. We've hardly noticed there's an experience of pleasant or unpleasant before we're moving to get it or to get rid of it. We quickly spin into thoughts of planning—how to get it, how to have more of it, how to get rid of it, how to never have it again in our lives. Stopping this momentum from the pleasant to the movement towards wanting, and all of the thoughts around it, is very difficult. It's hard to actually see the pleasant itself.

But this is helped by simply knowing that this is a really good quality to pay attention to. Until I heard these teachings, nobody ever told me it's a really good idea to notice when something's pleasant or unpleasant in your experience. Nobody said that to me. But it's a crucial place to highlight.

This feeling tone can be quite subtle. As I said, it's not something we've been trained to notice. Typically, we've been trained to react to it. That's how we've lived our lives—by reacting to pleasant, trying to get it, pushing away the unpleasant. But when we start to actually pay attention, when it's been highlighted for us that this is a quality useful to attend to, it can become quite obvious.

For instance, if you fall down and bump your knee, it's unpleasant. And if you're attuned to checking out pleasant and unpleasant, it will probably be pretty obvious that that's an unpleasant experience. When we eat a food that we like, there's often quite a bit of pleasant experience. Again, that's quite easy to see once we've gotten attuned to actually noticing the pleasant aspect. What's hard is to stop there, at that moment of pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. We're trained typically to respond to it.

But if we start seeing the feeling tone and seeing our response to it, we're beginning to see deeply into how the mind functions.

Every experience, as I mentioned in talking through the chain of dependent origination, whether physical or mental, has this quality of feeling tone. This is usually most obvious or easiest to see in our physical experience. It's pretty easy to know when we're experiencing unpleasant bodily sensations—unpleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, physical contact.

But mental experience also has a feeling tone. Anger, for instance, typically has an unpleasant quality to it. Joy has a pleasant quality. Thoughts themselves also carry a subtle feeling tone, though more often when we think we understand the feeling tone of a thought, it's actually because there's been a subtle reaction in the mind to that thought.

For instance, right now, just imagine that you're lying on a warm, sunny beach. Is there some kind of pleasant experience arising? Most likely it's the reaction—the emotions, the moods that were called up by that thought—that created the pleasantness. Now imagine somebody running their fingernails on a blackboard. If you're like me, that's an unpleasant thought. But when I feel through it, when I investigate it in my experience, what's happening is that there's a visceral feeling through the body that's unpleasant—a reaction to that thought.

Actually, this type of reaction underlies the belief that certain physical sensations are inherently unpleasant as well. For example, I often wake up in the middle of the night and have trouble going back to sleep, so I'll get up to meditate. One night I woke and went to meditate, and partway through the meditation I heard this tapping noise. My experience of the tapping was that it was unpleasant. But I just kept paying attention, noticing, being mindful. And I began to notice that when I heard the tapping noise, there was a contraction in the body. That contraction was definitely unpleasant. When I paid further attention to it, as I heard the tapping, I felt a very subtle fear arise. The fear was clearly unpleasant.

As I continued attending to the fear, when I heard the tapping sound again, I realized that the tapping sound itself was actually neutral—even slightly pleasant. It was the reaction to the sound, the subtle fear,

that made me think the sound itself was unpleasant. This can be a very interesting exploration of our experience.

The fact that all experience, mental and physical, has a feeling tone also explains why it's so hard to break out of this cycle, why it's so difficult to break out of this chain of dependent origination that we cycle around. In the cycle, feeling leads to craving, which leads to clinging, which leads to becoming, which leads to suffering or dissatisfaction.

But if we attend to the feeling tone of the links themselves, we notice that wanting is an unpleasant experience. Wanting feels like a deep sense of being unsatisfied. Our typical movement is to want to satisfy that desire, to get rid of this unpleasant feeling. We want to satisfy the desire—that is the way we've been trained. We satisfy the desire, the unpleasantness of wanting goes away, and in that satisfaction we also have that brief moment of becoming, that crystallization, that pleasant experience.

So we learn through repeated experience that when we get what we want, we receive this double hit: getting rid of something unpleasant while also getting that feeling of becoming, which is pleasant. The cycle tends to reinforce itself.

