Tracking Feeling (Workshop)

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 50:58

Over the past few days we've been emphasizing the role of body in the meditation practice. The practice we're doing is called Satipaṭṭhāna, and there are four Satipaṭṭhānas. Body is the first one, and it's not listed first because of alphabetical order. It's listed first because it's foundational to the whole thing, to the whole enterprise.

But the second Satipaṭṭhāna is vedanā, or feeling. This is what we're going to play around with this morning, and we'll talk more about it tonight. So let's begin with a meditation experiment in vedanā. As you do this, play with it. Don't take it seriously. Don't think that there's a right or a wrong. Just experiment and see what happens.

Settle awareness in your body and construct your meditation posture. Be aware of the sensations at the base of your body. From there, lift up through your spine. Relax your shoulders and let your head come into balance.

Let yourself become aware of what is happening throughout your body. At the bottom is the hardness and stability of your contact at the base. Rising up from there is the lift and firmness of your spine. Around that frame there is a field of sensations coming and going.

Start to settle your awareness on the movement of inbreath and outbreath. Now watch the movements of your breathing. Look at your breathing. Witness your breathing.

And now feel your breathing. Do not watch it. Do not look at it. Do not witness it. Feel it. Feel your breathing. Feel the movements.

Bring your awareness back to your whole body. Open awareness out to include your whole body. And from there, feel your body and everything happening within it. Feel your body.

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

"The texture. The texture of the breathing, the contact with the esophagus and the nostrils."

So you've got a sense of texture when you feel. Is that right? But you don't get that when you watch?

"Less."

Anyone else? Is there a difference?

"I find it very hard to do one without the other. So when I was watching, I realised that I was also feeling, and when I tried just to feel, I wasn't quite sure. Because they're always mixed up."

But they're distinct—you can tell the difference?

"Sometimes I do, but on this occasion I didn't feel something so strongly that I could separate it from watching."

But you do have a sense that it's twofold. There's watching and there's feeling, and that's normal.

"Yeah, so when I watch, I probably feel as well."

So I definitely feel something, but I can't do it without watching.

Yes, so you've got to have both at once. It's a package.

That's right. It's almost like I'm looking with my eyes. If I'm watching the breath in my nose, I feel like my eyes are looking at this place.

So there's a sense of the location from which you are aware, and this is associated with the eyes. I think that's actually quite a common experience.

Anyway, that's our little experiment. Some of you have done this before, and you're thinking, why do I have to do this again? The reason is because I just told you to. Because I'm in charge.

This is a way of introducing the whole subject of vedana, feeling. Vedana represents the affective or hedonic aspect of experience. The language that the Buddha uses can be quite precise. He's got a sophisticated technical vocabulary when he talks about experience.

One of the basic problems we have in understanding what the Buddha is talking about is that if you look at English and the range of words we have to talk about what happens in the mind, it's about this number of words. Usually people fall back on "thinking" as a kind of catch-all. If you look at the range of words that the Buddha has for describing what's going on in the mind, it's this big. He's got a considerable vocabulary. He's got many more words which are very precise than we have, which strongly suggests that we literally have no idea what he's talking about, because the concepts just aren't part of our culture.

So it can be quite challenging to actually work out what exactly he means when he uses a certain word. And especially since we're approaching it through translation, which is somebody else's interpretation.

The basic vocabulary that we use when talking about the Buddha's teaching comes from pioneer late nineteenth, early twentieth century English translators. Most of them were English gentlemen of the Victorian era who had absolutely no comprehension whatsoever about meditation practice. It was a complete mystery to them. You've got learned scholars who opined that meditation meant someone would sit down and commune with the devas, and the devas would give them messages, and this would be the

teaching that would come out of meditation. This is the sort of rubbish that they actually wrote about. They had no comprehension.

Did any of them ever practice?

No, no, no. They were scholars. They didn't go native completely. I mean, it was scandalous enough that someone like T.W. Rhys Davids actually studied Pali in Sri Lanka, which got in the way of his administrative duties. But it was okay because the British did admire linguists. But they were just linguists. And they were proper, objective nineteenth century scholars.

If you look at the image presented by how these pioneers introduced the Buddha to the Victorian public, he was presented as the perfect Victorian gentleman. Why do we think that the Buddha was against the priesthood of the Brahmins? It's because if you're a good Protestant gentleman, you're against the Catholic priesthood. So obviously priests are bad. Why was Buddhism presented as the religion, quote-unquote, of rationality? Because if you're a Protestant Victorian gentleman, you think rationality is right up there. And if you're going to present these uncivilized, barbaric black people, these Indians, as kind of civilized, well, you said, well, they're quite rational. They actually had what we might call a philosophy.

