

Contemplation of Feeling



Sayalay Susīlā

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Venerable Sayalay Susilā is the founder and current Abbess of the Appāmada Vihari Meditation Center (AVMC), in Penang, Malaysia, since 2014.

Sayalay was born in 1963 in Pahang, Malaysia. Sayalay began developing her keen interest in insight meditation while at the University of Science Malaysia, where she obtained a degree in mass communications in 1987. After graduation, Sayalay worked as a high school teacher for a year and a half. Being increasingly disenchanted with worldly matters and desiring to be dedicated to the practice more than ever, she resigned her post to take up meditation full time for three years.

In 1991, Sayalay ordained as a Theravada Buddhist nun in the Burmese tradition at the age of 28, in Malaysian Buddhist Meditation Centre, Penang, Malaysia. Six months after her ordination in 1991, she went to Panditarama Monastery in Myanmar, where she practiced intensively for nearly three years under the guidance of the famous meditation master Venerable U Pandita Sayadaw.

In 1994, wishing to cultivate concentration meditation, Sayalay moved to Pa Auk Forest Monastery in Myanmar. She placed herself under the guidance of the renowned monk Venerable Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw, and remained in the forest for 14 years. In addition to an assiduous

program of meditation, she also learned the *Abhidhamma*, ancient discourses, and the Pāli language from Pa-Auk Sayadaw. Meanwhile, she became his English-to-Chinese interpreter in Myanmar and abroad.

From 2000, Sayalay started teaching the *Abhidhamma* extensively in various renowned centers internationally, including those in the US, Canada, Malaysia, Australia, Singapore, Latvia, Indonesia and Taiwan.

In order to deepen her own understanding of the *Dhamma*, Sayalay also practiced different meditation methods during her stay in Myanmar, including those taught by Shwe Oo Min Sayadaw, Mogok Sayadaw, Sayagyi U Ba Khin, and Goenka. As a result of both her breadth of exposure and depth of practice of various meditation methods, Sayalay has become an unusually accomplished teacher—one who is able to present the subtleties of the Buddha's teachings in a simple and direct way. In particular, she presents the most profound division of the teaching, the *Abhidhamma*, in a lucid manner grounded not in pedantic philosophy, but in actual meditation experience.

After leaving Myanmar, Sayalay studied and practiced according to the suttas, putting an emphasis on teaching and practicing the *Satipatthāna*, the Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

Sayalay has traveled extensively as a meditation and *Abhidhamma* teacher, presenting the *Abhidhamma* and sutta expositions in formal lectures and talks, and has conducted meditation retreats throughout the United States, Canada, Eastern Europe, Russia, Australia, India, China, Indonesia, Singapore, and in her home country of Malaysia. In 2015, Sayalay led the first International Novitiate Program with Venerable Sanghasena held in Ladakh, the region of the Himalayas of northern India.

Sayalay Susīlā has a unique gift to teach and present the Buddha's teachings with profound depth, vividness, directness, precision, and clarity. Her teaching is very much appreciated by her students globally. As an effectively bilingual speaker in both English and Chinese, Sayalay is uniquely able to expound the Dhamma and teach to a wide global audience. In addition, Sayalay is also fluent in Burmese, Hokkien, and Malay.

Sayalay is the author of many books published in both English and Chinese. Her most well-known English book is *Unravelling the Mysteries of Mind and Body through Abhidhamma* 《揭开身心之奥秘》 (second edition, both Chinese and English).

Other books she has published in English include:

1. The Path to Happiness
2. Dhamma Essence Series
3. Inner Exploration
4. The Nine Attributes of the Buddha
5. Mindfulness of Breathing

Her Chinese publications include:

1. *From this Shore to Far Shore*
《从此岸到彼岸》
2. *The Practical Manual of Abhidhamma*
《阿毗达摩实用手册》
3. *Turning the Wheel of the Dhamma*
《正法初现》
4. *The Development of the Faculties*
《根修习经》
5. *The Nine Attributes of the Buddha*
《佛陀的九种德行》
6. *Contemplation of the Mind*
《洞见心之真相: 念处经之心念处》
7. *The Path to Happiness* 《朝向快乐之道》

8. *Dhamma Essence Series* 《佛法精粹》
9. *Mettā Bhavana* 《慈爱禅》
10. *Paṭṭhāna* 《二十四缘发趣论》

1. CONTEMPLATION OF FEELING – THE PATH TO CESSATION OF SUFFERING

In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, The Foundations of Mindfulness (MN 10), the Buddha taught:

This is the only way, bhikkhus, for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for reaching the noble path, for the realization of nibbāna—namely, the four foundations of mindfulness.

The four foundations of mindfulness are contemplation of body, feeling, mind and dhamma. Contemplation of feeling (*vedanānupassanā*) is one aspect of practicing the four foundations of mindfulness. According to the commentary on the discourse The Foundations of Mindfulness (MN 10), the reason why contemplation of feeling is included in the practice of the four foundations of mindfulness is because of the clearness of the arising of feeling.

Indeed, the arising of pleasant or painful feeling is very clear. When pleasant feeling arises, spreading through and flowing over the whole body, one utters: "Ah, what joy!" It is like a thirsty traveler drinking a cold drink in the hot summer. Similarly, when one is pierced by a thorn, one screams: "Ouch, how painful!"

The other reason why contemplation of feeling is important is because feeling conditions craving, the root cause of suffering. When, through contemplation, feeling ceases, craving comes to a stop, thus bringing suffering to an end. Thus, contemplation of feeling becomes one of the foundations on the path leading to the cessation of suffering—*Nibbāna*.

One of the Buddha's chief disciples, Venerable Sāriputta, became fully enlightened through contemplation of feeling. On that occasion, he was standing behind the Blessed One, fanning him. The Blessed One was preaching Dhamma to

Venerable Sāriputta's nephew, who was not a disciple.

Pleasant feeling, Aggivessana, is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, subject to destruction, vanishing, fading away, and ceasing. Unpleasant feeling too is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, subject to destruction, vanishing, fading away, and ceasing. Neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling too is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, subject to destruction, vanishing, fading away, and ceasing. Seeing thus, a well-taught noble disciple becomes disenchanted with pleasant feeling, disenchanted with unpleasant feeling, disenchanted with neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling. Being disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, his mind is liberated. (MN 74)

Whilst fanning the Blessed One, Venerable Sāriputta was contemplating his feelings as instructed, and he attained arahantship on the spot.

Due to his sharp wisdom that could penetrate to the ultimate truth upon hearing only a few lines of the Buddha's discourse, Venerable Sāriputta's path to liberation was a "pleasant practice with swift insight" (*sukkhā-patipadā khippābhiññā*). As for us, even after listening to the above discourse dozens of times, we are still not closer to enlightenment. Our path is a painful practice with sluggish insight (*dukkhā-patipadā dandhābhiññā*) because our wisdom is dull. Only through diligent and continuous practice can we hope to sharpen our wisdom and eventually succeed in reaching the final goal.

2. THE BUDDHA'S DISCOURSE ON CONTEMPLATION OF FEELING

And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu dwell contemplating feelings in feelings?

Herein, bhikkhus, when experiencing a pleasant feeling, the bhikkhu knows, 'I experience a pleasant feeling'; when experiencing an unpleasant feeling, he knows, 'I experience an unpleasant feeling'; when experiencing a neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling, he knows, 'I experience a neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling.'

Thus he dwells contemplating feelings in feelings internally, or he dwells contemplating feelings in feelings externally, or he dwells contemplating

feelings in feelings both internally and externally.

He dwells contemplating the origination factors in feelings, or he dwells contemplating the cessation factors in feelings, or he dwells contemplating both the origination and cessation factors in feelings. Or his mindfulness is established that 'There is feeling' to the extent necessary for further knowledge and mindfulness. And he dwells independent, not clinging to anything in the world. (MN 10)

3. WHAT IS FEELING?

What is feeling, or *vedanā*? The Pali word *vedanā* does not signify emotion associated with greed, anger, and delusion, but rather the bare affective quality of an experience. For example, when a gentle breeze blows over your body, a blissful and pleasurable sensation is felt by feeling. This experience of pleasant and blissful feeling is “feeling” itself. When your hand is accidentally cut by a knife, a painful sensation is being felt by feeling.

There are three types of feeling:

*There are these three types of feelings:
pleasant, unpleasant, and neither-
pleasant-nor-unpleasant. (MN 74)*

I shall explain the difference between these three types of feeling according to the characteristic (intrinsic property), the function, and the manifestation of each, as outlined in the *Visuddhimagga*, “The Path of Purification.”

The characteristic of feeling

Feeling is said to have the characteristic, or intrinsic property, of being felt (*vedyita*), as explained above. The difference is that the painful sensation caused by the cut of a knife is felt by unpleasant feeling, and the blissful sensation caused by the touch of a breeze is felt by pleasant feeling. When a glass of plain water is being drunk, the bland taste is being felt by neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling.

