Part 2 - Vedanā (Feeling/Sentience)

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This week we're going to continue to explore feeling, but we're going to take a backward step, as it were. We'll start by revising what we said about vedanā, about feeling.

Feeling represents the affective aspect of experience—in other words, the world of affect. What we mean by affect is that which has the capacity to move us. So we might say, for example, "that talk was very moving" or "I was moved by that." This is affect. It's what provokes a response, hence the idea of movement. So vedanā, or feeling, moves us to respond to whatever is happening.

Roughly, we could compare feeling or vedanā to flavor. When we eat, we have a whole series of physical sensations of the food—its hardness, softness, dryness, wetness, and so on. That food also has flavor, and the flavor is not the sensations. The sensations are not flavor. They're different, they're distinct, but they're intimately intertwined. Using the Buddha's language, they arise and cease together. In other words, if there are sensations, there's flavor, and if there's flavor, there are sensations. They come and go together, intimately entwined. And roughly speaking, it's flavor which provokes our response to the food.

We could say there are three categories of response. If the flavor is pleasant, we are moved to take more. If the flavor is unpleasant, we are moved to take less. And if we can't find any flavor, we are moved to indifference. But what moves us, what stimulates our response, is flavor. So feeling is that which moves us to respond to any experience.

There are three categories of feeling according to the Buddha, each with its corresponding movement. Pleasant feeling moves us to reach out and to hold on. Painful feeling moves us to resist, to reject, or to 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, confusion. But whatever category of feeling it is, we are moved in some way.

The Pali word vedanā, like the English word feeling, has a twofold meaning. It can indicate what we experience, but it can also indicate a way of experiencing. For example, regarding what we experience, I might say, "You hurt my feelings." So my feelings are a something out there. Or we might say, "I think that's a good idea, but I can't help but feel that it isn't." In other words, there are two ways in which I experience the world and judge it and relate to it: through thinking—cognitive, through the head—and through feeling—affective, through the heart. In our last talk, that's what we were focusing on, the second aspect of feeling: a way of experiencing. And this is what we're focusing on tonight as well.

The word feeling is the translation of the Pali word vedanā. Pali is the closest language that we have to the

language the Buddha taught in. Vedanā comes from the root vid, to sense, to feel—in other words, to directly encounter. Words based on this root all suggest intimacy, a very close encounter with whatever is happening. This is distinct from, for example, a whole series of words based on the Pali root pas, to see, which suggest distance and detachment. You might have noticed that when you get older, sometimes in order to see something, you've got to step back, and then you can see it. So you have words like vipassanā, insight. Here you have a word based on the root pas, to see, and again it suggests something cognitive, but it also suggests some distance, some detachment. I know what's going on there. But words based on vid suggest intimacy, getting close.

What we find as human beings—let's introduce the term sentient beings—is that as sentient beings, we live in an ocean of affect, of feeling. Imagine this very weird situation. I said this is a bit weird, but use your imagination.

Imagine living on the floor of a vast ocean of air. We move around on this floor and we live our lives, but we are so dependent upon this ocean that if we were separated from it just for a few minutes, we would die. Now, for such a being—for example, us—air surely is the most powerful and obvious aspect of our physical existence. But as you all know, we tend to ignore air completely. We often don't even notice it because we're busy with something else. Usually we notice it only when it's particularly disturbed in some way, when it disrupts our habitual activities—when we smell it, when it seems particularly hot or cold, or when we have trouble taking it in, such as during an asthma attack. If you've ever had a severe asthma attack, you know the insecurity that arises when the thought appears: "I might not get enough of this stuff." But usually, of course, we don't even notice it. It just disappears.

Actually, I'm reminded of the wisdom of my mother, who was born and lived and died in Sydney. As a true Sydneysider, she once commented, "Never trust air you can't see." I found that a very profound statement.

Now, the same is true for feeling. We live in that ocean of affect, an ocean of feeling, but we tend not to notice it until it disturbs us in some way—yet it governs everything. And so tonight, what we're going to look at is a particular aspect of this, which we could call the source of feeling, where it comes from. And this is sentience. This takes us to subjectivity.

