The Ocean of Affect

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 48:13

This morning we played around with, experimented with, and discussed vedana, feeling. Tonight we're going to talk about it in a bit more depth. The name of the talk is "The Ocean of Affect."

We start with this concept of vedana, usually translated as feeling, and what it refers to is the affective aspect of experience, where affect is that which has the power to move us, to stimulate a response. Vedana, or feeling, moves us to respond to what is happening.

We compared feeling to flavour—the flavour of food, not the physical sensations that we experience when we eat, but the flavour which is inevitably bound up with those sensations. Generally it's the flavour that moves us to take more or to have less.

The Buddha says there are three categories of feeling, and each one has its characteristic movement, its characteristic response. Pleasant feeling moves us to reach out and hold, to come closer and embrace. Painful feeling moves us to resist or to reject, to distance ourselves or to defend ourselves. But of course, sometimes we do not know what we are feeling, and then feeling is neither painful nor pleasant. This is the third category. When we recognize that feeling, we are moved either to ignore the event because it's not worthy of notice, or we move to dullness, doubt, and confusion in terms of what to do about it. But whatever the category of feeling, we are moved. We do respond.

I like the English word "feeling" very much. It can refer both to what we experience, as when we talk about someone's feelings, but it's also a way of experiencing things, as when we might speak about feeling our way forward. Tonight we're mostly concerned with this second aspect: feeling as a way of experiencing.

The first thing to recognize is that feeling is absolutely fundamental to our existence. If you look at our physical world, we live on the floor of a vast ocean composed of air. We are so dependent on this ocean that if we're separated from it, even for a brief period of time, we would die. This means that air is the most powerful and the most obvious aspect of existence, unforgettable in any circumstances. But as we all know, in fact we tend to ignore it completely. We notice it only when it disrupts our habitual functioning—when we smell it, or it seems particularly hot, or particularly cold, or we have trouble ingesting it. At other times, at most times, it completely disappears. We're not concerned with it at all. We don't even notice it.

This, by the way, reminds me of words of wisdom from my mother in my early adulthood. I told her that I was moving away from Sydney. She was born and raised in Sydney, and she was pretty horrified by a

certain number of things I got up to, but this really hit her. Why would you leave Sydney? I said, well, it's so crowded and the air so polluted. She shook her head and said, "Never trust air you cannot see." I thought, this person has wisdom beyond my capacity.

Our psychological world is quite similar. We live in an ocean of affect, of feelings, and we tend not to notice it until it disturbs us in some way. Yet like air, it governs everything.

So let's have a look at feeling. First of all, where do we find feeling? The Buddha says the six sense fields condition contact; contact conditions feeling. The sense fields are the sensitivities that together constitute a sentient body. In Pali this is satviññanakaya. These sensitivities provide the location where all experience takes place. Where does experience actually happen? Well, it happens here, doesn't it? You probably think it happens out there somewhere, but it happens here. This is the location for experience.

Each of us is a locus of sensitivity surrounded by an ocean of stimuli. Sense data floods into the sentient body through the sensitivities of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, minding. And each sensitivity is a receptivity.

to particular kinds of data. When the Buddha talks about the eye, for example, he's not referring to the physical organ as a doctor might. He's referring to the sensitivity of that part of our body which is receptive to light and colour. These are two little bits of the body that have that particular sensitivity. The sensitivity itself is what the Buddha calls "eye"—and so on through the physical senses. For him, mind is also a sensitivity. It's a sensitivity to non-physical data, such as thoughts, perceptions, concepts, and so on.

Each sensitivity picks up its own unique flow of data, and then all six streams come into the mind, where they're woven together to create a world. This is the world that we live in.

Depending on eye sensitivity and forms, visual awareness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. Contact conditions feeling. This applies to all six senses with the same analysis: depending on the sensitivity and the corresponding object, the corresponding awareness arises. Something is present. The meeting of the three is contact.

Contact is a coming together. Contact conditions feeling. As we've said this morning, contact translates the Pali word *phassa*, which literally means touch. The Buddha is saying that we are touched by what streams through the senses, and this touch is happening here and now. It is the immediacy of experience—the converging of the sensitivity, the sense object, and awareness. It's happening now.