So a lot of it was PR. But it was presenting the Buddha to a Victorian imperialist, largely Christian audience in a way that wasn't threatening to them. So a lot of the translations are very Victorian Christian. And they really don't get what the Buddha's talking about because they really didn't get this whole project.

Patrick, can you give some examples? You said we have so many words for thinking or mind that came out in the translations. Can you give a sense of what's been lost?

One of them is mañña and the verb mañña, which comes from a root meaning mind, but it's an action, and it's usually translated as "conceiving." What does that mean?

Not at the moment. When I was obsessed with this years ago, I could have rattled off a few words, but I've forgotten them. I'm getting far too old for this job.

So anyway, we've got vedana. Now vedana comes from the root *vid*, to sense, to feel. And you get a whole number of words that come out of this. For example, the Vedas come out of this root. But the way the Buddha uses it, when he uses words based on this root, what's being suggested is intimacy—a close encounter with the experience.

So for example, last night we were talking about feeling, in terms of breathing, feeling the whole body. *Pat isanvedati*. That's a word based on this root. So it suggests intimacy, getting closer. In contrast, with words based on the root *pas*, to see—like vipassana, insight—these words suggest distance and detachment and objectivity. So words based on *vid* suggest more of a subjective relationship, while words based on *pas* suggest a more objective relationship.

Now, vedana is translated as feeling, which I think is quite reasonably good, except people mix it up with

emotion. People often think vedana has something to do with emotion. Well, it's connected with emotion, but it's not emotion. But like the English word feeling, vedana can indicate both what we experience and a way of experiencing.

So in English, we talk about feeling as a noun. "When you said that, you hurt my feelings." "You're taking no account of my feelings about this." Here we have feeling as a noun, but we also have it as a verb, as a way of experiencing. So you might say, "Well, I think that's a good idea, but I can't help but feel that it would be a disaster." Now that makes sense in English, doesn't it? If somebody says that, you know what they're talking about. So there, vedana is not a something, but a way of experiencing. Not something which is experienced, but a way of experiencing. And that, of course, was what we were doing in this little experiment—seeing if we could get in touch with that.

Now, feeling, of course, is very important. I've probably told you this story, but one of my profound realizations in the course of this practice occurred years ago. The first time I was living in Brisbane, I was on a bus. I lived in West End, heading down Boundary Street. I don't know how familiar you are with Brisbane geography, but at the bottom of Boundary Street is a pub. Which in those days was a working class pub. Now it's been all yuppified. And the bus stopped very close to the pub. And this old bloke got on the bus.

Well, at my age then, he was old. He was younger than I am now. He seemed to be about mid-sixties, I would say. Very overweight. Very stiff. Dressed in the Queensland working class uniform—singlet and shorts. Skin damaged by decades in the sun. And you take one look at him and you think, okay, this is an example of the body shaped, conditioned by decades of spending all day working, labouring in the hot sun, and every evening at the pub, downing as many beers as you can get hold of.

So he gets on the bus and he kind of staggers down the centre and sits behind me. On the window seat, there was another old codger who was sitting there, and they knew each other. And the bloke who was already sitting there said to this new arrival, "G'day Bill, how are you feeling?" And Bill replied, "Buggered if I know, mate."

And in that moment, I realized that Bill was actually a bodhisattva who had descended from the heavens to give me a teaching which I really needed to learn. Which was: if you don't know how you're feeling, as a practitioner, you're in trouble. You've really got to know how you feel. And this is the realm of vedana.

Now, if we want to understand what vedanā is about, we could compare it to flavour. When we eat, we experience the physical sensations of the food—like the elements we've been talking about and playing with: hardness, softness, wetness, dryness, and so on. But we also experience the flavour of the food. And the flavour is not the sensations, though it's intimately connected with them. It's distinct from them.

Generally speaking, it's the flavour that moves us. It's the flavour that provokes a response. "Oh, I like that—I'll take more." "Oh, I don't like that one—I'll just pass it by." If we register the flavour as pleasant,

we're moved to take more. If we register the flavour as unpleasant, we're moved to take less. And if we can't find any flavour, we're moved to indifference. But what moves us, what stimulates a response, is the flavour.

Vedanā is like the flavour of experience, which means it's an aspect of affect—where affect is that which has the capacity to move us. We might say of something, "That was very moving," or "I was moved by what you said." What we're saying is that there was a response. Where you have vedanā, feeling, you have a response. It's always the case. It's always built in.

