

Thursday Dharma Talk – Feeling Tones

Hybrid Experienced Student Retreat IRC

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The instructions in the Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness are laid out in such a way that it can be understood as a journey from the outer part of our lives inward to deeper and deeper parts until we get to the heart of the matter. That journey begins with making sure that we are here in the present moment in such a way that we can attend to – know, see, feel, and experience – the present moment. The discourse begins with establishing awareness here – establishing ourselves in awareness here.

With that as a beginning, the next step is to stabilize this awareness so that there is a possibility to have continuity through time, which then spreads broadly into our lives. The means for this is mindfulness of breathing: breathing in, knowing you are breathing in long, knowing you are breathing in short. Breathing in, experiencing the whole body – feeling and knowing the whole body as we breathe in. The actual wording is a little different. I think the wording is: “Experiencing the whole body I breathe in; experiencing the whole body I breathe out.” That is a little different way of seeing it. It begins with opening more globally and then within that, experiencing the breath.

Continuing this stabilizing, we then relax. For some of us, the most profound and useful aspect of this practice is learning to relax deeply. The greater the sensitivity to the body, the more we can identify the subtle, deep, hidden places where we are contracted, held tight, resisting, or blocked, with all the different manifestations of tension. Then we can begin softening, relaxing, and letting go, sometimes intentionally. Sometimes we simply discover how to no longer send our attention and the energy of our system into clinging, holding, resisting, and wanting, which manifests as tension in the body. Sometimes just giving ourselves over to breathing can be quite calming. This can relax the body because we're no longer subconsciously feeding the tension that we are holding.

We are stabilizing. We are arriving here so we can be present for a process of discovery, a process of really coming inward in a beneficial way. Then we can see the sources of suffering and the sources of freedom from suffering. The journey begins with something simple and obvious: when you are standing, know you are standing. When you are walking, know you are walking. When you are sitting, know you are sitting. When you are lying down, know you are lying down. Whatever your posture is, know what it is.

This is not rocket science. We don't have to study the seven books of the *Abhidhamma* to understand the intricacies of dependent origination. Just know that you are standing. This is the outer layer. Part of this outer layer is to recognize what we are actually doing in our activities. The Buddha put a lot of emphasis on activity and action. We learn a lot about ourselves by being carefully attuned to and aware of the actions we do. The actions we do are often an expression of our desires, our aversions, our agendas, and our fears. All kinds of things come along with actions.

We are not just aware of postures and actions for their own sake. They are actually a doorway – if we're paying attention – to what drives them: the attitudes, feelings, purposes, and emotions that are behind the actions that we do.

Then the exercise goes deeper – to all the beans and rice we have in our bag open on both ends, by seeing and imagining all the different parts of our body. We are talking about bringing the attention inward in a deep way to a very intimate part of ourselves. With the elements exercise, we move closer in.

We are stepping away from the concepts and ideas of who we are, what is important, who other people are, and what is in the world. These are important things to conceive of or to perceive. But there is something valuable about coming very close in, where we are just aware of the sensations themselves. To some degree, these are sensations about how the world contacts us and how we contact the world – the interface with the world and us. When the sun is out, we feel the warmth on our body. When the floor is hard, we feel the hardness in that contact with reality. When the wind blows across our cheek, we feel the movement of that. This is reality contacting us in a direct way.

Vedanā is the next step deeper in this process. It is sometimes translated into English as “feelings.” I like to call it “feeling tones” to distinguish it from emotions, because in English, “feelings” sometimes means your emotions. What makes this step deeper is that this is our subjective experience of the sensations we have. It is our subjective experience of being in the world in all kinds of ways.

There are many kinds of subjective experiences. They can be either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Some translators translate these Pali words as “liking” and “not liking.” There is something subjective that goes into our experience of pleasant and unpleasant. I used to think that our experience of pleasant and unpleasant was completely innocent – it was just built into the inherent nature of reality that some things would be experienced as pleasant, and some things as unpleasant.

Some things are kind of that way. But there is also a subjective side. There is a kind of liking and not liking, preferring and not preferring, that has a bearing on what is pleasant and unpleasant. It's not a completely neutral event. There is something deeper going on in the way we register pleasure and pain. For some people, the two are confused, overlapping, or synonymous. Some people find pleasure in pain, or pain in pleasure. Some people have the same physical experience, but in one context, it is interpreted or felt as painful, while in other situations it is seen as pleasant.