One of the things that distinguishes the Buddha's teaching—let's call it religious teaching, or philosophic teaching, but particularly teaching that we normally call religious—one thing that distinguishes the Buddha's teaching is that what he's interested in is the nature of experience from the perspective of the experiencing subject. In other words, in Western philosophical terms, what he teaches is a form of phenomenology. He's really interested in subjectivity and what it is to experience and how experience works. Hence, you have the important role of what we call insight meditation. Insight meditation is essentially—one way of looking at it—a way of objectifying our own subjectivity. Does that make sense? It's like I'm going to look at my own subjectivity. I'm going to separate myself from it and observe: "Oh,

this is what's happening to me. Oh, I'm getting upset now. Oh, I'm not getting upset. Oh, I like this. Oh, I don't like that." So this is central to the Buddha's teaching: subjectivity—what it is, how it works, what it does.

And this brings us to the Buddha's teaching of dukkha, which I'm sure you've all heard of. Dukkha is usually, classically, translated as "suffering." Sometimes it gets different translations these days. "Unsatisfactoriness" is one. Tanissaro Bhikkhu likes to translate it as "stress." Basically, dukkha encompasses all forms of distress and dis-ease, ranging from the most subtle to the most gross.

Now, why is dukkha so central to the Buddha's teaching? Why is he so obsessed with it? In part because he's acutely aware of the pain that is inherent in subjectivity. In other words, for him, if you've got subjectivity, mate, you've got pain.

How does this work? We talked last time about how for the Buddha, all experience comes to us through our senses. For the Buddha, we have six senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching—the five familiar physical senses—and minding, the sixth sense of mind. Here, mind functions as a sense sensitivity. The five physical senses present the physical world within which we live.

The sixth sense is conceptual—it presents the world of thought, perception, and concept.

Now, each of these senses is a sensitivity, a sensitivity to a particular form of data. Take, for example, the eye—not the eyes in the self, but the eyes in the eyeball. The eye is that part of the body which is sensitive to light. If I'm in a dark room at night and I want to see what's going on, I don't put my hand out and wave it around because my hand is not sensitive to light. This is sensitive to light, so I have a look. The ear is that part of the body which is sensitive to sound, and so on. The mind is sensitive to non-physical phenomena such as thoughts, feelings, perceptions.

So we have six sensitivities receiving data, and this is how experience arises. The Buddha says: depending on eye sensitivity and forms, visual awareness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. Contact conditions feeling. And then he goes on through the other senses. This is a standard formula.

Contact—this is the translation of the Pali word *phassa*, which refers to the immediacy of experience, the very moment that something happens. And if you're interested in when this moment occurs, it occurs now. The word *phassa* literally means touch. In other words, the Buddha is saying we are touched by what streams through our senses. And this touch is happening right here and now through six streams. We experience something when we are touched by our outer world through the physical senses or our inner world through the mind.

The Buddha also uses the term *citta*, usually translated as mind, though it could be translated as heart-mind. *Citta* is our inner state. Our heart and mind is disturbed by the touch of the inner world and the outer world. And when it's disturbed, it responds—it does something. This response is feeling, and it involves three basic categories: pleasure, pain, confusion. This is his basic framework. This is how

subjectivity works.

Now, if you think about experience—or just feel it—experience itself is this ever-changing stream of events shaped by changing conditions. You notice that the conditions are always changing. Right now, something is happening. Is it exactly the same as it was when this talk began? No. It's changed because of the flow of experience. How much of these changes are under our control? Well, the answer is: bugger all. Very few of them.

Along with this flow of experience is the flow of feeling. Pleasure is always bookmarked by pain. Pain is always bookmarked by pleasure. This flow of sensation and response never stops, and it's out of our control.

The response that arises—we respond through feeling before we make any conscious choice. We talked about this last time. We do not first experience and then decide whether or not we like what's going on. By the time we recognize what is happening, we have already responded. We already like, or we already dislike, or we are already confused.

