On Vedanā

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:08:36

This morning we had a brief experiment on vedanānupassanā, the tracking of vedanā, of feeling, and then we had a long complicated talk about it. Tonight we're going to have another long complicated talk about vedanā, just to go over what we've done but also take it a bit further.

In the Satipāṭṭhāna Sutta the Buddha says, "How does a practitioner live tracking feeling as feeling? Here a practitioner sensing a pleasant feeling understands she is sensing a pleasant feeling. Sensing a painful feeling she understands she is sensing a painful feeling. Sensing a neither painful nor pleasant feeling she understands she is sensing a neither painful nor pleasant feeling." This is the opening section of the sutta, and it introduces feeling, vedanā, and the notion that there are three basic ones: pleasant, painful, neither.

When the Buddha talks about the human being and the human condition, if you look at the language that he uses and at the structure of his teaching, he distinguishes and talks about two aspects of the person: the cognitive and the affective. The cognitive is what we would call the realm of the head—all about concept, thinking, cognition, and so on. The affective is the realm of what we would call the heart: mood, emotion, and so forth.

You can see it in the way some of his key technical terms pair off. I've done a little table with a cognitive term on one side and its affective counterpart on the other. For example, the fundamental problem—why it is that we have to practice—is because of avijjā, ignorance, delusion, or moha, which is another word for delusion. But then sometimes he talks about the basic problem as taṇhā, thirst, craving. This is the heart, the drivenness of the heart. So delusion, ignorance—that's cognitive, up here. But craving, drivenness, is down here in the heart.

Similarly, we have the two sides of the solution: cognitive paññā, wisdom, understanding—again, cognitive. Or also saddhā, which is inadequately translated as faith. Saddhā—dhā is to put or to place, and saddhā comes from an old Vedic word for heart. So it's where we place the heart, and again, affective. In one discourse, which we might look at later in the retreat, the maturity of wisdom and the maturity of faith become interchangeable. They're like two sides of the same coin—distinct, but interconnected.

The Buddha will talk about vijñāna, awareness, knowing something, awareing something. And he'll talk about vedanā, feeling, feeling something, which we played with this morning. He'll talk about the asaṅkhata, the unconstructed—sometimes you see it translated as unconditioned. To recognize the unconstructed is an aspect of wisdom, definitely, and the flavor of it is cognitive: "Ah, it's unconstructed." And then you have the term nibbāna, which we've spoken about, and that is an affective term. This is the cooling of the heart.

So the Buddha has this view of what it means to be a human being, which encompasses both head and heart. Some terms come together like citta, which is a key technical term, usually translated as mind, but that includes what we would call the heart as well. When we talk about mind, we tend to think up here, but citta is just as much here, in the heart. Sometimes you see it translated as heart-mind.

We have the realm of cognition—knowing, understanding, or not knowing, not understanding. And then you have the realm of affect, and this is that which moves us. When we spoke about vedanā this morning, we compared it to the flavor of the experience, like the flavor of food. So when we eat food, we experience the physical sensations: smoothness, crunchiness, hardness, softness, hot, cold, and so on. And we also experience the flavor. The flavor is not the sensation but it's intimately entwined with the sensation. We could say that flavor is what moves us—when I get up to take seconds, I am moved by the flavor.

So vedanā is that aspect of experience that moves us, that provokes some kind of response. There are three basic flavors, according to the Buddha: pleasant, painful, neither painful nor pleasant—sukha, dukkha, and adukkha-masukkha. These three basic flavors are closely linked to the three basic movements of the citta.

Attachment, the movement toward an experience to hold on to it. Aversion, the movement away to get rid of it, to avoid it, to reject it. And then delusion.

Delusion is more complex. The first two are a simple binary: toward, grab; away, reject. And of course these go very deep, as we know. We talked about the evolutionary impulse—even an amoeba can do this, moves towards something to hold on, recoils from something that it doesn't want. Every living creature does this, every animal does this. It's absolutely built into the circuits. So these first two are both quite obvious, and part of their obviousness is you can see how deeply they must be embedded within us.

The third one is more complex. The third one can be ignorance, simple not knowing. So we could say not noticing. What do I notice? I notice what gives me pleasure or what gives me pain. These are important.