Some of this speaks to the fact that pleasant and unpleasant experiences are part of a complex world. On a coarse level, I probably would find it unpleasant to go to a cocktail party in a crowded room of people, like the ones my parents had when I was a kid. People were smoking and drinking and jabbering away. Even the thought of it is unpleasant. But people like my parents looked forward to those parties with relish. They were so delighted and anticipated them with great happiness. They enjoyed the excitement of all their friends coming.

Vedanā involves a lot of evaluation and associations. There can be a lot of things one can make pleasant or unpleasant. We sit down at the cocktail party and there is an 11-year-old boy who is not happy it is happening. There's too much smoke. But then I thought, “Wow, this is the softest couch I've ever sat in. This is cool. This is pleasant. It has a little bounce. I can bounce up and down. Isn't it fun to bounce up and down, jump up and down? It gets my energy going. The energy and softness of this sofa are pleasant. The rest is unpleasant. But this particular thing is pleasant. I find it pleasant that the 11-year-old boy bouncing up and down on the couch irritates the people in the party.”

What makes that pleasant? What makes it unpleasant? Does some degree of subjective evaluation go into these kinds of decisions? Classically in Buddhism, we say that we get the impression that pleasant and

unpleasant are kind of inherent in the nature of sense contact. That is much simpler than a whole cocktail party or a boy who wants to irritate the grown-ups. Sense contact is just pleasant or unpleasant.

Regardless of whether it's coarse and complicated or it's very simple, feelings of pleasantness and unpleasantness motivate many people much more than they usually admit or recognize. We usually move towards what is pleasant and away from what is unpleasant. Sometimes it is the opposite. When this movement towards and away operates unconsciously, it can give birth to all kinds of horrible things and biases.

I have sometimes wondered whether complicated political philosophies were born from someone finding something unpleasant and wanting to get rid of it. But they had to justify doing that with some grand political views. At the heart, maybe those views were just something as simple and ordinary as wanting to avoid something perceived or interpreted as unpleasant.

Some people find a lot of comfort in what is pleasant, and comfort is comforting. Some people have a deep need for comfort because their life is so tumultuous, difficult, and challenging. They need to feel some safety, comfort, and a sense of well-being. The closest thing available is to feel the pleasure of something. Pleasure may represent a deep need for them, so they gravitate toward what is pleasant. Sometimes people do that in a way that is unhealthy for themselves and others.

Sometimes this tendency is a problem, and sometimes it is a real support. With the unpleasant, there is usually an avoidance of it, pulling away from it, or pushing it away. I have known people who are so uncomfortable with unpleasant things that, for whatever reason – maybe it's their personality – their strategy is to get angry and push them away and have a strong aversion." No, this is wrong. I don't want this close to me. I don't want to see it." Very strong drives can be born from the simple fact that something is experienced as unpleasant.

One of the remarkable things to discover through Dharma practice is that it is possible to be comfortable with discomfort. It is possible to be at ease with things that are very unpleasant. It is possible to be at ease, without desire and clinging, with pleasant things. It is possible to have a stance of freedom in relation to both pleasant and unpleasant. Freedom means we can breathe easily and see the world clearly without the agitation or the drive of wanting the pleasant and not wanting the unpleasant.

I think this is one of the great gifts of Dharma practice. One of the paradoxes or cool things that can happen, which I first experienced in meditation, was having intense pain and rapturous joy together. That was pretty cool. By that time, I had been able to get very concentrated, and I could feel both rapture and intense pain. I had been sitting up and not moving for five hours, which explains the pain. I was young and reckless, and I was going to sit there forever. I had heard of people who sat for 24 hours without moving. "I am going to do that." Now I think it was a waste of time. But it was cool to experience pain and joy coexisting nicely for a while.