There's one sutta I particularly like that points to this fact—that feeling tone is a weak link in the cycle of dependent origination. It's a relatively short passage, describing a kind of chain of events. Though it's not a causal chain, it describes a way our experience can move as we pay attention:

"All things are rooted in desire. They come to actual existence through attention, originate from contact, and converge on feelings. The foremost of all things is concentration. All things are mastered by mindfulness. Their peak is wisdom. Their essence, liberation. All things merge in the deathless, and nibbāna is their culmination."

There are a couple of things I appreciate about this sutta. One is how it highlights that all things converge on feeling. The wording emphasizes the importance of understanding this feeling tone. In our experience, we encounter a wide variety of sense impressions—color, sight, sound, smells, tastes, and an endless stream of thoughts, moods, and emotions in our mind. We think we respond to the sense impression itself. We think, "I like blue," or "I don't like the way hot roofing tar smells," or "I don't like it when my partner says that to me." But all sense impressions converge on feelings.

For some of us, blue is pleasant. Hot roofing tar is unpleasant. The example of not liking what our partner says to us is a little more complex, but it might unfold something like this: when our partner speaks to us, there's the sound of the voice, and depending on the tone, that might be pleasant or unpleasant. But if what our partner is saying brings up an idea or a belief in our mind, there may be a reaction to that idea or belief which might be unpleasant—and that unpleasantness of that belief or idea is why we don't like what our partner says to us.

So from the wide variety of sense impressions, our reactions to those sense impressions actually just come

down to this very simple quality of whether the sense impression is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. It's like a springboard, a narrow gateway through which we react to all of our experience. All things converge on feelings.

The other thing I like about this sutta is that it talks about *all* things. All things converge on feelings. The foremost of all things is concentration. They are mastered by mindfulness. All things converge on feeling, and through concentration and mindfulness on the feelings—on whether they're pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, on how they are coming and going—feelings are impermanent. With mindfulness, we can break this movement towards wanting. The concentration and mindfulness on feeling leads to wisdom. All things have liberation as their essence, merge in the deathless, and culminate in Nibbāna. All things. It doesn't matter what we're paying attention to. It might be the pleasantness of our hands on a mug of hot tea. It might be the unpleasantness of the cold as we walk outside. It doesn't matter. All things culminate in Nibbāna.

There's another sutta that describes a more causal link from this attention to feelings, which I'll read to you as well. This one highlights attending to the impermanent nature of feelings as being the key to our liberation:

Pleasant feeling is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, subject to destruction, vanishing, fading away, and ceasing. Painful feeling too is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, subject to destruction, vanishing, fading away, and ceasing. Neither painful nor pleasant feeling too is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, subject to destruction, vanishing, fading away, and ceasing. Seeing thus, a well-taught noble disciple becomes disenchanted with pleasant feeling, disenchanted with painful feeling, disenchanted with neither painful nor pleasant feeling. Being disenchanted, one becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, the mind is liberated. When it is liberated, there comes the knowledge: it is liberated. One understands: birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being.

This is the typical statement of liberation of mind—the attention to feeling leading through some of these same links that Sally talked about last night: disenchantment, dispassion.

So the key with mindfulness of feeling is really to become familiar with what this feeling tone is. I'd like to talk for a while about how to engage with an exploration of feeling tone.

Probably the easiest place to attune to this quality is in our physical experience. Our touch sensations, particularly the contact of our skin, seem to be highly attuned to the painful, pleasant, and neutral aspects of experience. So simply exploring in your physical experience whether it is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—you can do this any time of day. It's actually a really wonderful exploration through the non-formal part of our meditation, doing the yogi jobs, brushing our teeth, getting ready for bed. What parts of the experience are pleasant? What parts are unpleasant? You'll notice a flow of changing experience. Washing the dishes—the warmth of the water, the weight of the dishes. Are they pleasant or

unpleasant?

One commentary to the suttas, the Visuddhimagga, states that while this touch sensation, the physical experience of touch, can be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, the other four physical sense doors are actually all neutral at the moment of contact. Any sense we have that the experience at those other four sense doors—sight, sound, smell, and taste—is pleasant or unpleasant has to do with a kind of reactivity in the mind, a very subtle movement of reactivity.

I'm not sure if I completely believe this, especially where taste is concerned. I kind of think there may be some tastes that are revolting because they're not good for us to swallow. But I do find it to be a really interesting exploration.

To look and see, when I am seeing something and perceive it as pleasant—is there some kind of reactivity in my mind? A thought, a construct, causes and conditions that have come together to create that pleasantness?

