



Dharma Gathering 2008

Mindfulness, feeling & insight

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Introduction

We have previously looked at mindfulness as guard, and in particular its role in sense restraint. This brought us to the topic of the six sense fields, the person-within-her-world located at the centre of the fields of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and minding. We have also looked at the role of mindfulness in meditation practice. Now we turn to the development of insight.

The Buddha speaks of the person in terms of five aggregates and six sense fields. The five aggregates are concerned with how we view our self-within-her-world and identify with our view, while the six sense fields are concerned with craving (*taṇhā*), our disordered response to the world of our senses.¹ It follows that while insight regarding the five aggregates is essentially *cognitive*, insight regarding the six sense fields is essentially *affective*. *Vedanā* therefore plays a central role in insight concerning the sense fields. In this essay we will look at mindfulness, feeling and insight.

What is *vedanā*?

Vedanā, usually translated “feeling,” is the affective or hedonic aspect of experience. We can compare *vedanā* to flavour. In eating we experience the physical sensations of food, its hardness, softness, texture, moisture, and so on. We also experience the flavour of food. While physical sensation and flavour are intimately related, they are not the same. When we are moved in our eating, to hold or reject or ignore, what moves us? The flavour. We are moved to take more if the flavour is pleasant and to take less if the flavour is unpleasant. If we can’t find any flavour, we are moved to indifference. But we *are* moved, and it is flavour that moves us.

Similarly, *vedanā* is that aspect of experience that moves us, that stimulates a response. Experience always has an affective tone or flavour, where by “affect” I refer to that which has the capacity to move us, as when we say “That was very moving,” or “I was moved by that.” Affect is linked to heart and to response. Pleasant feeling moves us to hold. Painful feeling moves us to resist or reject. And when we don’t know what we are feeling, we are moved to dullness, indifference, doubt and confusion. But in any event, we *are* moved.

¹ Bhikkhu Bodhi. *In the Buddha’s words. An anthology of discourses from the Pāli canon*. Somerville MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005: 311.

Vedanā in Cūḷavedalla Sutta

Returning to Cūḷavedalla Sutta (*The shorter discussion* M44), during their conversation Dhammadinna and Visākha come to the subject of vedanā. Dhammadinna explains:

Friend Visākha, whatever is felt [*vedayitam*] bodily or mentally as pleasant [*sukha*] and soothing [*sāta*] is pleasant feeling [*sukha vedanā*]. Whatever is felt bodily or mentally as painful [*dukkha*] and hurting [*asāta*] is painful feeling [*dukkha vedanā*]. Whatever is felt bodily or mentally as neither soothing nor hurting is neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling [*a-dukkha-(m)a-sukhā vedanā*]. ...

Vedanā is derived from the verb *vedeti*, from *√vid*, “know.” *Vedeti* means both “to feel” and “to experience.” Given this ambiguity, when our text says, “*taṃ kho ... vedayitaṃ ayaṃ ... vedanā*,” this could be translated as “whatever is felt is feeling,” or “whatever is experienced is experience.” Neither of these statements tells us much. Perhaps Dhammadinna is saying “whatever is experienced is felt,” where “felt” means “felt-as-pleasant,” “felt-as-painful,” and so on. Whatever experience contains *affect* is feeling, and *all* experience contains affect. For the Buddha says, in his teaching on dependent arising, “contact conditions feeling,” where contact (*phassa*) is the immediacy of experience, and is always accompanied by feeling.

Vedanā, in other words, represents the capacity of experience to soothe or to hurt — to affect. Experience has the power to move us, to stimulate a response of some kind. We find feeling in our responses to experience, in desire, aversion and indifference.

The role of vedanā

In *Guarding the mind* we looked at the teaching on proliferation given by Mahā Kaccāna in Madhupiṇḍika Sutta (*The sweet essence* M18). Let us return to this teaching to see how vedanā, feeling, shapes our lives.

Dependent on mind and phenomena, mind-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. Contact conditions feeling.