So if you're wondering what would be worth reporting when I have my meditation interview, and if you've just come off several hours of intense bliss, would that be a possible candidate? Yeah, that would be interesting. Or alternatively, if you just came out of several hours of misery and anguish, would that be a candidate? Yeah.

So pleasure and pain grab our attention, they grab our interest. If something isn't apparently pleasurable or painful, we simply ignore it. We just don't notice it. It's like effectively not there. So we are ignorant, simply not knowing. Or if we do notice it, we don't know what to do about it. Should I grab this or should I reject it? Maybe I should grab it, or maybe I should reject it. So we are moved to dullness and doubt and confusion.

But whatever flavour it is, what they all have in common is that we are moved in some way.

We mentioned this morning that vedana, like the English word feeling, functions as both a noun and a verb. As a noun, feeling can indicate what we experience: "I am in touch with my feelings." So it's something that I can find and experience. Or we might use feeling as a verb: "I think that's a good idea, but I can't help but feel that it would be a complete disaster." So there it's not a something, it's a way of experiencing which runs parallel to ordinary knowing. It's not the same, but it's not a something that we experience—it's a way of experiencing. And some people are more familiar with it than others.

So there's an ambiguity, even indeterminacy, in this concept of vedana. And it goes right back to the root of the Pali word. Vedana is derived from the root *vid*, to know, via the verb *vedati*, which means, according to the dictionary, to feel, to experience, to sense. So you can see there are different translations possible, and each one of them has a different connotation. They're not exactly the same.

So one of the problems is that it does create multiple possibilities of translation, which makes it hard for us, because we're operating in English. For example, that very simple passage I just read out from the Satipatthana Sutta, which I've translated here as "a practitioner sensing a pleasant feeling, sensing a painful feeling, sensing a neither painful nor pleasant feeling." You could translate as "feeling a pleasant feeling, feeling a painful feeling, feeling a neither painful nor pleasant feeling." That's a perfectly valid translation.

You could say "experiencing a pleasant experience, experiencing a painful experience, experiencing a neither painful nor pleasant experience." That would be a valid translation. Or you could say "sensing a pleasant sensation, sensing a painful sensation, sensing a neither painful nor pleasant sensation." And that would be a valid translation.

But they're not quite the same, are they? Even the most basic statement has this quality of being difficult to actually pin down. The other thing which I found about these is they're pretty redundant: experiencing an experience? What else did you do to an experience anyway? You could ignore it...

Often that's the best.

Let's look at how the Buddha speaks of the location of vedana, and we might get a better sense of where he's coming from. Vedana is intimately interwoven with the immediacy of experience.

The Buddha says the six sense fields condition contact; contact conditions feeling. So the six sense fields—this is one of the two major ways in which the Buddha analyzes the human being. Sometimes he'll talk about the human being as five bundles or aggregates, khandhas, and sometimes as six sense fields. He'll do this in different circumstances for different purposes. Later in the retreat we'll have a look at this.

But basically, if you look at the sense fields, what I am, what we are, is a kind of locus of sensitivity. There's this area here which is sensitive to data which strikes it. And there are six ways in which data strikes this sensitivity, or this bundle of sensitivities, which is me. There's a sensitivity to form—visual sensitivity—or the sensitivities of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, the five physical

sensitivities, and minding, the one non-physical sensitivity. Each sensitivity is a receptivity to its corresponding sense data.

So, for example, the eye—as in E-Y-E. When the Buddha talks about the eye, he's not talking about this eyeball, which, you know, if a doctor's talking about the eye, this is what he's talking about. But when the Buddha talks about the eye, he's talking about a felt sensitivity. There's this body, which is here, inescapably with me. And this body is sensitive. There are two little parts of this body that are sensitive to light. I've experimented with this and I can say with absolute certainty that my feet are not sensitive to light. They have no idea whether the lights are on or off. But there are two parts of the body just here which are sensitive to light.

So light strikes the body—most of it, nothing happens. But these two bits, it hits something which receives it. There's a sensitivity there, a receptivity there. Bang! And something happens.