We learn a lot about ourselves if we drop down to the level of recognizing that things are pleasant and unpleasant. With something complicated and unpleasant like a cocktail party, where I felt battered around by it, troubled, upset, and confused, I have had the experience of realizing, "Wait a minute, it's unpleasant. It's just an unpleasant experience." Then something in me just relaxes. "Oh, it's just unpleasant. I know how to be with something unpleasant." I don't have to try to figure it out, analyze it, and jump around all the things I don't like, and "It's difficult," and, "Poor me." It is discombobulating and exhausting to spend time in that kind of world. Instead, we can realize, "Oh, it's just an unpleasant situation. Okay, I can be with something unpleasant."

A lot of benefit comes from being tuned into pleasant and unpleasant. When we meditate, this is very helpful because of the way the mind can get agitated with pleasant and unpleasant. We can get contracted or resistant to pain or we can chase pleasure. Then we hear that in certain concentration states, there's a lot of pleasure, and we think, "Where is it? Do I have enough? I'll probably get it. There it is!" Then we hold on to it.

If you want to join a really big club of meditators, have a really nice meditation experience then spend months trying to recreate it. One person I knew spent a year. One meditation experience was so nice they spent a year chasing it and trying to get it, and they were so frustrated. I certainly have done some of that. Afterward, I felt kind of humbled, or dismayed. But as soon as I gave up, I dropped into a nice place. It was the very attempt to try to get something that was in the way of just letting go. It was kind of nice to not be trying so hard and not be so caught in desire and aversion.

Learn to recognize pleasant and unpleasant and be able to see your relationship to it. Learn what triggers it in you. It is a wonderful thing to discover where freedom is in relation to pleasant and unpleasant feeling.

What I've said about pleasant and unpleasant feelings, the second foundation of mindfulness, is not particularly new for a *vipassanā* teacher to say. I don't know how many teachers talk about cocktail parties, so maybe that was unique and exciting. What I said is more or less standard. But I think what is not often pointed out sometimes is that the Buddha gave another set of instructions. First, he said:

When there is a pleasant sensation, one knows there is a pleasant sensation. When there is an unpleasant or painful sensation, one knows it is a painful sensation. When it is neither painful nor pleasant, one knows it is neither a pleasant nor unpleasant sensation.

We are back in the world of knowing, which is a very rich world. There is a coarse knowing, like the mental noting, when it's really loud and coarse. Sometimes there's a whack-a-mole approach to mindfulness, where you make that note and you just whack it to blow it away or be emphatic. This just agitates the mind. There are also subtler places of knowing that are not necessarily as actively produced by the mind. They are not as intentional or purposeful.

We can encourage a certain kind of knowing to happen. It's almost as if we set the direction of our attention in the direction of the diaphragm, or the belly, and then we know breathing. Now, this is an in-breath. This is a breath. This is a movement. This is stretching of the diaphragm or the stomach. This is the release of it, the pulling in. So we start seeing the sensations. But the seeing and the recognizing happen nearly effortlessly if we are open and present for the experience in a relaxed way.

We are discovering, appreciating, and being curious about knowing and the different ways that we know. Knowing is a powerful thing to do. At certain points of practice, knowing something clearly has a quality of freedom in it. We can know without clinging, aversion, stories, conceit, and without there being a knower – just knowing. A kind of lightness, openness, or freedom can exist in knowing. This is onward leading. This can lead to deeper and deeper states of equanimity.

The text tells us to know these three feeling tones. But the Buddha goes further. This is a turning point in the discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. It is literally at the midpoint of the text. There are six exercises on mindfulness of the body, before feeling tones. Then there are six exercises after *vedanā*. *Vedanā* is right in the middle. In ancient texts all over the world, the structural midpoint of the teaching represents a turning point.

Then in the section on *vedanā*, there is a midpoint of the midpoint. There is a transition between mindfulness of the body, which is the first foundation, and mindfulness of the mind, which is foundation number three. The transition within mindfulness of feelings is from the body to the mind. The way that it is worded in the text is fascinating. In most English translations, you don't see the literal meaning. There are three kinds of feelings: pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. But these occur in two general places in our being, and in our experience.

The text makes a division between something that is more physical in the body, and something that is more part of the mind. (It's not really the mind either, maybe.) There are feeling tones that are of the flesh, and feeling tones that are not of the flesh. Some translators call them "worldly feelings" and "unworldly feelings." In my mind, that is kind of confusing. Some people call them "physical and non-physical." The literal translation is "of the flesh and not of the flesh."

