

**Lesson Three**  
**Mindfulness of Feeling Aggregate (Vedana)**

This is the third lesson from our Mindfulness of the 5 Aggregates series.

We have come to the third Aggregate that is Vedana (feeling). Here is what the Buddha taught:

*"Bhikkhavo Bhikkhu, Iti vedana  
Iti vedananaya samudayo  
Iti vedananaya atthangamo"*

*(Monks, this is feeling.  
Thus is the arising of feeling.  
Thus is the disappearing of feeling.)*

As you know, recognition and clear perception of meditation object is essential to build up strong mindfulness. So I will first explain what feeling is so that you can recognise and perceive it clearly.

**What is feeling (Vedana)?**

The Buddha taught in the Abhidhamma, that feeling is a reality. It exists as one of the mental states (Cetasika) in the mind.

Feeling's function is to feel all kinds  
of experiences in life.

Every moment is an experience and there are countless in life. Whatever kind of experiences in the past, present, future, however intense, joyful, traumatic or bland it may be, whether as man or woman and, wherever you live or come from, all boils down to just 3 types of feelings. They are namely pleasant, unpleasant and neutral feelings. You learn to recognise and be mindful of these feelings in the Beginners Course, Mindfulness of Feelings.

*How is going further than basics going to benefit us?*

In spite of just 3 types of feelings, we chase after experiences and objects, all because of (pleasant) feeling.

We chase after feeling because it is the 'flavour of life'. No feeling, no 'life'. Without feeling, life feels empty. It would be eating like food that has no taste. You wouldn't want to eat it. Feeling makes you want to live. And our ultimate aim in life is to feel happy always.

Not only does feeling plays the role of feeling the object, it savours, and enjoys it when it is pleasant.

As the saying goes, it is what makes life worth living for.

Sadly, it is not just pleasant feelings that we get in our pursuit. Frustration, anger, disappointment, sadness, loneliness, isolation just to name a few, are mental pain that we suffer. We feel pain when we can't get what we want, how we want it, or what we get does not meet our expectations. Worse, we get what we don't want. If you can't recognise this, you can observe how kids act up when they can't get what they want. It is what we adults experience as well and some even throw a tantrum like kids.

Unpleasant feeling is suffering. It seems we get that even though we didn't ask for it. This is our problem.

*Isn't Mindfulness of Feeling enough to solve our problem?*

Let us say, you feel sad thinking of a loss. When you are mindful of the sad feeling, the mind no longer takes the loss as object. So the suffering, sad feeling that the loss produced stops instantly. Instead, the mind has been redirected to a reality-object, which is feeling and that becomes the object.

Anchoring the mind on realities stabilises it, as mindfulness arises with mental balance and can only be accompanied by wholesome neutral or pleasant feeling.

Therefore, meditators should try to always direct and anchor the mind back on reality especially when suffering emotional pain.

When mindfulness is sustained on reality-objects over a period of time, concentration builds up then wholesome pleasant feeling becomes more apparent and frequent.

This basic change of mental pattern happens to all those who practise Wisdom Meditation, even with just the basics. Whether or not the change becomes integral and persists depends on whether wisdom has taken root or not.

Wisdom is seeing reality and its Nature. This 'seeing' becomes integral when it arises automatically and frequently as a perception. It is not a knowledge or understanding through thinking or analysing or discussing or listening. Wisdom Meditation cultivates this perception.

Back to the question of how going beyond the basics will benefit us. You may feel despite having taken up meditation, suffering (unpleasant feelings) still arises. Only after it has arisen, Mindfulness of Feeling is prompted to intervene it.

Is it possible that suffering (unpleasant feelings) could be avoided, not by way of distraction, but by, not arising altogether or reduced in frequency, in other words, to solve our problem?

Yes, this is possible. Overcoming suffering is precisely the core teaching of all Buddhas.

This is possible if the mind does not cling to what produces suffering in the first place.

In other words, there is detachment (Alobha) in the mind. I have explained this mental state and its importance in the first chapter.

