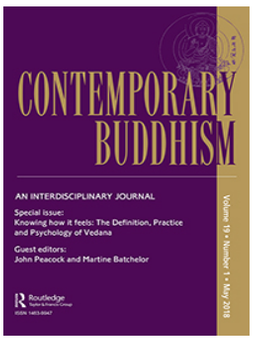

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VEDANĀ OR FEELING TONE: A PRACTICAL AND CONTEMPORARY MEDITATIVE EXPLORATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper will attempt to establish a framework for the term *vedanā*. Then it will present the range of the different feeling tones: pleasant, unpleasant and neutral. It will point out that 'neutral' feeling tone can be defined in different ways as either non-existing, indeterminate, indifference or the beginning of equanimity. Following this, *vedanā* will be discussed in the context of the five *nāma* factors: contact, feeling-tone, perception, intention and attention. This paper will suggest that mindfulness can be of benefit because it possibly gives rise to what is referred to in the early Pāli texts as 'unwordly pleasant' feeling tones. The paper concludes by making a connection between the practice of mindfulness of feeling-tones and the cultivation of the ethical precepts as an antidote to unskilful reactive patterns that arise in relation to *vedana*.

In one way, O monks, I have spoken of two kinds of feelings, and in other ways of three, five, six, eighteen, thirty-six and one hundred and eight feelings.

What are the two feelings? Bodily and mental feelings.

What are the three feelings? Pleasant, painful and neither-painful-nor-pleasant feelings.

What are the five feelings? The faculties of pleasure, pain, gladness, sadness and equanimity.

What are the six feelings? The feelings born of sense-impressions through eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind.

What are the eighteen feelings? There are the (above) six feelings by which there is an approach (to the objects) in gladness; and there are six approaches in sadness and there are six approaches in equanimity.

What are the thirty-six feelings? There are six feelings of gladness based on the household life and six based on renunciation; six feelings of sadness based on the household life and six based on renunciation; six feelings of equanimity based on the household life and six based on renunciation.

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> What are the hundred and eight feelings? There are the (above) thirty-six feelings of the past; there are thirty-six of the future and there are thirty-six of the present. These, O monks, are called the hundred and eight feelings. (Bodhi 2000, 1280)[1]

This paper will consider *vedanā* as one of the key terms in Buddhist tradition. It will be suggested that to investigate *vedanā* could illuminate the way it can be beneficially studied and practised in the contemporary context of Buddhist meditation and secular mindfulness. First, I will try to establish a framework for the term itself. I will try to define what the word meant originally and what it could mean now through examining the different words that are used by meditation teachers and Buddhist scholars to translate *vedanā* into English. I will then explain why I choose the term 'feeling tone' over other possible translations.

Next I will look at the three main categories of the different feeling tones: pleasant, unpleasant and neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant – which I will term 'neutral' for brevity. It will be pointed out that this neutral feeling tone can be defined in different ways and is presented by different meditation teachers either as non-existent, indeterminate, indifference or the beginning of equanimity. I will endeavour to show that in a contemporary context this neutral feeling tone could be considered a 'resting baseline', which could have implications for the application of mindfulness practice in the treatment of depressive states or moods.

Vedanā will then be examined in the context of the five *nāma* factors, which are defined in the Pāli *sutta*s as contact, feeling tone, perception, intention and attention. This will also enable us to explore *vedanā* in terms of three of the 12 links of dependent origination: contact > feeling tone > grasping.

In the modern context, *vedanā* is becoming known through the practice of 'mindfulness of *vedanā*' as presented in the Pāli *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness),* a text widely referred to in the secular mindfulness movement and the medical field.[2] This paper will suggest that mindfulness can be of therapeutic value because it gives rise to what is called in the Pāli texts 'unworldly pleasant feeling tone'.

My paper will conclude by making a connection between the practice of mindfulness of feeling tone and the cultivation of the ethical precepts as an antidote to unskilful reactions to *vedanā*.