Similarly, there are two little parts of the body that are sensitive to sound waves. And there's a part of the body which is sensitive to taste. There's a part of the body which is sensitive to smells. All of the body is sensitive to touch. And then there's the other non-physical sensitivity, the mind, which has its own range of sensitivity.

So we have these six sensitivities. Each of them picks up its own unique kind of data. For example, my ears do not pick up my thoughts—they are totally insensitive to them. My mind is sensitive to my thoughts. So you have like six channels. Each channel sends in its particular data. The mind receives its own unique data, but unlike all of the others, it also picks up the other ones as well. And it's the mind, mano, mind as a sense sensitivity, which brings all this data together and creates a coherent, meaningful world.

So there you are in the meditation hall. Something is created. And the way each one of these senses work—the Buddha says, depending on eye sensitivity and forms, visual awareness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. This is what he says about the immediacy of the experience.

So you have the particular sensitivity, you have this particular corresponding kind of data, and you have the corresponding awareness. When these three meet, like in an arena, in one location, bang, something happens and you have an experience.

Does that make sense so far? With me?

Now you notice—this is the immediacy of experience. This is the first time something happens. You cannot get anything simpler than this. You cannot get anything more elemental than this. And you notice it's already a complex event. Three things need to come together.

If one of them is missing, nothing happens. When all three come together, something happens. Awareness is necessary for something to happen.

For example, let's say I'm reading something quite interesting in a café. My friend enters and sees me,

calls out my name, but I don't hear it. He calls again—still nothing. He calls a third time, and I go, "Oh, what? Oh, there you are!"

Now, at what point did the touch begin? This word which gets translated as contact—*pasa*—could also be translated literally as touch, which I find quite interesting. We are touched by the sense data. At what point in that example does the touch on the ear sensitivity begin? It began sometime before I heard my name. The ear sensitivity was picking up data, but I didn't hear anything.

What changed such that I began to hear? Suddenly my attention, which was directing awareness, left the page—bang!—and went to the ear. "Oh, there you are." You need this convergence of three factors for an experience to take place. Experience at the most elemental level is already complex and requires the coming together of three different factors.

The meeting of the three is contact. Contact conditions feeling—*vedanā*. This sentence almost invariably follows the previous one. *Vedanā* is intimately and invariably associated with contact or touch.

This conditional relationship we explained this morning is immediate—there's no gap. It's not that there's contact and then the clock is ticking and somewhere down the track, ah, feeling arises. If there's contact, there is already feeling. There's no gap. And if there's contact, there has to be feeling. There's no exception to this, according to the Buddha.

If contact is the arena of experience, *vedanā* is found within the stimulus itself. Data strikes a sensitivity—there's some kind of bang, stimulus. Contact is like the arena within which this happens. *Veda nā* is like the stimulus itself.

Take the exercises we do in the morning. We're doing a stretch, for example. We come to a point where we get the message through the body and mind: "I can't go any further. This is it." The body feels it cannot move anymore—it's come to its limit. We experience a sense of hardness and pressure, perhaps, in both body and mind. We might also experience a touch of panic in the mind.

Then we stabilize ourselves, breathe and relax—this is the standard instruction. The body sensation changes and the mind changes. The mind softens, the body softens.

The meeting of sensation, sensitivity and awareness is contact. The different physical sensations are the elements. The responses indicate *vedanā*. The initial response of "that's it"—that's where we find the *vedan ā*. The later response of settling into it—that's where we find the *vedanā*. It's in the response that we find the *vedanā*.

The relationship between sensation and *vedanā* is really intimate. You can't even say that we sense something and this sensation is accompanied by *vedanā*. If I say that, it implies that *vedanā* is separate from the sensation—here's the *vedanā*, there's the sensation.

And therefore it would be coherent to suggest that you could have a sensation without vedana. But from

the Buddha's perspective, such a thing is completely incoherent. We sense, and vedana is already found in the response to the sensing. So they can be distinguished, but they can't be separated. Contact and feeling are as close as stimulus and response. Where there is a stimulus, there is already a response. And where there is a response, there is already a stimulus. They always come together as a package. They're different sides of the same coin. They're as intimate and inseparable as a sunflower turning toward the sun, or as a sleeper reaching for a pillow in the night.

