Part 1: Vedanā (Feeling)

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 34:28

I'll introduce what the Buddha means by feeling, and then next time we'll look at sentience itself and the vulnerability of sentience. So tonight is more or less a build-up. We're going to look at feeling and focus on the teachings of Dhammadinnā on feelings.

Let's begin.

First of all, we have the Pāli word and the Sanskrit word *vedanā*. This is usually translated as "feeling," and what it refers to is the affective aspect of our experience—in other words, that which has the capacity to move us. We could talk about the cognitive aspect of experience, the head, what we know, what we understand. And then there's the affective aspect of experience, the heart, what we feel, how we respond. So *vedanā* is all about the feeling, the heart aspect of experience. The English word would be "affect," which refers to that which has the capacity to move us. In English, we might say, "I was moved by that," or "That was very moving." This means I was affected by it, I was moved by it. So *vedanā*, or feeling, moves us to respond to what is happening. It plays a central role.

People often get it mixed up with emotion. It's not emotion in the Western sense of the word. Feeling is like the flavour of food. If you think about the experience of eating, as you're chewing away, there are lots of physical sensations involved—hardness and softness, dryness and wetness, crunchiness and smoothness, and so on. And there's also the flavour of the food. Now, the flavour is not the sensation, and the sensation is not the flavour, but they are intimately intertwined. When we have sensation, we have flavour. When we have flavour, we have sensation. Using the Buddha's language, they arise and cease together. What moves us, what stimulates our responses when we eat, is flavour, roughly speaking. We are moved to take more if the flavour is pleasant. We are moved to take less if the flavour is unpleasant. And we are moved to indifference if we can't find any flavour. But what moves us, what stimulates our response, is flavour. So this is feeling.

Now, there are three categories of feeling, each with its corresponding movement. Pleasant feeling moves us to reach out and hold. Painful feeling moves us to resist or reject, to distance ourselves or defend ourselves. And when we don't know what we are feeling—in other words, when feeling is neither painful nor pleasant—we are moved to dullness, doubt, and confusion. But notice that whatever the category of feeling, we are moved.

Like the English word "feeling," *vedanā* can refer to what we experience and also to a way of experiencing. If you use it as a noun, it indicates what we experience. I might say, "You hurt my feelings." Feelings are a something. Or we might talk about it as a way of experiencing, not a what but a how. We might say, "I

think that's a good idea, but I can't help but feel that it isn't." That statement makes perfect sense. If someone said that, you would know what they're talking about. Thinking indicates one way of experiencing; feeling indicates another.

Tonight what we're emphasizing is feeling in this second sense—a way of experiencing rather than a what. When the Buddha uses the term *vedanā*, and in particular when he uses verbs based on the root *vid* (to sense, to feel), words based on this root suggest intimacy, a close encounter with something. For example, when the Buddha talks about mindfulness of breathing, at one point he speaks of becoming intimate with body during this practice.

And he says the practitioner feels the body. The verb that he uses is *vedeti*, which is one of the verbs based on *vid*. You get *vedeti* and *vediyati*—these are the two most common verbs. So when he uses these verbs, what he's suggesting is intimacy, getting closer and closer and closer.

Sometimes he'll use verbs based on the verb *passati*, to see. There he's suggesting distance and detachment. So, for example, *vipassanā*, insight, or *anupassanā*, tracking, and so on.

So where do we find feeling? The Buddha says the six sense fields condition contact, contact conditions feeling. This is basic teaching of dependent arising. He begins with the sense fields. The sense fields are the sensitivities, the six sensitivities that together constitute a sentient body. In Pali this is *saviññāṇaka-kāya*. *Kāya* is body, *viññāṇa* is awareness, *sa* means "with"—a body with awareness, a sentient body. And this is what we are. We are sentient bodies. This is where all experience happens. Each of us is a locus of sensitivity. We're a little bundle of sensitivities, located somewhere. If you want to know where, it's here. And we are surrounded by an ocean of stimuli.

Sense data is flowing into our sentient body through the sensitivities of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, minding. Because for the Buddha, mind is another sensitivity. And each sensitivity is a receptivity to corresponding sense data. So for example, when the Buddha talks about the eye, he's not talking about the physical organ the way a doctor might. He's talking about the sensitivity of that part of the body which is receptive to light and color. The eye is a sensitivity that is receptive to a particular kind of data. The ear for the Buddha is that part of the body which is sensitive to sound, and so on. Mind is also a sensitivity—it's sensitive to non-physical data.

Each of the five physical sensitivities picks up its own unique stream of data, and all of these streams flow into the mind, which has its own stream of data. The mind brings all of these together and creates a meaningful world. That's its job. And this process occurs through what the Buddha calls *phassa*, usually translated as contact.

He says—this is a very common formula—depending on eye sensitivity and forms, visual awareness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. Contact conditions feeling. Then he goes through all of the sensitivities with the same sentence.