Terminology

Rhys Davids and Stede in their *Pali-English Dictionary* offered some of the earliest translations of *vedanā* (Rhys Davids and Stede 1921, 648). There they use the two terms 'feeling' and 'sensation' to translate it. This could be because the Buddha (as quoted in the epigraph above) talked about two kinds of *vedanā:* '*What are the two feelings? Bodily and mental feelings*'. From this one could deduce that it can be either a mental feeling or a bodily feeling. Since 'mental sensation' sounds strange in English, they may have considered 'feeling' to be preferable

when referring to 'mind', while when referring to body, 'sensation' seems to make more sense. In common English usage, 'feeling' generally refers to an emotion, while 'sensation' tends to denote something more physical. *Vedanā*, however, appears to refer to something that is more subtle than a distinct feeling/emotion such as anger or sadness, while at the same time not being as pronounced as a strong physical pain in the knee, for example.

Rhys Davids and Stede tell us that the root of *vedanā* is *vedeti*. They explain that the root of *vedeti* is *vid* which means to know or to feel, that is, to sense. They further point out that the '*meaning is twofold: either intellectually "to know" (cp. veda), or with reference to general feeling "to experience" (cp. vedanā)*'. As it is explained in the Pāli texts, *vedanā* appears when there is a contact through the senses: '*What are the six feelings? The feelings born of sense-impressions through eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind*'. So often *vedanā* has been and still is translated as 'feeling' or 'sensation' as suggested by Rhys Davids and Stede. Some teachers and scholars seem to prefer 'feeling' for its affective connotation. Anālayo defines *vedanā* in *The Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* as: '*Feeling feels in the sense that it feels such affective tones as pleasure, displeasure and hedonic tonality*'.[3]

Some meditation teachers, especially in the Goenka Vipassanā tradition, use 'sensation' to translate *vedanā* as this connects to their emphasis on practising body-scanning and developing a strong awareness of bodily sensations. In a text on the website of the Vipassana Research Institute, S. N. Goenka says (Vridhamma.org 2017):

> I needed no further proof that the Buddha was referring to the physical, bodily sensations when he described vedanā! Not only did these exhortations of the Buddha clear all my doubts, they also made me feel as if the Buddha himself was instructing me to give importance to the bodily sensations… Some of my friends insisted that vedanā is a part of nāma and hence it has no relation to the bodily sensations. Differences of opinion may exist. But for me the entire Tipitaka bears testimony to the fact that the bodily sensations are as much a part of vedanā as mental feelings; rather, bodily sensations are much more important in the Buddha's teaching. The Paṭṭhāna [found in the Abhidhamma] gave an added incontrovertible proof that bodily sensations are of utmost importance on the path of liberation. I have immensely benefited from this and I continue to teach Vipassanā as I learnt it from my revered teacher, giving importance to bodily sensations.[4]

Nowadays, meditation teachers and scholars use a variety of terms when referring to *vedanā*. In addition to the terms 'feeling' and 'sensation' one finds: 'sensory feeling', 'feeling tone', 'hedonic tone', 'affective tone' and 'valence of affective tone'. It seems that the first people to translate *vedanā* as 'feeling tone' were Herbert V. Guenther and L.S. Kawamura in their book *Mind in Buddhist Psychology* Guenther and Kawamura 1975), but even so they also use 'feeling' and 'feeling tone' interchangeably. As mentioned previously, the term 'feeling' can be problematic insofar as it tends to suggest to contemporary readers an emotion like sadness or anger.

It is notable today how the terms 'feeling tone', 'hedonic tone' and 'affective tone' are often used to translate *vedanā*. This shows a widespread preference to qualify the term 'feeling' or its synonyms with 'tone'. 'Tone' seems to indicate that *vedanā* is not a full blown feeling like the emotion of anger. It points to the subtlety of that of which one seeks to become mindful. In the Merriam–Webster dictionary 'hedonic' is explained as: '*of, relating to, or characterized by pleasure*'. So 'hedonic' would be only partially accurate as it omits neutral or unpleasant tones. In the same dictionary, 'affective' is defined as: '*relating to, arising from, or influencing feelings or emotions*'. Again this is only partly accurate since it omits bodily sensations.

My preferred definition of *vedanā* would be 'the pleasant, unpleasant and neutral tonality of experience that arises upon contact through the six senses with one's outer or inner environment'. Thus, 'feeling tone' or any other term is likely to remain at best an approximate way to accurately convey what is meant. 'Tone' is a useful qualification as it points out a certain similarity with different musical tones. Musical tones are qualified by their duration, pitch, intensity and quality. In the same way, feeling tones can be qualified as light, habitual or intense.