I had an exploration of this on one retreat. It was tea time here at IMS, and it was a very simple tea—I had bean dip and an apple. I took a bite of the bean dip, which was kind of tart and creamy. Then I took a bite of the apple. And it was the most pleasant apple I'd ever eaten. It was really, really delightful. These bubbles of delight came up through my body while I ate this apple. I thought, "Wow, that's cool," and I took another bite. It was pretty good too, but not quite so delightful as the last one.

I began exploring—maybe it was the bean dip. Maybe it was the bean dip before the apple. So I took a bite of the bean dip and then a bite of the apple, and yes, that was pretty pleasant. But over the course of the meal, I began to realize that the apple was losing a little bit of its allure. Even alternating it with the bean dip, it wasn't as delightful as it had initially been.

I could see that the causes and conditions coming together to create the quality of delightfulness, the level of pleasantness, were shifting. It's not just a simple valence, an on-off kind of thing where experience is either pleasant or not pleasant. There are gradations of these pleasant and unpleasant experiences. Feeling often comes about as a result of these causes and conditions.

An excellent place to play with mindfulness of feeling is with eating, because it engages all of our senses. We see our food—it may be beautiful on our plate, with different colors. We smell it before we eat it. We taste it, noticing the flavor, the texture on the tongue. We hear the sounds as we're chewing and swallowing. And we have all of the thoughts that arise around the food. So eating is a great place to play with mindfulness of feeling, especially if what you're eating is something you enjoy.

Another good place to pay attention to feeling tone is when strong emotions are present. See if you can recognize whether the emotion is pleasant or unpleasant. What feeling tone does anger have? What feeling tone does lust have? Happiness? Sadness? It can actually be quite surprising when we pay attention.

I had one experience on retreat where I was paying attention to anger quite a lot. Something had come up that made me angry, and this thing kept returning in my mind over and over again. So I kept experiencing the arising of anger. Generally, the experience of anger was unpleasant. But at one point, I saw the very beginning—just the very beginning of that feeling in the body. It was a feeling of warmth and fullness. And it was pleasant. It really quickly became heat and pressure, but that initial hit was pleasant. I was kind of shocked. I thought, "I wonder if this is part of the hook of anger, this initial pleasant feeling." So explore in your experience. There can be surprises—not necessarily what you'd expect with pleasant and unpleasant experiences.

On my first three-month retreat, Carol was here as a teacher, and she gave the instruction: if you're feeling aversion in your experience, there's something unpleasant in your experience, probably unnoticed. On that particular retreat, while doing walking meditation, I was experiencing a lot of aversion to the other people walking nearby. I don't know if you've had this experience, but it was very common for me during walking meditation to have strong aversion to people walking near me.

Not too long after hearing that dharma talk, I was doing walking here in the upper walking room and somebody came up and started doing walking meditation right next to me. Immediately this feeling of aversion arose. I remembered Carol saying, "Okay, aversion—there's something unpleasant in your experience." So I started exploring: what in my experience is unpleasant? I checked my sight. The person did not particularly look unpleasant. Nothing unusual about how they looked.

They didn't smell bad. And they weren't bumping up against me, so there weren't any physical unpleasant sensations. I thought, well, there must be something in the mind then. Something's going on in the mind. I didn't particularly notice any thoughts that were unpleasant. The mind felt pretty quiet. But I just attuned toward noticing what might be happening in the mind while doing the walking back and forth.

And this thought erupted: "He's weird." I thought, well, that's a thought. But I didn't really get the connection between unpleasantness and that thought. It didn't quite sink in. So I kept doing the walking. At some point, another thought erupted: "He's got bare feet on, and it's freezing cold outside." This was my justification for the fact that he was weird.

And I could see that a whole complex had been created in my mind—a complex that I found unpleasant and was reacting to. When I saw that, on the next walking path, the whole thing fell apart, and I was spontaneously doing mettā for the person. It was quite remarkable to explore this, exploring feeling tone in your experiences.

It's also really interesting to explore how we react to neutral—the neither pleasant nor unpleasant experience. This can be more difficult because neutral feeling can be pretty subtle, and often we just skip right over it. We don't even notice it. But as the mind settles down, we start experiencing more of that neutral quality. And in that space of neutral, it's a really interesting place to see how identification gets created.

