MINDFULNESS OF FEELINGS

The Second Foundation of Mindfulness

The satipatthana (sah-tee-pah-tah-nah) concept presents four ways to be aware of subjective experience: mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of feelings, mindfulness of the mind, and mindfulness of mental phenomena. The focus for this talk is on the second of the four, vedanupassana (vay-dah-new-pah-sah-nah). Here is a quote from Analayo’s “Satipatthana—The Direct Path To Realization”, pp. 7-8:

“And how, monks, does he in regard to feelings abide contemplating feelings? “Here, when feeling a pleasant feeling, he knows ‘I feel a pleasant feeling’; when feeling an unpleasant feeling, he knows ‘I feel an unpleasant

feeling’; when feeling a neutral feeling, he knows ‘I feel a neutral feeling.’ “When feeling a worldly pleasant feeling, he knows ‘I feel a worldly pleasant feeling’; when feeling an unworldly pleasant feeling, he knows ‘I

feel an unworldly pleasant feeling’; when feeling a worldly unpleasant feeling, he knows ‘I feel a worldly unpleasant feeling’; when feeling an unworldly unpleasant feeling, he knows ‘I feel an unworldly unpleasant

feeling’; when feeling a worldly neutral feeling, he knows ‘I feel a worldly neutral feeling’; when feeling an unworldly neutral feeling, he knows ‘I feel an unworldly neutral feeling.’

“In this way, in regard to feelings he abides contemplating feelings internally … externally … internally and externally. He abides contemplating the nature of arising…of passing away…of both arising and passing away in feelings. Mindfulness that ‘there is feeling’ is established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. “That is how in regard to feelings he abides contemplating feelings.

The term *vedana* (vay-dah-nah) is most frequently translated as *feelings*, but that can be misleading, as in the West we tend to regard feelings as emotions. A more accurate and useful term is *affect*, which is *the subjective experience of impulsive reactivity to either a pleasant or unpleasant stimulation* *or cognition*. In Western psychology, a *pleasant vedana* would be characterized as *affect approach* and an *unpleasant vedana* would be characterized as *affect avoidance*.

Vedana is characterized as:

1. Pleasant feeling in the body (Which can be visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, or somatosensory).
2. Unpleasant feeling in the body (Which can also be visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, or somatosensory).
3. Pleasant mental feeling (An attractive fabrication in the mind that emerges from a bodily experience or another mental construct).
4. Unpleasant mental feeling (An aversive fabrication in the mind that emerges from a bodily experience or another mental construct).
5. A neutral feeling (Which has a physical or mental association).
6. Unworldly feeling is described as a feeling that is experienced during more advanced levels of consciousness.

It is often the case that people misunderstand neutral feeling as equanimity, but this is not accurate. Equanimity is the ability to be non-reactively aware in the subjective experience of pleasant or unpleasant feeling.

The quote from the sutta also describes two different kinds of vedana: worldly and unworldly. Worldly refers to the normal range of feelings that are primarily the manifestations of an untrained mind’s response to a situation. Unworldly refers to the range of feelings that are the result of spiritual development, for example the joy experienced as a state of consciousness that is free from the hindrances and unified around kindness, compassion, generosity, and equanimity. These unworldly feelings are the result of internal unification and integrity of wholesome mental fabrications, not because of environmental circumstances.

Vedana is considered a *cetasika* (cheh-tah-see-kah), *a conditioning factor in the mind*, but it provides, along with *sanna* (sahn-yah), *perception*, a “bridging” function between physical sensation and mental processing. They are both considered to be a universal cetasika, occurring in every moment of self-organization. Vedana activates the affective process and sanna activates the identification process. Here is a quote from another Analayo book that analyses the various historical renderings of the Satipatthana Sutta, “Perspectives On Satipatthana”, from p. 122:

“Feelings can thus be seen as an intermediary between body and mind, with a conditioning effect in both directions. One aspect of this intermediary role is that whatever happens in the body is mentally experienced through the medium of feelings. The other aspect is that the affective tone of mental experience influences the body through the medium of feelings. The actual experience of feeling thus usually affects both body and mind. An exception is the attainment of the immaterial spheres, in which the bodily dimension of experience has been transcended and only neutral feelings are experienced.”