Tonality of experience

No matter what term one uses to translate *vedanā*, since the notion of *vedanā* is unfamiliar to all but specialists, it needs to be explained in greater detail. I propose an explanation that presents it along a continuum: starting at the point of contact with an object, upon which a feeling tone immediately arises, which then develops into a specific feeling-sensation, and which finally turn into an emotion which can be disturbing and destructive. We often only become aware of an emotion when it has reached a degree of intensity and there is little we can do to diminish its effect upon us. One of the advantages of becoming aware of feeling tones earlier on at the point of contact would be to de-intensify the emotional field.

At any given moment we are assailed by numerous feeling tones coming from our senses being impacted by the outer or inner world. Each time we see something, hear something, taste something, smell something, sense something with the body and think something with the mind a feeling tone arises. At any time we could be experiencing six different feeling tones: we could hear a bird's song as pleasant, we could smell burnt rubber as unpleasant, we could see wallpaper as neutral. We could suddenly think about a terrible loss as extremely unpleasant, we could be eating a piece of apple pie as very pleasant and we could feel the air on our cheeks as relatively neutral. Some feeling tones come and go very rapidly because the object of contact is fleeting, while others stay longer if the object is more continuously present.

At times, one feeling tone might predominate and colour all the others. We might have heard a wonderful piece of news: that we passed our exams successfully or obtained a grant we had applied for. Then the whole field of our experiential tonality becomes pleasant. Even if it is raining and we do not generally like rain, we feel that life and the weather are great. Alternately, an unpleasant feeling tone about one specific contact might overwhelm all the other feeling tones, making the entire field unpleasant and thus inducing a sour, unpleasant mood. Even if a good friend asks us to go for a walk because the sun is shining, we see nothing pleasant in this and refuse to go since it is such a terrible day.

Mindfulness of feeling tones can help us see more clearly the varieties of contact, the different types of feeling tones that emerge, and how they colour our experience and influence our mood. From a Buddhist point of view we can also reflect on the impermanence of feeling tones. For example, upon hearing a sound a feeling tone arises, but when the sound stops, does the feeling tone also stop or does it linger? If a sound continues, does the feeling tone arising upon that contact remain the same or change? If it changes, does it increase, decrease or return to neutral? If you chew a piece of food, does the feeling tone of that contact remain the same or change? Moreover, if you eat something surprisingly pleasant for the first time, what is the level of the pleasant feeling tone on a scale from 1 to 10? If you eat that same thing again the next day, does the feeling tone arising from the contact with the same thing remain at the same level or is it lower?

Pleasant feeling tone (*sukhā vedanā*)

> The underlying tendency to lust should be abandoned in regard to pleasant feeling. (Bodhi 2000, 1261)

From a modern point of view it can be useful to look at pleasant feeling tones from a scale of 1 to 10. Often there is a tendency to assume that the general baseline of our feeling tone should be a pleasant 5, from where we can only go up to gain more pleasure. This assumption diminishes the possible range of pleasant feeling tones. They must be quite high (i.e. more than +5) in order for them to qualify as pleasant feeling tones. Mindfulness of pleasant feeling tones helps us to widen the range and enable us to experience a broader and subtler variety of pleasant feeling tones. *Muditā* (appreciative joy or altruistic joy) can be a useful practice in this regard.

There are different methods to do the meditative practice of *muditā*. The one I would recommend is to repeat inwardly and silently these sentences.

> Appreciating my efforts
>
> Rejoicing in my success
>
> Being grateful for my existence

Muditā stands also for altruistic joy and the phrases can be used towards different category of people: people we like who are kind to us, people we have some difficulties with, etc. We can also add to the list living things in nature and animals:

Appreciating your efforts

Rejoicing in your success

Being grateful for your existence

In this type of practice, concentration resides in the repeating of the sentences and experiential inquiry is cultivated when we genuinely see the goodness in ourselves and in others. It can help us shift a certain tendency we can have to focus only on what is difficult and negative. Some people do not like to repeat sentences silently inwardly, while meditating as they find this artificial and possibly mechanistic. Then they can connect more with the resonance of the quality and experientially ask: 'what is it I can appreciate right now about this experience? What is it I can rejoice in? What can I be grateful for however small?' A friend did *muditā* practice for a whole month on a retreat. At the beginning she felt a lot of things were missing in her life as she was comparing her situation with others' and she felt they had more – opportunities, happiness, ease, etc. At the end of it she felt uplifted by and rich with all the beneficial things she realised existed in her life.