Contact is where experience takes place. *Contact* translates the Pali word *phassa*, which literally means touch. So the Buddha is saying we are touched by what streams through our senses. And this touch, which is happening here and now, is the immediacy of experience. Experience is already a complex event. It's an arena in which three elements converge: sense sensitivity, sense object, and awareness. The three of them converge and something happens.

Contact conditions feeling. If contact is the arena of experience, feeling is found in the response to experience. For example, I hold my palms like this and then bring them together very slowly so they gently touch. Touch is an impact. There's warmth and softness. And when I experience this, my body immediately responds. It relaxes and opens. This response is where we find feeling.

So you notice the intimacy between touch and response. This relationship between contact and feeling is very intimate. It's stimulus and response. Where there is stimulus, there's a response. Where there's a response, there is a stimulus. Contact and feeling are different sides of the same coin. They are intimate, they are inseparable—like a sunflower turning towards the sun, like a sleeper turning in the night.

So that's our introduction to vedanā. Any questions so far?

A participant asks about vipassanā and the language of intimacy versus distance.

The Buddha uses verbs based on *vid*, to sense, to feel. From that root he creates the verb *vedati vedayati*, to feel, which is all about intimacy. But he also uses words based on the root *pas*, to see—like insight, *vipassa nā*. There he's talking about not being intimate with something, but suggesting detachment, distance. If I'm having insight into something, it's like I'm over here looking: "Oh, what's that over there?"

So sometimes the Buddha uses language that suggests going in really close. Sometimes he uses language that suggests pulling back, creating a distance. The going in close is the affective, the feeling aspect. Creating a distance is the more cognitive, head aspect.

Let's move on to Dhammadinnā and her teaching in the *Cūḷavedalla Sutta*, the Lesser Dialectic. If you're looking for this, it's Majjhima number 44.

Dhammadinnā is an arahant bhikkhunī—fully awakened, and female. She's the only woman to give a discourse in the early teachings, as far as I'm aware. The Buddha's teachings are called *sutta*. It's not just the Buddha who delivers suttas; some of the senior teachers also deliver them. But for a teaching to become a sutta means that the Buddha has, in some way or another, listened to it or heard about it and put his stamp of approval. He says, "Yes, I would have said exactly the same thing." Then that teaching becomes a sutta. Dhammadinnā is the only woman who gets her own suttas—two of them. So she must be pretty important.

Here she's having a dialogue with her ex-husband, and they come to the subject of vedanā. This is how she explains it:

Whatever is felt physically or psychologically as pleasant and 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.

Now, you could summarize by saying "whatever is felt is feeling," which frankly doesn't tell me a lot at all. In fact, when I first read this, I thought, "Yeah, and?"

But when we look at her full statement, we get a sense of where she's coming from. Whatever is felt as pleasant and soothing is pleasant feeling. Whatever is felt as painful and hurting is painful feeling. What she's talking about is feeling as a way of experiencing. She's saying whatever is experienced as pleasant is feeling.

Whatever is experienced as painful is feeling. In other words, she's talking about feeling as an experiencing as.

And this represents a form of knowing or understanding, but it's much more intimate than how we usually speak of knowing something. For example, when we say "I know something"—like "I know Melbourne," for instance—we're implying a subject-object distinction. There's a separation between knower and known, between the I that knows and the thing that is known. I know Melbourne. There's me here, there's Melbourne there. There's a separation.

Feeling, in contrast, implies a knowing that's more intimate and therefore less nameable, less amenable to being pinned down as something. In other words, feeling does not tell us what we are experiencing, but how we are responding to it. And in fact, it's not even telling us that it's us that is responding. It's just saying there's responding.

Is this making sense? This is getting very obscure because we don't usually think of things in this way.

Feeling is found in a response that moves us before we have had time to think about it. That's one way of looking at it. Now, there must be some kind of understanding involved, because if we are moved to reach out and grab hold, or if we are moved to resist or reject, there has to have been some kind of assessment of the event. But this is an assessment that is so foundational, so non-cognitive, that it's built into the fabric of experience itself.

In contrast, we can look at the Buddha's teaching on cetanā, usually translated as intention, but perhaps more accurately as choice or decision. Cetanā, choice, is the decision to act that arises from the perceived significance of an event.

Now, choice is extremely important in the Buddha's teaching because it represents how we construct the direction of our lives—the choices that we make as we go through our lives. He even equates cetanā, choice or decision or intention, with karma. So karma, obviously, is really central to the Buddha's teaching. And for him, cetanā is karma. Intention is action. Choice is action. So this is really, really

important.

Where does vedanā, feeling, fit into this? Feeling represents the world as given to us that demands a decision. Feeling represents the world that demands a choice. The fundamental decision that we have to make is about this experience event, this which is happening right now. How is it positioned in relation to my interests and me? Is it pleasant, to be held onto? Is it painful, to be rejected? Is it neither, to be completely ignored?

Feeling has us already deciding, already engaging. Choice, intention, karma—they come in later as a kind of review of a commitment we've already made. We are already committed. Then we notice what's going on. Then we decide what to do about it. So this is what I mean when I say that feeling goes really, really deep.