The Buddha says there are three basic categories of response, and therefore three basic categories of feeling. Pleasant feeling moves us to reach out and to hold on. Painful or unpleasant feeling moves us to resist or reject the experience, to distance ourselves or defend ourselves. And finally, when we don't know what we are feeling—when the feeling is neither painful nor pleasant—we move to ignore it. We just don't notice it. Or, if we do notice it, we move to dullness, doubt, and confusion. "What do I do about it? Do I take hold of it? Or reject it? Or what?" But in every situation, we are moved.

In his teaching on dependent arising, the Buddha says contact conditions feeling. Contact refers to the immediacy of experience, and what he's saying is that where there's contact, where there's experience, there is feeling.

This relationship is very, very tight. He's not saying that there's contact, there's experience, and then later on feeling joins the party. He's saying that in the moment of experience there is already feeling. And there's always feeling. There's never an instance where there's not feeling. It's locked in. This suggests that experience comes to us already affect-laden. In other words, we are already moved by the experience. We are already responding to what is happening.

The Buddha says contact conditions feeling, and then he says feeling conditions craving. Now this relationship is different. If you've got contact, you have feeling—there's no possibility otherwise. Even a Buddha, if he has contact, he has feeling. But if you have feeling, you don't necessarily have craving. If there's craving, that craving arose from feeling. But you can have feeling without the craving.

And this is one of the reasons why feeling is considered so important, because it's at that point where we respond, where we have a choice. This is the area of particular interest in the Buddha's ethics. This is where we can make a difference. But in every case, we are feeling, we are mood.

So when we come to do the practice, what we're doing is experiencing body and mind. And how do we experience, for example, body? I remember when I started doing meditation practice, the instructions, whether verbal or in books, were invariably "watch the meditation object." Watch, for example, the body. Sometimes in the non-dual traditions they talk about the witness—be the witness of whatever is happening.

But what about feeling life rather than watching it? What about feeling the breathing rather than

watching it?

We could say that watching the breathing creates a relationship to the meditation object that emphasizes awareness, consciousness, what the Buddha calls vijñāna. Feeling the meditation object, feeling the breath, is a relationship that emphasizes feeling. So there are different relationships that we can have when we approach meditation.

Some people find that their natural way of working with an experience is watching. Other people find that it's actually feeling. And other people have both. For some people, if they're watching the experience in meditation, this indicates a degree of distance, a separation from the meditation object, while feeling indicates getting closer to it. For some people, watching is more objective, while feeling is more subjective.

For some people—and these are just reports that people have given over the years—watching is more specific and more detailed. So when we're doing all the detail of the breathing, that would be a relationship probably of watching, while feeling tends to be more general. For some people, the experience of feeling the meditation object is very clean but very difficult to communicate, whereas the experience of watching may not be that clean but is easier to communicate. So if you're reporting an experience in a meditation interview, the tendency is to report what you watch, what you see, as opposed to what you feel.

For some people, with breathing, if they watch it, they experience breathing in one part of the body; if they feel it, they experience it in another part. For some people, if they watch the breath, it naturally echoes at the nostrils, where the breath is less embodied. But when they feel the breath, it naturally brings the awareness down into the body.

Now these are just experiences that occur to some meditators, not everyone. For some people there is a very clear distinction between watching and feeling. For some people, these distinctions make absolutely no sense whatsoever. They go through this learned disquisition and look at me and say, "What the hell are you talking about?" There's always a certain proportion of the population who have that response, because the distinctions just don't make any sense in terms of their actual experience.

A student asks whether this relates to citta, the definition of heart and mind. We're going to get onto that, but citta includes both the affective and the cognitive. In our culture we tend to emphasize the cognitive—like the use of the word "mind" for citta. If you're meditating, you're training the mind. But of course you're training the heart as well. Cognitive and affective—these two sides.

This also comes out in the way the Buddha uses language. When the Buddha is talking about what he sees as the fundamental problem that we have, sometimes he'll use cognitive language. The fundamental problem is avidyā—ignorance, delusion. You notice that's cognitive. Sometimes he'll say the fundamental problem we have is craving. Where is that? That's in the heart. That's affective.

When he's talking about what's the ultimate solution to the problem, sometimes he'll use a common term.

The ultimate solution to the problem is bodhi, literally awakening.

Classically translated as "enlightenment"—which is cognitive. By the way, why did Rhys Davids choose "enlightenment" to translate bodhi? Because it was referring to the European Enlightenment. So it gets a big tick from the Victorians. That's why we use the term enlightenment, although it means awakening.