We can get a sense of the depth of vedana when we look at the necessity of living beings to respond to what is necessary for their survival and what is necessary to avoid for their survival. Seeking the desired, avoiding the feared—these are fundamental to all living beings. And right in the middle of that is vedana.

So let's return to the way the Buddha and his students talk about vedana. We'll have a look at the Cula Vedalla Sutta, the lesser dialectic. This is a discussion between the arahant bhikkhuni Dhammadinna and her ex-husband Visakha. And this is what she says about vedana:

"Friend Visakha, whatever is sensed, bodily or mentally, as pleasant and soothing is pleasant feeling. Whatever is sensed, bodily or mentally, as painful and hurting is painful feeling. Whatever is sensed, bodily or mentally, as neither soothing nor hurting is neither painful nor pleasant feeling."

So that's Dhammadinna's presentation. And again, the verb that she uses is vedayati, from vedana. So it could be to feel, to experience, to sense something. So you could translate it as "whatever is felt is feeling," "whatever is experienced is experience," or "whatever is sensed is sensation."

When you get it down to that basic sentence that she's saying, these don't tell us very much. "Whatever is sensed is sensation" doesn't say very much. But what she says is "whatever is felt as pleasant and soothing is pleasant feeling. Whatever is felt as painful and hurting is painful feeling." In other words, vedana is a particular kind of experiencing characterized by the capacity to soothe or to hurt. That's what distinguishes it—the capacity to affect.

Perhaps she's not saying "whatever is felt is feeling," but "whatever is felt as pleasant, whatever is felt as painful is feeling." So it's feeling as, experiencing as, sensing as something. And that something is what distinguishes vedana.

So vedana represents some form of knowing. I sense this as something. I feel it as something. You can see there's some kind of understanding involved. But it's much more intimate than our normal sense of knowing something or understanding something. For example, I might say, "I know that"—I often do say that, actually, when I'm driving and the family's going somewhere. I turn to the right and my wife says, "It's to the left, again."

When we say "I know that," what we're suggesting is a distance between the one who knows and what is known. "I know that." So there's this separation, this subject-object distinction which is always implied in the notion of knowing something. Vedana implies a knowing that's much more intimate, less nameable,

less amenable to being pinned down as a something that's known by someone. It's much more intimate than that.

But it's found in a response that goes in a particular direction. The response is in one direction, to hold on to. Or it's in another direction, to reject. Or it's in another direction, to ignore or to be in confusion about. So it's quite definite. Some kind of assessment is going on. "This is pleasant." Some kind of understanding, some kind of judgment has been made.

In that response, there's some kind of judgment that's been made, and it's quite definite. It takes the citta in a very specific direction. But if it's an assessment, it's a foundational, non-cognitive assessment that's built into the fabric of experience itself—before there is anyone who experiences.

I know that. There's someone here who knows that. But the knowing that's part of vedanā is so foundational and so much part of the fabric of experience that it happens—the judgment is made before there's anybody to make the judgment. The response is done before there's anyone to respond.

Does this make sense? No? We'll keep going.

"Would that suggest that every single person would have the same response to all stimuli regardless of their conditioning?"

No. There are bundles of infinite networks of conditioning. But there's no sense of identity in it. I mean, we bring into the world some tendencies. A baby will respond—different babies will respond to the same stimulus differently before they've created an identity. But the response is still there. The patterns are still there.

"Is there any sense of subconsciousness?"

Well, if you were going to talk about whether the Buddha had a concept of the unconscious mind, then I suspect this would be down there.

"When Dhammadinnā is describing this to her ex-husband, what does she say for neither?"

She just says it's neither soothing nor hurting.

"So she hasn't got confusion?"

No, but she's going to talk more about it in the next paragraph.

The comment about the idea that it's non-judgmental—like we have judgments, judgments are built in—makes one question the contemporary definition of living non-judgmentally. When those kinds of judgments are being made, we've already actually made a decision, and then we make a judgment. Which is what we're getting to next.

"Patrick, from what you're saying, vedanā is almost like another sense. It has pleasure, pain, success—rather like that. Like a seventh?"