Detachment is built up by seeing things as they really are (seeing realities), and gradually becomes stronger as perception of each Nature is developed. Nature means having the characteristics of Impermanence (Anicca), Suffering (Dukkha) and Non-ego (Anatta).

For as long as we don't see things as they really are, we can never see its Nature. Consequently, Detachment doesn't automatically arise as its undeveloped.

The basic practice of the first 3 bases (including Mindfulness of Feelings), and Mindfulness of 5 Hindrances will develop your perception of the first 2 Nature. It is the practice of Mindfulness of 5 Aggregates that develops the perception of Non-ego (Anatta).

Until and unless all 3 Nature is clearly perceived and understood, and Detachment is present, our problem will persist.

Because we still can't let go when lacking in Detachment in the mind. Specifically, we can't let go of things that produce suffering.

Therefore there is a need to go beyond the basics if we truly want to overcome our problems and suffering, not just momentarily. That also means, we need to practise Mindfulness of the 5 Aggregates after the basics.

### *Distinguish between Feeling-reality and concept (mind made)*

We may have learnt to recognise different types of feelings in the basics. To go beyond that, we must go on to learn to perceive clearly the distinction between reality (in this case, feeling) and concept. This is what

makes the practice of Mindfulness of the 5 Aggregates different from the first 3 bases.

Concepts are mind made.

But the trouble is, concept arises together with the reality. That makes it impossible for anyone who is not taught the difference to know and distinguish it, unless you have the Parami (perfections) from the past. Hence, we normally don't see realities. Instead, we see concepts and are caught up in its flow.

For example, when there is a pain after a long time in your sitting practice, the thought occurs "my legs are really painful, I must find out if I will ever walk again". Feeling is a reality. Legs, and "I, me, my" are concepts, a convention, a label where everyone agrees that such material form is called legs and I, me, my, or you, yours, they, theirs and etc.

Without seeing realities, we have nothing to compare to distinguish between reality and concept since all we see and know is concepts.

Therefore to distinguish between reality and concept, we must first learn & unmistakably recognise what realities are and in this chapter, feeling.

This essentially means, you must recognise the 3 types of feelings and you have already learnt that in Mindfulness of Feeling.

Anchor your mind on realities to develop your perception of it until it becomes undoubtedly clear.

Don't anchor your mind on concepts. In other words, don't go with flow of your thoughts (concepts) "my legs are painful, I am afraid I can't walk if I meditate etc." Instead, repeatedly direct your mind to perceive feeling, which is, the reality-object and not the thoughts of "my legs" or "I can't walk", which are concepts.

Through anchoring the mind and sustaining it on realities moment-to-moment, concentration is built up resulting in clarity of mind. With clarity of mind, we could perceive realities and its Nature clearly. We'll also perceive how concepts come to be and understand that it is truly nothing but mind made.

And, you will realise that concepts (mind made) influences feeling to be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

For instance, once a meditator told me that he was fascinated looking at a mosquito drawing out blood from his neighbour (who was probably being mindful of the feeling while he looked on). I replied with a question, would you be as fascinated if it was your hand that the mosquito was biting? I, me, my leg or hand are concepts and have an influence on feeling.

When perception is developed thus, the mind will be more and more able to distinguish between reality and mind-made concepts. Seeing this for yourself, you will further be encouraged to constantly direct your mind to realities, freeing the mind from the Suddha (happiness) and Dukkha (suffering) created by concepts (mind made).

*Being mindful of Feeling Aggregate and seeing it as it is (reality)*

Unless we practise mindfulness of feelings,  
otherwise we are merely conscious of  
feelings and caught up in its flow.

That means, we just feel. Being conscious of feeling is not the same as being mindful or aware of feelings. It does not mean that you perceive feeling as a reality. It does not signify the presence of mindfulness. Least of all, it is not the same as knowing the difference between feeling-reality and concepts.

