Tracking Vedanā

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:05:49

Over the past few days in our practice we've been emphasizing the role of the body. The body is the first of the four satipaṭṭhānas, so we've been working on that first. Today we're going to play around with the second satipaṭṭhāna, vedanā, usually translated as feeling. We're going to start with a meditation experiment and then we'll talk about it afterwards.

Again, with these little experiments don't take them seriously. Treat them as games and play and see what happens.

So if you establish your posture, set up your meditation posture, and open your awareness up to the whole body, experiencing the whole body. Now focus on the movements within the body that indicate breathing. Watch your breathing. Look at your breathing. Witness your breathing.

And now, feel your breathing. Don't watch it. Don't look at it. Don't witness it. Feel it. Feel your breathing.

Is there a difference between watching the breathing and feeling the breathing? And if so, what is it?

Yes, there is a difference. What's the difference?

"When you're feeling it, you're a lot closer. When you're watching it's more like a top-down kind of approach to it."

Disembodied and top-down. Where do you watch it from?

"Some kind of conceptualisation in the brain, I guess."

Don't theorise, just tell me where you watch it from.

"Yeah, it's looking down."

Anybody else? Anybody else find it different?

"I think I changed senses when I was witnessing, watching it. There was a bit of touch in it, but it was mostly kind of internal seeing. While when I felt it, I moved back more to touch, internal touch, the nose and the air passage and the lifting of the lungs and how it felt at the top of the lungs. It was much more touch-based than watching."

"I actually seemed to be feeling it when I was meant to be watching it and feeling it when I was feeling it. It wasn't that much difference to me. There wasn't any difference because you feel it anyway. I mean

somebody might say watch the breath but basically that goes and you just feel the breath."

"A little bit like the other two speakers. When I was mentally observing I did feel apart from it and I could sort of just feel a part of it so that felt really good. And then with feelings, I mean the words, it just felt timeless, which is not a feeling-type word but for me that was how it felt. It sort of felt timeless."

Timeless?

"Yeah, that was the word that came through. Felt with feeling, both closer as the other person said, but also more identified with the breath in some way. Whereas the watching, there's further away, more of a subject-object. More detachment perhaps?"

"Yes, though I must say I thought the main difference in the instructions was in the attunement. When you said watch the breath, look at the breath, it was kind of an admonition. And then you said, feel the breath. You were conveying a feeling."

"I remember a locus of observation tends to be in the middle of the body but at the back, as if my eyes are kind of here in the felt sense. And when you said watch the breath, I still had the experience of touch, but when I moved from watching the breath, the touch of the breath, to feel the breath, I was kind of more actively noticing which bits were painful and unpleasant and which bits were neutral, and what part of the breath, what parts of the body were actually not hurting. Because it's kind of painful at the moment, but it's not all painful. So I was really teasing out the pleasant-unpleasant quality rather than just the felt touch. So it brought out the whole pleasant-unpleasantness, the kind of mosaic of pleasant-unpleasant and where they are."

Thank you.

"When you said, watch your breath, I was sort of feeling that I wasn't really aware of the feeling tones. I was struggling a little bit, a little bit of strain. When you said feel it, definitely I came more into my body. And definitely I became more aware of that quality of it."

The painful, pleasant, painful quality of it, yeah.

Kim?

"Watching the breath, I was aware of the movement, but feeling it, I was aware of texture."

So texture when you're feeling, you found texture; when you're watching, you found movement. I like this experiment. Part of it is the power of suggestion, the power of language.

When I started doing meditation, all the language around it was about watching—watching and witnessing. So my initial instructions, as far back as I can remember, were all about watching the meditation object, which is what I did. Eventually I noticed that I would be aware of my—let's say, rising and falling of the abdomen—from up here.

Anybody ever get eye strain when they meditate? It can happen. Because there's this association of watching: where do I watch from? Well, I watch here. So I'm looking down at the breathing.

But years ago, my last trip to Burma, I attended an Abhidharma course in—where was it? Across the river from Mandalay. I forget the name of it.