On one retreat, I was experiencing quite a bit of time in this neutral place, so I got to explore it a lot. Most of the time I could be right there in the neutral, but I would begin to see it slipping off into boredom or indifference. And the feeling tone of those was slightly unpleasant. So it was a nice exploration—watching the neutral to see when it just tipped, just slightly tipped off. Because in that neutral place, often not much is engaging us, and we'll either get bored or space out and move into that indifferent place.

Also on this same retreat, I was experiencing the neutral feeling tone and noticing sometimes a subtle leaning into that neutral experience—a waiting for something to happen. Because I had the idea that this neutral place was a good place in practice, and that something was supposed to happen from it. So there was this leaning into the neutral, this waiting, this expecting something to happen. And when nothing happened, the mind got judgmental: "You're a failure."

This has been one of my strongest habits. I talked about it in my last talk—this self-judgment and movement from "you're a failure" to self-hatred, to this feeling of unworthiness. And here it was being created out of nothing, out of neutral experience and an idea that something was supposed to be happening. So this place of neutral can be a really interesting territory to explore how our identity gets constructed out of this very balanced place.

Another really interesting place to explore feeling tone is around the wandering mind—when the mind goes off and when it comes back. Often I find that there are a number of ways the feeling tone operates here. We can leap off an unnoticed pleasant feeling tone into, "Oh, this is so nice, I'm going to come back next year to this retreat, and I'm going to have a nicer shawl next time." We construct a whole fantasy because we didn't notice that subtle feeling of pleasant.

So the wandering mind can go off from this feeling tone. Or from a neutral feeling tone—it can just space out when things get neutral, just drift off because there's not much holding our attention. Or from an unpleasant experience. Sometimes with unpleasant experience, we launch into fantasy to experience something pleasant. We construct a pleasant thing in our minds to avert, to get rid of the unpleasant experience in our bodies.

Noticing how the mind moves from feeling tone to wandering off can be a really good place to explore vedanā. And likewise, coming back—waking up from being lost in thought. Is the feeling tone pleasant? Is it unpleasant? I often find that the drifting of the mind, if it's just drifting, not an actual fantasy or judgment but just drifting—I don't know if you're familiar with that, where it's not thinking about much in particular, just drifting—that can be a kind of pleasant experience that perpetuates itself because the pleasantness goes unnoticed.

So when you come back from the wandering mind, check into the feeling tone. I found when I started doing that, it actually helped the mind keep from wandering, because I realized I was missing the experience—particularly in that drifting, that pleasantness of drifting.

I wasn't noticing the pleasant. It wasn't apparent. It was just kind of lost in a fog of the drift.

As you become more familiar with feeling tone, you'll start seeing it more naturally rather than having to actually look for it, as I've been suggesting in this discussion. But it's helpful initially to actually attune yourself to this feeling tone because it can be difficult to see. It's so subtle, and we so quickly move off of it into reactivity. But as we start to get attuned to it and familiar with it, it will become more obvious, and then we can practice as the Satipatthana Sutta says: when something is pleasant, we know that it's pleasant; when something's unpleasant, we know that it's unpleasant; when it's neutral, we know that it's neutral.

When you can notice this feeling tone, you have the opportunity to actually witness the birth of reactivity—to see your mind moving from pleasantness to wanting, from unpleasantness to wanting to get rid of. And that begins to really show us how suffering is constructed. We start to understand the nature of suffering as that movement of reactivity from pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. And in that understanding of suffering are the seeds of freedom.

The last thing I'll say about feeling is that it can have this yin-yang quality to it. That is, in the pleasant are the seeds of the unpleasant, and in the unpleasant are the seeds of the pleasant. When pleasant experience ends, it's unpleasant. When unpleasant experience ends, it's pleasant.

The way neutral fits into this is quite interesting. I want to read to you the sutta that describes this. I like this sutta because it's a woman speaking—a nun—and the man talking to her is her ex-husband. He's asked her a number of very detailed questions, and he comes to questions about feeling:

"Lady, what is pleasant and what is painful in regard to pleasant feeling? What is painful and what is pleasant in regard to painful feeling? What is pleasant and what is painful in regard to neither painful nor pleasant feeling?"

"Friend, 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 painful when there is no knowledge of it."

Let's sit for a few moments.

Thank you for your attention.

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