The way I understand this is that the first has to do with the body and the ordinary senses we have, and how the world stimulates those senses. When you eat some wonderfully tasty food, that is a pleasure of the senses, of the flesh. The taste buds are stimulated. When you see a beautiful flower that is pleasant to see, that is a pleasure of the flesh. It's a physical pleasure. The eyes are being stimulated by the world outside. When you see something that's really difficult and unpleasant to see, then it is of the flesh. Feelings of the flesh are represented primarily whenever the outside world stimulates us.

Buddhism also says there is a sixth sense door, which is the mind. An example is when someone is praised, and they feel, "Wow, I feel so good now. Oh yes! Finally, someone understands how wonderful and great I am. This is really cool." It's good, and you feel uplifted. A lot of pleasure and energy get released from the hormones, but the mind also lights up – now it's awake. Maybe you're sleeping. Someone talks about you out loud, saying, "Oh, this person is really a great, fantastic – the most wonderful meditator." Suddenly, you're not sleeping. That is pleasant to hear.

Even though we don't think of the brain or the mind as of the flesh, it's still being stimulated from outside. The world outside is coming in with a message, with data, and there is a reaction, a response inside. In this case with praise, it feels great. If we hear criticism, it might be very unpleasant. In English, we wouldn't say it's of the flesh. We would say it's of the mind, but because the stimulation is coming from outside, it belongs to the category of flesh. (I'm sorry, this is a long explanation – very unpleasant.)

This is where it gets interesting. In these texts, that which is not of the flesh is mostly associated with Dharma practice. It is associated with a different source within. It has nothing to do with the world stimulating our sense doors. It has everything to do with the inner processes that are triggered and evoked as we do Dharma practice, in particular with meditation and concentration practices.

As we settle and feel calm, that calm begins spreading through the body and we feel a nice sense of ease and relaxation. That ease, relaxation, and calm do not come from the outer world. They come from the meditation practice we are doing. That calm is not of the flesh. It's a not-of-the-flesh, pleasant feeling of calm. When we sit, there can be a wellspring bubbling up inside of joy, delight, gladness, and pleasure. This might feel intimately connected to how concentrated on the breath we are in the present moment. When we get into a concentrated state with the breath and stay with it, that bubbling feeling gets stronger. When we wander off from the breath, it diminishes. "Wow, look at that." The nature of concentration seems to trigger the release of these really good feelings inside, so these are feelings not of the flesh.

Joy, happiness, equanimity, gladness, calm, and tranquility are some of the main feelings that I can think of that come along. Contentment can be that way. They belong to the category of states called "wholesome states." They are healthy states. It is fascinating to begin feeling some of the good feelings that come that are not dependent on what is happening in the world around us. Many people think they have to fix the world and arrange the world to be just the right way so that everything is in place for everything to be pleasant all the time. They think something in the world has to be there – we have to have the right food, we have to have the right clothes, we have to have the right friends, we have to have the right money, we have to have the right partner, we have to have the right something.

Sometimes we are aversive. Sometimes we have tremendous problems. Life is very hard for many, many people. The assumption is we have to fix the world so that we can be better. Sometimes that's true, so I'm not going to tell you not to do that. But a whole different relationship with the world can happen when we learn that the happiness, the joy, and the peace can live inside of us. They can be independent of what's happening in the world around us. For some people, it is a real life-changing event to see that an inner sense of well-being can exist independent of whether the circumstances outside are favorable or unfavorable. This is not condoning or passively accepting unfavorable, unfortunate circumstances. It means that the unfortunate circumstances that happen to us don't have to cause us to lose this inner sense of well-being.

If this instruction on *vedanā* is only about knowing pleasant and unpleasant, that is certainly useful. But there's a whole other advantage of being able to distinguish between the pleasant and unpleasant feelings that are related to the world affecting our senses and the pleasant and unpleasant feelings that have to do with how we care for our inner well-being. This is how we become the custodians of our own hearts. There is no one else capable of being the caretaker or the custodian of our inner well-being in a reliable way. That is really something we have to do for ourselves if it's going to be reliable.

As this text turns towards the feeling tones, not of the flesh, the inward journey becomes more intimate. We have gone from the outer activities to the sensations, and now we are going deeper into feelings that have a subjective aspect but are even deeper than that. They are so inward that they are no longer related to the circumstances around us.