That is why you hear people saying, "I am aware of feelings, but my heart is still aching". It is because they are not aware (mindful). They are merely conscious of feelings. They just feel, as feeling must arise with every consciousness.

One way to determine if you had been mindful or merely conscious of feeling is to check as follows. Using the above example, when you note Feeling, did the heartache (unpleasant feeling) disappear? Did it reduce in frequency and intensity?

It should disappear the instant mindfulness is brought up or reduce in frequency and intensity over a period. Why? Because mindfulness arises with detachment and therefore incapable of holding on to objects that hurt the mind.

We are conscious of feeling because  
feeling exists in all sense consciousness  
and mind consciousness.

That is to say, every moment you see, hear, taste, smell, or touch and also in thought, there is feeling accompanying it. This feeling could either be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral (except from the body base where there can only be pleasant or unpleasant feeling).

Everyone is conscious of feeling  
the moment they are awake and  
even in dreams.

You are in the flow of feelings so to say, as objects constantly come into contact with the senses.

There is no control over feelings when you  
are merely in the flow because objects  
dictate the ups and downs of how you feel.

This is the pattern for everyone who is untrained in Wisdom Meditation. They don't know what to do to guard the mind or bring about a different set of conditions for more wholesome feelings. They don't know how let go (bring out detachment), which is not the same as distraction or changing object.

### ***How to practise mindfulness of feeling aggregate?***

There are 2 aspects to Wisdom Meditation practice, internally and externally. Internally means being mindful of the Feeling Aggregate that is

arising from the internal sense base (mind) while externally would cover the Feeling Aggregate arising from the 5 external sense bases.

### *Internally*

Here is an example to illustrate the practice of Mindfulness of Feeling Aggregate, internally.

There are people who love to daydream. Most of us do actually especially when our life gets difficult. Like you think how wonderful it is to strike a lottery, at least you needn't work so hard for a while. The thought of going for a holiday makes your difficult day seem bearable. All these are thoughts (concepts) and arise with pleasant feelings.

Have you also remained angry for a while even after the person whom you were arguing with has long walked away? Some people can be angry even after years later and whenever they are reminded of them. Then, there are also people who suffer from anxiety, depression, sadness, grief, and so on for a prolonged period of time. These are examples of illwill mind that arises with unpleasant feelings.

*But where do these feelings come from?*

From the mind door directly

In the instance where the person you argued with, has long left the scene, the external object is no longer present. What is present is the mental object (Dhamma Aramana) arising from the mind door directly. It is no longer from the hearing and seeing consciousness, then goes into the mind door.

Unless mindfulness is prompted to disassociate the object, the mind continues in the same angry direction pulling out unpleasant feeling, again and again.

This strengthens the object and causes stronger anger. That is why you find yourself angrier as you think and talk more about it, until you find a distraction such as taking a walk, switching on the music or talk about other things.

Similarly in other instances, memories, expectations or whatever other mind objects arise in the mind directly without going through the external senses, and it arises with unpleasant feeling.

### *In Practice*

Direct and anchor the mind to realities with mindfulness, not concepts.

For instance, "he scolded me, he did this wrong or whatever that is making you angry" are merely concepts. The realities are mental sound (mind object), mind consciousness and unpleasant feeling. That is all. Nothing more. Direct the mind to be mindful of any one of these Aggregate-realities, depending on which is clear to you at that time although in this chapter, I am only explaining the Feeling Aggregate.

If you hadn't understood those words, the concepts of wrong, hurt etc. would not have arisen and unpleasant feeling connected to that concept would not have arisen either.

In the other instances, let's say you are grieving because you've lost someone dear. 'Someone' is a concept.

If the mind is clear and if you're able to look deeply, it is merely mental colours or mental sound or other mental objects. That is a reality, namely mental object (Dhamma Aramana). There is also the presence of Sanna (perception), which simply plays a function of remembering and associating.

In this instance it has associated the mental object with a concept 'someone', and not just anyone but somebody dear. So it pulls out attachment with pleasant feeling. But because you no longer can see, hear, touch or be in contact with this person any longer, grief (suffering) follows.

