

Vedanā (2 of 5) Freedom with Pleasure and Pain

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Welcome to this second talk on *vedanā* – feeling, feeling tone. This topic is central, I think, to being a human being. In ancient Buddhist cosmology, there are different realms of existence. The human realm, the realm that we live in, is called *kāmaloka*. It means the world of sensual pleasure.

To address the topic of feeling tones – the pleasant and unpleasant, the pleasure and pain that exists in this world – is to touch something that is really at the center of, or is central to, what it means to be a human being and live this human life. That is, we pursue pleasure. The pleasure principle became famous a hundred years ago. The pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain drive human behavior much more than most people recognize as they go through their daily lives.

To begin to look at how we relate to pleasure and pain – to what's pleasant and to what's unpleasant – and to see how we respond to it, is to look at and have access to some of the deep operating principles of what drives us, what we believe, and all kinds of things. I think it's fair to say that the human world – not the external world, but the world we experience, how we experience the world – probably has more pleasure and pleasantness in it than many people avail themselves of. It's there in our simple existence, or in the simple operation of our senses in everyday life.

Many times, we don't recognize – or take the time to feel – simple pleasures because we are preoccupied with other concerns. Some of these preoccupations and thoughts have to do with our social world, existential world, thoughts, ideas, and expectations that take us out of the present moment and into the bigger picture of what's going on.

Some of those thoughts and ideas are certainly reasonable, but we can spend hours and hours, days, years, and decades in the abstract world of our ideas of things. Some of the things that are happening – the events of our life – are difficult, but if we spend a lot of time thinking about, reviewing, or planning around them, we can easily start to live in an unpleasant world. The human world can seem so unpleasant because of what we are constantly thinking about.

I don't want to belittle our challenges or try to dismiss them at all, but there's a way we get preoccupied in that world. We don't avail ourselves of the simple pleasures – the ordinary pleasantness – of everyday life.

Then, there's the pursuit of pleasure, which is huge in human beings. We have in the modern world – the modern affluent world some of us live in – so many opportunities for pleasure. Just going to the supermarket to buy food. It isn't as though we're out hunting, just eating whatever happens to come back from the hunt. It's not as if we're gathering plants or growing food and only able to eat what we grow – it's long since the growing season and we're eating barley all winter long. That might start feeling a little bit tiring. But some of us go to a supermarket, and we have a greater abundance of options of food to buy than royalty did maybe even one hundred to one hundred and fifty years ago. The cornucopia! It's embarrassing. It's kind of painful, in some ways, that we can live in a cornucopia of opportunities that other people in the world do not live in.

We go to a supermarket and have a vast array of food to buy. What drives the purchase of it? I would guess that a high percentage of it is the pursuit of pleasure – eating things that are pleasant and enjoyable. We have, in the United States at least, an epidemic of obesity. Some of that, I suspect, is due to the pursuit of pleasure. The high consumption of sugar is partly due to a craving for sweetness and the other things associated with it.

Many of the purchases people make – for clothes, for simple activities, are oftentimes in the pursuit of pleasure. We enjoy them. There's nothing wrong with that. But it can be overdone. And sometimes the pursuit of pleasure leads to problems. The pursuit of eating sugar all the time has its problems, and, for alcoholics, so does the pursuit of alcohol. There's a kind of pleasure there. But the cost is that it disconnects and alienates us from the immediacy of life. And maybe for good reason. When the immediacy of the ecology of our life is painful and difficult, the pursuit of pleasure is a way to get away from it – get a break and get relief.

But in meditation, we sit to stop the cycles: the pursuit of pleasure, the suffering coming from pursuing pleasure – from the incessant nature of pursuing it, or from the incessant nature of avoiding pain and discomfort. The path, in meditation, sometimes has to go through some of the difficulties of our inner ecology – the ways we're driven, the ways we're troubled and challenged by things, our swirling minds, the anxiety, fear, anger, resentment, and craving we live in.