"Sagaing."

And we had Abhidharma in the morning and meditation at other times. It was a combination of Abhidharma course and retreat. One day the teacher was talking about vedana. And do you know how if someone's explaining something to you that you already know, you tend to go half asleep? You just keep the radar open enough to kind of have a sense of where they are, but you're not really paying attention because you already know.

I was doing this, and at one point I suddenly realized that he just said something about vedana and I didn't understand what he just said. And this frisson of alarm went through me, and I realized: if I don't understand that, that means I actually don't understand vedana. And I thought I did.

So then I started to pay attention. And I got quite intrigued by this. I went back, deciding, "OK, I don't know what vedana is. So I have to find out." And so what I did was, when I started the meditation part of the day, I decided: from now on, I'm not going to watch anything at all. I'm going to feel the meditation object. And then I'll find out.

I noticed the experience was different. So I got very intrigued by all this. I started doing this experiment, and I've been doing this for years with people. If you've done retreats with me before, you've done this.

Some typical responses that people give: for some people, watching indicates distance, feeling indicates closer perspective. A number of people have commented about this. For some people, watching is detailed and specific, whereas feeling is much more general—although we've had a couple of people for whom it's the opposite. The feeling is actually more specific. You heard about the specificity of pleasant, painful, while the watching is more general.

For some people, when they watch the breathing, they naturally go here at the nostril. And when they feel the breathing, it's down here, somewhere within the body. See, you do get a whole range of responses.

One response that people come up with is, "What the hell are you talking about?" Just completely bamboozled. Some people will say there is no difference because "I always feel the meditation object. Why would I watch it? Are you crazy?" So there's no difference.

You do get this wide variety of responses, but it's interesting that what it brings out is that there are different ways to be aware. There are different ways to relate to an object of awareness.

Now, you notice that we've made no attempt to define vedana or feeling. In fact, I've just assumed you

know what it is. But there's no reason why we should make this assumption. Let's go back to the Buddha and what he...

...what he's talking about. When he talks about what he calls vedana, he discusses it in terms of the qualities of pleasant, painful and neither.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, he says, "How does a practitioner live tracking feeling as feeling? Here, a practitioner sensing a pleasant feeling understands he's sensing a pleasant feeling. Sensing a painful feeling, he understands he is sensing a painful feeling. Sensing a neither painful nor pleasant feeling, he understands he is sensing a neither painful nor pleasant feeling."

So feeling gets divided up into three categories: pleasant, painful, neither.

One of my favorite hobby horses is to get up and shake my fist and denounce those who claim that the third feeling is neutral. Buddha does not say neutral. If he wanted to say neutral, he would have said neutral. He does not say neutral. He says, "neither painful nor pleasant." Understand?

You get the three feelings—pleasant, painful, neither—based on which you get three elemental responses. If there's pleasant feeling, there's grasping, attachment. If there's painful feeling, there's aversion, rejection. If there's neither painful nor pleasant, there's delusion and ignorance.

In other words, neither painful nor pleasant means "don't know." It's the feeling of the teenage boy. "How was your day?" "Dunno." "Would you like this?" "Dunno." This is what the Buddha's getting at. It's the not knowing. And so it's associated with delusion and ignorance. It's not neutrality. Neutrality is something else.

"So you don't feel neutrality?" You do, but neutrality is... These three categories are the kind of ground level, universal. Neutrality is a subtler feeling, but when it's developed in the practice, it becomes equanimity. And the response is equanimity. The response to genuine neutral feeling is equanimity.

The first time I became aware of this was—I've often told this story, it's a bit embarrassing—I was doing a retreat with John Hale. After about ten days or so, I hit a wall. I just couldn't do this anymore, completely stuck. This was down at Udumbara, at what is now the nunnery.

