



What About Neutral Feelings?

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At the Vedanā Symposium convened by Martine Batchelor and held at BCBS from 13 to 16 July 2017, the nature of neutral feeling was one of several topics discussed. In this article, I follow up the discussion, in particular the question of whether the early discourses recognize neutral feelings as a distinct category on their own.

“Feeling” has become the standard rendering of the Pāli term *vedanā*. In spite of what the English term conveys, *vedanā* does not refer to “emotions.” Instead, *vedanā* stands for the affective tone, the hedonic quality, the tonality of experience. This can be pleasant, painful, or *adukkhamasukha*, literally “not painful not pleasant,” also translated as “neither pleasant nor painful,” as “in-different,” or else as “neutral.”

The *adukkhamasukha* type of feeling tone (here translated as “neutral”) covers a range in the middle part of the spectrum of felt experience. In between pain and pleasure, an area in the affective tonality of experience appears as relatively bland and neither distinctly painful nor clearly pleasant. The term *adukkhamasukha* refers to this area.

A question raised during the symposium was to what extent neutral feelings are really recognized as a distinct category in early Buddhist discourse. The impression that this need not be the case appears to be

based on two passages found in the Discourse on Many Types of Feeling, the *Bahuvedanīya-sutta* (MN 59) and in the Shorter Discourse with Questions and Answers, the *Cūlavedalla-sutta* (MN 44).

Many Types of Feeling

The Discourse on Many Types of Feeling begins with a disagreement between two disciples regarding how many types of feeling the Buddha had taught. The carpenter Pañcakaṅga asserts that the Buddha taught two types; the monk Udāyin claims that the Buddha taught three types. Informed of their disagreement by Ānanda, the Buddha clarifies that he has taught different modes of analyzing feelings by way of two types, three types, six types, etc. Given such different types of presentation (*pariyāya*), the Buddha concludes, it is inappropriate for his disciples to insist dogmatically on only one mode of presentation.

The passage concerning the question of the nature of neutral feeling occurs in the reply by the carpenter Pañcakaṅga to the proposal by Udāyin that the Buddha had taught three feelings. Pañcakaṅga claims:¹

The Blessed One has not taught three feelings, venerable Udayin, the Blessed One has taught two feelings: pleasant feeling and painful feeling. Venerable sir, the Blessed One has taught this neutral feeling as belonging to a peaceful and sublime kind of pleasure.

This type of statement could easily give the impression that neutral feeling is not really a category on its own, as in the end it turns out to be a kind of pleasure. In the ensuing part of the discourse, the Buddha seems to endorse this statement by Pañcakaṅga, saying:²

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The presentation by the carpenter Pañcakaṅga, to which Udayin did not consent, indeed exists.

This could at first sight be read as if the Buddha approves of the idea that there are indeed only two types of feeling. Closer inspection, however, suggests otherwise.

For one the above statement is preceded by the Buddha making the same pronouncement regarding Udayin's presentation of three feelings:³

Ānanda, the presentation by Udayin, to which the carpenter Pañcakaṅga did not consent, indeed exists.

This shows that Pañcakaṅga was not just right in what he said, as he had dismissed the analysis into three feeling types. Yet this is clearly a valid mode of analysis. Moreover, what the Buddha's endorsement approves of is the type of "presentation" (*pariyāya*) of feelings as twofold. This is in fact the main theme of the remainder of his exposition, which is concerned with the existence of different modes of presentation and the need to steer clear of dogmatic clinging to any particular mode.

According to the Pāli commentary, the two types of feeling taught by the Buddha are bodily and mental.⁴ Thus, at least from the viewpoint of the commentarial tradition, the twofold analysis of feelings by the Buddha did not concern pleasant and painful types, but much rather the distinction between bodily and mental types. In fact the presentation by Pañcakaṅga of a twofold analysis of the hedonic tonality of feeling is unique in the early discourses. The threefold analysis is pretty much standard and the distinction between bodily and mental feelings also recurs elsewhere.

Of course, the explanations found in the Pāli commentarial tradition need not necessarily reflect the early discourses accurately. Therefore the identification

of the two types of feelings as being bodily and mental does not yet settle the point at issue.

The Discourse on Many Types of Feeling has a parallel preserved in Chinese translation, which at times differs from the Pāli version. For example, rather than being told by Ānanda about the discussion, the two disputants go themselves to the Buddha in order to get their disagreement resolved.

Also, in the Chinese parallel the Buddha not only lists the different types of feeling he has taught, he in addition explains himself what these different presentations are. In this way, whereas in the Pāli version he just states that he has taught two types of feeling, in the Chinese version he also explains these two types. This explanation agrees with the Pāli commentary, in that the two types of feeling are bodily and mental:⁵

In what way did I teach two feelings? I taught bodily feelings and mental feelings; these are reckoned to be the two feelings.