What we feel [*vedeti*], we perceive [*sañjānāti*]; what we perceive, we think about [*vitakketi*]; what we think about, we proliferate [*papañceti*].

Because of what we proliferate, we are harassed by concepts of perceptions coloured by proliferation [*papañca-saññā-saṅkha*] regarding past, future and present.

We begin with sense experience, naturally coming and going dependent upon conditions. Contact is the meeting of sense object, sense sensitivity and awareness. It represents the immediacy of experience, that which is happening now. Contact conditions feeling — experience is already affect-laden; we are already moved, in some way, by this experience.

After feeling comes agency. “Contact conditions feeling. What we feel, we perceive.” Our perceptions, our sense of what the world is and who we are within it, comes

from our affective or emotional responses to experience. Or, we could say, first comes the heart's response; then comes the head's understanding. "What we perceive, we think about." We construct a meaningful world from our attempts to understand, justify, our emotional responses to the world. "What we think about, we proliferate." The mind goes into hyper-drive in its determination to read more into experience than necessary, driven by affect and all that comes with affect. We create a world that does not exist; or rather, a world that depends upon craving (*taṇhā*) and delusion (*avijjā*) for its existence. "Because of what we proliferate, we are harassed by concepts of perceptions coloured by proliferation regarding past, future and present." Agency is lost, we are driven by forces entirely out of our control, and this in a world that we experience not directly, but through a layer of concept covering everything like cling-wrap. Living in concept, we perceive ourselves and our world as permanent, unchanging over time.

In brief, what we perceive as "reality" is conditioned by feeling. First comes what we would normally call "emotion;" *then* comes "reality." The cognitive rests upon the affective, not the other way around. What we think of as reality is a product of our affective response to experience. As Dhammadinna explains:

The underlying tendency to obsession [*rāga-anusaya*] underlies [*anuseti*] pleasant feeling. The underlying tendency to resistance [*paṭigha-anusaya*] underlies painful feeling. The underlying tendency to delusion [*avijjā-anusaya*] underlies neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling.

"Rāga," as we have seen, indicates excitement, restless obsession, desire, the heart irresistibly drawn toward its object. "Paṭigha" indicates rejection, aversion, the heart pulling away from its object. Both are clear in their direction, in their capacity to move us. "Delusion" is more complex, and more subtle. It has a quality of restlessness, but directionless restlessness, and also of oblivion, of nothing at all being apparent. Like disturbed sleep.

"Anusaya" is "underlying tendency," a hidden potential for these responses to arise given the appropriate conditions. The underlying tendencies represent something *implicit* rather than explicit; something *potential* rather than actual.

Mindfulness of feeling

Feeling plays a foundational role, so it is important to understand both feeling and the movements of the heart motivated by it. In Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta the contemplation of feeling is one of the four establishments of mindfulness, listed just after the contemplation of body. Let us look at how the Buddha speaks about this practice in the sick ward at Vesālī, as he visits sick and dying bhikkhus.

Bhikkhus, a bhikkhu should await his time mindful [*sato*] and clearly understanding [*sampajāno*]. This is our advice to you.

How is a bhikkhu mindful? Surrendering desire and grief regarding the world, a bhikkhu lives contemplating body as body, ardent (*ātāpi*), clearly understanding

(*sampajāno*) and mindful (*satimā*). ... He lives contemplating feeling as feeling ... mind as mind ... phenomena as phenomena, ardent, clearly understanding and mindful.

How is a bhikkhu clearly understanding? A bhikkhu is one who, when going forward and coming back, acts with clear understanding ... when looking forward and looking back ... when flexing and extending his limbs ... when wearing his robes and carrying his outer robe and bowl ... when eating, drinking, chewing and tasting; ... when shitting and pissing; ... when going, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, speaking and keeping silent, he acts with clear understanding. (Paṭhama Gelaṅṅa Sutta, Vedanā Saṃyutta)

This teaching is a repetition of the opening section of Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. There are two activities spoken of: mindfulness (*sati*) and clear understanding (*sampajañña*). We have already examined mindfulness. Clear understanding is the intelligence or knowledge associated with mindfulness. We have seen that there is a close relationship between mindfulness and wisdom (*paññā*). Clear understanding represents the beginnings of this wisdom. Mindfulness has a quality of reflexivity, an awareness of awareness. Clear understanding is a further development of this reflexivity, functioning as an on-going monitoring of our normal, everyday activities.

In Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta the section on clear understanding is found as part of the contemplation of body. Clear understanding *begins* with body but extends to every aspect of experience. In our text, clear understanding is being taught to bhikkhus in the sick ward. These are people preoccupied with the body, its pain and evident impermanence, because they are busy awaiting death.

While a bhikkhu lives in this way, mindful and clearly understanding, diligent, ardent, and resolute, if there arises in him a pleasant feeling (painful feeling/ neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling), he understands in this way:

“A pleasant (painful/ neither-painful-nor-pleasant) feeling has arisen in me. This is dependent [*paṭicca*], not independent [*apaṭicca*]. Dependent on what? Dependent on this very body. But this body is impermanent [*anicca*], conditioned [*saṅkhata*], dependently arisen [*paṭiccasamuppanna*]. When a pleasant feeling has arisen in dependence on a body that is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, how could it be permanent?”

He lives contemplating impermanence [*anicca-anupassī*] in the body and in pleasant (painful/ neither-painful-nor-pleasant) feeling, he lives contemplating vanishing [*vayānupassī*], fading away [*virāga-anupassī*], cessation [*nirodha-anupassī*], letting go [*paṭinissagga-anupassī*]. As he lives in this way, the underlying tendency to obsession regarding the body and regarding pleasant (painful/ neither-painful-nor-pleasant) feeling is abandoned in him.

The bhikkhus are urged to spend their time practising the establishments of mindfulness, with a particular focus on feeling. They are dying, and the feeling entailed in this process must be evident in the body and the heart's responses to what is happening in the body. This is the stage for the development of insight.

Entry into insight

The practice begins by recognising dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) through the nature of feeling. We have seen that mindfulness has direction. It is designed to generate wisdom, and it does so by being directed towards recognising, and so remembering, dependent arising.

“A pleasant feeling has arisen in me. This is dependent [*paṭicca*], not independent [*apaṭicca*]. Dependent on what? Dependent on this very body. But this body is impermanent [*anicca*], conditioned [*sankhata*], dependently arisen [*paṭiccasamuppanna*]. When a pleasant feeling has arisen in dependence on a body that is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, how could it be permanent?”

A pleasant feeling has arisen in me. We begin with a sensitivity to feeling, directing awareness to the affective aspect of experience. Mindfulness is aimed at recognising the arising of feeling, its beginning, and so beginning to perceive its impermanence, its inherent instability. This practice implies noticing the newness of this situation, the uniqueness of it. Something has just changed — did we notice? Feeling has just changed, our response to this situation, as it presents, now.

This is dependent, not independent. Having directed awareness to the flow of feelings, their inherent changeability, then we enquire into this, noticing how feeling is defined by its dependent nature. It is not alone, nor independent; it is inseparably part of a broader pattern of things. This experience of feeling arises in dependence on something other than itself, and it ceases in dependence upon something other than itself. Further, this relational nature is inherent to feeling; it is not an optional extra.

In the movement from “this has arisen” to “this is dependent, not independent” we see a movement from the particular to the universal. This move represents a shift in understanding (*ñāṇa*), from just “this,” to “this-within-its-context.” Meaning, significance, requires a recognition of context, so the meaning of “this” emerges from a recognition of its role in a wider pattern, the natural order of things — *dharma* — that is bigger than “this,” and bigger than the one recognising “this.” Not my life, but life; not my death, but death.

Dependent on what? From an awareness of the broader patterns of things, the understanding that nothing exists in isolation, nothing is separate from anything else, comes a specific enquiry. If the nature of this particular feeling is found in its radical dependence, then *what* is it dependent upon? This echoes the second and third noble truths, which reveal a specific relationship between craving (*taṇhā*) and pain (*dukkha*): from the arising of craving, pain arises; from the cessation of craving, pain ceases. We are dealing with universal patterns, but these patterns instantiate along specific lines of trajectory. It’s not just that all things are inter-dependent; it’s that specifically *this* is dependent upon specifically *that*.