I went to John and said, "I'm stuck, I've hit the wall, what can I do?" He looked at me rather fiercely and said, "Come with me." We left the main building and walked off to the hut that I was staying in. Now this was quite remarkable because at the time John was dying and movement was difficult for him. So to take me on a walk, to give me a talk, I knew something was going on.

We went off to this little private area and sat down. He considered the situation and said, "Patrick, you are a dried up old stick." Oh my God. "You are a dried up old stick. You are completely cut off from your feelings. You've got no idea what you're feeling, do you? You are totally oblivious to what you are feeling." And he put the boot in and I was, "Oh, yes, okay."

I said, "Well, what can I do about it?" He thought about this and said, "It's probably too late now." So I knew he was serious.

So then he put me onto vedana as a meditation object. I started to play with vedana, and it was a complete revelation. It was like, "Wha!" I discovered that I was living in this waterfall of vedana. It was everywhere—cascading through seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, minding. It was everywhere.

I was certainly no longer stuck. The wall had vanished, and I was playing around. But after about two or three days, again I got stuck. This time it was quite weird because I just couldn't find it—I could not find the vedana. It was really strange because I checked everything. The mind was really clear and sharp, the concentration was good, everything was going smoothly, but I could not find the vedana.

So I went to John and reported this, and he said, "Neutral feeling is the hardest to discern." I realized that's what it was—neutrality. It is so subtle that it's actually difficult to even recognize. It's not pleasant, but it's more pleasant than pleasant pleasure. It's better than pleasant feeling. But he meant neutrality—the actual neutrality that's associated with equanimity. He wasn't talking about ground-level feeling. He was talking about a feeling which is accessible once you develop a certain degree of mindfulness and concentration. Then that "neither painful nor pleasant" feeling has morphed into neutral feeling.

Does that lead to equanimity? Yes, the natural response to that is equanimity. In this case, for example, I was feeling frustrated because I couldn't find it. Therefore, conceptually, the whole project had failed, yet I was feeling very good. I wasn't upset by it. It was just, "Oh yes, I can't find it. Yes, there's a problem." But actually the equanimity was just there all the time.

The response to pleasantness is some degree of grasping, except when it matures and then the response is saddha, faith. The response to aversion is rejection, except when it matures and then the response is wisdom. And equanimity when it matures.

So when the Buddha's talking about these three basic categories of feeling—and they are categories of feeling, a system of classification—then at the ground level we have pleasant, painful, neither. In other words, essentially pleasant or painful. Either I like this or I don't like it. And in either case, I'll pay attention to it. It's important. "I like this. Ooh, pay attention. Ooh, I really dislike this. Okay, pay attention."

If it's neither, I just don't notice it. Why would I bother? So I don't pay any attention to it, so I don't even see it. So I'm ignorant. That is, literally, it just doesn't register. Or if it does register, I don't know what I should do about it. Should I grab it? Should I reject it?

Should I grab it? Should I reject it? I don't know. So there's doubt and confusion.

The first two vedanās are really quite clear and obvious—it's a simple binary of like and don't like, grab and reject. The third one is more complex. It can manifest in two forms. One is that I simply remain oblivious to it. Or if I do notice it, I'm doubtful and confused about what to do about it. Should I grab?

Should I reject? Grab, reject, grab, reject. Ever had any kind of restless sleep? It's like that. You don't quite know what's going on, but there's a kind of agitation about it. It's murky. If you speak to people with a lot of delusion, they often say it's like that—a kind of murkiness and restlessness, dullness.

So these are the three categories of vedanā.

Now vedanā is all about the realm of affect. It's the feeling, the affective world, as distinct from the cognitive world. It's what we would call heart rather than head. The Buddha talks about wisdom—that's head. He talks about the opposite of wisdom as ignorance—again, head. But the Buddha will also talk about, for example, saddhā, inadequately translated as faith. That's heart. And he will talk about the problem as taṇhā, craving, drivenness. Again, that's heart. Vedanā represents this whole area of heart, of affect.