The function of feeling

The function of feeling is to experience the desirable, undesirable or neutral aspect of the sense object. Every sense object has its desirable, undesirable, or neutral aspect, and it is feeling that experiences it. For example, the sound of praise for oneself is desirable and is experienced by pleasant feeling; the sound of slander towards oneself is undesirable, and is experienced by unpleasant feeling; a sound that has nothing to do with oneself is neutral and is

experienced by neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling.

During meditation, as concentration increases, the body feels light, joyful and relaxed, and feeling has the mere function of experiencing this pleasurable sensation. Similarly, when we get ill, feeling has the mere function to experience the arising of this miserable, unpleasant illness of the body. The neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling that arises upon seeing a stranger has the function to experience the neutrality of the sight of a stranger, being neither pleasant nor unpleasant in nature.

The manifestation of feeling

The manifestation of pleasant feeling

The manifestation of a pleasant feeling is a joyful sensation in the body and mind. Like being refreshed by a cold drink in the summer heat, we feel uplifted.

Pleasant feelings are indeed pleasing to the body and the mind, and people get

obsessed with them. Addiction to alcohol, recreational drugs, and sex are not attachments to the material or the action per se, but to the pleasant feelings conditioned by them. It is difficult to disentangle ourselves from the attachment to sensual pleasures associated with pleasant feeling.

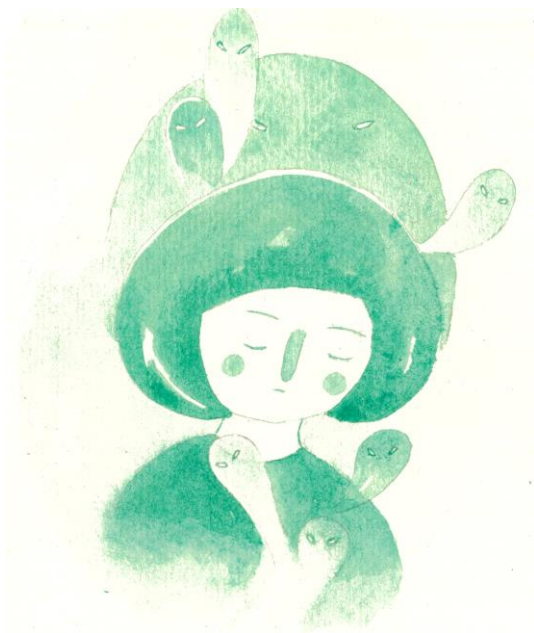
The manifestation of unpleasant feeling

The manifestation of unpleasant feeling is just the opposite of pleasant feeling. Instead of being refreshing, unpleasant feeling manifests itself as distress to the body and mind. It drains away energy and can be very uncomfortable. Buddha likens unpleasant feeling to a dart (SN 36.5).

Most people do not know how to handle the mental and physical pain arising from unpleasant feeling. They identify with and grasp the unpleasant feelings as “I” and as “mine” and drown in an ocean of pain,

lamenting and crying, driven to delirium by the suffering, even committing suicide.

Most people do not know how to handle the mental and physical pain arising from unpleasant feelings.



They identify with and grasp the unpleasant feelings as “I” and as “mine.”

The manifestation of neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling

Neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling manifests like drinking tasteless, bland water, not stirring up any emotion in the mind and body. We experience this feeling often when we engage in repetitive tasks like brushing our teeth, driving, doing daily household chores, and so on. When neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling manifests, it is easy for us to be unaware of what is happening, leading to loss of mindfulness and to thinking there is no feeling at all.



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uplifted.*

Feeling is not an experiencer

Not fully understanding the characteristic, function and the manifestation of feeling, we may mistakenly take the feeling that is experiencing a sense object as “myself.” So when hearing the flattery, we might think, “It is me that experiences pleasant feeling”; we then attach to that pleasant feeling and feel flattered.

There is the tale of a criminal, a master of flattery, who was brought to Yama, the king of the hell realm, for a trial. An assistant tried to warn King Yama: “My king, beware of this cunning criminal. He is an expert liar. Be careful not to be fooled by him.”

Trying to escape harsh punishment, the criminal made his best effort to please Yama: “My mighty king, I never thought I would meet such a perfect ruler in this realm. With your charming elegance, with your power and wisdom, you have the admiration and loyalty of all your people. Long live the king!”

Hearing these words, Yama was elated in both body and mind and felt extremely delighted—the exact manifestation of pleasant feeling. His assistant whispered to him, “My king, don’t be fooled! Don’t trust this criminal!” Hearing this, Yama felt as if he were dashed with a bucket of cold water, and the unpleasant feelings immediately took over. Without realizing it is just the changing of feeling from pleasant to unpleasant, he was depressed by the change of feeling, and yelled at his assistant in anger: “Don’t you know this man is telling the truth?”

Most people do not understand feeling as feeling, so they easily identify feeling as myself. From the standpoint of “myself” comes what belongs to myself: so while encountering an unhappy event, we probably think, “I am feeling down, and it is my sorrow that could not be shared!” Such a way of perceiving feeling makes one feel even more sorrowful.

The worst case scenario is, when finding no way to escape from unpleasant feeling and despair, some may seek delight or indulge themselves in sensual pleasure—intoxicating themselves with drugs, alcohol, or sex. This is because they do not know of any escape from unpleasant feeling other than sensual pleasure.

Experiencing pleasant feeling without the “I”

Take chocolate as an example: it is pleasant due to its aroma, taste, and smoothness. However, we often do not realize that it is the pleasant feeling—originating from the contact of the chocolate with the tongue—that plays the role of the experiencer. We do not see that it is the pleasant feeling that experiences the aroma, taste, and smoothness of the chocolate, not “myself.” When we misunderstand the pleasant feeling and wrongly take up “myself” as the experiencer, we fall into the trap of identity-view and think “I” experience the good taste of this chocolate.

Experiencing unpleasant feeling without the “I”

How does an unpleasant feeling experience the unpleasant nature of the object? Suppose someone is abusing us verbally. The abusive words impinge our ears, and unpleasant feeling arises in our mind. At this moment, if we do not comprehend “It’s the unpleasant feeling that is experiencing the unpleasant nature of the abuse,” we would take up the unpleasant feeling as “I” and think, “I feel unpleasant; I am in distress.” This wrong view entertains the unpleasant feeling and keeps it sustained in our mind.

Even after the unpleasant feeling associated with the ear impingement dissolves due to its nature of impermanence, the mind is still embroiled in pain. Why? This is due to the perverted perception of permanence deeply rooted in the mental stream after countless lifetimes of repetitive false identification of the unpleasant feelings as “I” and as “mine.” The mind perceives them as

permanent and buries them deeply within. To avoid such false identification and grasping, we must keep contemplating: “It is the unpleasant feeling that is associating with and experiencing the abusive sounds—the unpleasant feeling is not ‘I,’ the unpleasant feeling is not ‘mine.’”

Experiencing neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling without the “I”

Just as pleasant feeling experiences the pleasant nature of a sense object and unpleasant feeling experiences the unpleasant nature of a sense object, neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling functions as the “experiencer” of the neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant nature of a sense object. For example, you are walking on a bustling street and see pedestrians coming and going, you feel neither pleasant nor unpleasant. This seeming lack of feeling is actually neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling.

In the practice of concentration meditation, such as mindfulness of breathing, before one develops good concentration, with simple mindfulness on the in-breath and out-breath—a neutral object—one experiences neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling. It is not “I” that experiences the neutral aspect of the sense object—the breath—it is simply feeling that is experiencing.

4. WHY SHOULD WE CONTEMPLATE FEELING?

Why is it important to contemplate feeling? Because—as described in the doctrine of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*)—**feeling is the conditioning factor for craving**, which keeps the cycle of birth and death turning.

“Dependent on feeling, craving arises.”

According to the suttas, if you fail to apply mindfulness to know the arising of pleasant feelings, pleasant feelings will give rise to the latent defilement of craving. This is commonly seen in our daily life drama.

In the modern consumer culture, we are being lured all the time. In shop windows attractive jewelry and accessories are exhibited nicely to catch the greedy eyes of women passing by. Pleasant feelings from eye contact immediately condition craving,

making women buy things compulsively that are totally redundant.

“Dependent on craving, clinging arises.”

Craving is sticky in its nature, and when it becomes a state that cannot be let go of, it is called clinging. Clinging is intense craving, it is like mental addiction. To fulfill what one strongly desires, one must perform actions to get it. These actions are called “kammic becoming” in the teaching of the Buddha. Just like a smoker craving for cigarettes: in order to get his desire fulfilled, he will smoke again and again, sustaining the addiction. Thus, it is said:

“Dependent on clinging, kammic becoming arises.”

Kammic becoming means skillful and unskillful actions rooted in craving and clinging. Driven by craving and clinging, various kammic actions are performed, either skillfully or unskillfully. Every skillful or unskillful kamma leaves behind

the potentiality to produce future rebirth. Thus it is said:

“Dependent on kammic becoming, there is birth.”

Kammic becoming is rooted in craving; it's the sustaining energy of the continuous cycle of life and rebirth, resulting in aging, sickness, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair—the whole mass of suffering.

Therefore, it is essential to contemplate feeling with mindfulness, regardless of which type it is, so that feeling will not lead to craving, and the cycle will not revolve.

