

Lesson 4

by Bro James Ong (30 minutes)

CONTEMPLATION OF FEELINGS

Part 1

4.1 Introduction

Welcome to the fourth lesson of Satipatthana Meditation Discourse. Today, we move onto Contemplation of Feelings, in Pali – Vedanupassana.

4.2 Why do we need to practise mindfulness – contemplation of feelings?

Feeling is important because we measure happiness with feelings. If we don't feel, we are like a block of wood, so we want to feel all the time. In fact, all our actions are channelled to acquiring good feelings. When feeling pleasant, we consider that as happiness. On the other hand, if we experience unpleasant feeling then we feel unhappy. So therefore feeling is an important subject for meditation.

We think feeling is always within us, residing somewhere in our body or in our mind... This perception gives rise to the idea that: *'This is my feelings. It belongs to me.'* So when someone says something which you don't like to hear, you would probably say *"You hurt me, you hurt my feelings."*

The truth is: feeling does not belong to us. Feeling comes about because there are conditions for its arising. It passes away due to conditions. You may ask how does feeling arise? Feeling arises when there is object coming into contact with our 6 senses.

So the Buddha begins with the 3 basic types of feelings. The Buddha said: *"And monks how does a monk live practising feeling contemplation in feelings? Herein a monk, when experiencing a pleasant feeling knows, I am experiencing a pleasant feeling or when experiencing painful feeling knows, I am experiencing a painful feeling or when experiencing a neutral feeling knows, I am experiencing a neutral feeling."*

I would like to explain further on these 3 basic kinds of feelings: pleasant, painful and neutral.

4.3 Pleasant Feelings

What is pleasant feeling? When we see something agreeable or something nice then pleasant feeling arises. That is why, most people like to go window-shopping or sight-seeing or travelling. Seeing something strange, different, colourful, new, or certain shapes give rise to pleasant feeling.

There are people who like to move things around in the house and it makes them feel happy to see their things properly put in place. Some would frequently change the wall colour, pictures and flower pots. It makes them happy even though they can't keep switching new houses, they could still feel, a different environment each time they change things around.

For those who are lucky, we say as a Buddhist, that owing to their good karma of the past, they now have pleasant objects appearing. They stay in a beautiful place with nice garden. They wake up in the morning look out of the window they see flowers in a clean garden. They drive big cars, no traffic jam, reach the office and people say "*good morning boss*" and they feel happy about it because they feel being respected.

Then they would go out to lunch in a hotel with ambience and they are happy about it. Then when they go back home they see their children - well behaved, see their wife and feel happy to see them. Then, it is indeed a very happy life. All these pleasant objects give a lot of joy. Such types of people mostly feel very satisfied and find it hard to meditate as there is no urgency.

However, it does not mean that meditators are all sad people. There are meditators who are fortunate as well. There are those who have acquired great wealth but understand that there are things more meaningful in life besides worldly sense-enjoyment. So they come to meditate. There are also those who wish to seek for deeper meaning in life other than superficial worldly happiness.

4.4 What is painful feeling?

Now, the problem in life is we can't have everything we want. We can't expect everyone to speak nicely to us all the time. Strangers, colleagues or even dear ones might say things that you don't like to hear, which makes you unhappy and upset.

In life, we meet with these objects, pleasant and unpleasant all the time. So, our feeling is like a yoyo, going up and going down – one moment we feel happy, next moment we feel sad. The up-and-down creates instability in our mind which is upsetting and not peaceful.

The Buddha taught us that feeling is just feeling. It has its causes of arising and when it arises, it passes away. But if we catch hold of unpleasant feeling, then it produces agitation, frustration or mental pain. If we hold on to pleasant feelings then the mind

wants more and more of the delightful objects. It is like drinking sea water to quench thirst. It can never be satisfied.

So Mindfulness or Wisdom Meditation is about developing mindfulness to see things as they really are: “*suchness*”, no concept, no plus, no minus, just see its arising and its passing away. If you understand the phenomenon about feeling, you would understand that you cannot hold on to feelings.

People who suffer from depression or become neurotic, constantly replay the trauma inside their mind. They could not let go of feelings. Feelings generate more thoughts. It is like 2 persons quarrelling. A shouts at B, B shouts back and A shouts louder and B begins to raise his voice also. Very soon comes, the sticks and stones. When there is unpleasant feeling, it conditions more negative thoughts. The mind becomes revengeful and starts to think how to harm or hit back. So, feelings, affect thinking. In turn the negative thinking, again, produces more unhappy feelings.

That is how one becomes depressed failing to see the nature of feelings. They could not get out of the negative thinking and is trapped, in the world of suffering. One of the ways of not letting feelings take control of the mind is, by cultivating mindfulness in watching feeling as feeling, seeing its true nature of arising and passing away.

4.5 Neutral Feelings

What is neutral feeling? Object that is neither pleasant nor unpleasant produces neutral feelings. Example: when you walk along a road and there is nothing particularly nice or disgusting to see, so then, you just have neutral feeling. Or, if you are in your house, probably just sweeping the floor and it is neither exciting nor interesting so you would probably just have neutral feeling.