As the Buddha pointed out, we have an underlying tendency to grasp or crave pleasant feeling tones. When they are present we want them to continue. After they have ended we want to have them again and thus, we try to replicate the conditions that made them arise. For this reason we want to have close contact with those things or people with which we have experienced pleasant feeling tones. But we as well as other things and people change, so even if we replicate the conditions there is no guarantee that we will either experience the same pleasant feeling tones or that they will last as long with comparable intensity.

Another important aspect of pleasant feeling tones is to observe what happens when they come to an end. The *bhikkhuni* Dhammadinnā declared in the *Cūḷavedalla Sutta*: '*Pleasant feeling is pleasant when it persists and painful when it changes*' (Bodhi 1995, 401). The greater the pleasure we experience, the greater is the contrast when it stops. When it suddenly stops, rather than returning to a neutral feeling tone we immediately tend to experience an unpleasant tone simply by virtue of the contrast with the ending of the intense pleasure that preceded it.

The Buddha also made a difference between feeling tones based on the household life and feeling tones based on a life of renunciation – these are sometimes called 'worldly' and 'unworldly' feeling tones. Could it be that pleasant feeling tones that arise from everyday contact with sense objects are more likely to trigger the underlying tendencies of grasping? While, on the other hand, pleasant feeling tones that arise from being mindful could have a quality

of calming and brightening the mind? When we experience being mindful as in *sammā sati* we come into contact with a specific feeling tone characterised by caring and carefulness.

We may also need to make a difference between a mindfulness which becomes co-opted by a worldly judgement, which would then give rise to an unpleasant feeling tone, and the mindfulness developed through the cultivation of *sammā sati,* which would have the quality of renunciation. The latter would be a pleasant feeling tone, which gives rise to equanimous well-being rather than grasping. I would suggest that this might be one of the positive effects of cultivating mindfulness for people who have a tendency to experience a lot of unpleasant feeling tones. Cultivating this caring and careful mindfulness would enable them to experience a different type of feeling tone, which might help them settle in a more neutral or even a pleasant experience. It would also help them understand how it is possible to experience things differently simply by paying more careful attention to what is happening to them.

Unpleasant feeling tone (*dukkhā vedanā*)

> The underlying tendency to aversion should be abandoned in regard to painful feeling. (Bodhi 2000, 1261)

We could also look at unpleasant feeling tones from a scale of −1 to −10. It seems that due to the basic survival mechanism of evolution, the human organism reacts more strongly and faster to unpleasant feeling tones. While we might need a pleasant feeling tone above +5 to become aware of it fully, the pleasant feeling tones below that level are often felt as normal or ordinary and thus not registered as 'pleasant'. But it only takes an unpleasant feeling tone of -1 to make us quickly react with aversion and rejection. This may have been a good survival mechanism for our ancestors who lived on the savannah, but might not always be so useful in modern life. Nowadays we still experience many small irritations but only occasionally do we encounter major life-threatening situations to which we have to react rapidly. Run-of-the-mill annoyances do not have the same intensity as life-threatening dangers, and it would be exhausting and unnecessary to react to the former as though they were instances of the latter.

One problem in over-reacting to ordinary unpleasant feeling tones is that we exaggerate the experience, which makes it even more unpleasant. The Buddha points this out in the *Sallatha Sutta*:

> When the uninstructed wordling is being contacted by a painful feeling, he sorrows, grieves, and laments; he weeps beating his breast and becomes distraught. He feels two feelings – a bodily one and a mental one. (Bodhi 2000, 1264)

Mindfulness of unpleasant feelings tones could help us to be with the experience without adding unnecessary mental suffering to it.

