

Eightfold Path - Right Mindfulness (4 of 6)

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

unpleasant, pleasant, neutral, feelings, wanting, begets, reactivity, mind, *Vedanā*, freedom, common denominator,

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We continue the talks on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, also known as the four applications of mindfulness. These are the four areas of applying or developing mindfulness or awareness.

In Pāli, the second foundation is known as *Vedanā*. *Vedanā* is a word that generally means feeling, but it could also mean experiencing or knowing. *Vedanā* has to do with our present-moment experience. It is how this moment is directly felt, known, or experienced in its immediacy before we add interpretations and stories about it.

We have many feelings like this. There are many kinds of feelings and *Vedanā* refers to all of them.

In the practice of mindfulness, the Buddha points out three fundamental feelings. He teaches that all feelings have these qualities and characteristics. We are to notice how feelings can be pleasant or unpleasant or neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

Sometimes people in the Vipassana world will say *vedanā* means pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. This is not quite right. *Vedanā* is more generally about feelings. Then we focus on how feelings are pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. These pleasant and unpleasant feelings trigger being for or against, wanting or pushing away, or aversion.

It works like this. Consider someone who really likes candy. They just can't stop eating candy. They eat lots of candy. Then they get physically sick and bloated. They will often feel kind of tired. After a while, they realize that eating candy doesn't work and they stop. They feel great. Now they start eating cookies. They eat lots of cookies, and the same thing happens. They stop eating cookies and start eating cake. They stop eating cake when they realize how terrible they feel. Then they start drinking a lot of sugary sodas because the other things didn't work.

Eventually, they discover that the common denominator for all these things that they are eating in an addictive way is sugar. "Oh, I am addicted to sugar. It is sugar, which is making me feel so bad. Why don't I just stop eating sugar?" That applies to all things that have sugar in them. It is seeing the common denominator that applies to all situations. All these cravings had their root in sugar.

It can be the same thing with the feeling of pleasant. All kinds of things can be pleasant. We can have all kinds of relationships with that pleasantness. We can have desires, wants, and addictions. Sometimes we pursue a lot of pleasures. It is not necessarily the activities that we are pursuing. We are pursuing the feelings of pleasure, comfort, joy, exuberance, or whatever it might be. It is not the thing we're doing. It's the pleasantness it provides us – the hit of pleasant sensations, hormones, or whatever goes on.

It is the same thing with unpleasant feelings. We can react to unpleasant feelings in inappropriate ways if we don't understand what is happening.

For seven years in my twenties, I had a wheat allergy. I had never heard of wheat allergies before. It wasn't well known back then. Before I knew it was a wheat allergy, I would eat wheat. I worked at a bakery, so there was lots of bread to eat, and I was probably breathing in flour. I would feel really bad.

When I felt bad, I wanted to comfort myself. One of my comfort foods for me was baguettes and I had lots of access to baguettes. I would eat a baguette and feel worse. Since I felt bad, I would eat more baguettes. I didn't make the correlation. At some point, it dawned on me that maybe it was all the wheat I was eating.

I read about it and discovered there were wheat allergies. I would stop eating it, and I felt better. I didn't believe it was a wheat allergy, so I would eat a little bit more, and sure enough I would feel bad. This went back and forth for a while. It was the craving for pleasure in reaction to feeling unpleasant. I had to get better; I had to fix it, but I was doing the very thing that would make myself feel worse. Once I discovered the common denominator of wheat, then I could find health.

In looking at pleasant and unpleasant experiences, we look at the common denominator of many different things. If we could learn to identify how we generally react or respond to what is pleasant or unpleasant, we could get an overview or a lot of wisdom about different areas of our lives. We wouldn't have to do sophisticated analyses of situations. We would just have to realize that we are reacting because of pleasant and unpleasant.

Maybe we go to a crowded party or something. No one knows us, and we don't know anyone. Everyone is having a good time with each other, and we are left out. The music is kind of unpleasant. Maybe some of the conversations are unpleasant. There might be a lot of cigarette smoke in this place. We realize we feel off and bad.

We start analyzing or interpreting this. One popular way to do that is to blame ourselves. We are so unlikable, no one likes us, and everyone's avoiding us. This is why we feel so bad. Or maybe, we need to understand what these people are all about. We need to analyze and try to understand them. How can we blame them for how we are feeling?

Then it dawns on us, "These are pleasant and unpleasant experiences." We might say, "Oh, wait a minute, this situation is just unpleasant." We don't have to understand exactly why it's unpleasant or what's triggering the unpleasantness to not react to the unpleasant. It's just unpleasant. We know how to be with unpleasant. With unpleasant we just let it be. We don't pick it up. We don't push it away. We don't look for blame in ourselves or others. It's possible to be aware of it and hold it in a spacious, relaxed mind.

The same thing occurs with pleasant when we come to a pleasant situation. Perhaps there is a table full of pastries. I once taught a Vipassana retreat at a monastery in Missouri. There was a meditation hall that had a little room on the side. The meditators kept going into that room. I had no idea what they were doing there. Finally, I went to check that room. It was full of pastries. I couldn't believe how much pastry there was. It seemed like there was a different pastry culture in Missouri than in California, and the meditators were eating a lot of sweets. It was very pleasant, but I wonder how good it was for their meditation.

To see pleasant, and know we want that. But then, there is freedom knowing we don't need to do that. Discovering freedom in relation to pleasant and unpleasant is a wonderful thing. It is freedom to be able to go into unpleasant, uncomfortable places, and be comfortable. We can approach or experience something pleasant and be comfortable enough without addiction. There is no leaning, grabbing, or wanting more. We just allow it to be.

This is important for meditation because the mind won't settle if it is chasing after pleasure, wanting pleasure, or wanting comfort. The mind won't settle if it is reacting to, holding on to, pushing away, or being upset with unpleasant and trying to fix it. If it doesn't settle and calm down, we won't discover any freedom. The mind will live in its reactivity.

To start understanding this common denominator is like a little key. It's very simple. Sometimes sophisticated people feel it's too simple, but simplicity sometimes is the key. We can come to the common denominator out of which so much reactivity arises. Someone's complicated behavior, complicated political philosophies, or religious philosophies can have their source in this simple idea – this is pleasant, I want more of it, or this is unpleasant, I want it to go away.

This is a huge driver of human behavior. We learn to sit and be quiet. We see pleasant and unpleasant, and our reaction to it. We learn to be free – be free of reactivity, or free of picking up and being involved in the reactivity. Eventually, we see that between pleasant experiences, there is a gap before reactivity kicks in. In that gap, we leave the pleasant as pleasant and the unpleasant to be unpleasant. Then the mind can begin to discover peace, freedom, calm, contentment, and well-being. This experience is not dependent on the things of the world. It is a deep inner pleasure, contentment, and happiness which is not of the skin. It is not of the world, in the sense of how the world is. It is something deep inside, maybe something of the heart. So, you might explore this second foundation today. As you go about your day, notice when something is pleasant or unpleasant. See if it's just pleasant or unpleasant. Do you also have reactions to it? Does it prompt behavior and feelings and other kinds of reactions?

So, thank you so much.