Neutral feeling constantly arises every day. We do not notice it because, neutral feeling is very subtle compared to the very strong type of pleasant or unpleasant feeling which are very noticeable.

4.6 Pleasant feelings connected with sensual things

Now the Buddha continues with: “*when experiencing a pleasant feeling connected with sensual things he knows, I am experiencing pleasant feeling connected with sensual thing*”

What are pleasant feelings connected to sensual things?

Examples of pleasant feeling connected to sensual things are feelings that we get when we enjoy seeing movies, shopping, tasting nice food, good company, interesting

conversation, having pleasant body feelings like being in air conditioned room. Even, day-dreaming or fantasising give rise to pleasant feelings.

So if the day is pleasant without much disturbing objects then we consider it, a happy day – the day flows like a song. A meditator should be mindful that these are happy feelings connected to sensual things. They are, impermanent.

They should take note of the arising and disappearing of feeling so that they would not be controlled by ignorance and fall into to the 2 extremes. One is the craving to regain the pleasant feelings connected to those sensual things. The other is the frustrations when unable to replenish the sense-enjoyment.

Anchoring on feelings that are connected to sensual things produces suffering when such feelings disappear. Therefore, sensual joy comes along with pain. The happiness connected to sensual things if not noted, or be aware of, give rise to encumbrances.

Here I like to relate this story of Kisagotami in the scripture. She married very young and was very happy when she had her first-born son. Unfortunately, after a couple of months her son died due to some sickness and she could not accept it. She could not accept that the son passed away so young - just a few months old.

So she wrapped the son around and goes to the medicine shop and asked “*could you please give me some medicine for my son?*” But the doctor said the son is dead and said he is turning cold. There is no medicine for dead. “*No no*” she said “*he is just sleeping, not dead*”. Then the doctor said please you go away I have no time for you. So she goes on to the next and the next and she was chased away from all, until, she came to this one shop, where a man took pity on her and said, perhaps the Enlightened one, the Buddha, could help. He is here in our town if you could go and see him perhaps he has medicine for your son.

She quickly took the baby, rushed to the Buddha kneeled down, paid respect and said “*Lord Lord please give me medicine for my son. He is sleeping*”. The Buddha looked at the baby and knew that the baby was dead but the Buddha said “*could you bring me some mustard seed?*” She was very happy now that there is this medicine for the baby and so she replied “*Yes yes Lord I will get mustard seed*”. The Buddha added “*but...it must be from the household where no one has died*”. She said “*yes yes*” and off she went to ask for mustard seeds.

They gave it to her as most household have it. Then she said “*oh wait...I have to ask, has anybody in the house died?*” “*Yes of course my father has died*”. “*Oh then I cannot use this. I can only have mustard seed from family where no one has died*” and she went onto the next family and next family and next. As she went on, the realisation comes upon her. So she took her baby to the forest and cried and cried, dug a hole carefully wrapped the baby and buried him.

Then she returned to see the Buddha. The Buddha looked at her “*Kisagotami have you found the mustard seed?*” She said “*Lord, I understand now*”

The baby that has given her so much happiness, so much pleasure, produced so much pain in her, which I always say, the one you love the most, normally give you the most pain. If you don't care for that person you don't feel for that person. It is only those you care that give you the most pain.

These are sensual pleasurable feeling but it comes with encumbrances. It gives you lots of pain once the joyful object is no longer there.

In contrast, spiritual happiness does not result in pain. It is different. It gives rise to concentration. When the mind acquires spiritual joy, concentration develops. The mind becomes peaceful and wisdom becomes deep.

Feelings that are happy are not necessarily wholesome. There are happy feelings which are also unwholesome. This contrast would become clear once you meditate.

4.7 Pleasant feelings connected with spiritual things

Coming to the pleasant feeling connected with spiritual things. Now, these pleasant feelings are, wholesome.

The Buddha again continues with: “*When experiencing pleasant feeling connected with spiritual things he knows, I am experiencing pleasant feeling connected with spiritual things*”.

Spiritual things are not connected to sensual things. These are considered as wholesome feelings. Example: the pleasant feeling that arises from listening to the dhamma. Now some of you may have such pleasant feeling while listening to this talk. I suppose if you are unhappy about it you probably would not come back next week. If I see you next week then I presume you were happy.

Perhaps some people like chanting and they feel very happy when they chant. They chant early in the morning, they chant at night and have good sleep. They feel very peaceful. They have good dreams. Chanting is a form of concentration but there are those who don't like chanting the Sutta. That is quite alright because it is individual preference. Now these are spiritual things.

Or services: Some help out in the temple, some go to the old folks home or children's home. They are not paid. Some even bring food to cheer. It gives them joy and they feel happy about it, not because of sensual enjoyment but because of services in trying to make those unfortunate people's life, more bearable and happier. Doing simple things sometimes could give you great happiness that is spiritual.