Vedana has a very important function in Buddhist psychology and appears in various concepts:

* As the second of the Five Aggregates of Clinging: Form, Feeling, Perception, Conditioning Factors and Consciousness.
* Of course, the second of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness
* The seventh of twelve links in the “chain” of dependent origination: Ignorance, Conditioning Factors, Consciousness, Name & Form, Six Sense Bases, Contact, Feeling, Craving, Clinging, Becoming, Birth, and Death.
* Feeling is associated immediately with what are called the Six Sense Bases: Eyes & seeing, Ears & hearing, Nose & smelling, Tongue & tasting, Body & tactile sensations, and Mind & cognition.

Vedana is crucially important as it is managed skillfully in regard to the self-creating process described in the doctrine of *paticca samuppada* (pah-tee-chah sah-moo-pah-dah), *dependent origination*. Buddhist teachings state unequivocally that the only way to cultivate the karmic conditions necessary for Awakening is to be clearly aware of feeling as just a phenomenon of nature, not a self, and to cultivate an awareness such that feeling does not immediately become craving and clinging. This awareness is described in the sutta as:

“In this way, in regard to feelings he abides contemplating feelings internally … externally … internally and externally. He abides contemplating the nature of arising…of passing away…of both arising and passing away in feelings. Mindfulness that ‘there is feeling’ is established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. “That is how in regard to feelings he abides contemplating feelings.

One of the interesting congruences between traditional Buddhist psychology and contemporary neuropsychological research is the way the research validates physiologically what Buddhist adepts realized centuries ago through mindful investigation of direct subjective experience. The processes of feeling are represented by the actions of the limbic system in the brain, located underneath the cortex, the outer lining of the brain. The most important neural clusters in that area for the process of feeling are the *amygdala* (ah-mig-dah-lah), which functions in regard to *affective processing*, and the *hippocampus* (hip-oh-camp-us), which functions to *coordinate current affective responses to higher levels of cognitive processing* in the cerebral cortex. These two neural clusters are situated right next to each other and are coordinated in their functioning, assessing— “friend or foe, food or poison?”.

The amygdala/hippocampus operation links to higher levels of processing in the association cortex, where memories are stored. These stored memories also have various degrees of affective potency—a strongly unpleasant memory is more easily activated than a neutral memory. Simultaneously, neuronal stimulation is traveling from the amygdala/hippocampus processes to another cluster of neural nuclei, the nucleus accumbens. The function of this part of the brain is to prompt various areas of the brain towards certain behavioral responses (The nucleus accumbens function has been significantly researched and is strongly involved in responding to potential rewards, such as addictive drinking, drugging, sexual activity, etc.).

The integrated activities of these areas of the brain can be associated with what Buddhist psychology calls craving and clinging, with craving being the interactions between the amygdala and nucleus accumbens, while clinging can be related to the interactions between the amygdala, hippocampus and association cortex. Craving is affective arousal, either towards a reward or to avoid an aversive experience. Clinging is a cognitive fixation on a particular fabrication in the mind.

How does mindfulness practice affect these neurological processes? In the front of the brain, above the eyes, is the preorbital cortex. It functions to integrate, coordinate and regulate limbic system processes. A neurological signal comes from the limbic system that signifies a level of activation within that system. Other areas of the cortex are also sending stimulation into that area. One of the most important functions of the preorbital cortex is to send a signal “downstream”, to the limbic system; this signal either amplifies the “good to go” function of the limbic system or a “cease and desist” function of the limbic system.

When someone consciously intends to be mindful of the process of breathing, which has a neutral affective tone, the activity of the preorbital cortex trains the mind to be wiser in regulating either affect approach or affect avoidance, in order to maintain focused attention on the breath. When a distraction occurs, the amygdala/hippocampus/nucleus accumbens process is activated; if this is mindfully noted, a signal goes to the preorbital cortex and there is no “good to go” signal. When the craving and clinging process is activated, the beneficial function of the preorbital cortex is diminished and becomes associated with and supportive of the various forms of craving and clinging. In the practice of mindfulness of breathing meditation, however, the function of the preorbital cortex is trained to be able to notice the craving and clinging enough to reactivate the “cease and desist” signal, interrupting craving and clinging. Referring back to the dependent origination cycle, when we can notice and regulate feeling before it becomes craving/clinging/becoming, the process is altered, strengthening the executive regulatory function of the preorbital cortex. The resultant affect provides the realization mentioned in the above quote:

“He abides contemplating the nature of arising…of passing away…of both arising and passing away in feelings. Mindfulness that ‘there is feeling’ is established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. “That is how in regard to feelings he abides contemplating feelings.

The ability to actively and persistently monitor feelings as feelings, mindfully observing their arising and passing away non-reactively occurs because the regulatory function of the preorbital cortex is sufficiently strong to “abide independent, not clinging to anything in the world.”