Let me look at these terms more closely. Saddhā and taṇhā are both terms that refer to the world of affect. In saddhā, the *dhā* is the root meaning "to put" or "to place." *Śrad* in Sanskrit is an old word for heart. So saddhā is to place the heart or to place in the heart. In English we have the expression "I put my heart into it"—that's an emotional connection. So saddhā is the heart connection to what's going on.

What about taṇhā? It's not *dhā*, it's *ṇhā*—not D-H-A, but T-A-N-H-A, *tṛṣṇā* in Sanskrit. That's literally thirst. If you think about thirst: I might think that I'm thirsty—well, that means I'm not really thirsty. If I'm really thirsty, I'm just thirsty. It's feeling, it's the heart area. And there's a drivenness, a desperation about it. I've got to do something about it. I don't think that I have to do something about it—I have to do something about it.

So this is the area of affect. When you look at the Buddha's language, some of the terms he uses refer to this world of affect, of feeling, of what we would call emotion. And some of his terms refer to the world of cognition. They're both parts of the human being. We're part cognition and part feeling.

And Vedana is over here. Vedana refers to this whole area. We're going to talk more about it tonight. Vedana is, I found, one of the most difficult subjects to actually get across. It seems to be quite simple and obvious, but when you start to actually talk about it, it's quite difficult.

Vedana is rather like the flavor of the experience. Every experience comes to us flavored in some way. It's like the flavor of food. When I eat, there's a whole variety of physical sensations—hard, soft, smooth, crunchy, hot, cold, and so forth. These are physical sensations. Food also has flavors. The flavor is not the sensation, the physical sensation, but it's intimately tied up with the sensation. You can't have the flavor without the sensation. When I'm moved to respond, to get up and take seconds or to push the plate away and not have it at all, what moves me, what creates that response, is the flavor.

Vedana is the flavor of the experience, whether the experience be physical or non-physical. So Vedana is what moves us. It's what provokes a response. Something happens, I respond. Vedana is what provokes that response. It's the felt sense of experience—the feltness of the sense. There's the data of the physical

body, like hot, cold, hard, soft, and then the mind's response to that data. The Vedana is in the response. You could even say the Vedana is the response.

Is it the mind or the heart? The mind's response or the heart's response? It's the citta's response, which covers both, but here the context would be heart, because it's the feeling area. So probably it would be better to say heart's response. We have the expression "a heartfelt response," conveying the same sort of thing but at a very strong level. But it's automatic.

This is an interesting debate. Sometimes people do translate it as sensation. But the problem with that is if we translate it as sensation, we have no word for the actual data as distinct from the response to the data. But often you do see Vedana translated as sensation because Vedana and sensation are so intimately intertwined that for practical purposes you can't separate them, because they're so close. We're going to talk about this tonight. It gets really tricky to talk about. This is why it's so hard to actually grasp it.

In English, feeling means both sensation and emotion. The word is ambiguous in both Pali and in English. For example, in English and in Pali, a feeling can be a thing—"you hurt my feelings," so feelings are a something. I can experience my feelings; you are cut off from your feelings. So there are your feelings, and your job is to experience them—they are the object of your experience. But you can also say, "Yes, I understand that's a good idea, but I can't help but feel it's not right."

There you're not talking about a something that you experience but a way of experiencing. If you want to do this, you've just got to feel your way into it. What are you conveying there? You're saying there's a particular way you need to experience this, and maybe it's not the way that you're used to. In Pali, as in English, Vedana can refer both to what one experiences—so you can make Vedana the object of your awareness—

But it also refers to a way of experiencing. So you can feel the meditation object, or you can watch the meditation object. And that, of course, was what we were doing for this little exercise.

"I find it really hard to separate a feeling from watching it. Because the feeling is there, and then in order to actually have the feeling, there must be something that's watching it. There must be awareness of it. If there was nothing there watching it, the feeling would be..."

"So there's the feeling and the awareness of the feeling. That's the watcher, isn't it?"