I wish to give an example that happened to me long time ago. One day in Penang there was a blind man trying to cross the road. Each time he stepped out, a motorbike or a car would honk at him. So he stepped back and when he feels it was alright he stepped forward and he would get honked again. I was already late for an appointment but I decided to walk up to him and asked: *“Are you trying to cross the road?”* He said *“yes”*. *“Can I help you?”* He said *“yes”* and I said again *“I will hold your hand can you just follow me?”*

So, I brought him across and I asked again: *“Where do you want to go?”* He said *“no need, now I know my way once I am across I know my way”*. I asked *“sure?”* *“Sure”*. *“Ok”* then I moved along.

Even though I was late there is so much of spiritual joy arising in me. I was so happy and when my friend saw my huge smile and asked if I strike a lottery to which I replied *“not so lucky”*. But he was puzzled why I could be so happy. Well, that is because there is spiritual joy. It is just a simple act and I don't have to pay one cent. All I did was to take a blind man across the road but the joy lasted a long time. This is spiritual joy.

One must also not assume that when you meditate you would become like a stone with no feeling. Meditators used to ask me: *“Bro James, does it mean that people who meditate on mindfulness and equanimity have no more feeling of joy? In that case I do not wish to become like a block of wood with equanimity feelings all the time. I want to have pleasant feelings”*. It is not so. There are spiritual joys which are, more subtle and sublime, long lasting and do not produce encumbrances.

4.8 Balance of spiritual joy and sensual joy

Meditators should be mindful of wholesome spiritual joy which they should cultivate more. The Buddha said it leads to happiness not only in this life but also in the future lives.

In the absence of spiritual joy, it is essential to have sensual joy, otherwise one would feel deprived, and become agitated, sad, angry and jealous at those who have it. As one cultivates and experiences more spiritual joy, then the need for worldly joy becomes lessen.

As a Buddhist we must remember that in the enjoyment of worldly pleasure we should not cause harm to ourselves and other beings. For instance we should not steal or cheat in order to satisfy our enjoyment. One should not consume nor distribute drugs.

Meditators without keeping precepts will find difficulties to progress in meditation because morality is the foundation for attaining concentration, peacefulness and wisdom.

I have explained in this talk the 3 basic kinds of feelings – pleasant, painful and neutral. I have also explained the pleasant feelings connected to sensual things and pleasant feelings connected to spiritual things.

4.9 How to practice contemplation of feelings?

In the practice of meditation, how do we cultivate mindfulness on the feelings? In the beginning of the sitting, we normally start with rising and falling of the abdomen as the preliminary starting point so that we do not have to go searching for an object and also to build up concentration.

After some time, a meditator may find that the sensations or feelings on the body become more predominant and obvious. A meditator could then switch over to the body feelings such as itchiness, numbness, painful sensations, tension etc...

The meditator should observe the feelings the way one should be mindful of the body as instructed before by the Buddha. That is, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful. One should look deeply into the feelings and see the built up of intensity of that feeling whether it is itchiness or painful sensations that is being built up gradually. So it is essential to practise equanimity and mindfulness so that the mind can be detached from those painful feelings.

Only when the feelings become unbearable should the meditator change his posture. Mindfully “changing, changing” by putting down one foot on the floor or both feet relaxed on the floor without interlocking. In this way the meditator then observes the painful sensations disappearing from the leg.

Sometimes a meditator could see the arising and disappearing of the sensation even without moving the legs or releasing the posture. As for itchiness which is bearable a meditator should not scratch it but observe the itchiness which is sometimes moving, or becoming stronger or gradually disappearing. A meditator should refrain from moving the body once he has settled into a comfortable posture so that, feelings that are built up and became prominent can be observed.

A meditator therefore, can switch to other feelings arising from the body instead of coming back to the rising and falling of the abdomen which is the air element if, feeling object is clearer and predominant.

Feeling is a very strong object compared to the rising and falling which is very subtle. Therefore, it is very suitable object to build up concentration because it pulls the mind there. The mind is compelled to anchor on the painful feeling which then builds up strong concentration.

I shall end my talk here today and will now deal with the frequently asked question with regard to contemplation of feeling.

Question:

- (1) *Can we stay on the feeling for whole hour or must we return to rising and falling of the abdomen?*

Answer:

If the feeling object is very predominant and strong and when it has disappear and another predominant feeling object appears such as after itchiness there is pain. You may still stay on the feeling object even if it is for the whole hour except when the feeling object is no longer noticeable and there is no other prominent object then a meditator needs to come back to the preliminary object which is the rising and falling of the abdomen.

When pain is appearing like a block of pain or block of numbness and the meditator cannot see the change in that feeling object – it advisable then for the meditator to go to other object or return back to the rising and falling where the change is more easier perceive.

Question:

- (2) *How long or how much are we supposed to bear the pain?*

Answer:

You try to bear the pain as long as you can. If you find the pain too excruciating then, you slowly change your posture mindfully.

I will continue with the other types of feelings next week mentioned in the Discourse concerning painful feelings and equanimity feelings connected to sensual and spiritual things. I will also cover methods of how to deal with pain in the following talk and with more Q&A.

Sadhu! Sadhu! Sadhu!