Mindfulness of feeling tone can help re-establish equilibrium to experience, and allow a wider range of creative responses to the different levels of

unpleasant feeling tones. With light ones, often we just have to wait for them to pass. For the habitual ones that keep repeating themselves, we can start to look at the inner and outer conditions, which might act as triggers. For the intense ones, which are often caused by shocking or surprising events, we need to have the patience to accept that it might take some time for the shock to pass through our system. Moreover, we might need to find ways to engage creatively with such unexpected turns of circumstance.

The *bhikkhuni* Dhammadinnā said: '*Painful feeling is painful in remaining and pleasant in changing* (Bodhi 1995, 401)'. Mindfulness can help us notice that when an unpleasant feeling tone stops, it does not just go back to the baseline of neutrality but we immediately experience pleasure in being relieved of the pain. Only later does it become neutral. When a stomachache or a headache stops, we are so conscious of the fact that we do not have it anymore that this is experienced as pleasant. But after a while we generally forget all about the pain we had and no longer notice that we are free of it. At this point we revert to a neutral experience.

Neutral feeling tone (*adukkham asukhā vedanā)*

> The underlying tendency to ignorance should be abandoned in regard to neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling. (Bodhi 2000, 1261)
>
> Neither-pleasant-nor-painful feeling is pleasant when there is knowledge [of it] and painful when there is no knowledge [of it]. (Bodhi 1995, 401)

Recently, as an experiment, I asked different meditation teachers and scholars how they would define neutral feeling tone. I received various answers: some said such feeling tones were 'non-existent', some said they were 'indeterminate', some said they were synonymous with 'indifference' and others said they were 'the beginning of equanimity'. There is clearly a wide range of understanding of what this feeling tone is and little consensus. I would suggest that the neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling tone needs to be considered from various angles, and each angle could require a different definition. Since we shift so quickly from it to unpleasant or pleasant feeling tones, it might not appear to exist at all. As the second *sutta* quoted above points out, if we have no knowledge of a neutral feeling tone it can easily be experienced as boring and thus is felt as unpleasant, since boredom today is not perceived in a positive light.

Such a notion of boredom is a relatively recent phenomenon. In his book *A Philosophy of Boredom,* Lars F. H. Svendsen points out:

> the term 'boring' is linked with the term 'interesting', both appeared at about the same time and have had the same development. It is with the Romantic movement at the end of the 18th century that man expresses the desire to have an interesting life… (Svendsen 2003, 39)

Svendsen notes that the term 'boredom' appeared first in the English language in 1760 (Svendsen 2003, 34). The Romantics put the accent on experiencing

intense states, be they pleasant or unpleasant. 'Neutral', of course, is the very opposite of 'intense'. However, were we always to be in an intense state of experience, this would be very tiring for the organism.

This is why I would suggest that the neutral feeling tone is more like a resting baseline that the organism needs to return to in order to recover from more intense experiences. In this case, the neutral feeling tone would be understood as restful and peaceful and thus slightly pleasant. In a way, it is a state where nothing bad is happening, which is already something. Thus, once we become aware of this quality (as Dhammadinna pointed out), it could be considered a pleasant absence of something unpleasant. Moreover, if we are experiencing unpleasant feeling tones and are daunted by the prospect of having to come back to the imaginary baseline of +5, it will be a relief to see that we only need to go back to neutral to start with, which might be less of an undertaking.

Neutral feeling tones could also be considered indeterminate in the sense that they are hard to identify because of their subtlety and low intensity. It took me a long time to recognise them. Only when I noticed that most of the time nothing much was happening to me did I realise that I was in fact experiencing neutral feeling tones. With mindfulness I then became more and more aware of them.

Neutral feeling tone can also be seen as the basis for indifference towards objects and people. But this could easily become uncaring and detached, which I do not regard as the aim of Buddhist practice. However, in the *Indriya Saṃyutta*, the Buddha states: *The equanimity faculty should be seen to be neither-painful-nor-pleasant- feeling* (Bodhi 2000, 1682).

