

Satipaṭṭhāna (34) Introduction to the Second Foundation

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Gil Fronsdal

The second foundation of mindfulness is a profound topic. The simple explanation of what it is does not clearly indicate its profundity. It builds on the idea of omniscience, a theme in the teachings of the Buddha. Some people in the Buddha's time wanted spiritual leaders to be omniscient. Apparently, some spiritual teachers claimed a certain kind of omniscience. The Buddha tended not to push such ideas away or deny them. Instead, he would accept them and then redefine them on his terms.

The Buddha did not say this exactly the way I am saying it, but I am building on his statement that he was omniscient, and all of us can be omniscient in a specific way. We can know something about everything, and that something is the feeling tone of every experience we have. No matter what the experience is, it is either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. In terms of the hedonic tone, those are the three options. There might be many other features of our experience besides the hedonic tone, but that tonality has those three characteristics. So you know something about everything by knowing its feeling tone.

You can recognize feeling tone as it arises in all kinds of situations. Some situations can be very complicated, and then you realize: "Oh, this is a very unpleasant situation. It is just unpleasant." Recognizing the unpleasantness of it gives mindfulness a place to land, settle, or open so that the mind is not jumping around, chasing after it, or trying to understand what is going on. Knowing the feeling tone can allow something to settle. It is the same with something pleasant: "Oh, this is really pleasant. No wonder I am leaning forward so much." The ability to recognize our reactions to pleasant and unpleasant feeling tones is tremendously useful.

A very high percentage of human reactivity – of wanting and not wanting – is not based on a sophisticated analysis of the situation, but rather, on the very simple, almost amoeba-like tendency to go towards what is pleasant and away from what is unpleasant. If we can watch that movement for and against – to see it clearly before we are living in it and pushed around by it – there is a lot of freedom to be found. More than freedom, there can also be a deep understanding of ourselves. Seeing that movement opens a door to a deeper understanding of ourselves.

My understanding or interpretation of the second foundation is there is a transition here from attention to the body to attention to the mind. The mind – the *citta* – is something deep inside. There is a movement from that which is a little more peripheral to what is deeper inside.

In the first foundation, we were involved with the breathing, and the postures and activities of the body. We also used imagination and reflection to consider the parts of the body, the elements of the body, and what it is like for the body to be there without any sensations at all.

Now, we are seeing a kind of rebirth in the second foundation. Following the corpse meditation of last week, I think there can be a heightened sensitivity and interest in the sensations that are evidence of our being alive. There can be a heightened sense that this is something to appreciate and value. As we explore the feeling tones, we are beginning to get into the deeper functioning and qualities of the mind.

In the next day or two, we will see that the foundation of feeling tones makes a distinction between that which is of the flesh – or surface – and that which is dharmic. Dharmic feelings involve what is going on more deeply. In the second foundation, there is a phenomenal transition from what is more surface – sensual feelings – to what is more non-sensual or deeper in the mind, deeper in our inner life.

At first, we want to understand these three tones – pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. The Pali word for pleasant is *sukha*. Unpleasant is *dukkha*, which we often translate as “suffering.” The most literal meaning of *dukkha* is “pain,” and *sukha* is “happiness.” Because these words cover such a broad range of feeling tones, rather than translating them as pain and happiness or pain and pleasure, we use pleasant and unpleasant to capture the subtlety. But we have to remember that the words also apply to the most intense versions of those feelings.

In the beginning, the focus is much more on the sensual experience of pleasant and unpleasant. The difference between pleasant and pleasure probably has a lot to do with how much we lean into it – how much we get caught up and involved in it. There may be less involvement with pleasant and unpleasant than with pleasure and pain.

But in Buddhism, pleasant and unpleasant is understood to be a quality of the mind. It is not purely physical. This was confusing to me in my early years of studying Buddhism. I thought pleasant and unpleasant was a purely physical reaction to things that had nothing to do with my evaluation of it. But deeper in the suttas, it is actually a little more complicated. We are not innocent bystanders of pleasant and unpleasant. There can be a subtle leaning into it, a mental formation of it, or a preference in the very idea of pleasant and unpleasant. It is not only physical phenomena. The mind participates in the formation of pleasant and unpleasant.

This points to how we are now beginning to dip our toes into the deeper well of our inner life. Feeling tone is not just physical and mechanical. It involves mutuality – a reaction. Mental processes are also touched as we feel pleasant and unpleasant. We do not have to understand how all this works. But we do want to appreciate that pleasant and unpleasant can come off the tongue quite easily as something that seems hedonistic or distant from the sophisticated life we live or the full range of happiness and unhappiness we might experience.

We can begin by keeping it simple and recognizing how often and how much we react to pleasant and unpleasant. Sometimes we are reacting to what is neither pleasant nor unpleasant. We begin finding that we have more choice to not react or to step back into a broader awareness, where the awareness is not the reaction. The awareness just knows the reaction. Doing this develops and strengthens mindfulness.

This is the direction we are going towards in *Satipaṭṭhāna*. We are moving in the direction of cultivating awareness that can observe the experience or be wide enough to hold the experience. Pleasant and unpleasant, liking and not liking, wanting and not wanting can all be seen and known through awareness – through mindfulness. It makes a world of difference to see and to know feeling tones.

Finally, I suspect you might not get a sense of the full value of feeling tone because of the way I am teaching today. The Buddha points to *vedanā*, the Pali word for feeling tone, as one of the most important pivot points for our experience. It is as if there is a funnel or an hourglass, and the neck is where the feeling tones are. Everything goes through that neck. Many different things go through, but everything has to go through the neck of feeling tones before it fans out again in the hourglass.

The Buddha pointed to feeling tones as having a central, foundational role in mindfulness practice – for getting a handle on our experience and becoming free. He also pointed to feeling tones as an alternative to getting wrapped up in the philosophical enterprises of his time – like philosophies, interpretation, and speculation about metaphysics and spirituality. He was pointing to direct experience. In particular, he pointed to the importance of feeling tones in helping us become free and understand what is going on more deeply.

Finally, in the structure of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, feeling tone is the seventh exercise. There are six exercises before feeling tone and six after it. Feeling tone is right in the middle – it is the pivot. In the next few days, as we get deeper into the feeling tones of our experience, we will see other ways that feeling tone is the pivot.

So here we go – the second foundation of mindfulness. I hope you will appreciate how wonderfully significant it is to bring mindfulness to this part of your life.