Contact is like the arena of experience. It's the place where it happens, where everything intersects and comes together. Feeling is found in the response to experience. If I bring my hands together very gently and they touch, that touch is in a specific location. It's an event where something is happening. But as soon as there's touch, there's a response—warm, soft, pleasant—and there's just that little response of relaxation and opening in the body. That response is the feeling. The impact is contact. The response to that is feeling.

This relationship between contact and feeling, as we mentioned this morning, is particularly intimate. Contact and feeling are as close as stimulus and response. Where there is stimulus, there is already response. Where there is response, there is already stimulus. Stimulus and response, contact and feeling—they're different sides of the same coin. Contact is happening now, which means a response is happening now.

Let's look at one discourse where there's a discussion on feeling. It's very brief, from the Cūḷavedalla Sutta, "The Lesser Dialectic," in Majjhima Nikāya 44. The teaching is given by Dhammadinnā. She was an arahant bhikkhunī. I'm pretty sure she's the only woman who has her own sutta, her own discourse. The Buddha's teachings are the suttas—or in Sanskrit, sūtras—but sometimes a senior student would give a teaching, and the Buddha would hear about it. He might be present, or he might be told about it later, and he would give it the seal of approval, saying, "That's exactly what I would have said under those circumstances." Then that becomes a sutta. The Cūḷavedalla Sutta is the only sutta given by a woman, so Dhammadinnā must have been particularly important back in those early days.

This is what she says: "Whatever is felt physically or psychologically, as pleasant or soothing, is pleasant feeling."

Whatever is felt, physically or psychologically, as painful and hurting is painful feeling. Whatever is felt, physically or psychologically, as neither soothing nor hurting, is neither painful nor pleasant feeling.

This is her analysis. Again, you notice it's really brief. This is typical of the suttas—you've got to expand them to find out what's going on. But what she seems to be referring to when she's talking about feeling is the capacity of experience to soothe or to hurt. And this is what's central to vedanā, to feeling.

So as we've seen, feeling indicates a way of experiencing. She's saying that feeling is whatever is felt as pleasant or experienced as pleasant, felt as painful, experienced as painful. This "felt as," this "experiencing as," represents a form of understanding, of knowing. Because I know that it's pleasant. I know that it's painful. So there's an element of understanding. But this understanding is much more intimate than how we usually speak about understanding or knowing.

Let's say, in ordinary language, I say "I know something." If we say that, we are implying a subject-object distinction. There's a knower and there's what is known. And usually it's the I that knows and something which is known. Feeling implies a knowing which is much more intimate than that. And therefore it's less nameable. It can't quite be pinned down as a something separate from the one who knows it. If I say "I know something," that something is what I am experiencing, what I know. But feeling doesn't really tell us what we are experiencing, but how we are responding.

So feeling is found in a response that moves us before we have had time to think about it. Contact conditions feeling. Later on comes perception, thought, and so on and so forth. So before we've had any time to think about it, there's already a response. And that means there's already some kind of

understanding involved. Because our movement to hold out and to reach, our movement to resist and reject, is based on some kind of assessment of the event. But this is a foundational assessment, built into the fabric of experience itself. It's not something found later, once we consider what's going on.

And the Buddha says there are three fundamental responses, depending on the three categories of feeling. If the feeling of a sensation is pleasant, we're moved to hold it. If the feeling of a sensation is painful or unpleasant, we're moved to reject or resist. And if the feeling of the sensation is neither painful nor pleasant, we are moved to ignore it as beneath notice. Or if we do notice it, we're moved to confusion and doubt about it. What to do? Shall I hold this? Shall I reject it? Shall I hold it? Reject. Hold. Reject. The mind oscillates back and forth.

So these responses occur before we have made any conscious decision. And this brings us to the Buddha's teaching on cetanā, usually translated as intention, but perhaps we could see it as choice or decision. Cetanā is the decision to act that arises from the perceived significance of an event.