"Yeah, you could say watching. But certainly awareness. And the thing about—well, we'll talk more about this tonight—the Buddha says contact conditions feeling. Contact is the immediacy of experience. Where there is contact, there is feeling."

Now this relationship, this causal conditional relationship, is extremely tight. The Buddha is not suggesting that first you have an experience and then later on feeling joins the party. He says if you're experiencing now, you are feeling now. And also this relationship is compulsory. It is impossible to have

an experience without feeling.

He then says feeling conditions craving. Now that relationship is not compulsory. You can have feeling without craving. But you cannot have experience without feeling. So it's bound up really tightly. And one of the implications of this is it's very difficult to actually tease them apart. So it's not actually worth worrying about for practical purposes. It comes together, doesn't it?

Different people are sensitive to different aspects of experience. Some people naturally are attuned to the feeling aspect. Some people naturally are attuned to the awareness aspect and not the feeling aspect. And some people are naturally attuned to both.

Such a person is likely to say, "What the hell are you talking about?" Precisely because they've already got it. It's like you're trying to explain something new to me and the more you explain it the more confused I get because I already know it. So sometimes that's the response that you get when you talk about this. It's difficult to talk about because it's so intimate.

Last night we were talking about the Buddha's use of the verb *patisamvediti*, which I translated as sensing. But you could translate it as feeling. Now I translated it as sensing because I was looking for an English word that conveys intimacy. What's the closest, most intimate form of experience that you can talk about using the English language? What's the verb you would use? If you wanted to express an experience which was completely close, completely intimate, what verb would you use?

"Engage." "Experiencing." "Engaging." "Feeling." "Sensation." "Sensing." "Moving." "I was moved. I moved."

But here it's like, let's say with the breath...

The breath moving. That doesn't quite work. Inhabiting the breath? But you notice how we're groping for the right expression? There's no obvious candidate that stands out. So I chose "sensing." But these verbs like *paṭisaṃvedeti* and similar terms—this is what I think the Buddha is expressing in Pali. He's pointing to a form of experiencing that is really, really intimate. And this is the realm of vedanā.

This understanding is important for practical purposes because it's all about response. I respond to the world. But why do I respond in that particular way? You can see gross levels of response: "Jesus, I hate that. I just get so pissed off when people do this or that." And the flip side: "I just love that. I've got to have it. I just can't let that go. If I don't get this, I'm going to kill myself."

All the way down to the subtlest levels—you can be sitting in meditation with just this vague sense of disquiet. It's so subtle you don't even notice it until the bell rings to indicate the end of the sitting, and there's this instant response: "Phew." That's the first hint you get that actually, over the past half hour, there's been this sense of disquiet. It's so subtle. All of this is vedanā.

So to get to know vedanā is to get to know our responses. Why is it that awareness, that the mind, moves toward this? Why does it do that? Vedanā—it's moved to go there. That movement is vedanā. To get to

know vedanā, to become familiar with it, opens up this whole realm of how the citta, the heart-mind, responds to everything. How it is responding now. Right now there is vedanā. Right now I am already responding.

As a meditator, I've got to be interested in this. But the strange thing about it is there's no technique for it. It's too intimate. You either feel it or you don't feel it. It's so fast.

It's both very fast and inescapable, because it's happening now. And there's never a moment in my life when it's not happening now.

"Isn't vedanā also simultaneous with the consciousness of it? So it's the contact, the feeling, and consciousness all happening..."

All in one package. Boom. Exactly.

And because of its complexity, different minds have different sensitivities. The same mind has different sensitivities over time, so that at one point I may be more attuned to the awareness aspect. At another time I may be more attuned to the feeling aspect. At another time I may be more attuned to the impact of the contact.

"It's like love."

Mmm-hmm.

"It defies analysis. It defies conceptualization."

And it drives conceptualization. Why am I trying to make sense of it?

I am moved in that direction. It's the vedanā which is pushing me to try to make sense of it.

I was very struck by the idea that every single cell in our body, or a one-celled animal, an amoeba, the one thing it can do without a brain is approach or avoid. So if that's true of every cell in our body, it's more fundamental than breathing.