Again, in practice, be mindful of any one of these Aggregate-realities, depending on which is clear to you at that time.

Similarly, with anxiety, depression, sadness, loneliness, we must also direct the mind to the realities.

Don't anchor the mind on thoughts,  
unfulfilled expectations, ideas or any thoughts  
that bring out those unpleasant feelings.

They are merely concepts.

Anchoring your mind on concepts will make you  
feel even worse.

It also increases those negative thoughts. In  
turn, those negative thoughts strengthen the  
object and bring out more unpleasant feelings.

While we can get up and escape the pain of sitting for a long time but we cannot runaway from the mental pain and in particular that which arises from the mind door. Therefore, it is essential for us to go beyond the basics.

Even though Mindfulness of Feeling Aggregate internally is difficult because it is subtle compared to material form Aggregate. And since it arises from the mind door, which is immaterial it makes it harder but not impossible to perceive. All we need is clarity of mind from concentration and proper direction.

Deepening our practice with Mindfulness of the Aggregates will enable us to cut out a lot of mental suffering through an understanding gained from direct experience and observation (Patipati). Overcoming our pain and gaining this happiness through wisdom is worth all the effort.

### *Externally*

Externally refers to feeling that arises from the 5 external sense bases.

### *Examples*

You feel happy when you see someone you like. You feel happy when you hear someone says good things about you. It feels great to be in an AC room on a very hot day.

You waited a long time at a restaurant famous for their noodles. But when you tried it, it wasn't how you like it. You feel disappointed (unpleasant feelings) and probably a waste of time and money. Why? You had an idea of how it should look and taste or had a previous experience to compare with.

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| <p>This expectation or comparison is a<br/>concept, not a reality.</p> |
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The realities here and now are just colours, taste, hardness and softness (earth element). There are seeing, tasting and even smelling consciousness. There are still feelings arising with the consciousness. As usual, we don't see these realities, things as they really are. Instead we see our ideal noodles in our mind.

When the mind grasp hold of the past comparison or expectation, it is likely that such concept will bring about unpleasant feeling if it falls below the mark.

If it exceeds the expectations it brings out pleasant feeling.

### *In practice*

Direct the mind to recognise Feeling-Aggregate (reality). Don't anchor the mind on concepts, as it will only cause more unpleasant feelings to arise if it is disappointment or attachment if it is pleasant feelings. We should be mindful of it in the same way we are mindful of Feeling Aggregate internally.

### *Challenge in daily life*

The conditions in a retreat centre are often conducive for the perception of reality to be sustained thereby making it favourable to perceive Nature.

Back in our lay life, maintaining that perception built through intensive practice becomes a challenge.

It is a challenge because concepts automatically arise with realities unless, our perception is anchored on realities continuously, building up strong Samadhi (concentration). So, in lay life we don't see realities. We see concepts. We are caught up in concepts and the flow of feelings. This is the typical pattern. But concepts are necessary for lay people as it is what enables us to function in this sense world, such as driving and making a living.

So how do we continue to build up and develop the perception of realities (seeing things as they really are) so that we are able to perceive its Nature?

The way to break the typical pattern is to constantly take a moment and be mindful, by directing the mind to note: "what is the reality here and now?" Direct your mind to recognise realities. Apply what you've learnt to help you recognise it.

Once you are able to recognise the reality, repeat: "feeling, feeling, feeling" or whichever reality is clear to you, to develop and strengthen your perception of it. Repeat, "concept, concept, concept" to distinguish between concept and reality.

This is one way of continuing the practice in our daily life outside of a retreat and weekly formal classes.

Even though it is slightly delayed compared to retreat setting, training the mind this way in daily life enables us to continue our practice.

If the perception of reality and its Nature arise more frequently in our daily life although not as continuously as during intensive practice, it will still enable us to cut off a lot of suffering. This is especially helpful when concepts produce much suffering or disturb our mind. When it begins to arise automatically and more frequently in our daily life, only then we know that our practice has deepened.