Now choice or decision, cetanā, is extremely important for the Buddha's ethics, for his teaching on how we live, because it represents how we shape the direction of our lives. And he even equates choice or decision or intention, cetanā, with karma, morally significant action.

So where does feeling fit into karma? Feeling represents the world as already given that demands a decision from us. We are already thrown into the world. And that thrownness has the flavor of vedanā. It's pleasant. It's painful. I don't know.

And it's that which demands a decision. What do I do about it? And our fundamental decision is all about how this experienced event that's happening right now is positioned in relation to us and our interests. Is it pleasant, to be held onto? Is it painful, to be rejected? Is it neither, to be not noticed at all?

So feeling has us already deciding, already engaging. The choice, karma, comes in later. It's almost like a kind of review of a commitment we've already made. Feeling is elemental. It's absolutely fundamental to experience. It's so fundamental that it's very difficult to get hold of, and it can be very difficult to understand conceptually.

At this level of elemental response, we find ourselves up against the limits of language. If we're going to speak about something, that something has to be an object out there, separate from the speaker. But feeling gives us a world before we recognize this world as separate from us. We are already committed to it. We are already responding, already entangled. And it's this response that we have to the world that helps create a sense of a world that we can recognize as separate from us and demanding our participation.

Feeling is absolutely elemental. It's before we construct any kind of perception, thought, and so on. It's the basis and foundation upon which we construct perception and thinking.

This brings us to the concept of sentience, which is another key concept in the Buddha's ethics. You notice that vedanā is right at the heart of the Buddha's understanding of ethics. For the Buddha, we are sentient beings, where to be sentient is to be aware and to feel. These are the two aspects of sentience. Living beings are sentient. Non-living things are not sentient.

For example, I may have an air conditioner and I may program it to maintain a steady temperature of twenty-five degrees by means of a thermostat. But we don't say that the thermostat feels hot or the thermostat feels cold. We, on the other hand, feel hot or feel cold. This capacity to feel is sentience. We are sentient bodies. This is another aspect of the Buddha's understanding of the human condition.

Sentience is central for the Buddha's understanding of ethics because our circle of ethical concern—who we should be concerned about—is that of sentient beings. In other words, the Buddha's ethical concern does not stop at the border of our species. Often in ethical systems, that boundary is taken for granted. But for the Buddha, all species that we can recognize as being sentient demand our ethical concern.

If you think about the first way of training, the first precept—abstaining from killing living beings—the beings covered by this way of training are sentient beings. We mentioned this on the first night: beings who feel pain, love life, and fear death. Roughly speaking, if a being tries to escape our blow, it's covered by this way of training. And you notice that the first characteristic of a sentient being is feeling pain. In other words, for the Buddha, sentience entails pain. If there is sentience, there is pain.

We could go so far as to say that the difference between a robot and a living being is not their comparative intelligence. That's got nothing to do with it. The difference is whether or not they feel pain. If an entity feels pain, that entity is sentient.

We won't speculate about robots, but there's no doubt that we are sentient. We are aware and we feel. And that means we are exposed to pain. That's built in. This becomes quite evident in our meditation practice. We run around living our lives caught up in our habitual obsessions and dullness.

And then when we press the pause button on all of that in order to meditate, when we allow ourselves to be aware of whatever we are experiencing now, without any barrier, what we recognise is the pervasive pain. Often in the form of pervasive restlessness, an inability for the body and the mind to settle and absorb into the present.

And that's one reason, maybe the main reason, why meditation is so easy to postpone. Did you know that there have been many scientific studies on mindfulness, and that these studies have proven beyond all doubt that of all human activities, meditation is the easiest to postpone? And you all know that, don't you, from your own experience.

Why is it so easy to postpone? It's because we don't want to expose ourselves to what we know or sense is happening just beneath the surface. When we give ourselves permission to feel whatever we are actually feeling now, without all the usual distractions and superficial preoccupations that we fill our days with,

then we expose ourselves to an underlying sense of unease or dis-ease. And we don't want to see this because what it reveals is the vulnerability of experience, the pain inherent in sentience. It reveals the sensitivity of the heart and the uncontrollable flow of disturbances that arise when the heart's sensitivity is bombarded by sense stimuli.