It can be very difficult to sit and be present for that. But the benefit of it is to settle those things – to see them through to the other side, to a kind of simplicity of being. Returning to a kind of simplicity in which there's a lot of pleasure in life not involving the pursuit of pleasure. A simplicity that doesn't involve an alienation from ourselves, leaving ourselves, by making a habit of going and going to get more and more things. But, instead, a very simple pleasure of being-ness. Pleasure in breathing, the pleasure of light (someone pointed out the light on the wall earlier), the pleasantness and warmth of the sun, and of the night sky.

There can be a lot of pleasure in this world. And there can be a lot of pain. Begin to understand and appreciate that it isn't the pursuit of pleasure we're looking for. It isn't the pursuit of avoiding pain we're looking for. What we're looking for, in meditation practice, is a mind – a heart – that's able to be wide enough, broad enough, free enough to be present for it all. And to be wise about it, to be free in the middle of it. The idea of freedom in the world of pleasure and pain – *both*, in the relationship to pleasure and to pain, is one of the goals of Buddhist practice.

The way it works with *vedanā* – the pleasantness, unpleasantness, and neither pleasantness nor unpleasantness built into all experience – is that, as we begin becoming mindful of the pleasant, unpleasant, and neither pleasant nor unpleasant nature of our experience, we can begin to see how we react and respond to it. We can begin to see how we live, avoiding pain, discomfort, or unpleasantness. How there's a holding on – a clinging – to pleasure, comfort, and how that can be so automatic. It's such a strong habit. The automatic nature of it is seen in the word *vedanā* – meaning that which is known and that which is felt. It is not pure sensual pleasure or pure pain.

In fact, in the Buddhist analysis of things, there is no such thing as pure pleasure or pure pain. All of it is mediated, to some degree, by the mind – our perceptions, interpretations, and the meaning we add to things. This can be very, very subtle. But in Buddhist psychology, feeling tone (*vedanā*) is an aspect of the mind, not of the body.

Even a very nice, pleasant feeling of the body, like getting a massage, or the warmth of the sun on the body, is not completely, one hundred percent, free of our mental evaluation of it – the recognition of what it is. Because of that, *vedanā* is very intimate to the mind, to the inner life. That intimacy gives a certain kind of authority, a greater authority, to our tendency to want, to react to it, to cling to it, or to push it away.

It's wonderful to experience the simple pleasures of life. It's wonderful to just allow them to come. Our inner life benefits so much from the freedom that just allows pleasantness to come, the freedom that allows pain to be there without evaluation, judgment, or reactivity. There's something wonderful about that freedom, a kind of pleasure beyond pleasure.

What we're trying to do in mindfulness practice is to stay close to the simple place where we start feeling pleasant and unpleasant, pleasure and pain, and become wise about that reaction. The response to it. The pursuit of it. The avoidance of it. The degree to which there's craving – compulsion – operating, and the possibility of freedom in relationship to it. We begin being simpler in our inner mental life, and more able to just go through the day in the simplicity of the day – just being present for the experience of our life, without looking and trying to make things pleasant or pursue it.

One of the rewards of this, I would suggest, is that, more often than not (although sometimes very much not), there's a lot more pleasure than we realize in the world of *kāmaloka*, this world of sensual pleasure. Not to

indulge in it, but to allow ourselves to feel that pleasantness. Take the time for it in a way that supports us to be present, mindful, and that allows us to learn how to not get seduced by our thoughts, ideas, desires, and agendas that take us away from the simplicity of being, where freedom is found. Where there's room to breathe. Where we breathe easily. And where we have the pleasure of an easy, relaxed breath as we go through our lives.

I think today's talk is partly an encouragement to be mindful of pleasant and unpleasant and what your relationship is to it. How do you respond to it? What's your relationship to anticipated pleasure, anticipated pain – discomfort? What is your reaction to its presence, the anticipation of it? And, also, when it's no longer there?

This is a rich world to discover -- to understand -- if you want to discover how to be freer in the midst of it. Thank you very much.