Then in the *Saḷāyatanavibhaṅga Sutta* (Bodhi 1995, 1069, 1070) the Buddha explains in greater depth household equanimity and renunciation equanimity:

> What are the six kinds of equanimity based on the household life? On seeing a form with the eye, equanimity arises in a foolish infatuated ordinary person, in an untaught ordinary person who has not conquered his limitations or conquered the results [of action] and who is blind to danger. Such equanimity as this does not transcend the form; that is why it is called equanimity based on the household life.… And what are the six kinds of equanimity based on renunciation? When, by knowing the impermanence, change, fading away, and cessation of forms, one sees as it actually is with proper wisdom that forms both formerly and now are all impermanent, suffering and subject to change, equanimity arises. Such equanimity as this transcends the form; that is why it is called equanimity based on renunciation. [And similarly in both cases with sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas.][5]

So, household equanimity would be more like indifference as in: 'this does not bother me'. And renunciant equanimity would come from a deep insight into the three characteristics of change, *dukkha* and not-self, which would lead us to develop a compassionate equanimity.

It is important to note that we often have the impression that a feeling tone arises because of the quality of the object itself, but when we examine our

experience mindfully we realise that the feeling tone is constructed and depends on many different factors. It depends on our biology: on how acutely our sense organs see sights, hear sounds, smell odours, taste flavours and feel sensations, as well as how our nervous system is impacted by the world. It also depends on how we have been influenced in our upbringing by the culture surrounding us, the sense of history imparted by that culture, our various geographical locations, our immediate family or friends. Moreover, our personal experience has led us to like certain things and dislike others. It can also depend on the conditions one finds oneself in at any given moment. One week the weather might be very hot and we experience a pleasant feeling tone when eating ice cream, but the next week when the weather changes, we feel it is too cold to eat ice cream. Another key element that affects the feeling tones we experience is perception. This is why when exploring feeling tone it can be useful to look at the wider context of their place within consciousness and the *nāma* factors.

The *nāma* factors

> Thus, Ānanda, name-and-form conditions consciousness and consciousness conditions name-and-form. Name-and-form conditions contact, contact conditions feeling, feeling conditions craving, craving conditions clinging…. (Walshe 1995, 223)

In this quote from the *Mahānidāna Sutta*, the Buddha posits that consciousness (*viññāna)* is an emergent property of name-and-form (*nāmarūpa)*. In the early Buddhist tradition *nāmarūpa* was used to refer to the material and mental conditions that generate consciousness. 'Form' here refers to the entirety of the material world that impacts the senses, while 'name' refers to the primary mental processes triggered in our moment-to-moment encounters with the world. There are five of these *nāma* factors: contact (*phassa*), feeling tone (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), intention (*cetanā*) and attention (*manasikāra*).

Contact is the initial impact of the world on one of the six sense organs – eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind. In Buddhist practice it is essential to become more mindful of contact because this is where things start to happen that can lead to suffering for ourselves and others. I need say no more about feeling tone since it has been explained above. Perception is that which identifies the object as this object rather than that object by differentiation. Intention is the movement towards and engagement with the world (but also the recoiling and disengaging from it). It is connected to making moral choices and acting on them. Attention is that which apprehends and focuses on an object.

All five of these functions operate together and thus all condition and influence the others. If we do not pay attention to something, it will not give rise to a feeling tone. It is only by paying attention to it that we truly come into contact with it. How we perceive it and make sense of it will also influence the tonality of the experience. For example, if we assume that what we are eating are crispy

little nuts, we might experience pleasure, but on learning that the little nuts are actually fried ants, the experience might suddenly become unpleasant. We can also intentionally decide to change the feeling tone of a contact. A Korean monk I once knew noticed that Westerners liked cheese while he did not. So he decided to see if he could 'tame' it, that is, learn to like it or at least become indifferent to it. After a week of eating a little bit of cheese each day, he was able to change the feeling tone from unpleasant to neutral.

As the Buddha pointed out repeatedly contact leads to feeling tones which lead to craving and clinging. In this way contact and feeling tone are two juncture points, which we can either grasp at or, with the help of mindfulness meditation, engage with creatively. Generally, once we have come into contact with something and a feeling tone has arisen, grasping happens very quickly and triggers a cascade of emotional reactions and proliferating thoughts. The process of grasping entails an immediate identification of the contact and feeling tone as 'I' or 'mine'. This immediately limits our experience to what we are grasping and then amplifies it so that that nothing else seems to exist or matter.