So we're thrown into this world where we are already grappling with it, already responding to it before we're even clear about what it is. And this world is a ceaseless flow of experienced events that never stops and is out of our control. This ceaseless, uncontrollable flow of pleasure and pain reveals our vulnerability and our fragility. It's like we are quite literally exposed—exposed to the impacts of our inner world and our outer world. We cannot control these impacts, and we cannot control our immediate responses to them. Both are out of our control.

Nothing has solidity. Nothing can be relied upon to remain still. Nothing can be relied upon to refrain from giving us pain. So the sensitivity which is at the heart of the heart-mind, this sensitivity, this receptiveness, is in a chronic state of disturbance. The Buddha says we are like a fish pulled from the water, flapping about in a panic. If you get that image in your mind and realize that what the Buddha is pointing to here—he says this is the normal human condition—it's a bit scary.

So this brings us to sentience. We've looked at feeling, then subjectivity. Now we're looking at sentience. And sentience is a very important concept in Buddhist ethics.

First of all, what we mean by sentience: to be sentient is to be aware and to feel. For example, we might in the hot weather have an air conditioning system. And we might program our air con system to maintain a temperature of 25 degrees. This temperature is regulated by a thermostat. Every time the temperature moves above 25, the thermostat recognizes that and adapts. Every time the temperature drops below 25, the thermostat recognises it and responds. But we don't say that the thermostat feels hot or feels cold. On the other hand, we feel hot or feel cold. This capacity to feel is sentience.

Sentience is really important for the Buddha because it's at the center of his understanding of ethics. When the Buddha talks about our circle of ethical concern—who should we be concerned about?—for the

Buddha, that's sentient beings. When Westerners first stumbled into Buddhist ethics, one thing that was interesting for them was the recognition that Buddhist ethics does not stop at the borders of our species. All species that we can recognize as sentient demand our ethical concern. This is a really fundamental principle for him.

If you think about the five precepts—or the five ways of training, which is a more accurate translation—the first way of training is to abstain from killing living beings. Now, the beings here are sentient beings, not just human beings, but sentient beings. These are beings who feel pain, love life, and fear death. Roughly speaking, if a being tries to escape our blow, it's covered by this precept. So this is the circle of ethical concern which goes beyond the human. And what defines it is this quality of sentience.

This concept of sentience is really important. And you notice that the first characteristic of a sentient being is that of feeling pain. For the Buddha, sentience entails pain. If there's sentience, there's pain. We could perhaps go so far as to say that the difference between a robot and a living being is not their comparative intelligence, but whether or not they feel pain. If an entity feels pain, that entity is sentient.

So we are sentient. We are aware and feel. And that means we are exposed to pain, for the reasons we talked about. This becomes evident in our meditation practice. When we hit the pause button on our habitual obsessions and oblivion, when we allow ourselves to be aware of whatever we are experiencing now, what we often recognize is a pervasive restlessness, an inability for the body and mind to settle, an inability to absorb fully into this present experience.

This is one reason why meditation is so easy to postpone. We don't want to expose ourselves to what we know is happening underneath the surface. When we give ourselves permission to feel whatever we are actually feeling now, without all the usual distractions, without the superficial preoccupations that we fill up our daily lives with, then we expose ourselves to an underlying sense of dis-ease, of restless discontent. And we do not want to see this because it reveals the vulnerability of experience, the pain inherent in sentience. It reveals the sensitivity of the heart and the uncontrollable flow of disturbances that characterize the heart when it's being bombarded by sense stimuli.

So this is why we resist meditation.

It's also a major reason why we find it so easy to get lost in our thinking. We run away from the felt reality of our immediate experience—for example, the five physical senses. Have you ever noticed when you sit to meditate, what's the most obvious thing that's going on? Isn't it the body? Isn't it the five physical senses? Isn't that really, really obvious? And yet, how long does it take before awareness goes into the thinking world, into the world of concept?

We run away from the felt reality of what's really going on now, particularly in the five physical senses, and we live as refugees in our conceptual world. We create fantasies, and the principal job of those fantasies is to separate us from the felt reality of our physicality. Get me out of here.

So if we're going to go deep into our own subjectivity, if we're going to go deep into our felt experience—which is what meditation is all about—we need to face this vulnerability. And this brings us to the role of feeling in practice, in meditation practice.