So bodhi is cognitive. And sometimes what the Buddha says is that the ultimate solution to the problem is nibbāna. And nibbāna is an affective term. It's a heart experience.

Now, when I say bodhi is cognitive, I don't mean it's a cognitive phenomenon—I mean it's a cognitive word, a concept. They're different sides of the same coin, but they're quite distinct. Awakening is cognitive: it's like I can see what's going on, I understand what's going on. Nibbāna is affective, of the heart. It's the cooling of the heart.

Now, they go together. Let's say I finally recognize what's going on, and because of that I calm down. Or it could work the opposite way: the heart calms down and now I can finally see what's going on. It wouldn't be "I see what's happening and I'm furious about it"—that wouldn't be nibbāna, would it? So these are the two sides of the human being.

We're talking about vedanā, feeling, which represents a different relationship to experience—quite distinct from watching, usually indicating intimacy and subjectivity. And of course we've got words based on watching: vipassanā, insight, and so on.

Now, as we said, the Buddha uses a whole range of quite sophisticated technical terms to analyze and describe experience. But these words are not science. They're more poetry than they are science. What I'm suggesting by that is not that these terms have a single objectively correct meaning that we are supposed to identify in our experience. And it's not that there exists a single objectively correct experience and an objectively correct practice to get to that objectively correct experience. Experience is much more untidy than our concepts about experience.

It's really interesting, I find, to look closely at what the Buddha is saying and try to sort it out. But it is possible to get too caught up in the meanings of the terms and miss what's actually going on. So don't get caught up in concepts like watching and feeling. Words and concepts are just ways of reading our experience. They're just names. They're names of something, perhaps, that we need to discover. Or they're names of things we have already discovered but just haven't yet named.

So if you're taking on the job of tracking vedanā, using vedanā as a meditation object—or anything else, for that matter—we start with the experience, and from there we interpret it. I'm aware of this. Could this be vedanā? What we do not do is start with the interpretation and from there look for the experience: "Where is vedanā?" Always ground yourself on the experience. But at some point we have to read the experience. We have to interpret it. We have to understand it. And that's where we bring in these terms.

So if you find that a term helps you understand the experience, that's good. It clarifies the experience for you. But it's not that there's only one meaning. Again, it's like poetry. A good poet is very precise in their language, yet different people can quite legitimately get different meanings from the same poem. And I think the Dharma is like that. It's more like poetry than science.

What we're doing in this practice is seeking to directly encounter what is already here, already available. But if we have a map of the area, then we can put our experience into a context. And that, apart from anything else, gives us a way of communicating experience with others. So don't look for something to match the concept. But rather, if we understand the concept, then we'll recognize it if we experience it. The concepts are useful, but don't get caught up in them. This is a danger with this kind of talk where we're going on about subtle conceptual distinctions.

One student shared an example of this complexity. He was out doing a bushwalk and saw a butterfly come by. Normally when he sees a butterfly, there's an automatic response of "oh, lovely." But this time there was an automatic kind of aversion, which he interpreted with interest—"that's weird, why am I responding this way?" All this happened very quickly. And at the same time, what he saw in the colors of the butterfly reminded him of a German Shepherd. It was the same colors on the butterfly. As a child, his cousins had German Shepherds, and he was always scared of them. One day the German Shepherd broke through a rabbit cage and devoured his rabbit in front of him. So there was this interesting discovery—normally the vedana toward a butterfly would be "I like this, I want more of it." But in this case, something else happened.

Experience is always complex. And in this case, perception got in the way, because the perception wasn't "oh, that's a butterfly." The perception was "that's a German Shepherd." Change the perception, you change the affective response. And this is one of the things that we discover in the practice—how our experience is conditioned by so many different aspects, that what we take to be solid and real is just this network of conditions. And it's not so solid as we thought it was.

So if you want to, if you're interested, you could make vedana your meditation object, play around with it. What we did this morning in the experiment was feeling rather than watching. If that was interesting to you, you could explore it further. If it's not interesting to you, forget about it. Don't worry about it.

Usually, certainly in the Burmese traditions, they emphasize experiencing vedana within the body. And they do this because the contact, the phassa, the direct experience of body, of touch sensation, is stronger and clearer than in other senses. So the vedana tends to be stronger and clearer.

One piece of advice I came across in Burma was from a book about an insight method that's very popular in Mandalay and that area, but has never been exported. They have vedana as their grounding object. Reading this introduction to the meditation method, one of the pieces of advice the author gave was: do not look for vedana. And the reason is, don't look for it because it's already here. We can miss it precisely because we're so busy looking for it, thinking it must be something special, and it must be hidden—that's

why we haven't come across it yet. But it's already here, and it's already obvious. So it's a question of not looking for anything, but feeling what's already here.