And this means it's so elemental that it's very difficult to understand with concepts. It's very difficult to talk about, which I think is one reason why people don't talk about it very much. Basically, at this level of elemental response, we've come up against the limits of language.

Remember we talked about knowing something. In order to speak of something, to think of something, that something has to be an object out there, separate from the speaker, separate from the thinker.

But feeling gives us a world before we recognize it as being separate from us—in which we are already entangled, already committed, already doing something, already responding. And it's this very response that helps create the world that we can recognize as separate from us and demanding our choices and decisions.

So feeling is found in our response to what is happening now. 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. If the feeling of a sensation is painful, we are moved to resist or reject. If the feeling of a sensation is neither painful nor pleasant, we are moved to ignore it as being beneath our notice. Or if we do notice it, we're moved to confusion and doubt over what to do about it. Should I hold it? Should I reject it? Hold, reject, hold, reject...

So Dhammadinnā goes on to say: pleasant feeling is pleasant in its stability and painful in its instability. Painful feeling is pleasant in its instability and painful in its stability. Neither pleasant nor painful feeling is pleasant with understanding and painful without understanding.

What she's drawing attention to, first of all with the first two feelings—pleasant and painful—is their stability. In other words, she's saying the very ordinary, everyday thing: if the degree of pleasure is the same, then something that gives me pleasure for a day is better than something that gives me pleasure only for one hour. Conversely, the longer a painful experience lasts, the worse it is. And of course, this is what makes any kind of chronic pain so difficult to endure.

These changes in pleasant and painful reveal what we really do and do not like. How do we know that we are enjoying this experience? In part, it's because of a sense of contrast—we notice we are upset when it ends, when it changes. How do we know we are not enjoying this experience? In part, it's because of a sense of contrast—we notice we are pleased when it changes. So pleasure and pain is bound up with change, with instability.

The third category of feeling is the odd one out. This is neither painful nor pleasant. Dhammadinnā does not talk about how it changes over time, but whether or not we are aware of it. She says that when we are clear about this kind of feeling, it is pleasant. When we are not clear about it, it is painful. So that which is neither painful nor pleasant changes into that which is either pleasant or painful, depending on the quality of our awareness. Our capacity to discern feeling changes feeling.

Dhammadinnā has introduced a new relationship. She's talking about the fluidity of feeling, which we're going to explore more in the next talk when we discuss sentience. Feeling is constantly changing. Pleasant and painful is bound up with stability. Experience flows, it's constantly changing, and this has a huge effect on how we feel. "I like this—okay, it's already over." "I really hate this, and it's been sticking around forever." Our relationship to time is bound up with our sense of pleasant and painful.

With the third category, it's not about time—it's about awareness. What Dhammadinnā is suggesting is that that which is neither painful nor pleasant is something which is here but not understood. And then later, it's still here but now it's understood. It's this shift in understanding that changes it. This feeling changes as it moves in and out of awareness. When we are not aware, neither painful nor pleasant feeling is painful.

Which is an interesting thing to say, because it throws up an obvious question: How can something be painful when we're not aware of it? And perhaps—this is just my own speculation—what Dhammadinnā is referring to is the painful quality of a felt sense of obscurity and its accompanying confusion.

Have you ever had disturbed sleep? Would you say it was pleasant or painful? But how can it be either if you're asleep and you don't know what's going on? If you don't know what's going on, how do you know you've had disturbed sleep? I think this is the kind of thing she's getting at. What about restless distraction when you're meditating?

Have you ever had restless distraction when you're meditating, when you don't really know what's going on? It's like you suddenly enter into this kind of restless, distracted state. But you know that when you're distracted, you don't know that you're distracted. And then later you realize, "Oh, I'm distracted." You've suddenly come out of it—"Oh, I'm really out of it." Was that pleasant or painful?

I think what Dhammadinā is suggesting is that it's painful, but what makes it painful is not knowing it. The absence of awareness, or the weakness of awareness. So something is felt—otherwise there would be no feeling. And if there's no feeling, there's no contact. And if there's no contact, there's no experience at all.

This is really important, really basic things about feeling. There's always feeling. It's impossible to have an experience without feeling. But something can be felt as here, yet only vaguely, obscurely. And that vagueness has a painful quality to it. She's suggesting that delusion itself hurts, which is interesting. But when it emerges, when we confront it directly, then it's not so bad. It might even be pleasant.

I think we've all experienced this in the meditation practice—when we're bugged by something and then we face it in the meditation. "Oh, this is what it is." And it improves.

Where this matures, I think, is in the experience of equanimity. In a state of equanimity—and this is where mindfulness practice is designed to take us—the feeling tone is genuine neutrality. It's not pleasant, it's not painful, but it's clear. Very, very subtle, but very clear. And when you notice it—and it can be easy to not notice it because it's so subtle—but when you notice it, it's actually more pleasant than pleasant. Which is odd.

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