Given the concordance of the Pāli commentary and the Chinese version, belonging to a different school and transmission lineage, it seems safe to conclude that this is indeed the preferable way to interpret the reference to two feelings.

Final confirmation comes from a discourse in the *Samyutta-nikāya* (SN 36.22). The discourse sets out in terms quite similar to the *Bahuvedanīya-sutta*, listing different modes of analyzing feeling, including the two types and the three types. Similar to the Chinese parallel to the *Bahuvedanīya-sutta*, this *Samyutta-nikāya* discourse continues with the Buddha explaining what these types refer to. According to this explanation, the analysis into two types indeed stands for bodily and mental feelings:⁶

Monastics, what are the two feelings? They are bodily and mental; monastics, these are reckoned to be the two feelings.

This convergence of Pāli commentary, Chinese parallel, and another Pāli discourse imply that in the case of the *Bahuvedanīya-sutta* the Buddha's endorsement of the "presentation" by Pañcakaṅga must be concerning the idea that there are two feelings as such. In fact in the Chinese version the Buddha does not even endorse Pañcakaṅga's presentation. Instead, he directly points out that he has taught different ways of analyzing feeling.

This is not to say that neutral feeling as a peaceful and sublime type of pleasure does not exist. But if all neutral feelings are reckoned in this way, they would all be commendable.

The Ethical Dimension of Feelings

A problem with Pañcakaṅga's presentation is that it could convey the impression that neutral feeling, being "peaceful" and "sublime," is invariably of a commendable type. Such a conclusion would not square with the analysis of feeling found in other discourses. This can be seen, for example, in the Discourse at Kīṭāgiri, the *Kīṭāgiri-sutta* (MN 70).

This discourse takes its occasion from the refusal of a group of monks to follow the Buddha's injunction not to partake of food in the evening. The Buddha rebukes them for this behavior and then explains that his instructions are based on his own personal insight into the ethical repercussions of feelings. In the case of neutral feelings, he explains:⁷

When someone feels a certain kind of neutral feeling, unwholesome states increase and wholesome

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states diminish. When someone feels another kind of neutral feeling, unwholesome states diminish and wholesome states increase.

The Buddha goes on to explain that this is why he recommends abandoning certain neutral feelings, namely those that increase unwholesome states, and why he commends those neutral feelings that increase wholesome states.

This presentation reflects the overarching ethical concern that is so pervasive in early Buddhist discourse. What really matters throughout is the distinction between what is wholesome and what is unwholesome.

Applying this distinction to feeling appears to have been a decisive realization of the Buddha during his quest for awakening:

What matters is not the affective tone of feelings, but rather their ethical repercussions.

Before his awakening, the Buddha had been living a life of indulgence as a prince, pursuing pleasant feelings of the sensual type. When going forth and embarking on the practice of asceticism, he abandoned any indulgence in sensual pleasures.

The reasoning that often informs asceticism inverts the average approach to feeling. Instead of pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain, ascetic practice tends to be based on pursuing pain and avoiding pleasure. Eventually the Buddha found that this approach does not offer a real solution to the predicament of being subject to *samsāra*.

Instead of inflicting pain on oneself in the belief that this will purify, what is required is an ethical perspective on feeling. Some pleasant feelings are indeed to be avoided, namely those of a sensual type. But others, such as the joy of deep concentration, are rather to be pursued. The same basic distinction holds for painful

and neutral feelings. In other words, the crucial question is whether a particular feeling triggers an underlying tendency (*anusaya*) in the mind.

The Underlying Tendencies

The relationship of feeling to the underlying tendencies is one of several topics taken up in the Shorter Discourse with Questions and Answers, *Cūḷavedalla-sutta* (MN 44). With this discourse I come to the second passage taken up during the symposium at BCBS with regard to whether neutral feelings exist as a separate category.

This discourse consists of a series of questions asked by the lay follower Visakha to the nun Dhamma-dinnā. The relevant passage reports one of the explanations given by the wise nun as follows:⁸

Friend Visakha, with pleasant feeling persistence is pleasant and change is painful. With painful feeling persistence is painful and change is pleasant. With neutral feeling knowing is pleasant and not knowing is painful.

One might wonder if this presentation does not confirm the assumption that neutral feeling does not really exist. After all, on being known, it apparently becomes pleasant.

Yet this does not seem to be the implication of this presentation. Instead, the teaching given in this passage points to the need to know neutral feelings as they truly are, and it is that knowledge which is pleasant.