Yeah, almost like a seventh sensitivity, except that it's attached to each of the sensitivities.

"Well, that's like the mind, in a sense, isn't it? It has access to all the data and has this sort of coordinating or integrating function. It's there in that also, isn't it?"

Yes, certainly it shares in that. It's certainly very close to that. Because the pleasure-pain comes from the whole integrated visual contact with that tree. And perhaps even before that, it might be rearranged and reshuffled within the mind.

But like one person might find one thing pleasant and another person might find it totally unpleasant. It's just our differences, our conditioning, whatever. And they might be conditioned to, over time, have a different judgment.

"They can change. I might not like ice cream today, but tomorrow I think ice cream's great."

This is part of dependent arising. It's always shifting.

But here what we're talking about is a kind of basic structure of the patterns, which remains true throughout. The structure does.

So vedana is a kind of assessment, a kind of response that is pre-intention. This brings us to *chaitanya*.

Chaitanya is a key technical term normally translated as intention. I like to translate it as choice or decision—the decision to act that arises from the perceived significance of an event. In other words, what will I do about it?

Chaitanya is extremely important in the Buddha's teaching because for him it's the central factor in how we construct our lives. He says very famously, "*Chaitanya* is karma." Everyone's heard about karma. Karma is absolutely central. And for the Buddha, *chaitanya* is karma. We could translate it as "choice is action." After choosing, one performs actions of body, speech, or mind. Or "decision is action." After decision, one performs action of body, speech, or mind. This is the whole realm of karma, which is the whole realm of ethics—totally centrally important to the Buddha.

Vedana represents the world as given to us before *chaitanya*, before a decision is made. It's in a sense the given background of the decisions that we make. Or you could say vedana presents the world that requires a decision. I've got to do something about this. Why do I have to do something about it? Because this world already has vedana built in, so it demands a decision. There's already a response, so I have to make a decision about it.

The fundamental decision that we have to make right now—literally right now—is how the experienced event is positioned in terms of me and my interests. Is it pleasant? Should I head towards it? Is it painful?

Should I repel away from it? Is it neither, such that I won't bother to notice it at all? This is the whole world of vedana.

And it's very difficult to pin down in concept. It's like we start to talk about vedana and we hit the limits of language. This makes sense because if I am to speak of something, that something has to be an object out there, separate from the speaker. So, "I feel this to be..." To make such a statement, there has to be an "I" distant from the "this," which I feel to be whatever it is.

But when we're talking about the relationship between contact—the immediacy of experience—and vedana, the response to that immediacy, there's no distance from which any kind of description can be attempted. If there's no distance, if there's total intimacy, there's nothing you can say. Because to say anything requires separation.

So there's a response, but there's no rationalization of the response. This comes later. We're going to look at this discourse later on. In the *Madhupindika Sutta*, Mahakaccana says, "What we feel, we perceive. What we perceive, we think about. What we think about, we proliferate or we complicate." First he lays out contact, and then contact conditions feeling, and then he says, "What we feel, we perceive."

Perception is recognition. I recognize this place. This place is Blue Mountains Insight Meditation Centre. I recognize you lot. You're the latest group of meditators. Now this perception is fundamental. I don't have to think about it. I don't have to think, "Where is this?"

I know I've seen this place before. Ah! I remember. It's just obvious. It's just presented to me.

But perception is built upon feeling. I perceive what I've already felt. First comes the feeling. Then comes the perception. First comes the feeling... Then comes the world that I recognize, including me. But all of it rests upon feeling.

And then comes the thinking. Then I start to think about it and say, "Oh, this is good, this is bad. I like this, I don't like that. That's valuable, that's not valuable." But all of that is like up here—this complicated structure that's built. Down here at the base is vedanā, is feeling.

A student asks: "Say a black bird initially, and you didn't recognize what it was. Wouldn't it be maybe until after you decided it was a bird that you liked, or a crow that you don't like, that you would have a response after the perception?"

You might have an initial response, then there's perception, and that would feed back into the feeling, and the feeling might change.

"So you've got the category 'bird' anyway to start with?"

So you have the initial visual stimulus, and the Buddha is saying with that there's already a response. Then later on there's the perception: "Oh, that's a bird," and "Oh, that's this kind of bird."