Yes, it is. The Buddha would agree with that. It is more fundamental than breathing. Feeling is more fundamental than breathing.

In our culture we exalt reason and rationality. All of that rests on the foundation of vedanā and is an expression of vedanā. Even plants can do it. Amoebas do it. Plants do it.

In terms of the meditation practice, working with vedanā is basically impossible to pin down as a technique, but it's all about intimacy and it's all about the relationship to the present, because it is happening. It's not that it's going to happen later. It is happening. It's immediately available. It's always immediately available. And it's what's driving everything.

So the more I uncover it, the more I can see: What is it that I do? What are the responses? How am I responding to this situation? And what's driving that response? All of this is revealed through vedanā.

But we'll talk more about it tonight. We're going to have a dharma talk on vedanā.

If it's not useful, forget about it. Anything that I say that is not useful, just don't even bother arguing with it—just let it go. But feel your way through the day, and if you do that, be really genuinely experimental. There's nothing that is supposed to happen. Just play with it and see what does happen. The important thing is to learn from the experience.

And you learn by playing. It's the basic principle that if you've got some complicated piece of electronics in the household and you don't know how to use it, who do you call upon? The youngest member of the household. Now, why is this? Is this because that said youngest member was born with a PhD in electronics, which they inherited from a previous life? No. It's because when you get your complicated piece of electronics, the child looks at it and thinks he's looking at a toy. And so he plays with it. And because he plays with it, he learns it.

Meditation is a toy. Please play.

When I was last in Burma, one of the things that I did was go to bookshops and collect books written in English about Buddhism, because I was interested in what do Burmese people read about Buddhism. I can't read Burmese, so I was looking at English books.

In Burma there's dozens of different meditation methods, particularly insight meditation methods. Only two of them have been exported, but there's heaps of them in Burma. And there's one insight meditation technique which is very popular in the Mandalay area. Mandalay and Sagina are intellectual centres for Burmese Buddhism. There's a hell of a lot of study that goes on there, and particularly Abhidhamma.

There's a particular form of insight meditation which is popular in that part of the country, which is very Abhidhamma-based. Like many of the methods, its grounding object is kāyika vedanā—vedanā felt in the body. Think Goenka method. Vedanā in the body, because it's obvious.

I found a beginner's instruction manual for doing this, and the author had various warnings for the beginning meditator. One of the warnings was: if you're going to practice using vedanā, in particular bodily vedanā, as your meditation object, do not make the very common mistake of looking for it.

Because if you look for vedanā, it's rather like looking for your glasses. Now I know that I can distinctly remember putting my glasses on when I was in my room and coming down here, and I could actually see at a distance. So I know I had them on. I came in here...

Obviously I took them off at some point and they're gone. And I've looked everywhere. The only rational conclusion is one of you bastards took them. So I'm just telling you, none of you are getting out of here until I get my glasses back. Is that clear?

It's like that. For a start, if I'm looking for something, it assumes it's somehow hidden. You cannot hide Vedana. It's bleeding obvious. If you look for it, you're thinking, ah, it's something special. And if I'm just clever enough, I'll stumble upon it. The very desire to stumble upon it is an expression of Vedana. It's too obvious, isn't it?

It's hidden in plain sight. Yes, it's hidden in plain sight. It's so obvious that it's difficult to recognize.

Patrick asked about the practice of noticing pleasant, unpleasant. Yeah, that's where it's most obvious. They're the two which are clear. If you go into work with Vedana, they're the two that you would actually go for. So you notice any recognition of the pleasant or any recognition of the painful.

For example, in the visual field, the eyes are constantly scanning the visual scene. I noticed with my eyes, when I sit here and they're kind of scanning, that there were certain parts of the room—dark corners—that the eyes would just skip over a bit faster. When the eyes kind of go outside to the view, they'll just linger there, just for a moment. Painful, pleasant.