And this brings us to one interesting aspect about meditation practice: often the hardest thing to find is the most obvious.

This was clarified for me years ago. I was reading a book on the history wars in Australia—the black armband versus the white blindfold approaches to Australian history. There was a quote from Geoffrey Blainey in which he talked about what the job of the historian is. He said the job of the historian is to look at the records left by people in the past in order to work out what was going on at that time. And if you're engaged in that project, the most difficult thing to discover is what was bleeding obvious to those people. The reason is because we never record what is bleeding obvious. Why would we? It's bleeding obvious. So we don't write it down. We don't record it. If you're coming at it later on, as a historian, that's the most difficult thing to pick up.

I realized the same applies to meditation practice. What's most difficult to find is what is most obvious. Because it's so obvious, so habitual, we overlook it. We assume that we're looking for something special, something spiritual, something Buddhist-y. We assume we don't know. And we assume that whatever it is we're looking for must be located somewhere else, and we've got to go hunting for it. But what we're looking for is already obvious, and it's already here. So don't look anywhere else. Just recognize what's already here. This can be helpful advice if we're working with vedanā, because vedanā is already here.

Someone asked whether this might also be connected to the Buddha's understanding that we are fundamentally bodies—sentient bodies—and that everything is in the body. Definitely, that's where the whole game is. And particularly with insight meditation, that's one reason why body is the first satipaṭṭhāna. Because this is where it happens. This is where the whole project unfolds.

There's an expression that you come across in the Buddha's teaching about experiencing enlightenment *kāyena*—with the body, in the literal translation. Now this is controversial. There are some people who say it shouldn't be translated literally as "with the body," that it should be translated as something like "experientially" or "personally," that it doesn't really mean the body. I can't help but suspect that if the Buddha said it, he meant it. Everything happens in the body.

Of course, as you refine the body, becoming aware of increasingly subtle aspects, what you're left with is what's called the mental body, the mind body. So the concept of body goes deeper than our normal anatomical concept. People do have experiences that seem completely disembodied. But as a general principle, it's the relationship to the body which is absolutely central, and which gives you your entry in. Once you're in there, you might find experiences that seem to have nothing to do with body, quote-unquote. But how did you get there?

Someone asked how this links with the Dhammapada, where the Buddha talks about the mind leading. In

the Dhammapada, mind is the chief, mind is the leader. But where is mind? It's indissolubly linked with the body. If there's a mind, there's a body. And if there's a living body, there's a mind. This is part of why sometimes the Buddha uses the term nāma-rūpa to emphasize this mind-body integration—that where you have one, you have the other.

You cannot have the experience of body without mind, because you cannot have any experience without mind. But equally, you cannot have mind unless it's located in a body. Even in the deva realms, according to the Buddha, beings have bodies—more subtle bodies, but bodies nonetheless. So it's always interconnected. The term we use for mind in this context is mano, which is mind as a sense sensitivity, the sixth sense. What mind does in this capacity is absorb all the data of the physical world through the five physical senses, plus its own forms of data—perceptions, thoughts, memories—and bring all of this together to create the sense of "me in my world." So it works together with the physical world.

There's a related question about teachers who say that no effort is required, that realization is already here. This touches on the whole issue of dealing with what is already present. Certain aspects of dharma teachings emphasize this—that what we're looking for is already here. We simply don't recognize it. We think of ourselves as being over here while what we're looking for is over there, and somehow we must make a journey to reach it.

The Buddha does speak in those terms. The idea of a path, for example—a path from here to there. But the flip side of this is the intimacy that what we're looking for is actually already happening.

Consider insight practice. What do you want to see and understand? The three universal characteristics: anicca, dukkha, anatta—impermanence, suffering, not-self. There's a clue in the name: they're universal. They're already here. There has never been a moment in our lives when we have not been intimate with anicca, dukkha, and anatta. They're built into the very fabric of experience. It's simply a question of noticing. We tend not to notice because we're so busy doing something else.

In traditions that call themselves non-dual, this recognition is emphasized more. In Theravada, it's emphasized less. But you do find this stream—the recognition that what I'm looking for is already here, already available. If I'm pushing beyond what's already here to get to something else, that's when I trip up. That's when I tend to make too much effort, or misdirect my effort.

But when I start practice, this pushing is inevitably what I do. It's only gradually, over time, as sensitivity develops, that I begin to recognize: it's already here. And often when we have some kind of realization experience, we can feel that we've simply stumbled into what has always been available to us—but now we're noticing it.

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