How to contemplate feeling?

With mindfulness, we recognize the arising of the feeling, accept it with a dispassionate attitude, and further contemplate its origination and cessation. Through this practice, craving conditioned by feeling can be abandoned gradually, so that the wheel

of dependent origination can eventually be stopped.

Another reason why it's important to contemplate feeling is because feeling leads readily into the grip of views (*diṭṭhiggāha*) through the grasping of feeling as "myself"; into the grip of craving (*taṇhāgāha*) through grasping the feeling as "mine"; and into the grip of conceit (*mānagāha*) through grasping the feeling as "I." For example, when concentration is well developed during one's meditation practice, rapture spreads all over the body. The body is uplifted, and the yogi experiences pleasurable feeling. Under such circumstances, one is likely to take up the view that a permanent entity of "self" is experiencing this superb, pleasant feeling (the grip of view), and one would also contend that the pleasant feeling belongs to oneself (the grip of craving). One might develop conceit, thinking, "I am someone who progresses fast, others move like a snail!" In this way, the pleasant feeling becomes the target of the grip of views, craving, and conceit.

5. CLEARLY COMPREHENDING FEELINGS WITH MINDFULNESS

In the twelfth discourse of the *Vedanā-saṃyutta*, the Connected Discourses on Feeling (SN 36.12), the Buddha compared the characteristics of feeling with different winds blowing in the sky: warm and pleasant, cold and unpleasant, weak or strong, hot or damp, etc. In similar ways, different types of feelings arise from our body and mind. While experiencing all sorts of feelings in daily life, what should we do?

The Buddha told us to clearly comprehend all of them with mindfulness:

Herein, bhikkhus, when experiencing a pleasant feeling, the bhikkhu knows, 'I experience a pleasant feeling'; when experiencing an unpleasant feeling, he knows, 'I experience an unpleasant feeling'; when experiencing a neither-

*pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling, he
knows, "I experience a neither-
pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling."
(MN 10)*

*The Buddha compared feeling with
different winds blowing in the sky:*

*warm and pleasant, cold and
unpleasant, weak or strong, hot or
damp.*



*In similar ways, different types of
feelings arise from our body and mind:
pleasant, unpleasant, neither-pleasant-
nor-unpleasant.*

Distinguishing between “to know” superficially and “to comprehend” mindfully

When the Buddha talks about knowing feeling with mindfulness, he is not talking about simply being aware of feeling in general terms. We may come to know that we are experiencing a pleasant feeling, an unpleasant feeling, or a neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling.

The commentary on the “Foundations of Mindfulness” states that even infants lying on their backs know that they experience pleasure when sucking the mother’s breast. However, the infant may not truly know it with mindfulness (*pajānāti*). So, what then is the difference between “to know” in general terms and “to truly know,” or “to comprehend with mindfulness”? An infant lying on its back knows that he experiences pleasure, but without recognizing the underlying belief in the existence of a being who’s doing the experiencing, and without

arousing mindfulness to stop the pleasant feeling from leading to craving.

In Pāli, *pajānāti* is not superficial mindfulness but comprehension of the object clearly and rightly. To comprehend clearly is to pay keen attention to the feeling that is arising while maintaining a dispassionate attitude toward it—neither rejecting nor embellishing it. Mindfulness is free of judgment, bias, and preference. By keeping the mind centered, mindfulness simply observes, recognizes, and accepts any feeling as it is, regardless of its pleasant or unpleasant nature. This is what the Buddha meant when he taught:

*When experiencing a pleasant feeling,
the bhikkhu knows, “I¹ experience a
pleasant feeling.”*

Comprehending pleasant feeling

¹ The words “I experience” form a conventional expression, it shouldn’t be taken as a real “self.”

When a pleasant feeling arises in you, do you comprehend “I experience a pleasant feeling” clearly and dispassionately? If yes, you are a yogi with mindfulness.

Through the six sense faculties—namely, the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind—we enjoy pleasant feelings at all levels from different sources (objects). With our eyes, we see beautiful ladies and handsome men, and we watch captivating videos from television and portable electronic devices; with our ears, we listen to enchanting music and pleasant, flattering words; with our nose, we smell the lovely fragrances of delicious food and perfume sprays; with our body, we touch the softness and smoothness of fine fabrics or the body of someone we are attracted to; with our mind, we fantasize or recall sweet memories, enjoy the sense of accomplishment in our career, or experience the sublime delight of loving-kindness meditation or the indescribable bliss from absorption concentration (*jhāna*).

In the above cases, if we do not fully understand it is feeling that feels, and we do not comprehend that “pleasant feeling has arisen” with mindfulness as mentioned above, pleasant feeling easily conditions craving to arise.

Let’s take an example of tasting food. When the tongue tastes a piece of delicious cake—mmm, yummy!—both the body and mind are elated by the pleasant feeling that comes to be. After eating the cake, an untaught worldling without mindfulness clings strongly to the pleasant feeling and subsequently develops craving. In order to satisfy the craving, this person quickly reaches out for another piece of cake, devours it, and then takes yet another, until the belly becomes overly full and the belt has to be loosened. Without clear and right comprehension of feeling, the mind is always tainted by craving.

Trying to grasp the object that brings pleasant feelings is the reaction of a greedy mind—a spontaneous reaction occurring in

a person who does not dwell contemplating feelings in feelings. Repeating such impulsive reactions day and night makes them habitual. Not only will this person take up the joyful pleasant feelings with greed, they will also habitually grasp the pleasant feelings as “I” and “mine,” thus getting entangled by identity-view.

However, with keen mindfulness at work, we simply recognize the arising of the pleasant feeling and stay with it, but we are not controlled by it in a way that can lead to spontaneous and habitual reactions, such as eating one piece of cake after another. When we do not grasp the pleasant feeling tenaciously, no craving follows. Although pleasant feelings bring delight to our mind and body, mindfulness remains detached by simply noting their presence.

There is also a pleasant non-worldly feeling experienced by the yogi who practices concentration. It is a blissful feeling arising from access and absorption concentration (*upacara* and *appana samadhi*). It is called a

pleasant non-worldly feeling because it is free from sensual enjoyment. It is a purely spiritual joy and satisfaction. This kind of joy is far superior to the joy associated with sensuality, a fact that has been reported by many practitioners. Such spiritual joy is essential in the progress of spiritual practice because it leads to happiness, and happiness leads to better concentration. Also, when there is joy, the mind is content. When the mind is content, it settles easily on the practice, rather than lingering on sensual objects.

When a yogi experiences such a pleasant non-worldly feeling, if he or she is familiar with contemplation of feeling, he would know that it is merely a pleasant non-worldly feeling conditioned by concentration, without holding to this pleasant feeling as “mine” or becoming attached to it. As the Buddha said: “The concentration thus attained is for the purpose of crossing over to the other shore, not for the purpose of grasping.” (MN 22)

Comprehending unpleasant feeling

When an unpleasant feeling arises, do you try to comprehend “I experience an unpleasant feeling” clearly and look at it dispassionately? If yes, you are practicing contemplation of feeling with mindfulness.

Despite our desire to dwell in pleasant feelings, the fact is, every life drama has its ups and downs. We often experience far more unpleasant feelings in life than we expected. There are hidden thorns everywhere in our life’s journey—getting fired or demoted from jobs, the breaking up of intimate relationships, falling out with family members, failure on important exams, the death of loved ones, getting ill and becoming forlorn, being discriminated against or physically abused, or even just enduring the pain arising from sitting meditation, or stagnancy in one’s spiritual progress.

In ancient India, there once was a senior monk called Mahasiva Thera. He was proficient in all the teachings of the Buddha and had guided many students to arahantship. However, he himself was still a worldling. Reminded by his noble disciple, he decided to put aside his teaching duties and practice intensively in the forest. He was confident that he would become an arahant in a few days. However, days and months passed by and he still had not attained any stage of sainthood. He was ashamed to face his students, so he continued to practice diligently. One year... seven years... ten years... twenty years... thirty years passed, and he still had not attained what he aspired to. Reflecting on his plight, he was overwhelmed with despair and broke into tears under a tree. This is a kind of unpleasant non-worldly feeling.²

² Encouraged by a tree deva, he continued his practice and finally became an arahant.

Just as with pleasant feeling, if we do not comprehend the feeling that has arisen simply as “unpleasant feeling” as mentioned in the sutta above, we will identify with the feeling and thus condition agitation to arise. Just as the latent defilement of greed lies behind pleasant feeling, the latent defilement of aversion lies behind unpleasant feeling.

So, when unpleasant feelings arise, we try to comprehend clearly: “I am experiencing an unpleasant feeling.” With mindfulness, an unpleasant feeling is simply recognized and accepted as an unpleasant feeling, without reacting to unpleasant feeling with agitation and anger. I’d like to relay one of my experiences that illustrates this very point:

Many years ago, when a heat wave struck London, I was at Heathrow Airport. Before the plane took off, the cabin was really hot, and all the passengers in the cabin, including myself, were fretfully fanning themselves. My mind became agitated too.