This is why those meditations where we cultivate stillness (*samatha*) and experiential enquiry (*vipassanā*) together can help us at this point. In meditation we develop a kind of concentration that is focused and anchoring without being tense. In this way we are able to stabilise and still the mind. If we sit in meditation and try to be aware of the breath, soon we will think of something else. The purpose of such meditation is not to stop the thoughts but to develop a different relationship to them. We pay attention to the breath but then wander away. Only by continuing to focus on the breath and strengthening the intention to do so, will we keep coming back again and again to the experience of breathing itself. Each time we come back, four things happen: we stop feeding our mental habits; we weaken their powerful tendency to keep repeating; we bring them back to their creative functioning; and we come back to a wider perspective that is able to include all the elements that we are in contact with at that moment. This practice counters the tendency to grasp at just one of the elements with which we are in contact, which often leads us to proliferation and amplification.

Experiential enquiry or looking deeply helps us to be more in tune with what is happening as it occurs and thereby to develop a more processual awareness. This experiential enquiry makes us more aware of our body, our senses, and the impact of the environment on our senses. It helps us experience for ourselves the arising, duration and fading away of feeling tones. This looking deeply can also make us see that events, if they last a little while, can change within themselves. There is momentary change, as when things arise and pass away, as well as organic change, as when sensations or sounds are observed to shift and mutate within themselves.

When experiencing physical pain, if one probes that experience at the specific part of the body where it takes place, one sees that it is not something fixed

and solid but it fluctuates, ebbs and flows. It is not exactly the same all the time. When one is aware of this, the pain still exists but it seems to be more a diffuse sensation than an attack on our personal well-being. It is then easier to relate to it in a non-reactive, non-intensifying way. I know someone who has suffered extensive burns. At one point in the treatment of her pain she was given the choice between more medication or an eight week mindfulness course. She chose the course and this was a revelation to her. The mindfulness exercises continue to help her to deal with her pain in an entirely different manner.

Experiential enquiry brings brightness and clarity to the meditation at the same time that we develop calm and stability through the development of concentration. The two together seem to produce a different kind of awareness that could be called creative mindfulness. And when this creative mindfulness is applied to contact and feeling tone, it is likely that the process of grasping will happen less and less.

The five precepts

The Buddhist eightfold path is organised around the three major themes of ethics, meditation and wisdom. These are often referred to as the three trainings and are understood as complementary to and supportive of each other. For lay practitioners, the training of ethics includes the five precepts, which serve as an antidote to automatic reactions of grasping to certain feeling tones in specific situations. The five precepts are to:

- Refrain from killing
- Refrain from stealing
- Refrain from inappropriate and harmful sexual acts
- Refrain from lying
- Refrain from intoxicants that make one uncaring

One is often led to cause harm or kill because of the unpleasant feeling tone that arises through coming into contact with a person or animal, which then triggers an immediate reaction to hurt or annihilate that person or animal. If we are bitten by a mosquito, we do not think twice: we squish it immediately. If we hear the whining sound of a mosquito, it remains acutely unpleasant as long as we have not found and killed the insect. If someone says or does something unpleasant to us, often we immediately start plotting revenge. Equanimity based on renunciation does not mean we do not creatively respond to the situation. It means that we stop reacting to it automatically.

We tend to get drawn into theft either because we have a pleasant feeling tone in relation to an object we do not have but hanker after, or because we have unpleasant feeling tones due to lacking the finances to sustain the kind of life we wish to lead. Or it might be that we simply see an opportunity to make a lot of money quickly and illegally, which we imagine will then give rise to an

abundance of pleasant feeling tones. By bringing creative mindfulness to these situations, we can quieten our mind and choose either not to come into contact with the object of our desire (restraint) or, if we are in contact with it, to wisely reflect on its impermanence and conditionality. This is not always easy, especially if poverty and the degree of one's needs are sufficiently pressing.

We are often led to commit inappropriate and harmful sexual acts because we experience strong pleasant feeling tones towards a person or because the anticipation of the act is so pleasurable. In both cases, one selfishly does not consider the feelings of the other person and the impact of the act on him or her. So mindful restraint and consideration of others would be helpful antidotes for our automatic reactions to such kinds of pleasant feeling tones.