I also suspect that this is one reason why, when we're meditating, we find it so easy to get lost in our thinking. Because if we get lost in our thinking, which we can do very quickly and easily—we're all very skilled at that—then what we're doing is running away from the immediate experience of the senses to live as refugees in a conceptual world. We create fantasies to separate us from the felt reality of the sentient body.

So if we're going to go deeply into our felt experience, what we need to do is face this vulnerability. Here we can talk about the role of feeling in our meditation practice. We've talked about feeling as being a way of experiencing, not just an object of experience. This suggests that feeling can be practiced. But how do we practice feeling, especially since it's so elemental and so entangled with the immediacy of experience itself?

I think the key is intimacy, which we talked about this morning. What we want to do is get close, as close as possible, to the felt touch of contact, the immediacy of sensation itself. And to do this, we have to open up to the vulnerability of sentience and drop the layers of armour that we normally carry, often in the form of layers and layers of concepts. We have to open up to the currents of pleasure and pain that are flowing through us regardless of our consent, often absolutely different to what we want.

One possible way of exploring this is, for example, when you're sitting, begin by checking feeling. And the easiest to check is pleasure and pain—they're the most obvious. Am I experiencing pleasure now? If so, I let myself relax into the pleasure. Am I experiencing pain now? I let myself surrender into the pain.

Now when we're doing this, we're not concerned about being clear or accurate in our awareness. Up to now we've been talking about being really precise, clear, accurate. But that concern for clarity belongs to what we were calling watching, the cognitive aspect of awareness. Here we're interested in feeling, which arises before perception, before judgment, before concept. So it may lack the clear boundaries of concept.

One of the reasons why we find concepts so attractive is that concepts have very discrete, definite borders. The concept of pleasant feeling—it's good, it's pleasant, I like it. Then there's this absolute border, and then you have the concept of painful feeling, and it's definitely not good. And they're definitely completely different. But all of that is concept.

The realm of feeling, the realm of intimacy, may lack these clean boundaries. Feeling is found in the disturbed vulnerability that characterises human experience before any perception or any concept arises about it. However, once it emerges, once it becomes clear, then we may become very clear about how the feeling is presenting itself to us. But this is after it emerges, and it's reasonably strong.

So if we're working with feeling, it's about surrendering into experience. Not getting lost in our concepts about the experience, but surrendering into it, relaxing into it. Staying with the vulnerability of sentience. And as we do this practice, we might get a sense of how deep these layers of concept go.

They're like layers of cling wrap blocking us from direct sensation. So we work our way through those layers. But of course, each one of those layers is characterized by feeling. So it's available. It's not that we have to dig deep down before we come to feeling. Every step of the way is dominated by vedanā.

But as a project, we're learning to stay with the vulnerability of sentience.

Now, we continue to construct a cognitive world out of our experience. We've been doing this quite literally longer than we can remember. So we're not going to stop now. But that's fine. When we notice that we're lost in a world of perception, judgment, and concept, what to do? Surrender to it and feel the intimacy and vulnerability of being in that world, the world of concept. Because that world also has its own unique flavor.

And as we do this, what we might notice is how feeling flows like a river. Nothing in it is stable. No single experience is reliable. When we're practicing with feeling, we're not disturbing this flow by clinging to any particular feeling. This is it. Grab it.

Of course we hold on to pleasant feeling, but we also hold on to painful feeling, which is really perverse, but that's what we do. Oh, this is my pain. This is the tragedy of my life. These other meditators, they think they've got dukkha. It's nothing compared to my dukkha.

This is the clinging to feeling which so characterizes our behavior. Instead, we enter into this river and allow pleasant to succeed painful, and painful to succeed pleasant. What we might find as we practice mindfulness of feeling is that feeling itself transforms. Pleasant segues into painful and back again. It's like a freely flowing river.

As mindfulness becomes stronger and clear understanding builds, we may discover more subtle levels of feeling—those that we originally sensed as neither painful nor pleasant. This is the level of feeling characterized by ignorance and delusion, and therefore the most difficult to actually pinpoint. Because if we pinpoint it, then we're clear about it, and so it's probably going to transform into something either pleasant or painful. This third category is the most obscure in practice.