Suddenly, I felt quite ashamed of my behavior. Although I was a practitioner, when challenged by a heat wave, I reacted as mindlessly as a non-practitioner! Stirred by shame, I quickly called up mindfulness. Mindfully and objectively, I comprehended clearly the arisen unpleasant feeling caused by the excessive heat without grasping the unpleasant feeling as “myself.”

Due to the power of mindfulness, although my body still felt the surrounding heat, the agitation in my mind instantly disappeared, leaving only peace and calm. The mind felt equanimous toward the heat.

This is how, with mindfulness, habitual unskillful reactions are kept at bay. Without mindfulness to protect the mind, the passengers in the heat wave suffered unpleasant feelings in both body and mind, leading them to fan themselves in agitation. They were also oblivious to a third source of suffering—the defilement of craving (for fresh air). Due to the absence of mindfulness, they were shot by three arrows simultaneously—unpleasant feeling

of the body, agitation of the mind, and the defilement of craving.

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Due to the absence of mindfulness, they were shot by three arrows simultaneously—unpleasant feeling of the body, agitation of the mind, and the defilement of craving.

Comprehending neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling

Both pleasant and unpleasant feelings are easily noticed, but when a neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling arises, I guess most of us fail to comprehend “I experience a neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling” with mindfulness.

How do we know we are feeling a neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling? When there is neither a pleasant feeling nor an unpleasant feeling present, then we are experiencing a neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling. This is because, at any given moment, the mind experiences only one of the three types of feeling.

The Buddha said:

When a pleasant feeling is present, you do not feel an unpleasant feeling or a neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling; you only feel a pleasant feeling.

When an unpleasant feeling is present, you do not feel a pleasant or neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling; you only feel an unpleasant feeling.

When a neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling is present, you do not feel a pleasant or an unpleasant feeling; you only feel a neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling. (MN 74)

Both pleasant and unpleasant feelings are clear in nature, but the vague neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feelings are often overlooked because of their subtlety and neutrality. However, they arise more frequently in our daily life than pleasant and unpleasant feelings. For example, they arise when we are wandering in thoughts, while walking to the office, doing household chores or while being buried in monotonous and repetitive work.

If we fail to recognize the presence of neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feelings, we may unskillfully regard ourselves as

being without feelings and fall into the trap of ignorance.

We need double effort to be aware of neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feelings while we are doing repetitive chores, to comprehend mindfully and clearly “I am experiencing a neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling” and let the mind stay with that feeling without feeling bored. In this way, ignorance will not creep in, leading us to think there is no feeling at all.

6. CONTEMPLATING INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL FEELINGS

Once pleasant feelings, unpleasant feelings, and neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feelings are recognized with mindfulness, and clear comprehension has been established, the Buddha continued to teach:

Thus he dwells contemplating feelings in feelings internally, or he dwells contemplating feelings in feelings externally, or he dwells contemplating feelings in feelings both internally and externally. (MN 10)

Here, Buddha extended the domain of contemplation to the external world. Apart from contemplating our own feelings—pleasant, unpleasant, or neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant—we should also contemplate the three types of feelings in others (external feelings).

Why is it important to contemplate the feelings of others, especially our loved ones? Because we get very attached to our loved ones' feelings. When they are happy, we are happy, when they are down, we are affected too. Most people are easily annoyed by other people's unpleasant feelings when they are displayed to the point that it may ruin their whole day.

Most importantly, by repeatedly and alternately contemplating feelings in both ourselves (internally) and others (externally), we make our insight knowledge more comprehensive. Through contemplating feeling internally, we come to understand that there is only feeling, but no "self." Through contemplating feeling externally, we come to understand that there is only feeling, but no "other." As such, we abandon attachment and hatred toward both internal and external feelings and gradually come to see a world composed of mere phenomena, without beings. As is said in *The Path of Purification*:

Mere phenomena rolling on, no one is found .

But then, how do we contemplate feelings in others? We can watch their facial expressions and their body language as well as listen to their tone of voice and words—in this way, we can infer what type of feeling they are experiencing at the moment and contemplate feeling as feeling. We stay with their feeling with mindfulness rather than focus on their “personality.”

7. CONTEMPLATING THE ORIGINATION AND CESSATION OF FEELING

He dwells contemplating the origination factors in feelings, or he dwells contemplating the cessation factors in feelings, or he dwells contemplating both the origination and cessation factors in feelings. (MN 10)

To abide contemplating the origination factors (*samudayadhammānupassī*) is to contemplate the arising as well as the conditioning factors for the arising of an object. To abide contemplating the cessation factors (*vayadhammānupassī*) is to contemplate the cessation as well as the conditioning factors for the cessation of an object. Here, we are instructed to contemplate the feeling on its (i) arising; (ii) cessation; (iii) both arising and cessation;

and (iv) the conditioning factors for the arising and the cessation.

How do we contemplate the arising of feeling?

As the six sense objects impinge the six sense faculties, feelings are conditioned to arise. To give an example during eating: When a pleasant feeling is conditioned by impingement of the tongue with delicious food, this is the time to dwell contemplating its arising: "A pleasant feeling is arising." Focus on pleasant feeling mindfully without being carried away. Mindfulness recognizes pleasant feeling as merely pleasant feeling, without habitually grasping it as "I" or as "mine," or without letting it condition craving. It is most critical to keep mindfulness alert and sustained on the feeling, so as not to allow any wandering thoughts to creep in. The power of right effort needs to be summoned at this stage, to keep mindfulness in position and the meditation object centered. Mindfulness observes the pleasant feeling as though

from a third-party perspective—the pleasant feeling is merely a feeling of excitement, and mindfulness stands like a firmly embedded column. As mindfulness keeps keen observation on the object of focus whilst putting habitual reactions on hold, mental activities slow down. This allows clear comprehension (or wisdom) to penetrate the nature of impermanence in the object.

How do we contemplate the cessation of feeling?

Usually, under the keen observation of mindfulness, the common or universal nature of the pleasant feeling—impermanence—will manifest itself. If the pleasant feeling still appears to persist, direct your mind to see its cessation by making an effort to notice when it ends. Pay attention to or mentally note the pleasant feeling as “impermanent, impermanent” or “gone, gone.” You may ask, “Why must I pay attention to the cessation?” Because if you don’t, your mind will habitually regard

the pleasant feeling as perpetual or even grasp it as a constant entity. This perception creates a barrier that stops us from experiencing the reality of impermanence.

According to the *Visuddhimagga*, without paying attention to the cessation of pleasant feeling, its nature of impermanence easily slips by the mind unnoticed, for impermanence is always concealed by compactness of continuity. Pleasant feeling may seem continuous and constant, just as, when observed from a distance, a line of hundreds of working ants could be falsely perceived as a continuous cotton string. This is what is meant by compactness of continuity. When we pay wise attention to the vanishing or cessation of pleasant feeling, then the compactness of continuity can be disrupted. The manifestation of pleasant feeling becomes discrete instead of continuous, with momentary arising and ceasing. Just as when we observe a line of ants very closely, the gaps between two adjacent ants become visible, and the ants

are now revealed as a series of discrete entities instead of a continuous string.

When the compactness of continuity is disrupted, the reality of impermanence manifests itself vividly. Once we see the arising and passing away of pleasant feeling to be completely without a controller behind it, our mind will turn away from the pleasant feeling and, as a result, the clinging that is conditioned by the pleasant feeling ceases. Who would cling to pleasant feeling that is constantly passing away?

You may contemplate unpleasant feeling and neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling in the same way.

The transient nature of feeling

A group of scientists from the West performed an experiment where they put a monkey in a cage with a light in it. Whenever the light turned on, the monkey got a drink of fruit juice. After doing this for some time, whenever the light was switched on—whether or not the juice was

given—the monkey got excited and its dopamine level became high, even higher on the occasions when it didn't get the juice than when it did.

What is happening here? The monkey would feel pleasure when drinking the juice, and his brain secreted dopamine. The monkey's perception aggregate knew and labeled the fruit juice as pleasurable and also associated the light with the pleasurable feeling. This experience left an imprint in the mind of the monkey. Gradually, whenever the monkey saw the light come on, the past memory (perception aggregate) would stimulate the secretion of dopamine, even when the monkey didn't get the juice. What does the experiment tell us? It shows that the monkey gets more pleasure when remembering and expecting the pleasant feeling that has already passed away—even more than what he actually feels when drinking the juice. So the pleasant feeling from actual fruit juice consumption only lasts a fleeting moment, but the memory brings greater pleasant

feeling. This experiment matches with my experience of eating blueberry pie:

On one occasion many years ago while I was in New Jersey, a disciple brought me freshly baked blueberry pie during meal time. I had a bite, and when the delicious taste touched my tongue—wow!—I felt intense pleasant feeling arising from both mind and body. Immediately my mind lost composure and clarity and clung to the taste with craving. “What a nice taste!” The weak mindfulness failed to detect the arising of craving. With craving, the mind became excited, restless, and agitated. The experience left an imprint in the mind that blueberry pie was delicious, and the pleasant feeling was superb.