Start to recognize the feeling tones, the pleasant and unpleasant feelings not of the flesh, which some people call "spiritual." There are worldly and spiritual feelings. Of the flesh is the worldly, and not of the flesh is spiritual. Sometimes I think we should maybe call them "Dharmic". They are related to the Dharma or Dharma practice, versus that which is related to how things in the world are as we navigate the world.

The teachings of the Buddha are inspiring for me. The Buddha champions an amazingly positive view of this inner wellspring of wisdom, understanding, inner connectivity, and the possibility of harmony and peace.

In the text itself (which we kind of glossed over), we talked about different activities such as stretching your arm and bending it back, walking, defecating, urinating, and all those common things that people do. The Buddha talks about having clear comprehension, clear understanding, and clear recognition of what it is. This is an appreciation that there is something more than just knowing. It is knowing with wisdom. It is knowing with depth, or knowing something more fully. What a wonderful thing.

The Buddha then teaches something that I have been teaching about a lot lately, called "*yoniso manasikara*." The word "*yonī*" can sometimes refer to the womb. It is like a deep source. The idea is that it is a womb-like place, a place of gestation, of generation. *Manasikara* is a form of thinking – I call it "contemplation." It is a way of contemplatively attending to our direct experience, coming from a very wonderful place within.

The Buddha has nothing negative to say about this profound contemplation. He doesn't say that it is impermanent, suffering, and not self. Maybe it is implied by his teaching that this too is that way. He says a lot of things are impermanent, not self, and suffering, but he doesn't say it about this. I'd like to interpret that to mean that he kind of thinks it is cool. It is wonderful, and we don't have to be so concerned about letting it go. In *yoniso manasikara*, it is the very depth of understanding that supports a profound letting go. It is a Dharmic contemplation, a Dharmic reflection. It is a deeper source of wisdom.

There is a little collection of things having to do with understanding, perceiving, and sensing that start to come together and evolve as we do Dharma practice. These feeling tones that are not of the flesh are part of this.

They are intimately connected to our capacity to start perceiving, sensing, recognizing, and distinguishing the spiritual or liberating side of practice. We begin to be able to distinguish and see what is wise and skillful. Seeing what is not of the flesh points to what is really important. This has greater value than chasing the pleasant and unpleasant in the world around us. And it's portable because it is deep inside. No matter where we go, we take our home with us, the home we find inside.

In these instructions on *vedanā*, how do *you* experience pleasure not of the flesh – Dharmic pleasure? Do you have any reference points for this?

When I started doing Dharma practice and meditation retreats, I began to remember experiences that I hadn't thought about since I was five, six, or seven years old. This was like being reunited with the wonderful feelings I had when I was young. I knew I valued them, but I didn't realize that they meant anything. I just kept jumping up and down on the couch because that was more fun, or more obvious. But there were a few memories like taking a white sheet from the bed and draping it over our small kitchen table. Then when the sunlight was coming in through the kitchen window, I would crawl inside. I would go in there and look at the table, with this beautiful white, clear sunlight filling the space. There was clarity, peace, safety, and well-being. Something in my chest got so cozy. I don't think it was because of the light. I think I could relax, I could feel safe, and I could feel at home. It was kind of wow.

When I went to sleep, I sometimes had an experience I called “the edge of the pillow” experience. I'd be lying there in bed getting ready to fall asleep with my head on the edge of the pillow. Something in my chest just opened up. From the inside, I felt such a warm glow of well-being and peace. I felt that things were finally good in the unsafe world that I lived in. “Ah, this is good.”

When I started sitting in meditation, I thought, “Oh, there's the edge-of-the-pillow experience. Wow.” Or “There's the under-the-kitchen-table experience. It's back. My old friend.” This experience doesn't have to come from Dharma practice. Maybe you have had some reference points for what I'm trying to point to today: something that's not necessarily triggered by the world in the ordinary way the senses get triggered. Something within flowers, opens, flows, and spreads. “Ah, this is good.” In a sense, it is not of the flesh. People might complain that of course, this not-of-the-flesh feeling is radiating through my muscles.” Yes, but it's not because the muscles are being stimulated. I don't want to say the good feeling is entirely because hormones like serotonin are being released. I feel like something is lost as soon as I say that. It is just goodness that's spreading through.