But as we go deeper and deeper, this third category of neither painful nor pleasant transforms into genuinely neutral feeling. This neutrality emerges when the heart is dominated by mindfulness and equanimity. What characterizes it, quite counter-intuitively, is that neutral feeling—genuinely neutral feeling—is actually more pleasant than pleasant, usually. Which is quite odd.

But when this emerges, when the heart is dominated by equanimity and mindfulness, the neutral feeling represents the maturity of the practice, where, as the Buddha says in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the

practitioner lives independently, not clinging to anything in the world. This represents, in its mature form, a stream of feeling that does not move into craving or drivenness. And so this is the equanimity of the awakened one.

Any questions?

"I think that today, and we've touched on it tonight, the idea that there's choice with vedanā. Is that right?"

Vedanā comes before choice. But then we're presented with a world in which we're already entangled. And then we recognize, oh, what to do about it? Then there's choice. And of course choice has vedanā. And what we choose has vedanā. Because vedanā is inescapable. It's not that there's vedanā here and then there's other things happening. All along the line—vedanā, vedanā, vedanā, vedanā, vedanā. This is one of the things that makes it so difficult to get a handle on.

This is a very interesting question: can one experience more than one feeling at the same time? This is the kind of question Buddhist philosophers have been debating for thousands of years, and it is indeed a very good question. If you follow orthodox Theravada, the answer is no—you can only have one at a time.

Does that mean one feeling is dominant? Not necessarily, but each feeling, like every event, lasts only for a moment and is immediately succeeded by another. So according to Theravada orthodoxy, if I think I'm experiencing two things at once, it's because the mind is going back and forth rapidly—this one, this one, this one, this one—and it merely appears to be two things at once.

But let me just say that this is a philosophical orthodoxy. It's not necessarily your experience. So the question is, as a practitioner, do you experience more than one thing at once? Forget about orthodoxy. Forget about neuroscience too. If you're making your living that way, I suppose you could go on about it. But we're practitioners, not neuroscientists. What they say is completely irrelevant to our experience. Never let someone talk you out of your experience. You're a practitioner—the one thing you have to rely upon is your experience. Your job is to be clear about it. If you experience something, that's it. You experience it.

Now, maybe if you want to bow down before the altar of neuroscience and worship accordingly, you might create an intellectual framework that says, "Oh, I'm experiencing more than one thing at once, but that's because my experience is inadequate, and if I go deeper, I will recognize the truth of whatever science says." But stick to your experience as a practitioner.

Someone wisely commented that they've had some experiences they don't want to stick to. That's a very wise observation indeed.

I'm not actually sure, but I always assumed that this one-thing-at-a-time doctrine—this is *khaṇavāda,* the doctrine of moments—is characteristic of Theravada. But I believe I read somewhere that every Buddhist tradition, at least in theory, subscribes to this theory. They may ignore it in practice because it's

completely unverifiable through direct experience. So you do find different attitudes in different traditions. But we're talking about orthodox Theravada here, not Theravada in general. I mean, how many people actually know what the orthodoxy is? How many practitioners doing meditation have the foggiest idea what Theravada orthodoxy actually says? Perhaps 0.001 percent. So it's pretty irrelevant. As practitioners, given that we're not doing a PhD in Buddhist philosophy, it doesn't matter what the philosophers think. What matters is: what do I experience? That's the important thing.

Someone mentioned feeling a bit dull, a bit foggy, and that while I was talking about this, it felt like a whole new way of dealing with that experience—just recognizing it as neither pleasant nor unpleasant, just this whole thing.

I'm always puzzled by the common interpretation of the third type of vedana. The Buddha says *sukha vedanā, dukkha vedanā, adukkhamasukha vedanā*. So the third one is literally "not unpleasant, not pleasant" vedana. That's precisely what he says. And I'm always puzzled why people think he's saying "neutral." If he wanted to say neutral, he would have said neutral. He has a word for neutral: *tatramajjhat tatā*. He could have said *tatramajjhattatā vedanā*.