The mind also delusively thought that pleasant feeling was permanent, and longed to eat the blueberry pie again in the future to regain the same pleasant feeling. The discourse on “The Honey Ball” precisely stated such mental proliferation:

“Dependent on tongue & taste, tongue-consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With

contact as a requisite condition, there is feeling. What one feels, one perceives (labels in the mind). What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates (papañca³). With what one has mentally proliferated as source, perception and notion tinged by mental proliferation (Papañca-saññā-saṅkhā) beset a man with respect to past, future and present taste cognizable through the tongue.” (MN 18)

The pleasant feeling that I felt caused the mind to perceive that the taste of blueberry pie is superb and permanent, such way of perceiving caused craving to arise (taṇhā-papañca). The mind also started to think that it was a permanent “self” who felt and perceived, a sign of proliferation by way of view (diṭṭhi-papañca), followed by the conceit “I am eating the superb

³ In the commentaries, we often find a threefold classification *taṇhā-papañca*, *diṭṭhi-papañca*, and *māna-papañca*, which means the world’s proliferation created by craving, false views and conceit.

pie!" (*māna-papañca*). Beset by these proliferations, the mind was caught and longed to taste the blueberry pie again in the future.

The longing to taste the blueberry pie again was soon fulfilled. When my disciple brought the blueberry pie again, the mind became excited upon seeing the delicious blueberry pie that was associated with a past pleasant memory. When eating the pie, instead of being mindful of the pleasant taste in the moment, the mind was muddled and greedy, clinging to the memory of the previous pleasant feeling and yearning for the same feeling to come back. It seemed that the mind got more pleasure from remembering and expecting the pleasant feeling that had already passed away—even more than what it felt when eating the pie for the second time. However, since that past pleasant feeling was long gone, I could not find the taste I wanted! The mind ended up with disappointment—thinking that the new blueberry pie was not as delicious as before.

After eating blueberry pie for the third time, I eventually woke up from my ignorance and

craving and realized that my mind had been cheated by the perverted perception of permanence regarding feeling. The previous pleasant feeling had long gone, never to return again. I was also awakened to the fact that when I was eating the blueberry pie, I failed to put mindfulness in place and contemplate the cessation of the arisen pleasant feeling coming from tongue contact; instead, I was clinging to and grasping the old pleasant feeling. As soon as I realized this, the craving for blueberry pie was eliminated from my mind completely.

From my experience, we can see how important it is to be mindful of feeling while eating, to stop mental proliferation and to cut off craving for future pleasure.

To be able to recognize the arising and the cessation of feeling, we need to slow down. Be slow while eating, and start contemplating. Otherwise you can easily become mindless due to the craving and clinging conditioned by pleasant feeling, which will drive you to keep eating in order to keep the pleasant feeling sustained, and

the problem of obesity would soon develop in you. Obesity will cause other health problems, such as metabolic syndrome, arthritis, and some types of cancer. So, for your health, eat slowly with mindfulness and clear comprehension. In this way, not only will you be healthy, but you will be able to recognize the cessation of the pleasant feeling. You will also not make the same mistake that I did and misperceive the continuum of a series of pleasant feelings coming and going incessantly as one single, long-lasting pleasant feeling. Not seeing truly the nature of feeling causes the perverted perception of permanence to come to be. This ill-directed perception keeps deceiving us life after life and enslaves us under the dominion of pleasant feelings.

An exercise for practicing mindfulness while eating

Each time food impinges your tongue, try to observe the pleasant feeling conditioned from tongue contact. First, learn to observe

from a third-party perspective, without embracing or entertaining the pleasant feeling. Instead, watch the pleasant feeling in a detached manner and avoid the trap of regarding the pleasant feeling as “I” or “mine.”

One effective way to contemplate is to keep paying attention by noting: “Pleasant feeling is merely pleasant feeling, pleasant feeling is merely pleasant feeling.” This noting will help you comprehend that pleasant feeling is merely a pleasurable experience, not the “self” that we habitually regard it as.

To see the feeling change, you must slow down and chew the food mindfully. If you eat and devour the food quickly, your mind will also be devoured by craving. In this case, due to the defilements in the mind, you won’t be able to see the arising and vanishing of the feeling; furthermore, you will add on another defilement—identity-view, or self-view, that believes “I” am enjoying the food.

As you chew slowly, become aware of the arising of the pleasant feeling. Sustain your awareness of the pleasant feeling as you keep chewing. The taste of the food is released as you chew, giving the tongue a better taste, and the pleasant feeling gets intensified accordingly. Some emotions may be stirred up, too. At this moment, the key is to keep mindfulness alert. Don't lose your mindfulness of the pleasant feeling—be aware of it continuously. If mindfulness can be sustained, with the aid of keen observation you will experience the vanishing of the previous pleasant feeling and the arising of a new one. New pleasant feelings keep replacing the old ones. You will also realize that various foods with different tastes bring you different feelings, and sometimes unpleasant and pleasant feelings interchange.

Before you bring up mindful awareness, you might expect plenty of pleasant feelings from the food. Once you start eating with mindfulness, the process of eating isn't as

pleasurable as you were expecting. It becomes monotonous. Why?

Just like in the study with the monkey and the fruit juice, pleasant feeling conditioned from impingement of the food on the tongue is actually momentary. However, under the influence of ignorance and craving, we have always been perceiving “pleasant, pleasant, pleasant” when eating delicious food. The pleasant feeling that we long for blinds the mind and conceals its momentary nature. We are misled by this previous labelling by the perception aggregate, and we take the pleasure from food as being permanent. Even before the food touches the tongue, greed comes to our mind due to past memories and expectation just like it did with the monkey. Whenever the monkey saw the light come on, the past memory (perception aggregate) would stimulate the secretion of dopamine, even when the monkey didn’t get the juice. The greed makes the mind agitated and distracted. How can we clearly comprehend the transience and impermanence of the

pleasant feeling from the impingement of the food with the tongue with such a muddled mind?

Breaking the compactness of continuity in feeling

As we abide contemplating the continuously arising pleasant feelings with keen mindfulness, the changing nature of the pleasant feeling starts to appear to our mind, and the speed of change quickens. Sometimes, intensification of pleasant feeling speeds up the heart rate, making the whole body pumped with excitement, while in its phase of fading, it vanishes like dry dead leaves being blown away in a gust of wind. The arising of phenomena is easy to recognize, but cessation is harder, as it requires steadier mindfulness. Both the alteration and fading of feelings are the manifestation of impermanence—being subject to change. As explained in the commentary: “Having been, it is not, therefore it is impermanent.” All formations

are impermanent in nature because of four intrinsic properties:

1. They arise and dissolve, like bubbles on water;
2. They change or alter, transforming from one state to another, such as from unpleasant to pleasant and vice versa;
3. They are temporary, like lightning in a thunderstorm;
4. They lack permanence or any lasting quality, like the short-lived dewdrops at dawn.

Continuous contemplation of feeling with uninterrupted mindfulness gives rise to wisdom that penetrates the impermanent nature of the feeling. If you are unable to see the cessation of feeling, you can still note in your mind: “Cessation, cessation, cessation.”

There is a trap to avoid here: do not pay too much attention to the arising of feeling, because feeling is more intense at the time when it first manifests. Grasping feeling at its peak intensity may lead to a false

perception that the feeling is solid and permanent. Another tip is: when noting the cessation of feeling in the mind, do not simply reiterate “cessation, cessation, cessation” verbally. Instead, direct your mind toward the diminishing or dissolution phase of the feeling, and try to stay with it until the moment it totally disappears.

When we train our mind to observe the cessation of an object, we are training to comprehend the true nature of formations; in this way, the nature of impermanence manifests more swiftly. If we do not train this way, the continuous arising and ceasing is concealed by the compactness of continuity, rather than being revealed as sequential discrete phenomena, leading to the wrong impression that there is but one constant feeling present—this is how the distorted notion of eternalism comes to be.

Once the compactness of continuity is disintegrated by contemplation of cessation and dissolution, the momentary origination and disappearance of the object is revealed.

The mind perceives the passing of feelings like the passing of clouds in the sky. Who would try to grasp passing clouds in the sky? The mind must stay away from clinging and grasping.

Attachment to pleasant feeling clouds the mind and hinders the development of vision that enables us to see cessation. To practice successfully, we must allow everything to come, to be, and to go.

Paying wise attention (*yoniso manasikāra*)

I always teach my students to contemplate and note the four foundations of mindfulness (body, feeling, mind, and dhammas) as “impermanence, impermanence,” or as “cessation, cessation,” or as “vanishing, vanishing.” However, many are reluctant to try because this sounds to them like mechanical repetition and conceptual contemplation. Here I would like to share a report from a student from Shanghai, China.

Attending the online retreat and listening to your Dhamma talk has opened a new window for me. I realized that meditation can actually be practiced in daily life. Before the retreat, I tried to apply mindfulness and clear comprehension towards all kinds of mental and physical phenomena. Very often, mental defilements would disappear after I repeatedly paid wise attention to them. This experience gives me lots of faith in your method. Thanks to this good opportunity to attend your online retreat, my understanding has been deepened with more experience. You taught us to cut off craving through contemplation of feeling. In one sitting meditation, unpleasant feeling arose in me, and right after I called up mindfulness to contemplate, the unpleasant feeling disappeared. I didn't even need to pay wise attention to it. All these experiences have given me more confidence in the methods you taught.