Dependent on this very body. The body lies at the centre of this discourse. Body, of course, is not radically separate from mind — the Buddha is speaking of the

saviññānakāya, the “sentient body.” Our text focuses specifically on the relationship between feeling and body. How can we access feeling, the affective aspect of experience? Is feeling most easily accessed through the body? That makes sense. To get a handle on feeling, we need to become intimate with the body. In the context of this sutta, delivered to practitioners awaiting death, the body, its changes and its inevitable fate, is a major preoccupation.

So the Buddha points towards a relationship. Look at the connection between body and feeling; between physical sensation and our affective response. The body itself then comes under scrutiny. Is *this*, upon which feeling is radically dependent, which largely defines its nature and without which it cannot survive; is *this* permanent or impermanent?

But this body is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen. This body is impermanent, it is not a reliable basis for anything. It is conditioned, constructed from parts, each of which is made up of other parts. It is entirely dependent for its existence, for its very identity, on things other than itself. It is not a “thing,” but a dependently arisen phenomenon, radically dependent, lacking any reality within itself. Our experience of body, for example, is radically dependent upon mind; body can only be experienced through mind. When mind changes, body changes. Similarly, our experience of mind is radically dependent upon body; mind can only be experienced through body. When body changes, mind changes.

We find two phenomena, feeling and body, both shifting and unreliable, each looking to the other for confirmation of its reality. Awaiting death, feeling takes our attention, emerging as pain, fear, anxiety, loneliness. While we obviously feel this way as we slide towards death, as practitioners we do not rest satisfied with the obvious but look further. What gives rise to this pain, in all its forms, both physical and mental? The body, which is dying. Yet, this body ... this too is slipping and sliding, and we are unable to grasp it. We were always unable to grasp it, even when we were healthy and had no thought of death. This body too has no existence within itself, but looks beyond itself for confirmation. Looking deeper, the mind which is aware of feeling and body is also radically dependent, also looking for confirmation of its reality from phenomena other than itself.

When a pleasant feeling has arisen in dependence on a body that is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, how could it be permanent? The view changes, radically. Nothing is stable. Everything moves. The absence of refuge becomes increasingly clear, along with the pointlessness of hoping that a refuge will be found some day in the future — before death, or even after. The mind is ready for a different view, the heart for a new relationship to what previously had been taken as “reality.”

The maturing of insight

He lives contemplating impermanence [*anicca-anupassī*] in the body and in pleasant feeling, he lives contemplating vanishing [*vayānupassī*], fading away

[*virāga-anupassī*], cessation [*nirodha-anupassī*], letting go [*paṭinissagga-anupassī*]. As he lives in this way, the underlying tendency to obsession regarding the body and pleasant feeling is abandoned in him.

He lives contemplating impermanence in the body and in pleasant feeling. The practice began with a single object of meditation, feeling. This was joined by body, found through following a trajectory of dependence revealing that feeling and body are intimately intertwined, each dependent upon the other for its existence. Awareness has shifted from one phenomenon to a dance between phenomena.

This represents a maturing of insight, from specific *phenomena* to the universal relationships *between* phenomena. No longer are feeling and body being explored, but impermanence as it manifests in and between feeling and body. We have already spoken of a move from the particular to the universal, from “this has arisen” to “this is dependent, not independent.” Here the sense of the universal deepens, expands, its real nature becoming clearer. For “the universal” is not a thing, a “Oneness” of some kind. It’s a network of conditional relationships that is universal in that there is nothing that lies beyond this network. Everything arises and ceases in radical dependence upon everything else. With entry into this depth of understanding, the sense of a person awaiting death fades. The fate of this person is no longer the centre of interest. The dharma itself is now of interest. The universal processes of mind and body, manifesting as an infinite network of conditional relationships, are now at the centre of awareness.