We've talked about feeling as being a way of experiencing, not just an object of experience. This understanding opens up how to practice with feeling. The key is intimacy. What we want to do when we practice is to get closer to the felt touch of contact, the felt touch of the immediacy of sensation. And in order to do this, we have to open to the vulnerability of sentience.

So when you sit, check—and you might want to play with this in our sitting period—check your feeling now. The easiest way to do it is to check pleasant and painful; they're the most obvious. So right now, am I experiencing pleasure? Let yourself feel that pleasure. Relax into it. Right now, am I experiencing pain? Let yourself feel that pain. Surrender into it.

Now when you do this, when you're working with feeling, don't worry about being clear or accurate in your awareness. This concern belongs to watching, the cognitive aspect of meditation. Here we're dealing with the affective aspect, not the cognitive. And feeling arises, as we talked about last time, before perception, before judgment, before concept. And so it lacks the clean boundaries of concept.

One of the things that is attractive about concept is the fact that it has very clear boundaries. Feeling doesn't. Sometimes it does, but often it doesn't. It's too viscous, too flowing to have those clear boundaries.

Feeling occurs before judgment, perception, and concept in the sense that feeling arises from the same place that perception, judgment, and concept come from. Feeling is found in the disturbed vulnerability that characterizes sentience before any perception or concept arises about it. It's more intimate.

If you think about the world of concept: Why do I perceive myself as this person rather than that person? Why do I perceive this experience as good rather than bad? It's because I have abandoned my original vulnerability and moved into a cloud of concepts buzzing around, trying to make sense of it, to distance myself from it.

But feeling does not make sense. Sense comes afterward. First we feel, then we make sense of whatever is happening. So don't worry about what it is or what it means, or look for any clear borders, or look for it to make any kind of sense. Just surrender into it. Don't worry about being clear; just surrender. Allow yourself to feel whatever you're feeling. You don't have to like it. You don't have to dislike it. Just relax into it. You don't have to do anything with it. Just relax into whatever is happening right now.

So when we practice feeling, we learn to stay with the vulnerability of sentience. And in this surrender, we do not get lost in concepts about what we are experiencing. We're just intimate with our sensitivity.

Now, of course, when we try to do this, we keep sabotaging ourselves. We continue to construct a cognitive world out of our experience. We do this all the time.

We've been doing this 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, we surrender into it and feel the intimacy and the vulnerability of being in that world.

And again, notice how feeling flows like a river. Nothing is stable. No single experience is reliable. So we don't disturb this river, this flow, by holding on to any particular feeling. We let pleasant succeed painful and painful succeed pleasant.

Strangely enough, sometimes we find that we have habits of clinging—definitely. And perversely, sometimes we cling to the painful rather than to the pleasant, because that's where we construct an identity from. So as soon as you notice yourself doing that, notice how you've just separated yourself from the flow of sentience and feeling. And then just surrender into it. What does it feel like to be doing this? Surrender into that feeling. I don't have to drop it; I just feel what I'm doing.

And over time, feeling itself transforms. This is where, as this process develops, the Buddha talks about the arising of equanimity. But perhaps we'll talk about that some other time.

Question: Is this meditation process really just us getting in touch with what we're feeling? What about practices like noting what one is feeling—is that the mind trying to make sense of the feeling after one has had it?

When people talk about noting, usually what they want is for you to be clear and accurate about what's happening—to clarify the meditation object. This is really standard, particularly in Mahasi Sayadaw's approach. Here, we're not interested in that. Don't do it. Just feel it.

Noting is cognitive, and when it dominates the meditation experience, it means you're moving to the cognitive side of the ledger. Here, we're deliberately swinging to the other side. I just want to feel. If it happens to be accurate, fine—that's good. But don't try to be accurate. Just feel it.

And often you do find that experience doesn't have clear boundaries. Often you will find that actually, you don't know. That's the third category of feeling—neither painful nor pleasant. That's one of its flavors: not knowing. What does it feel like to not know? Surrender into that. For some people, it's quite painful. That makes a lot of sense. For some people, it's very painful and can be quite challenging.

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