

Mindfulness of Feelings

You'll recall that *samma sati*, or "right mindfulness" is one part of the Noble Eightfold Path, one of the many structures that the Buddha gave us to help us to remember his teachings. I think we all know what mindfulness is, but what specifically are we to be mindful of as defined by *right* mindfulness? That question is answered in the Satipatthana Sutta, one of the most-studied suttas in the Theravada tradition. This sutta outlines four areas in which we should develop mindfulness, both during formal meditation periods and in day-to-day life.

A few weeks ago, I gave an introductory talk on the first of these "Four Foundations of Mindfulness": mindfulness of the body. Tonight I'd like to address the second area: mindfulness of feelings.

Let's define some terms. What do we mean by "feeling"? The Pali word is *vedana* and it includes two different phenomena:

1. Sensation – feelings that arise based on sense contact with an external object.
2. Emotion – non-sensory feelings that are generated internally

Feelings are also categorized by their affective component: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. It is this aspect of feeling that is emphasized in the Satipatthana Sutta.

Taking the simpler case of a sense-based feeling, we can say that such feelings arise based on the contact between one of the sense bases and a sense object. When this contact takes place, consciousness arises and a feeling occurs.

As a simple example, you look up at the shrine and notice the flowers. One of your sense bases (the eye) has made contact with an object having form (the flowers). Eye-consciousness arises along with a pleasant feeling.

Of course, the affective component of the feeling is subjective. It's possible that someone here really hates alstroemeria and experiences a negative feeling. More likely, there may be people here for whom flowers just aren't that interesting. These people will still see the flowers (eye consciousness still arises), but the feeling will be neutral.

The type of feeling that one experiences with reference to an object can change over time. Bhante Rahula carried out an experiment on this. He grew up in California and loathed avocados. When he began studying Buddhism, he decided to test the transitory nature of feelings by gradually acclimating himself to avocados. It worked, and he can now happily eat them. Same sense object—different feeling.

Now maybe I'm just dense, but I heard Bhante Rahula tell the avocado story quite a few times before I really understood the significance. "Big deal," I thought. "Tastes change." As a kid, I loved Cheetos and hated iced tea (which is a serious drawback in the South). Those tastes have completely reversed, with no effort on my part. Why is this significant? The moral of the avocado story is that *we are not our feelings*.

Not only is *vedana* the second foundation of mindfulness; it is also the second of the five *khandhas*, or "clinging aggregates." Its close relations "perceptions" and "consciousness" are numbers three and five of the *khandhas*. In other words, the problem with feelings is not just that they are transitory, but that we can come to identify with them very strongly and cause suffering for ourselves and others. Observing the changing nature of our feelings, as in the avocado experiment, shows us that feelings are not "I" or "mine."

Food preferences, relatively, are small potatoes, but there are cases where this tendency to identify with feelings can cause real problems. We might hear a politician make some remarks on TV. If we agree with her, we may begin regarding ourselves as being pro-X. If we disagree, we're anti-X. Not only will such thinking strengthen our illusory sense of "self," but it can cause problems when we have to deal with others who identify with the opposite viewpoint.

Another example: we might reflect back on a past traumatic event and experience unpleasant feelings of injury or loss. Identification with such feelings can cause us to regard ourselves as injured or broken people. If there was an antagonist in the situation, we may further identify ourselves with feelings of aversion toward that person.

In these cases, it is important to be mindful of our feelings as just feelings. We don't need to regard them as "me" or "mine." We can say to ourselves, in the words of Bhante Gunaratana, "This is a pleasant feeling. It has arisen depending on these factors. When these factors disappear, this pleasant feeling will also disappear."

So far in this talk, I've been emphasizing what all feelings have in common: a transitory nature that will cause suffering if the feeling is identified with. In practical terms, there are differences in how we react to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings.

Our reactions to these three types of feelings correspond to the three poisons: greed, hatred, and ignorance.

When we encounter a pleasant feeling, the natural tendency is greed or clinging: "I'll have some more, please!" If we get caught in the trap of clinging, we will inevitably suffer when the pleasant feeling comes to an end.

The mind's natural tendency when it encounters an unpleasant feeling is hatred or aversion. "Make it go away! Make it stop!" If we get caught in this trap, we can easily

be deflected from worthwhile goals, as when we stop meditating because of a minor knee pain. Far worse are cases where aversion is felt toward a person, leading to feelings of hatred and ill will. There are many whole books on how to deal with anger, especially in the Mahayana tradition.

The natural reaction of neutral tendencies is ignorance. We don't pay much attention to that which isn't obviously pleasurable or painful. Formal meditation practice gives us a good chance to practice being mindful of neutral feelings. In seated meditation we can attend to things like the feeling of our clothing on our skin, the weight of our bodies on the cushion, the sound of the air handling system, and other things that we may not normally be aware of. Of course, once we become aware of them, the previous neutral feelings may become pleasant or unpleasant.

As meditators, we want to cultivate mental stability and not be jerked around by all this pleasure/pain, liking/not-liking stuff. The key to developing this stability with reference to feelings is equanimity.

The Buddha describes this stance in a sutta on the "development of the faculties":

There is the case where, when seeing a form with the eye, there arises in a monk a pleasant feeling. He discerns that, 'this pleasant feeling has arisen in me. And that feeling is compounded, gross, dependently arisen. But equanimity is peaceful. Equanimity is exquisite.' With that, the pleasant feeling ceases and equanimity takes its place. Just as a man might open or close his eyes, that is how quickly, how easily, the arisen pleasant feeling ceases and equanimity takes its place. In the discipline of a noble one, this is called the unexcelled development of the faculties with regard to forms cognizable by the eye.

--MN 152

The sutta goes on to describe similar reactions to feelings that arise dependent on the other five sense bases. The practitioner notices the feeling, reflects that the feeling has arisen based on temporary factors, and quickly develops an attitude of equanimity toward the feeling, seeing it for what it really is and not identifying with it.

This is how the Buddha taught his followers to be mindful of feelings.