One of the ways to experience the not-of-the-flesh feelings is to not be overly preoccupied with experiences that are of the flesh. Don't be overly preoccupied with getting things just right so that it's physically only pleasant, and you never have any discomfort or pain.

There are so many problems here at IRC. There are so many things that are not working just right. If we were a really good, perfect meditation center for you, we would have done it much better. We would have been a place where there was much more fresh air coming in while we cut out all the sound outside. We wouldn't have put IRC here where they have chainsaws nearby. How could they have chainsaws nearby? Every time you walk down those steps, mostly when you walk up, what is going on there on the edges of those steps? Do they never clean them? Maybe they are clean. I can't tell whether it's the lighting.

There are a lot of problems here. You can go through the building and find lots of problems and realize what a terrible place this is. Or you can just be here and focus on your practice. Don't look outside of yourself for perfection. Just learn how to be with chainsaws. Learn how to be with the imperfections without having your inner well-being dependent on the outer world being just right. Let the world be the world, at least when you're here at IRC. It's kind of the Hilton of retreat centers.

Discover the not-of-the-flesh feelings. At first, you'll just have inklings of them, just hints of something different. But when you start getting a sense of that difference – a certain kind of tenderness arises in how you sense and feel the breathing. In that tenderness, there might be little hints that there's something else going on here. There is another possibility. There is a little bit of gentleness as you walk on the ground. As your foot touches the ground, it is almost as if your foot is kissing the ground. Something different is happening with walking. It is tender touching, loving touching, imagining it is kissing the ground. Something begins vibrating in the chest.

Now it is getting more interesting to be in the present moment. The present moment is coming alive with niceness, intimacy, well-being, and calm. It is just a hint, but maybe we should take care of that.

Don't start fantasizing about how much better your meditation would be at a first-class meditation center. Don't get distracted. Don't lose yourself. This process of coming inward that I'm describing is a process of reclaiming ourselves. It is a process of no longer being alienated from ourselves. We no longer live at a distance from the depth and fullness of who we are, which many people don't know they have.

I associate this feeling of fullness, wholeness, and home-ness with feelings that are not of the flesh. As we get a sense of the difference between these two ways of being in and experiencing the world, this gives birth to all kinds of wisdom about what is valuable, what is important, and what is not important. We begin to see what leads to suffering and what leads to greater and greater happiness and freedom.

Seeing this distinction is very useful to highlight and show us something important. We can't really imagine this unless we're in touch with it. Then we see, "Oh, now I see why they talk about abandoning greed. I thought these Buddhists were just party poopers. But in fact, the poop is the greed. I had no idea. And generosity – no wonder they talk about generosity. They don't mean it's an obligation or that you're supposed to be generous. This is the flowering of a beautiful inner quality."

It is not so easy to feel these all the time. Feelings not of the flesh come and go. But I think it is important to appreciate that they are part of the unfolding. They are part of the deepening that we are coming to, so at the right time, when they begin showing themselves, we can recognize, "This is good." We don't miss it because all we were told was, "When it's pleasant, know it's pleasant; when it's unpleasant, know it's unpleasant."

Instead, we see, "Oh, this is Dharmic pleasure. This is onward leading, to be known by the wise. This is visible. This is immediate. This is inviting inspection. Come here. Come look." This gives a different perspective on the qualities of the Dharma that I opened the retreat with.

Don't go chasing after this. Don't engineer yourself into it. But follow this path. Be a beginner. Establish awareness here. Know that you are breathing. Feel the whole body as you breathe. Relax the body. Come in more intimately and feel the sensations that are here. Feel the moment-to-moment unfolding and flow of sensations. That puts you close to the place where the feeling tones can be known and felt. As that intimacy and closeness come and gather in, gathering everything here, at some point you might see or feel well-being not of the flesh.

Value that. Appreciate it. Appreciate that well-being provides a renewed perspective on this life of ours. As we go along, we'll talk more about the perspective that well-being provides and how it supports and helps this process. For now, I hope that you discover something about just knowing that things are pleasant and unpleasant, in and of itself. There can be a gentle experience of freedom right there in the knowing.