So you just have initial response to the form of that, which probably would be nothing much. Because do we ever see it? Do we ever actually get down that far? But all along the way there's some kind of sense stimulus, and along with that is the feeling.

So the whole process is dynamic. It's changing every nanosecond. But the basic structure of it remains the same.

"Until you knew what sort of bird it was, couldn't it be both? Because it could be a bad bird, it could be a crow, so there's negative and positive."

Could be.

"Wouldn't vagueness stimulate the exploration of what kind of bird it is?"

That's another aspect. You see all the things you can start working with. I think it's so tied into the conditions. What past we bring with us is one thing.

So I think initially you would see—and I think it's you—you would see a black object, and there could be initial perception of blackness or darkness or something. But then perception would arise, and then in response to that perception there's another vedanā. And then in response to that there's thinking. In response to the thinking there's more vedanā. So it goes all along the line.

"Does this example show us that in fact, if it's neither pleasant nor unpleasant, we want it to be one or the other?"

If it's neither pleasant nor unpleasant, we probably wouldn't even notice it consciously. It probably wouldn't even rise up into consciousness. Or if it did rise up into consciousness, it would be, "What's that?" So we would be trying to check it out.

I think, as you suggest: Is this pleasant or painful? I think that's the crucial question for us. We do have a very... We want things to be pleasant or unpleasant. "Now, is this important to me or not? Should I run or not?"

The movement brings the contact because you may not have been paying attention before that. So contact happens, and at that point you have the interest to know whether this is going to be dangerous or pleasant.

And interest itself, depending on the person—some people find interest unpleasant. And some people find interest just in and of itself pleasant. Some people find just the fact of being able to see pleasant and will look at things just for the pleasure of looking, whether or not it doesn't matter what it is. Like in a retreat where you read the notice board again and again and again.

So vedanā creates the world that has the power to move us. It's found in the response to a stimulus. The Buddha points out there are three fundamental responses: If the vedanā of a sensation is pleasant, we are

moved to grasp. If the vedanā of a sensation is painful, we are moved to reject or resist. And if the vedanā of a sensation is neither painful nor pleasant, we are moved to ignore it as beneath notice, or if we do notice it, we are moved to confusion and doubt about how to respond.

Damodaro goes on to say, "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 understood and painful when not understood."

That's interesting. So vedanā changes its nature. Like everything else, it's impermanent and shifting all the time. It changes its nature depending on how it moves and whether or not we understand it. I find that very interesting. And how can an object of experience be so protean that it shifts around like that? Well, maybe because it's not an object of experience. It's a relationship. And the relationship involves time and understanding.

So at first, vedanā appears solid. It appears to be something which is either pleasant or painful. But its solidity dissolves over time, because that which is pleasant is so only as long as it persists, and it becomes painful when it changes. So when its solidity is perceived to be illusory, then suddenly it shifts into being painful. And the converse is true of that which is painful—it's painful only as long as it appears to be solid. But once that solidity is seen to be illusory, it ceases to be painful. So it depends upon time. Again, it's more a felt relationship than a thing. And it's a relationship which is continually flowing.

In terms of the third one, that which is neither painful nor pleasant, that changes into either pleasant or painful, depending on shifts in understanding. So our capacity to discern vedanā changes vedanā.

Now the word translated here as understanding is ñāṇa, which is the same word you find in vipassanā ñāṇa, insight knowledge. But here it's got a more general meaning. Here the fluidity of vedanā is not a function of time, but of a relationship involving awareness and understanding. So what this suggests is that something is here, but not known. And then later, it's known. It's understood. So what is presently experienced changes as it moves in and out of awareness.

When outside awareness, it's painful. And this is really odd, isn't it? How can you have painful without awareness? How can something be felt as painful when it's beyond the boundaries of awareness?

Perhaps what Dhammadinna is getting at is sometimes there's a felt sense of obscurity and its accompanying confusion. For example, in disturbed sleep. Have you ever had disturbed sleep? Is it pleasant or painful? Unpleasant. And yet it's characterized by not knowing. But there is something—there's an obscurity to it. And I think what Dhammadinna is suggesting is that very obscurity is painful. Or restless distraction. So something is felt as being here but only obscurely. And it's felt as painful. But when it emerges and we confront it directly, then it's not so bad. It could even be pleasant. I think this is what she's getting at, this kind of relationship.