You can see this with all the senses. Where do the senses go? How long do they linger? You can start to say, oh, pleasant, painful, pleasant, pleasant, painful, pleasant, pleasant, pain, pain, pleasant, pain, good, bad, good, bad. It comes with the territory.

Also, one warning I should address. You notice the contradiction that what we're talking about this morning is feeling, and yet it's being incredibly intellectual. There's concept and there's experience. When you're working with the meditation tradition, you're always dealing with concept and experience.

I think, first of all, the technical terms that the Buddha uses are very precise, but they're not scientific terms. They're more like poetry. So if you read poetry—good poetry—you can get a very precise meaning that's coming out of those words. And yet, if somebody else is reading the poem and they have a very different meaning, you wouldn't be inclined to have the same kind of argument with them if you were both reading a science textbook and coming up with different meanings. Because you know that poetry has an element of subjectivity, and you can quite legitimately read the same poem in different ways.

For me, the Buddha's teaching is a form of poetry. It's the poetry of human experience. Yes, it's incredibly precise, but it's fundamentally poetry. Sometimes when you pin down a meaning you've got a meaning that works for you, but it's not necessarily—you know—absolutely this is what the Buddha means and anybody who disagrees is wrong.

So don't get caught up in concepts. It's not that there's an objectively correct meaning for terms like Vedana and therefore an objectively correct experience that we're supposed to find, or an objectively correct method of practice. It's more like these concepts can guide us in cultivating a particular form of sensitivity to what is already happening.

If you're trying to track Vedana, start with the experience and then interpret it. Don't start with the

interpretation and from there look for the corresponding experience. You start with the experience. I'm already feeling this. And from there I get the concept, the interpretation.

Is this what they mean by Vedana? Don't start with the concept—"Where is Vedana?"—and then from there look for the experience. "Could this be it? Is this it? Maybe this is it." Favor the experience over the concept. Clarify the experience. Basically, become intimate. And then you might question, "Is this what they mean by Vedana?" And if it fits, it fits—for you. And if it doesn't fit, it doesn't fit.

Questioning whether something is pleasant or unpleasant—is that what you mean? I think that's quite useful. We're going to talk about what exactly that means tonight when we look at Dhammadina's explanation of it.

For example, you can also look at attachment and aversion, because attachment and aversion are responses to pleasant and painful. One way that I've worked with it—I have heaps of aversion. I'm very strongly aversive. I'd like to sum it up by saying that for me, approximately 95% of my experience, I'd much rather it was something else.

"You'd much rather it was something else? 95%?" At a conservative estimate.

"I don't remember that in the interview today."

This is the nature of aversion.

"Yes, but do you like being averse?"

I'd much rather it was something else.

One time I got very interested in this because it struck me that, of course, if there's aversion, aversion is a response to pain. So if I'm averse most of the time, I'm feeling pain most of the time. There's a painful quality to it. So I started to get interested in this.

The way that I worked with it was I'd just be doing my normal meditation, but when I felt that I was quite settled, I'd drop in the question. Basically, I'd look for any manifestation of aversion, particularly the subtle ones.

For example, I was doing walking meditation along a veranda. Everything was going really smoothly. It was a good day. It was a good walking period. And I see the end of the veranda, and this half-formed pre-verbal thought popped up in the mind: "It would be good to get to the end."

And I thought, "Wait a minute, why? If it's good to get to the end, that means it's correspondingly bad to be here—which means this must be unsatisfactory in some way, although I haven't noticed it. So what is it? What is the pain here?"

I would send the awareness: "Okay, what's the pain?" And I would ask the question, "What is dukkha?" So

I would drop down and try to find what's the painful quality of this. It has to be there because there's just a twinge of aversion.

I started to explore it in that way, and it got really interesting. What I found most interesting is that when I went down to look for the pain, the closer I got to it, the more it disappeared.

I remembered a teaching I got from Sayadaw Utejaniya on the first retreat I did with him. When I was reporting experience—which is quite common for me—I was often reporting painful experience. Lots of dukkha.