But he didn't. He said "not painful, not pleasant." So what is he talking about? I think, in context, what he's talking about is: I don't know. It isn't painful, it isn't pleasant—I don't know what it is.

And when you look at the three basic movements of the heart—greed, anger, and ignorance—ignorance arises from this third category of feeling. Why would ignorance arise from neutrality? This is what the Buddha says: you have the three movements—lobha, dosa, moha. Moha is generally translated as ignorance, and moha comes from the third category of feeling. That's basic Buddhism.

Now, I warn you that this is my interpretation, so feel free to chuck it out the window. Analayo says he's determined that the third category is neutral feeling, and I hesitate before I disagree with Analayo—but I just do. What to do?

All of this is theoretical, and so it's not particularly important from the perspective of the meditator. What's important is the clarity of your experience. If you have a question like "Is it neutral or is it something else?" or "Can two things be aware at once or not?"—these are excellent questions for practice. Clarify them in the practice. That process makes the mind sharper and clearer, and you go deeper into the nature of experience.

But what theory you wrap around it? That's not important. So long as you've got some kind of conceptual framework that helps you make sense of the experience, that gives it meaning in some way—that's all that counts. And it doesn't even have to be Buddhist. There are Christians who do Buddhist meditation, and their theoretical framework is Christianity. And it works.

A student shared that they had been thinking back to the earlier discussion about awareness and consciousness, and the Susan Blackmore poem with the question "What am I aware of now?" Their

experience was that sometimes awareness seems like a shifting stage, but when they applied that question repeatedly—now, and then now, and then now—there was only one stage, and it became quite clear. They found that question helpful for clarifying what's going on.

Questions are important, but a good question is much more important than any answer you come up with. A good question sends awareness in a useful direction. It clarifies experience. So questions are good. And doubt can be very good.

Someone asked about magical thinking. What have you got in mind? What's magical thinking? They offered an example: "Crystals cure cancer." Do they? I tried it once—it only burned holes in my socks. That's pretty powerful.

No, I really have nothing to say about magical thinking. It's not something I'm preoccupied with. I see a lot of people firmly entrenched in magical thinking.

I think it's common. And while I view that as every minute they spend on magical thinking, which is just because they believe it makes it real, versus whether it's real or not, is one minute away from sitting. One minute away from practice. Probably wasting time.

But in this project, what we're interested in is the nature of experience. The project is to clarify the experience. And it's really important to have faith in your own experience.

In Burma, depending on the teacher, of course, but sometimes you go in for interviews six days a week and you give a very precise description of what you think is your best meditation over the previous twenty-four hours. Now, at some point, you're going to walk in and report something which is significant, which you may not know. You may not have the slightest idea.

And for some teachers, if you did that, the response would be a frown, even a grimace. And then an accusation: "You're making that up. You're telling me stories. You haven't experienced that. You heard someone talking about it and now you're coming in and telling me about it. That's just your imagination. You must never be disrespectful to the Dharma and disrespectful to your teacher by coming in here and reporting something which did not happen."

Now this is in the context of a very hierarchical, authoritarian culture. So if someone gets that hammering, it's devastating. The temptation is to crawl out and hope they'll forget about it. But if the meditator stands their ground and says, with all respect, "I know what I experienced, and this is what I experienced," then the attitude completely shifts. And it's congratulations. Welcome to the club.

It's a way of really insisting that you've got to be clear about your experience and you've got to have faith in it. Because that's the only thing you've got to rely on when you're doing this practice. So it's a very important point. Don't get caught up in ideologies. Don't take an ideology and impose it on the experience. Keep the experience clean.

A lot of the time it's very difficult to find the language to explain. Describing experience is like describing music. And that's another problem, of course—the problem of how do you communicate experience in words. Some people are better at it than others and they, in a sense, have an unfair advantage.

But how can you be clear on your experience and sure about it? You'd be clear about what's coming up now. There's something happening now. What is it? That's the basic principle. Including what's coming up now might be the experience of memory arising now. And what is that experience?

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.