So given all of the above, how do we practice vedanā, the vedanānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna? The practice is

vedanānupassanā. Anupassanā is contemplating or tracking, tracking vedanā. How do we do that?

This practice, first of all, takes us directly into the realm of affect. What does this feel like? It's perhaps a key question. What does it mean to like something?

To dislike something? What does that mean? What is that experience? What's the nature of it? What is pleasure? What is pain? What's confusion? What is it exactly?

In this practice, what we're doing is training ourselves to investigate our experience. This is the basic move. And of course this quality of investigation has a strong cognitive element to it, and generally it appeals to people who are a bit on the cognitive side.

Vedana points us towards our own subjectivity. Can we investigate our own subjectivity? Or another way of looking at it is: can I objectify my own subjectivity? And again, it's tricky to talk about because as soon as we start to speak about it, we're drawn into the realm of cognition and away from feeling, away from affect. But let's try to say what we can.

Firstly, working with vedana entails cultivating intimacy. The direction is always in. More and more in. More and more intimate with the experience.

Secondly, if we're working with vedana, normally what we would work with are the first two aspects: pleasant and painful, attraction and aversion, because these are the most obvious. The third one is harder to work with because it's so much more obscure.

One way of working with it is with what we call emotion. They're obviously either pleasant or painful, but let's avoid the obvious. Let's say we might work with what we normally call mood. There's always some kind of underlying mood. This experience now is flavoured in some way, and I'm already moved by this flavour. I already find this situation as in some way satisfactory or unsatisfactory.

What's the quality of this pleasure or pain? What is that? How do I feel that? What does it feel like?

Let's take pain. Pain may be so subtle that I can overlook it. I gave the example this morning—being very aversive, I tend to work with pain. Let's take, for example: has anybody had the experience of having a good sit? Now, forget about the bad ones. I'm just talking about the good ones. You're in a situation where you've got the meditation periods and someone rings the bell at the end, and you're having a good sit—which means pleasant—and the bell goes, and you notice that very subtle response immediately arises: "Phew!" Does that ever happen? Is it just me?

Now where does this "phew" come from? There's something about that experience which has to be painful, because otherwise I wouldn't have responded that way. What is that? I didn't notice it at first. If someone had interrupted me to conduct research, I would have said, "Oh, very pleasant." But apparently not. The pain might be so subtle that it can be easily overlooked.

The other thing that must not be overlooked is pleasure. This is, I think, very important for meditators. As the mind settles, we find a pleasure in mindfulness and awareness—a pleasure which is completely different from our normal pleasure of getting what I want or receiving some kind of interesting stimulus. We've talked about the freshness of things that we can experience, the directness of the felt encounter with the world that arises when we're doing this practice. And there is a pleasure in that.

Can I drop into the citta and feel that pleasure?

And finally, vedana always concerns a response, so we can find it in our responses. The example I gave just then, "phew"—that's a response. And that's where we find vedana. So I am moved to hold or to reject or to ignore. Can I see this movement? Can I discern this movement in real time? Can I feel it? Can I discover what's feeding it? What's behind it? That's interesting.

So this is an exposition on vedana. It's very complicated when you try to talk about it, but in terms of experience it's incredibly simple. It's complicated to talk about because it resists any kind of conceptualization. The concept takes us away from vedana. Vedana is still there. Vedana is always here. There is not a nanosecond of our lives in which we are not being moved by vedana. We're always moved by vedana. But it's harder to pick up when we're lost in the cognitive, when we're lost in concept. So the more we conceptualize it, the more difficult it is to get hold of it.

And we talked about it being difficult to get hold of it because it's already got hold of us. Again, the intimacy of it makes it tricky. But it's radically simple, and it's basically a matter of dropping into it. And it's important to drop into it because it's the source of every decision that we make and every perception that we have about ourselves and our world. So opening up to this realm is an important aspect of the meditation practice. And it's not something that can be pinned down by a technique, but it is something to have the radar open to, to be sensitive toward, to be ready to pick it up when it comes knocking.