On the last day of the retreat, when the retreat was over, I came across Tejaniya in the corridor. He wasn't speaking much English at the time; everything was through an interpreter. But he sees me, and he comes bowling up to me. He looks me in the eyes and says, "No dukkha," and marches off.

Investigating vedana—this feeling tone that underlies all experience—reveals profound insights about the nature of dukkha itself. When I truly investigated this during that retreat, it became bleeding obvious what Sayadaw Utejaniya was pointing toward. Fundamentally, there is no dukkha.

This investigation of vedana involves cultivating an interest in the feeling tone, the feeling quality of experience, however it presents itself to you. It's not a standardized package that fits everyone, but rather a process of becoming sensitive to the feeling aspect of being here in this place at this time, and then sending awareness to it. What is this clarifying? How does this work? The key is getting genuinely interested in it.

When deep concentration arises, something remarkable can happen. Pain might transform into elements—pure heat, movement, sensation without the overlay of suffering. But what does this mean for our understanding of vedana? If it's no longer actually painful, is it pleasant? The conventional categories suggest we can only have pleasant or painful.

I think it can transcend those three categories altogether—pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. There might be delight in the pain becoming manageable, transformed into heat and movement. There's pleasure in the relief that comes when suffering ends. But beyond this, there's the recognition that pain itself is just another concept.

Sometimes what emerges is genuine neutrality—not exactly delighting in the experience, but not suffering either. You might find neutrality in the very disappearance of painful sensations. This is seeing into the nature of pain itself. What exactly is pain?

Pain is actually a package deal. You get sensation, but you also get aversion. These elements mutually support each other—if you don't have aversion, you cannot have pain. When you tease that package apart through clear seeing, there's no pain. The sensation might be exactly the same or completely different, but there's no pain. What remains is pure sensation without thought, without commentary.

In that experience, you might feel genuine neutrality—a sense that everything is simply okay. It's not wonderful and it's not terrible; it's just totally okay. This can be quite fascinating, though some meditators actually grow bored with such subtlety after a while. There's nothing you can grab onto as being anything in particular, and the very spaciousness of it can feel uninteresting to minds accustomed to drama.

What Sayadaw Utejaniya was suggesting is that vedana itself involves judgment. What happens when you simply don't make that judgment? This is essentially the heart of the Vipassana technique—sensing every sensation without judging it as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

This investigation opens fascinating paradoxes. Many of us discover we can actually enjoy pain to some degree because it provides such a clear, concentrated experience to rest awareness upon. Even more intriguingly, we might enjoy emotional pain because it feeds our sense of self. You can observe this clearly in meditation when painful emotions begin to dissolve. An alarm arises: "Oh my God, if I don't think about this anymore, what will happen? I'll disappear!" And so the mind regenerates the pain.

There's a strange reassurance in pain, and that reassurance carries its own pleasure—the pleasure of knowing "I am a person who suffers from this." The very identification with our pain becomes part of how we know ourselves to exist.

This is the profound territory that opens when we begin to investigate vedana—not just noting pleasant and unpleasant, but seeing through the very mechanism by which experience gets categorized and how those categories create the sense of a someone who is experiencing them.

Yes, and there's a pleasure in that. There's a pleasure in, there's a satisfaction in being quite clear about that and finding a ground with that. So that would then be not neither pleasant nor painful. That would be a mix of definitely pleasant and definitely painful.

Again, these are categories. So they're concepts. A concept has a fixed border. Like, if it's pleasant, it's not painful. Obviously. That would be a contradiction and philosophers would be hammering at you. But in terms of experience... Experience doesn't have the border. Experience is not tidy. And so something can be simultaneously pleasant and painful. In fact, people experience it that way.

So again, that's the danger of concept. If you bring too conceptual a framework to the practice, then you start to mess up the experience to try to make it fit the concept. And this is the problem of the fundamentalist in every approach. So the concepts are useful, but don't let them take over.

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