He lives contemplating vanishing. Having made this move, the rest naturally follows. As practice matures, vanishing becomes apparent, where vanishing represents the maturity of the perception of impermanence (*anicca-saññā*).

The perception of impermanence comes in different flavours. Sometimes arising and vanishing are both apparent, and both clear. Experience has a strobe-like appearance. Sometimes the phenomenon between beginning and end is clear, where we recognise a stability but changes within it. Experience has a wave-like appearance. And sometimes — especially as insight matures — vanishing is apparent. Things disappear, slipping out of our grasp, or falling into an emptiness.

From head to heart

He lives contemplating fading away. At this point in our text we see another shift in the development of insight. The perceptions of impermanence and vanishing are both essentially cognitive in their nature. Phenomena move; movement itself, in all its variations, becomes more real than the phenomena that move. But with fading away (*virāga*) we are now in the realm of the heart, for “fading” refers to the fading of passion, obsession, which is an expression of craving rather than of delusion. The pattern of insight unfolding here is first the head, then the heart; first the view, then the heart’s response *to* the view. Yet, we *began* with the heart, for we began with feeling, the heart’s response to impending death. Head and heart take turns. Heart

takes our interest, moves us in some way, then we examine what it reveals, bringing the coolness of the head to our situation. The result is a opening of the heart, but at a level deeper than personal. The heart finds itself in a new situation, where desire itself has changed.

He lives contemplating cessation. The meaning of cessation (nirodha) depends on what ceases. As we go deeper into practice, particular obsessions, or patterns of obsession, fade and cease. This is an aspect of transformation. We find that what used to hold us does so no longer, like a child who gives up playing one game in order to move on to another.

Cessation indicates a sense of finality, of something finishing. As cessation is part of the movement towards nibbāna — even *into* nibbāna — then what ceases is saṃsāra, either partially or, at the end of the path, completely. Cessation is the natural ending of whatever entanglement is being contemplated. Vanishing (vaya) is therefore similar to cessation, except that vanishing has the implication that whatever has vanished, disappeared, will arise again. Vanishing is part of the natural world of coming and going, going and coming. Cessation, on the other hand, carries a sense of something gone, no longer to return. Something more definite has occurred, a shift in awareness such that things cannot be quite the same again.

He lives contemplating letting go. In letting go (paṭinissagga) we find that after something has ceased, while there is a return to the world the relationship *to* the world has changed. Instead of seeking, there is giving, releasing. Craving seeks to possess; letting go is its opposite. Possession is now a burden; freedom is far more important. Whatever has ceased now no longer litters the landscape, and everything is different. Again we have the workings of the heart, for craving is of the heart. The heart grasps; the heart gives. This final stage of letting go indicates the liberated heart, or citta. The Buddha says:

This is the peaceful, this is the sublime — all formations stilled, all attachments abandoned, craving exhausted, obsession faded, cessation, nibbāna.
(Mahāmālunkya Sutta M64)

Underlying tendency

As he lives in this way, the underlying tendency to obsession regarding the body and regarding pleasant feeling is abandoned in him. We return to feeling, but at a deeper level of appreciation, where we have a sense of what *underlies* feeling. Here we find the underlying tendencies, the anusayas. Anusaya, from *anu*, “along” + *√shī*, “lie down,” indicates an unconscious predisposition of the heart or mind that will arise given the appropriate conditions. These predispositions can lie dormant for a long time but always have the potential to arise when suitable conditions manifest — and they will, sooner or later.

In Mahāmālunkya Sutta (M64) the Buddha addresses the question of whether “a young tender infant lying flat” has attachment and aversion. Such an infant, he says,

“does not even have the notion ‘beings,’ so how could ill will towards beings arise in him? Yet the underlying tendency to ill will lies within him.” The infant sleeping in his cot knows neither love nor hatred, but love and hatred *will* arise in the future, given the appropriate conditions. I may live a peaceful life and meditate intensively for many years, my mind becoming purified and peaceful, but when the appropriate conditions arise, suddenly I am ambushed by the passion and anger that afflicted me many years before. Love and hatred still “underlie” (*anuseti*) me.