Okay, that's enough for tonight. Any questions or comments?

"The simultaneous—" Yes, that's one possibility. And it's a possibility that the pleasant is immediately replaced by the painful so that it was pleasant up until you heard the bell. That's a possibility. There's infinite possibilities. Can we start to become sensitive to it, to that whole realm?

"When you said one of the things you can do is work with the attraction or the aversion—what do you mean by that? Just really experience the attraction or the aversion?"

You can experience it as, for example, attraction literally as a movement. It's like I feel myself—I can, like in the mind, the attraction of thought, distracting thought, I can feel the awareness go into it. It's an interesting feeling. Or with something that I recoil against, I can feel that the mind goes—there's a raw energy to it. So it's really building up a sensibility towards that. It's all about sensitivity. It's cultivating a particular sensitivity. It's like, I know there's something of this nature here. Can I learn to tune into it? Can I become sensitive to it?

"You just gave examples that sometimes with thoughts you can feel yourself being attracted to them or repulsed by them, but earlier—and I completely understand that—the thing that I don't understand is earlier you were saying that the cognitive area gets you away from... I don't know, but there's so much vedana in ideas, like people who go 'Oh, I get it!' or 'Aha!' or recognition, or like this morning when your clock—when you finished the talk, you said, 'Oh, just in time, the battery was about to run out.' And there was sort of like vedana in that. That was just recognition of a coincidence. So I just don't quite get that vedana is absent in the cognition—sorry, removes us away from it."

When we—the more we think about it, the more we tend to miss it. So if we think too much, we can tend to miss the feeling aspect. But the feeling aspect is always there. And as you point out, in the realm of cognition, there's also affect. And some people are particularly sensitive to that. Some people find a great deal of feeling in thoughts. For example, I would say academics and people generally who are attached to view, like me, find a great deal of affect in concepts. In scientists and inventors.

Because it's a sense base. And every sense base has its vedana with it. So the cognitive realm—the thoughts are the object. So you've got the sensitivity, the object, and consciousness is contact and vedana in all of life. So if the mind is the sensitivity and the thought is the object, when you're aware of the thought, it's vedana in all of life.

So when a pleasant thought arises you get a pleasant feeling. When an unpleasant thought arises you get an unpleasant feeling.

It's no different in that way to any other sense sphere. But what I was getting at is that we can get too caught up bringing the head in. This practice is about opening up the heart in a broad sense. It's about the heart rather than the head when we first approach it.

Can understanding or insight be grasped conceptually? Certainly it cannot be understood in that way. It defies intellectual understanding because it's too elemental.

Take me as an example of a dried up old stick—because my background, my habit, is always to approach head first rather than heart first. I've had to recondition myself to work more in what we would call the heart area, because I was so caught up in the realm of cognition that I was cutting myself off from much of the realm of feeling. Of course, that cognitive realm is a pleasant realm, and I can get lost there. I can have a great time there.

But recognizing this background mood, this bias that you have—the karmic bias, whatever you want to call it—and then moving in another direction through cetana... hence cetana is so important because that's what we can work on. That's the steering wheel. Until you understand that background bias, you're really just being a puppet on a string.

You could say cetana is like the court of appeal—you can now review and maybe go in a different direction. By the time we're thinking about something, we've already made a decision. But that decision is

always subject to review. There's a power of veto. So we have free will, not free won't.

Part of this whole process of insight meditation is to expose what was previously unconscious and bring it up into consciousness. And then something can happen, something can change. When people work with emotions in this practice, it's exactly this process. Normally I react when someone does X, but if I can actually see in real time the arising of that pattern, then it gives me the opportunity to say, "Uh-uh, no, I think I'll try something else."

All along the way, the background and the ocean within which we're swimming is an ocean of vedana. It's like being an amoeba—we're all Buddha's little amoebas. Amoebas don't have so much cetana, and they don't have so much dukkha. But they definitely have vedana in them—the movement toward and away from.

The cetana is the choice—the choice either to lead into more suffering or to lead out of it. The volitional choice, made on top of the deeper layer of non-volitional choices that have already been made.

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