The key to this method is not simply mechanical recitation, but paying wise attention—to use the noting to direct one's attention to the true nature of phenomena. All conditioned formations are subject to cessation. This is the truth the Buddha told us to learn by heart throughout his 45 years of teaching.

Wise attention is attention directed to the universal characteristics, the true essence of all phenomena. What is one of the universal characteristics of all phenomena? It is the nature of impermanence—constant change.

Wise attention is one of the four prerequisites that lead to the attainment of stream entry (*sotāpatti*). The other three prerequisites are: associating with the wise, listening to the Dhamma, and daily practice in accordance with the Dhamma.

Wise attention leads to noble fruition

The significance of paying wise attention is explained in this discourse taught by

Venerable Sāriputta to Venerable Mahākoṭṭhita.

Once Venerable Mahākoṭṭhita asked Venerable Sāriputta: “Friend Sāriputta, what are the things that a virtuous monk should carefully attend to?”

Venerable Sāriputta said:

My friend Koṭṭhita, a virtuous monk should wisely attend to the five aggregates of clinging as impermanent, unsatisfactory, a disease, a cancer, a dart, a misfortune, an affliction, alien, disintegrating, empty, and impersonal.... My friend, it is possible that a virtuous monk who wisely pays attention to these five aggregates of clinging as impermanent,and impersonal can realize the fruit of stream-entry. (SN 22.122)

To pay wise attention to the five aggregates of clinging as impermanent and disintegrating is contemplation of

impermanence; to pay wise attention to the five aggregates of clinging as unsatisfactory, as a disease, a cancer, a dart, a misfortune, and an affliction is contemplation of suffering; to pay wise attention to the five aggregates of clinging as alien, empty, and impersonal is contemplation of not-self.

The Venerable Sāriputta continued to say that if a yogi keeps paying wise attention in this manner, he or she can attain once-return (*sakadākami*), non-return (*anāgāmi*), and arahantship (*arahatta*)—the final goal. He then said:

Friend, an arahant has nothing more to do, and nothing that needs improvement. Still, these things, when developed and cultivated, lead to blissful meditation in the present life and to mindfulness and clear comprehension. (SN 12.122)

One of my students from the USA struggled to contemplate and to note impermanence, but she eventually made a breakthrough

and realized the nature of impermanence—the arising and cessation. She sent the following description to me:

I had heard your teaching on noting impermanence more than once over the years. I always agreed that it seemed like a good thing to do, but every time I tried to do it, it not only felt mechanical, but it was uncomfortable. So I would do it for a little while, then it would taper off.

I started thinking about what I was focusing on whenever an object arose. I realized that I was looking at the stable aspects of objects and noting “impermanent”—but because the stable aspect seemed permanent, my noting and my experience were not matching. That’s what was causing the discomfort.

Although I tried very hard looking for the impermanent aspect of objects, still I couldn’t see it. I felt frustrated. I asked myself, “Why can’t I see the

impermanent aspect of these objects?" I looked more closely at the objects—there were so many—one after another, impinging on my senses. Then I discovered that I was seeing the arising of the objects, and the arising was the stable aspect that gives rise to the perception of permanence.

Then I realized I was too tense. I was spending too much energy directing my attention at the objects—grasping at them, trying to see. So, I said to myself, "Don't look at the objects, just look at the moments passing by." My mind relaxed and suddenly it was like a rushing river of countless moments passing by. Like a fire hose—uncontrolled, unrecognizable, a whole torrent of moments passing. Everything is passing!

Since then, in daily life and meditation, I can still see the passing away of moments. Whenever I can see the passing of things instead of the

arising, there is a sense of relief. Particularly with unpleasant sensations—I can see them passing, and they are not bothersome. When I note “impermanent, impermanent” it is comfortable now and matches what I am experiencing.

Whenever feeling changes and we contemplate with wise attention by noting its nature of impermanence, the universal characteristics of all conditioned phenomena will be perceived and eventually imprinted in the mind. Perception of impermanence is strengthened gradually. Once the perception of impermanence becomes habitual through continuous contemplation, we realize that feeling is subject to constant change, and our attachment to it is abandoned. Pleasant feeling soon becomes unpleasant, unpleasant feeling becomes neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant, neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling becomes unpleasant, and it goes on and on. This is our daily experience as well as the nature of the world. However, since we often neglect it in our contemplation, the truth of impermanence escapes our mind day after day.

The feeling aggregate is like water bubbles

The Buddha gave a simile to compare the aggregate of feeling to water bubbles. If we closely watch the rain drops falling onto the surface of a pond, we can see bubbles arise and burst on the water. The bubbles quickly appear and then quickly disappear; they appear again, then disappear again. In the same manner, feelings come and go—pleasant, unpleasant, and neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant; they all appear and disappear in quick cycles. They are not to be grasped as constant and permanent objects.

The Buddha gave a simile to compare the aggregate of feeling to water bubbles.



In the same manner, feelings come and go—pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral; they all appear and disappear in quick cycles; they are not to be grasped as constant and permanent objects.

8. INVESTIGATING THE CAUSES OF ORIGATION AND CESSATION OF FEELING

After contemplating the origination and cessation of feelings, we further investigate the causes for them. There are two types of causes, or conditioning factors: the proximate and the root. The proximate cause for the arising of feeling, whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant, is **contact**. The root cause for the arising of feeling is **ignorance**. Let's look deeper.

The proximate cause for the arising of feeling

"Dependent on contact, feeling arises."

There are six types of contacts based on the corresponding sense faculties: eye contact, ear contact, nose contact, tongue contact,

body contact, and mind contact. These six types of contact are the proximate conditioning factors of feeling, and each of them can condition three types of feelings. Take eye contact, for example. When a person sees someone they are attracted to—an agreeable material object—pleasant feeling is conditioned from eye contact. When a person sees someone they hate—a disagreeable material object—unpleasant feeling is conditioned from eye contact. When seeing a stranger—a neutral material object—neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling is conditioned. In the same manner, three types of feeling can be conditioned from the other five contacts: ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. Six types of contacts conditioning three types of feelings makes 18 categories of feelings, which are the meditation objects in the practice of *vedanānupassanā*—contemplation of feeling.

“Dependent on contact, feeling arises.”



*Trying to grasp the object that brings
pleasant feelings is the reaction of a
greedy mind—a spontaneous reaction
occurring in a person who does not
dwell contemplating feelings in
feelings.*

When unpleasant feeling is conditioned due to contact of the ears with a vulgar sound, we should contemplate this way: “Ear contact with a vulgar sound is the cause; unpleasant feeling is the effect. Both contact and feeling are conditioned formations that are subject to change.”

Venerable Sāriputta told the monks:

Friends, if others abuse, revile, scold, and harass a bhikkhu, he understands thus: ‘This painful feeling born of ear-contact has arisen in me. That is dependent, not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on contact.’ Then he sees that contact is impermanent, that feeling is impermanent, that perception is impermanent, that formations are impermanent, and that consciousness is impermanent. (MN 28)

Thus, whatever comes to our mind are simply conditioned phenomena, nothing else. Contact, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness — they are all

conditioned formations. When a sound stops impinging the ear faculty, ear contact ceases to be. When ear contact ceases to be, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness arisen from this condition dissolve. All phenomena are based on cause and effect—the doctrine of dependent origination, in which no self or being is involved. There is no entity such as “I,” or “you,” or “others” in this process.

Here I want to share my own experience from some twenty years ago. At that time, I was still inexperienced in practicing contemplation of feeling. On that day, my venerable teacher was waiting for the gong to strike for the alms round, and I had the opportunity and privilege to speak with him. Taking the opportunity, I reported to him some of my experiences in meditation. It took me longer than usual, and the alms round was delayed. The layman who was in charge of striking the gong got very angry, and he shouted very loudly and harshly at me in front of hundreds of monks and nuns. Due to this unpleasant ear contact and also

my unwise attention—assuming a “self” or ego that was hurt—a strong unpleasant feeling arose in me. Unable to disassociate that unpleasant feeling from “myself,” I felt offended and mentally tormented.

I was desperate to separate from this unpleasant feeling. But how? In the middle of this, Venerable Sāriputta’s teaching in regard to the cause and effect of contact and feeling suddenly struck me: *“This unpleasant feeling born of ear-contact is dependent, not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on contact. Then he sees that contact is impermanent, that feeling is impermanent.”*

I quickly contemplated ear contact as impermanent, not a self, and also contemplated unpleasant feeling conditioned from ear contact as impermanent, not a self. As I kept on contemplating in this way, I was amazed to find that my unpleasant feeling and agitation vanished in no time, leaving the mind calm and relaxed.

I am always thankful to this layman, for it is because of him that I was forced to contemplate unpleasant feelings, which helped me cultivate the wisdom to comprehend that unpleasant feeling is conditioned and is thus impermanent in nature.