### *The Arising and Passing Away of Feeling Aggregate*

The practice of Mindfulness of the Feeling Aggregate goes further than just recognising the realities and distinguishing between realities and concept. As the Buddha mentioned earlier, we must know the arising and disappearing of feelings.

So, be mindful of where and why  
feeling is arising.

Recognise the (Feeling) Aggregate, and note where it comes from. Note if it causes another thought to arise or it dies off as a sense consciousness? Be mindful of why it disappears.

Pay attention to the realities and  
its arising and disappearing phenomena.

### *In Practice*

Once we are able to recognise the realities, we continue to anchor and sustain our mind on it. In other words the mind should stay on the realities

without much straying. When it is sustained as such, concentration is developed, mind and object becomes clear. At this point, you can start directing the mind as follows.

Be mindful and look deeply, is the feeling in the hearing consciousness or in body consciousness or in the mind consciousness, and etc. Feeling arises when object comes into contact with our sense bases, namely the 5 external sense bases and 1 internal, which is the mind base.

We must learn the skill of directing the mind to the right trajectory. In this instance, direct it to be aware of its arising and disappearing.

When there is concentration, clarity of mind and proper direction, you will begin perceive clearly the different feelings arising with different consciousness.

### *Example*

In your sitting meditation, you may start to notice itchy feeling from the body. As your mindfulness becomes sharper it begins to notice other sensations as well, such as numbness that is spreading and crawling up and then disappear. Maybe there is a thought and you noted the feeling accompanying the thought and then it disappeared. Every now and then there is feeling from the hearing consciousness and then it disappeared. And so on. It is clear what feeling arising with which consciousness.

Continue to sustain the mind on its arising  
and disappearing phenomena.

Direct and sustain the mind to its arising  
and learn to perceive how did that feeling  
arise or why did it arise.

Do the same to perceive and understand  
disappearing phenomena.

Through this, you perceive and understand that feeling arises because of conditions. You'll perceive and understand those conditions. Basically, there was an object and contact at the sense base (including the mind base).

You'll also understand there are various factors that influence feelings including our Sanna (perception) and concepts (mental formations). Conversely, you will also understand and know how to disassociate unwholesome feelings. And you know how to redirect the mind for new conditions related to wholesome feelings.

As you direct the mind to noting these cause and effect phenomena, you will eventually realise from your own practice, that feelings do not belong to anyone, not me, not you or any other being. Feeling is not me or I, you or he or she or they either. This is the Nature of Anatta (non-ego).

The mind does not cling onto feelings when it sees this Nature, as it does not belong and has no one to belong to.

Realising this Nature is important because  
many of us fight and argue because we see  
feelings as ours and it is hurt.

People take revenge or can't forget a hurtful past, so they get angry, argue, or scold, or hit back because they feel hurt, or their feelings are hurt. It is because we don't see feeling-realities nor understand its Nature. We see concept, 'he has wronged me, hurt me, I feel hurt, disappointed' etc.

When we realise that feelings don't belong to anyone, and there is no 'I' to own those feelings, nor is feeling permanent nor something that resides inside, outside or in between, we stop fighting and arguing as it is unimportant.

The mind does not cling to feelings because it understands that it arises because of conditions and disappears because those conditions disappear.

Only when we see Nature clearly, we let go.

We reduce or stop clinging to what is impermanent, suffering and which is insubstantial, or don't belong.

This makes room for much wholesome happiness  
to arise more frequently and to persist.

Consequently, spiritual happiness in life increases, up to the highest bliss of Nibbana (highest happiness). This gradually replaces sense happiness, which is inferior as suffering always follows it up. Spiritual happiness on the other hand, does not result in suffering.

Happiness is our aim in life. Knowing that this practice results in a far more superior happiness than the sense happiness, a wise person should incorporate Wisdom Meditation as part of his lay life and continue with Mindfulness of 5 Aggregates after the basics.