What does it mean to abandon the underlying tendencies? These tendencies have an intimate relationship with awareness. The Buddha says:

What one chooses [*ceteti*], plans [*pakappeti*], and has an underlying tendency towards [*anuseti*], becomes an object [*ārammaṇa*] for maintaining [*ṭhiti*] awareness. When there is an object, there is a landing place [*patiṭṭhā*] for awareness. When awareness lands and grows, further becoming in the future is produced. When further becoming in the future is produced, future birth, ageing-&-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair arise. Thus is the arising of this entire mass of suffering. ...

If one does *not* choose, does *not* plan, and does *not* have a tendency towards something, there is no object for maintaining awareness. When there is no object, there is no landing place for awareness. When awareness does not land and grow, further becoming in the future is not produced. When further becoming in the future is not produced, future birth, ageing-&-death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair cease. Thus is the cessation of this entire mass of suffering. (Cetanā Sutta, Nidāna Saṃyutta)

To the degree that letting go has not matured the heart moves to take hold or reject, and choices are made on that basis. Whatever is held or rejected becomes an object of awareness. Awareness has a “support,” a “landing place” (*patiṭṭhā*), where it can be “maintained” (*ṭhiti*) as long as the heart remains interested in the object. But to the degree letting go has matured, the heart does not move and awareness has no place to land, nothing to base itself upon. Awareness is “unsupported,” “ungrounded,” “unlanded.”

When the Buddha speaks of awareness being “maintained” or having a “landing place” he uses words based on $\sqrt{sthā}$, “stand, station.” We have met words based on this root before. The “establishment of mindfulness” is *sati-(u)paṭṭhāna*, from *upa* + $\sqrt{sthā}$. The “maintenance” of awareness is *ṭhiti*, from $\sqrt{sthā}$. The “support” or “landing place” of awareness is *patiṭṭhā*, from *pati* + $\sqrt{sthā}$. Awareness, like mindfulness, must be based on, stationed on, something. Which is another way of saying that awareness is always awareness-of ... *something*, just as mindfulness is always mindfulness of ... *something*. There is no awareness without something to be aware of, an object (*ārammaṇa*) of awareness.

Or is this always true? For when we come to the maturity of insight, where the underlying tendencies cease, we discover the game plan has changed. In *Atthirāga Sutta* (*There is obsession*) the Buddha asks his students:

“Suppose there was a house or hall with a peaked roof, with windows to the north, the south and the east. When light enters a window at sunrise, where would it land [*patiṭṭhita*]?”

“On the western wall, bhante.”

“If there was no western wall, where would it land?”

“On the earth, bhante.”

“If there was no earth, where would it land?”

“On the water, bhante.”

“If there was no water, where would it land?”

“It would not land [*apatiṭṭhita*], bhante.” (Atthirāga Sutta, Nidāna Saṃyutta)

The Buddha speaks of awareness that does not land (*apatiṭṭhita viññāṇa*). What does this mean? It has no meaning, for to provide a meaning is to provide a landing place, a ground for awareness — but there isn’t one. But there is no denial of meaning either, for any such denial would again constitute a landing place — but there isn’t one. This awareness indicates the awareness of the awakened one.

But what of mindfulness? We never find mindfulness spoken of in this way. Mindfulness is always firmly established, supported, landed. Mindfulness has an solid, down-to-earth quality about it. Where there is mindfulness, there is an object of mindfulness. Similarly with craving. Craving is always craving *for something*, and that something provides the location of craving. But it is possible for awareness to have no location. It can exist, but no-where. And if it is no-where, there is nothing that can be said about it, just as there is nothing that can be said of light that strikes, illuminates, nothing.

Here — which is not here, or there, or in between — is where we find nibbāna, a realm that can be experienced, but not conceptualised, not pinned down by words or concepts. In nibbāna, there is nothing more to be said. Which makes for a good place to end.