The root cause for the arising of feeling

The doctrine of dependent origination reveals the root cause of feeling—ignorance, which leads to craving, clinging and grasping, and kammic becoming. This is how we start with ignorance and end up with feeling:

1. Dependent on ignorance, formations arise.

Blinded by deep-rooted ignorance and craving, beings cling to sensual pleasure. To satiate this craving, we perform kammic actions to get what we desire. Such kammic actions are called formations.

Take an example, suppose a government official oversees the construction of a public building. A contractor comes to visit him, attempting to bribe his way into the project. The contractor puts nice gifts in front of him. It could be a good sum of money, a luxurious watch, a piece of artwork, or a beautiful woman, something very pleasing to his eyes. Pleasure arises in his mind following the eye contact with the alluring gifts, this pleasant feeling immediately results in craving, and he develops strong desires for the gift. He then accepts the bribe (a kamma formation), which lays the potential for an unhappy rebirth in the future.

2. Dependent on formations, consciousness, materiality, and mentality arise.

Formations, both unwholesome and wholesome, condition rebirth, which brings a new body and mind, or materiality and mentality.

3. Dependent on materiality and mentality, the six sense faculties arise.

With body and mind as a condition, the six sense faculties—the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind—come to be.

4. Dependent on the six sense faculties, contact arises.

With the six sense faculties—eyes that see, ears that hear, nose that smells, tongue that tastes, body that touches, and mind that thinks—the six-fold sense contacts come to be.

5. Dependent on contact, feeling arises.

With contacts as a condition, different types of feeling come to be, regardless of whether the being is reborn in a woeful state or a blissful state.

6. Dependent on feeling, craving arises

When feeling is not seen with insight, it leads to craving—craving for more pleasant

feeling or the craving to get rid of unpleasant feeling.

7. Dependent on craving, clinging

Clinging is strong craving.

8. Dependent on clinging, kammic becoming

In order to get what we desire, we perform kammic actions by body, speech or mind. The potential power of kammic actions continues turning the wheel of rebirth.

Thus, the root causes of the arising of feeling are consciousness, materiality, and mentality founded in ignorance, craving, clinging and kammic formations. With this understanding established, perhaps we will make more ardent effort and be willing to contemplate feeling, so as not to allow feeling to turn into craving, which extends the round of rebirth.

“Dependent on feeling, craving arises.”

“Dependent on kammic becoming, there is rebirth.”



*“Through many a birth I wandered in
samsara. Seeking, but not finding, the
builder of this house. Painful it is to be
born again and again.”*

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With the cessation of ignorance, feeling ceases

The formula of dependent origination says:

*With the arising of this, that
arises...with the cessation of this, that
ceases. (SN 12.61)*

With the cessation of ignorance, all the conditioning factors come to cessation. Elimination of ignorance requires cultivation of wisdom that leads to the attainment of arahant path and fruition. With the elimination of ignorance, craving, attachment, and kammic formations come to cessation, and no rebirth will be conditioned. Without rebirth, no six sense faculties will be conditioned. Without eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind, no contact will be conditioned. Without contact, no feeling will be conditioned. Without feeling to condition craving, craving loses its power to produce birth. This is how, with the cessation of ignorance, feeling also comes to complete cessation.

This is the way to contemplate the cessation of feeling.

Feeling is not a self

Feeling is not to be taken as oneself, or as possessed by oneself. If feeling is “I,” then when feeling disappears, “I” should disappear with it. In this scenario, when a pleasant feeling ceases to be, “I” would also become non-existent. When an unpleasant feeling ceases to be, “I” disappears once more.

When a neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling ceases, “I” ceases to be again. If “I” experience cessation of feeling fifty times a day, “I” would die fifty times a day.

Simply during a meal, we experience the arising and the cessation of multiple feelings. Pleasant feeling arises when the tongue is in contact with tasty food, and unpleasant when in contact with bad food. If you have a mouthful of plain rice, its lack of taste conditions a neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling through contact with the

tongue. Now have a mouthful of your favorite dish—pleasant feeling would again replace neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant feeling. Here, you can see, different feelings keep appearing and disappearing depending on the taste of food and your preference. Thus in the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* (SN 22.59), the Buddha taught:

*Feeling is not-self....And you can't
compel feeling: "May my feeling be
like this! May it not be like that!"*

In Pāli, the word “atta” (self) implies control, yielding to one’s wishes, domination, and possession. If feeling is oneself, we should be able to control, dominate, and possess it. Can we have only pleasant feelings when we see, hear, smell, touch, taste, and think? Can we only feel happy all day long? Upon seeing our enemy, unpleasant feeling arises beyond our control. We immediately feel agitated with a high-pitched noise. We feel uplifted when being praised. There is no way to

manipulate our feelings because feeling is not self.

Who feels?

If feeling is not a self, we may ask then, “Who feels the feeling?” In this sutta, the Buddha gave an answer:

A monk asked the Blessed One: “Venerable sir, who feels?”

“Not a valid question,” the Blessed One replied. “I do not say, ‘One feels.’ If I should say, ‘One feels,’ in that case this would be a valid question: ‘Venerable sir, who feels?’ But I do not speak thus. Since I do not speak thus, if one should ask me, ‘Venerable sir, with what as condition does feeling [come to be]?’ this would be a valid question. To this the valid answer is: ‘With contact as condition, feeling comes to be; with feeling as condition, craving.” (SN 12.12)

To ask “who feels” is to first assume there is a being or someone. This is our habitual way of taking up the feeling as “I.” Buddha tried to correct our wrong way of perceiving and urged us to contemplate feeling as a conditioned phenomenon.

Contemplate feeling in its arising, and recognize the immediate conditioning factor to be contact. Contact is the cause, feeling is the effect. The effect comes from the cause. If the cause is conditioned and not self, how can the effect be a self? In this way, clear comprehension towards the dependent origination of feeling can be developed.

As we discussed earlier, the Buddha taught us to contemplate feeling with the knowledge of dependent origination—the middle way. This is the right way of seeing feeling.

The knowledge of arising and passing away

When insight knowledge matures, we can directly see or experience the rapid arising and cessation of feeling, regardless of its pleasant or unpleasant nature. With this knowledge, feeling itself is no longer pronounced, and only the arising and the passing away manifest.

I would like to share my little experience here:

More than ten years ago, I heard that my teacher was having a lot of trouble when practicing in Sri Lanka, due to difficulty adapting to the local diet with coconut milk. Out of deep respect and appreciation, I flew to Sri Lanka by myself to support my teacher with the proper food conducive to his health and practice. However, I was totally unprepared for the primitive environment and poor living conditions there. In the following few months, lacking physical well-being myself, I fell ill repeatedly. Due to lack of medical support, I grew very exhausted

and fatigued and was developing hearing loss as well. Both my mind and body were afflicted. Leaving the place seemed the only way to bring my pain and misery to an end. But I knew my teacher needed my help, as he pleaded for me to stay on to help him. I found myself entangled in an inner struggle, not knowing what to do. The struggle was so meaningless and only strengthened the view of "I" and "mine."

Finally, I made up my mind to end this plight by using the power of the Dhamma, and I directly faced the unpleasant feelings conditioned by the body and the mind. I took unpleasant feeling as a meditation object. With sustained mindfulness, the mind no longer clung to the unpleasant feeling as "I" or "mine." At that moment, I saw the unpleasant feeling arising and passing away incessantly at a rapid speed. As this continuous cycle of arising and cessation went on, with the aid of keen insight knowledge, the unpleasant feeling was no longer clear, and only the arising and the cessation was manifesting.

Afterwards, as the mind felt the continuous arising and passing away of feelings, another insight knowledge immediately arose—the insight of dukkha (suffering or unsatisfactoriness.) That feeling of dukkha was due to the oppression of the incessant arising and ceasing of feelings. I had repeatedly heard the sutta that said: “What is impermanent is suffering.” For the first time, this statement became a practical experience to me.

The insight continued to arise that both dukkha and the process of arising and ceasing are anatta (not-self). Following this, the mind felt that whatever was arising was the arising of suffering. The arising appeared to be dangerous, painful, and dreadful. It was the cessation, or non-arising, that was secure, peaceful, and delightful. This stanza from the Dīgha Nikāya came to me:

*Formations are indeed impermanent;
their nature is to rise and fall.*

*Having arisen, they cease;
their stilling is bliss. (DN 16)*

Only with realization of the suffering nature of conditioned phenomena due to incessant arising and vanishing in the body and mind can we truly understand the bliss of no birth. Any life form born—human, gods, or brahmas—is suffering, because everything born is subject to decay, to death. Only when there is no birth will there be no death.

Seeing impermanence and dukkha also helps us to see not-self. Once the nature of impermanence is uncovered, the nature of suffering becomes self-evident. Both impermanence and suffering reveal the absence of a controller, therefore the nature of not-self also becomes clear. The three universal characteristics of conditioned formations, namely impermanence, suffering, and not-self, are tightly bound together as a trinity. Revelation of one of them reveals the other two. Contemplating and comprehending such matters is how we dwell contemplating feelings in feelings and how we dwell contemplating both the origination and cessation factors in feeling.