One also finds oneself drawn into lying because of pleasant and unpleasant feeling tones. One might tell a lie because it seems to be a way to avoid future unpleasant feeling tones because of a mistake we have made. Or one might boastfully lie in order to experience the pleasant feeling tones that come from being admired or respected by others because of one's supposed accomplishments. These are tricky to address. The first case requires us to accept our mistake in our own eyes and then in the eyes of others. This may require a lot of courage. The second case of boastful lying can appear irresistibly attractive because of the great importance we place on how others view us. Could we learn to be content with our simple and modest accomplishments? *Muditā* meditation could be of great help in this instance.

As for taking intoxicants, this is clearly tied to gaining pleasant feeling tones and avoiding unpleasant ones. Some people will persist in drinking alcohol or taking drugs even though they are clearly aware of the harm it causes both themselves and others. And some people who drink to excess simply feel unable to cope with the amount of unpleasant feeling tones that life brings them.

There are two aspects to the cultivation of ethics: one is to refrain from committing acts that cause harm, the other is to cultivate the opposite of what one seeks to refrain from. When phrased in this positive way, ethics means cultivating harmlessness, generosity, respect of others' integrity, honesty and clarity of mind. We can cultivate restraint more easily when we become more mindful of the harm to ourselves and others that our actions can cause, thereby enabling us to see the dangers of these actions and their results.

Mindfulness (*sati*)

In conclusion, I would like to consider how mindfulness can help us remain in contact with the senses, experience feeling tones without reacting and cultivate an ethical attitude in regard to them.

The original meaning of *sati* was to remember. The *Sekha Sutta* says:

> [The practitioner] has mindfulness; he possesses the highest mindfulness and skill; he recalls and recollects what was done long ago and spoken long ago. (Bodhi 1995, 463)

Mindfulness also entails a widening of one's perspective, as is implied in the *Lohicca Sutta*:

> He dwells without having set up mindfulness of the body, with a limited mind.… He dwells having set up mindfulness of the body, with a measureless mind. (Bodhi 2000, 1203, 1204)

And as Anālayo points out in his definition of *sati*:

> Sati represents the ability to simultaneously maintain in one's mind the various elements and facets of a particular situation.

He also makes a connection between *sati* and attention, one of the *nāma* factors:

> Sati can be understood as a further development of this type of attention, thereby adding clarity and depth to the unusually much too short fraction of time occupied by bare attention in the perceptual process.[6]

In yet another discourse, mindfulness is compared to a watchful charioteer, who can survey the road and the surroundings from a higher position and at the same time holds the reins of his horses in a balanced manner (Anālayo 2003, 55).

Mindfulness, therefore, serves a range of different functions in meditation. It is at the same time a tool that one needs to cultivate as well as the effect of that cultivation. To meditate you need to remember to focus on the object of meditation and also to look deeply into the experience. Doing that helps you be more mindful and being more mindful makes you more aware of what is going on. Being more aware of what is going on enables you to engage with it creatively and thereby transform your relationship to it.

Thus, at different times mindfulness can be either a recollected intention or a simple presence of mind. One of its functions is to make things that are arising conscious. It has to be balanced. Moreover, it is neither repression nor proliferation. In a meditative context it is also caring and careful. Finally, meditative mindfulness is based on ethical discernment. It helps us to answer such questions as: is this wholesome or unwholesome? Is this beneficial for myself and others or not? Does this bring pain or not? Being based on Buddhist ideas, it is fundamentally about the causes and conditions of suffering.

Notes

1. The text quoted here is Nyanaponika Thera's 1995 abbreviated version of the original.
2. There are two texts of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* in the Pali Canon: *Majjhima Nikāya*. 10, and a longer version, the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta, Dīgha Nikāya.* 22.
3. *The Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, 2009, Vol. 8, no. 3, p. 513.
4. http://www.vridhamma.org/Why-Vedana-and-What-is-Vedana.
5. *Majjhima Nikāya*. 137, Bodhi (1995), 1069, 1070.
6. *The Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, 2007, Vol. 8, no. 1, 8.

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