Understanding Feelings

The second Foundation of mindfulness is Vedanupassana, Mindfulness of Feelings. Westerners often categorize vedana, feelings, as emotions. This is a valid but incomplete understanding and can mislead our ability to usefully practice Vedanupassana. Here is the translation of this passage in the Satipatthana Sutta:

Contemplation of Feelings

“And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu contemplate feelings as feelings? Here, when feeling a pleasant feeling, a bhikkhu understands; ‘I feel a pleasant feeling’; when feeling a painful feeling, he understands: ‘I feel a painful feeling’; when feeling a neither-pleasant-nor-painful feeling’, he understands: ‘l feel a neither-pleasant –nor-painful feeling. When feeling a pleasant worldly feeling, he understands: ‘I feel a pleasant worldly feeling’; when feeling a pleasant unworldly feeling, he understands: ‘I feel a pleasant unworldly feeling’; when feeling a painful worldly feeling, he understands: ‘I feel a painful worldly feeling’; when feeling a painful unworldly feeling, he understands: ‘I feel a painful unworldly feeling’; when feeling a neither-pleasant-nor-painful worldly feeling, he understands: ‘I feel a neither-pleasant-nor-painful worldly feeling’; when feeling a neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant unworldly feeling, he knows: ‘I feel a neither-pleasant-nor-painful unworldly feeling.”

I prefer to describe *vedana* as *affect*, a contemporary psychological term. Affect is the “push/pull” we experience regarding a situation—a “push” to avoid an unpleasant feeling and a “pull” to approach a pleasant feeling. The former is termed *affect avoidance* and the latter is *affect approach*. This is a fundamental biological orientation—when you place a single-celled amoeba into a toxic medium, it will avoid exposure; place an amoeba into a nutritive medium, it will immerse itself.

This is what is found in Wikipedia regarding affect, downloaded May 7, 2018: "Affect" can mean an instinctual reaction to stimulation that occurs before the typical cognitive processes considered necessary for the formation of a more complex emotion. [Robert B. Zajonc](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_B._Zajonc) asserts this reaction to stimuli is primary for human beings and that it is the dominant reaction for non-human organisms. Zajonc suggests that affective reactions can occur without extensive perceptual and cognitive encoding and be made sooner and with greater confidence than cognitive judgments (Zajonc, 1980).”

Following this assumption, I believe that affect describes the emotional intensity a person experiences as a situation is processed. I have described feelings on a continuum, from the ecstatically pleasurable to the agonizingly painful:

***RANGE OF AFFECT***

Ecstasy Delight Neutral Discomfort Agony

Every moment of experience has some affective tone. In Buddhist psychology, vedana is considered a universal conditioner of experience. This also involves an initial perceptual response to a situation that assesses threat/reward potentials: *friend or foe; food or poison*. This initial wave of processing is shared with other neural memory association processes, and a feedback loop is established that rapidly jumps to a conclusion about the meaning of the situation and what the most appropriate response would be. The memory that is identified with often has the strongest affective drive, whether pleasant or unpleasant, and this determines how the mind creates a response to the stimulus. When conditioned by clinging, affect becomes craving—for the persistence of pleasant affect and the avoidance of unpleasant affect.

If my experience of a dog was primarily pleasant earlier in life, when I encounter a dog now, the memory associations will be accompanied by pleasant expectations; if however, the earlier experience was traumatizing, the feeling tone and associated memories would create distrust and fear in current expectations.

When I was in grad school studying psychology, we were taught that cognition, that is, thought processes were predominant and that when a person “thought differently” about a situation, their behavior followed accordingly. From my own experience I knew that was inaccurate, particularly as I had been practicing mindfulness meditation for several years prior to grad school. The urgency of affect is the driver of thoughts and behaviors. However, when the mind is sufficiently trained and disciplined to disengage from the push/pull of affect and return attention to the neutral sensation of breathing in and out, the ability to mindfully regulate affect is strengthened.

Here is some information about the neurophysiology of affect in the brain to support this understanding:

The ***Amygdalae*** are two small clusters of neuronal nuclei, one in each temporal area. Their primary function is to cooperate with the ***Hippocampi*,** two other neuronal nuclei clusters in assessing the threat/reward dynamic. The amygdalae assess for threat and the hippocampi associates the initial stimuli with prior experience to determine what is being perceived. The ***Anterior Cingulate Cortex*** is thought to play a central role in the process of attention and emotional awareness. These cortical areas are also found next to the amygdalae and hippocampi and are associated with motivating behavior. The ***Nucleus Accumbens*** is located just above and in front of the amygdalae and is associated with preparing for and motivating behaviors to avoid unpleasant affect and maximize the acquiring of pleasant affect. The ***Prefrontal Cortex*** is in the forehead and regulates the emotional and behavioral aspects of cognition. Neural pathways run from there to the nucleus accumbens and amygdalae and sends a signal to those areas to reduce the excitability and arousal that is generated by them. The ***Insular Cortical*** areas are in the temporal area just outside of the amygdalae and function to regulate autonomic arousal (increased heartbeat, breathing patterns and emotional arousal).

The practice of mindfulness of breathing meditation literally changes the structure of these areas, primarily by strengthening the regulatory functions of the preorbital cortex, increasing self-awareness and self-discipline. The repeated, intentional directing of attention to the breath sensations reduces general autonomic emotional arousal, inducing calmness. Becoming mindfully aware of distractions (primarily driven by the push/pull of affect), renouncing them and redirecting attention back to the breath sensations empowers the functioning of the preorbital cortex, strengthening the neural pathways that regulate emotional/affective activity. This practice enables the practitioner to reduce reactivity and more effectively challenge whatever thoughts and behaviors that might be recalled by the hippocampi, enabling a more creative and adaptive response to situations.

The strengthening of mindful awareness of affect and the ability to regulate emotional reactivity is a core part of Buddhist strategies for awakening. Vedana and sanna (perception) are bridging functions, connecting more fundamental processes such as sensations and memories to current strategies for self-organization. Vedana is present in every moment of experience. There is the feeling that accompanies physical experience as well as the feeling that accompanies mental experience. Physical stimulation as a feeling is a mental phenomenon, while feeling related to mental phenomena reflects into the body in the form of physical tension or emotional urgency.

In the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness, vedana is mentioned regarding the Five Aggregates:

“Again, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu abides contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects in terms of the five aggregates affected by clinging. And how does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects in terms of the five aggregates affected by clinging? Here a bhikkhu understands: ‘such is material form, such its origin, such its disappearances; ***such is feeling, such its origin, such its disappearance; such is perception, such its origin, such its disappearance;*** such are formations, such their origin, such their disappearance; such is consciousness, such its origin, such its disappearance.’

The wording of this part of the discourse directs the practitioner to observe the impermanence of feeling; not just that the feeling arises and passes away but also the insubstantial quality of the experience. Feelings and other mental phenomena are the most transient and insubstantial aspects of subjective experience; craving and clinging create the misperception that “I am feeling this, this is my feeling”.

The emphasis in this Second Foundation is the focus on feeling as a phenomenon that does not contain or constitute a self. As one’s mindfulness practice matures, the ability to notice the feeling quality of experience without identifying with it as “my feeling” is a crucial skill to cultivate. During the next talk the core concept of paticca samuppada (dependent origination) will be explore and the key role that mindfulness of feelings plays in the process of “depersonalizing” experience will be emphasized.