To finish my story, with the insight knowledge of arising and passing away, the insight knowledge of disenchantment toward formations also developed as a natural result. This good experience with the Dhamma had gladdened my heart and refreshed my body and mind. With the nutrient of the Dhamma, I was able to continue to stay in Sri Lanka for eight months and help my teacher throughout.

Without the knowledge of arising and passing away, no disenchantment will be developed towards feeling, not to mention disenchantment toward life and rebirth. Without the knowledge of disenchantment, no matter how diligently we practice, not much determination for liberation can be established.

*All conditions are impermanent —
when this is seen with wisdom,
one grows disillusioned with
suffering: this is the path to purity.
(Dhp 277)*

In summary, we first contemplate the arising of feeling, we then contemplate the cessation of feeling, and we finally contemplate both the arising and the cessation of feeling, as well as the conditioning factors for both. Practice continuously until insight knowledge matures. Whatever feelings we experience, see them as suffering, not worth adhering to, because they are all oppressed by impermanence.

Seeing feeling as feeling, but not a self

Now, we come to last stage of the contemplation of feeling:

Or his mindfulness that “There is feeling” is established to the extent necessary for further knowledge and mindfulness. (MN 10)

Here, we continuously, repeatedly center mindfulness on the notion “There is feeling,” until knowledge and mindfulness

is established, and we understand “There is feeling” only, but not a “self” to experience the feeling, either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant.

Below is the sharing of one of my students from the USA about her experience of “not-self.”

During a personal retreat last year, I had an interesting experience regarding feeling. I was sitting in the afternoon, and the mind was fairly calm, resting on the breath easily. I started to get some pain in my legs where they touched the cushion. When I could no longer ignore the pain, I decided to investigate it. I tried to separate the unpleasant feeling from the sensation. I wanted to see the unpleasant aspect of the pain only—just the unpleasant nature separate from the actual sensation itself. It was difficult to see at first and also difficult to bear—it seemed to encompass my whole mind and was also wrapped up with a feeling of resistance, which caused tension in my head and chest. I tried to relax and let go of the resistance and tension, but it was too great.

Suddenly, a thought entered my mind. It was a quote from Sayalay Susīlā's articles that I had read recently. It said, "What feels the feeling? Feeling feels the feeling..." As soon as this thought arose, the unpleasant feeling separated completely from my mind and jumped out in front of me. It's hard to explain, but it's as if the unpleasant feeling was sitting in front of me, separate from me. The resistance and tension completely disappeared because "I" no longer identified unpleasant feeling as mine, although it was still there. I was completely amazed and felt very relaxed and free.

Then I turned my attention back to my legs—I wanted to know what was happening there. To my surprise, there was no pain at all. There was only sensation coming and going in different parts of my legs. Once again—amazing.

Through the rest of the day and retreat, I played with separating feelings from "myself"—pleasant feelings while eating, unpleasant feelings while sitting. I was simply aware of the presence of different feelings but wasn't attached to them. It was quite entertaining—I had never

experienced anything like it nor thought anything like it was possible.

I hope the experience of this yogi is enough to motivate you in contemplation of feeling as “not self.”

Below are additional tips for you to contemplate feelings without involvement of self. Here, a third party perspective, or an attitude of equanimity, is required. Whatever feeling arises, either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant, see it with detachment as foreign, as intrusive, as conditioned phenomenon, as a decaying formation, as empty, as ownerless, and as devoid of essence. Keep the mind focused on the feeling, and mindfulness will then grow stronger and steadier. You may also investigate: “Who feels?” In this way, further knowledge and mindfulness is established to realize: “There is feeling only; there is nobody experiencing the feeling.” This is how practice is carried out—by sustained right effort, by continuous work,

contemplating feeling with mindfulness and investigation until sufficient insight knowledge is cultivated.

*One abides independent, not clinging
to anything in the world. (MN 10)*

With clear comprehension of internal feelings without “I,” and external feelings without “others,” identity-view and craving are diminished gradually and are eventually erased. **“One does not cling to anything in the world”** means one does not cling to the two mental defilements of identity-view and craving. No longer clinging to the world of feeling—or to the other four aggregates of form, perception, formations and consciousness—as “I” and as “mine,” one is freed and liberated.

*This, bhikkhus, is how a bhikkhu
dwells contemplating feelings in
feelings.
(MN 10)*

Sakka, ruler of gods, was interested in how to bring craving to complete destruction.

He thus went to the Blessed One, and asked:

"Venerable sir, how in brief is a bhikkhu liberated by the destruction of craving, one who has reached the ultimate end, the ultimate security from bondage, the ultimate holy life, the ultimate goal, one who is foremost among gods and humans?"

The Blessed One answered in connection with feelings in brief: "Here, ruler of gods, a bhikkhu has heard that nothing is worth adhering to. When a bhikkhu has heard that nothing is worth adhering to, he directly knows everything; having directly known everything, he fully understands everything; having fully understood everything, whatever feeling he feels, whether pleasant or unpleasant or neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant, he abides contemplating impermanence in those feelings, contemplating fading away,

9. FACING IMMINENT DEATH WITH MINDFULNESS AND CLEAR COMPREHENSION

Among all the difficulties in life, the final moment—the moment when the four elements (earth, water, fire, and wind) are about to disintegrate and the life faculty is fading away—is the most challenging and always leaves us most vulnerable. At that moment, a dying person can experience much pain. In the *Anāthapiṇḍikovāda Sutta* (MN 143), Anāthapiṇḍika, a lay follower of the Buddha, was on his deathbed. He said he felt as though winds were piercing his head and belly and his whole body was burning as if it were being scorched on a pit of glowing coals.

Anāthapiṇḍika was a stream-enterer and, due to this attainment, he was no longer subject to being reborn in one of the four unhappy realms. Instead, he was born in a

heavenly realm upon death. But despite this, he still died in pain.

What about us ordinary people who do not know how to contemplate unpleasant feeling? What can we do? Practicing contemplation of feeling regularly and diligently will enable us to dwell contemplating feelings in feelings, especially unpleasant feelings, at this last moment of life. With mindfulness and clear comprehension, the mind can remain unmoved, and we may even break through to the Dhamma in this last moment.

The Buddha once instructed some ill monks:

A bhikkhu should await his time mindful and clearly comprehending...

Bhikkhus, while a bhikkhu dwells thus, mindful and clearly comprehending, diligent, ardent, and resolute, if there arises in him a painful feeling, he understands thus: "There has arisen in me a painful feeling. Now that is

dependent, not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on just this contact. But this contact is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen. So when the painful feeling has arisen in dependence on a contact that is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, how could it be permanent?" He dwells contemplating impermanence in contact and in painful feeling, he dwells contemplating vanishing, contemplating fading away, contemplating cessation, contemplating relinquishment. As he dwells thus, the underlying tendency to aversion in regard to contact and in regard to painful feeling is abandoned by him...

He understands: "With the breakup of the body, following the exhaustion of life, all that is felt, not being delighted in, will become cool right here." (SN 36.8)

Suppose a clay vase containing oil is dropped into a water pond, and it breaks in the water.

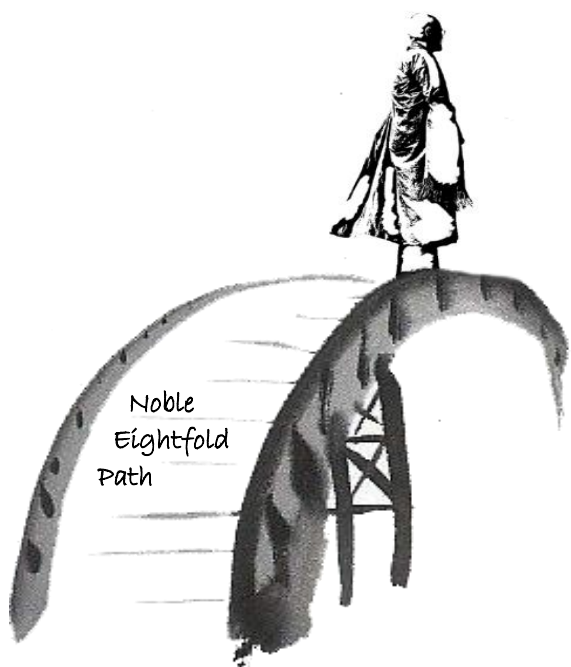


Deep in the water, the broken pieces of clay would sink to the bottom of the pond, and the oil would rise to the top.



*Ciraṃ Tiṭṭhatu Saddhammo!
Sādhū! Sādhū! Sādhū!*

May the True Dhamma Endure
for A Long Time!



Sharing of Merits

*Sabbadānaṃ dhammadānaṃ jināti sabbarasaṃ
dhammaraso jināti; Sabbaratiṃ dhammarati
jināti, taṇhakkhaya sabbadukkhaṃ jināti.
(Dhp. 354)*

A gift of Dhamma conquers all gifts; the
taste of Dhamma conquers all tastes;
a delight in Dhamma conquers all delights;
the ending of craving conquers all
suffering & stress. (Dhp. 354)

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