The passage is not just about changing one type of feeling into another one. This can be seen with pleasant feelings as well. A change of pleasure is painful (or at least “unpleasant”) even when such a change only results in a neutral experience. Still such change will be

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experienced as unpleasant; it is not welcome. The same holds for painful feelings, where a change to a neutral hedonic tonality of experience will be pleasant, simply because the pain is over.

In the case of neutral feeling, the pleasure comes from knowing it. In practical terms, simply being with knowledge of feeling in the present moment can become a source of joy. This is a rather subtle form of joy that can be cultivated through the sustained practice of mindfulness.

Neutral feeling is a particularly useful starting point for such practice, due to its bland nature. Being aware of the breath is a good example. Usually, the felt sense of inhalations and exhalations will be of a neutral hedonic tone. This affective neutrality is precisely why normal breathing is usually not registered in the mind and why it takes intentional effort and training to stay aware of it; the breath on its own simply fails to attract our attention.

By directing mindfulness to the breath and keeping it there in a gentle manner, pleasure and joy arise. These are not feelings caused by the breath itself. Instead, these are pleasant feelings resulting from the cultivation of mindfulness.

Without the presence of mindfulness, the blandness of neutral feeling tends to impel a search for something else that is more stimulating. The mind becomes bored and wants something more exciting.

This is what makes not knowing neutral feelings painful, or perhaps better “unpleasant,” in the sense that boredom is actually a form of displeasure.

It is for this reason that the nun Dhammadinnā relates neutral feeling to the underlying tendency to ignorance. Whereas pleasant feelings relate to the underlying tendency to lust and painful (or unpleasant) feelings to the underlying tendency to aversion, when faced

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with the bland hedonic tonality of neutral feelings the average reaction amounts to precisely this: Ignore it!

The relationship between neutral feelings and the underlying tendency to ignorance comes up again in the Discourse on the Six Sixes, the *Chachakka-sutta* (MN 148). The relevant passage describes the following predicament:⁹

Being touched by a neutral feeling, if one does not understand as it is the arising, the disappearance, the gratification, the disadvantage, and the escape in regard to that feeling, then the underlying tendency to ignorance underlies one.

In contrast, when one does understand these dimensions of neutral feeling, the underlying tendency to ignorance is not activated. Therefore knowing the arising and disappearance of neutral feelings (as well as their gratification and disadvantage) enables realizing the escape from neutral feelings and their underlying tendency to ignorance.

Ignorance is the starting point for the dependent arising of *dukkha*. This invests any practice that counters the underlying tendency to ignorance with an eminent potential. It follows that, far from being a somewhat irrelevant category of feelings that could be ignored, neutral feelings turn out to deserve meditative attention as a fertile ground for the cultivation of liberating insight.

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Abbreviations:

MN: *Majjhima-nikāya*

Ps: *Papañcasūdanī*

SN: *Samyutta-nikāya*

T: Taishō

Endnotes:

¹ MN I 397: *na kho, bhante udāyi, tisso vedanā vuttā bhagavatā; dve vedanā vuttā bhagavatā: sukhā vedanā, dukkhā vedanā. yāyaṃ, bhante, adukkhamasukhā vedanā santasmiṃ esā paṇīte sukhe vuttā bhagavatā ti.*

² MN I 397: *santaṃ yeva ca paṇa pariyaṃ udāyi pañcakaṅgassa thapatissa nābbhanumodi.*

³ MN I 397: *santaṃ yeva kho, ānanda, pariyaṃ pañcakaṅgo thapati udāyissa nābbhanumodi.*

⁴ Ps III 114: *kāyīcetasikavasena dve veditabbā.*

⁵ T II 124a: 云何說二受？說身受，心受；是名二受。

⁶ SN IV 231: *katamā ca, bhikkhave, dve vedanā? kāyikā ca cetasikā ca; imā vuccanti, bhikkhave, dve vedanā.*

⁷ MN I 475: *idhekaccassa evarūpaṃ adukkhamasukhaṃ vedanaṃ vediyato akusalā dhammā abhivaḍḍhanti kusalā dhammā parihāyanti, idha panekaccassa evarūpaṃ adukkhamasukhaṃ vedanaṃ vediyato akusalā dhammā parihāyanti kusalā dhammā abhivaḍḍhanti.*

⁸ MN I 303: *sukhā kho, āvuso visākha, vedanā ṭhitisukhā vipariṇāmadukkhā; dukkhā vedanā ṭhitidukkhā vipariṇāmasukhā; adukkhamasukhā vedanā nāṇasukhā aññānadukkhā ti.*

⁹ MN III 285: *adukkhamasukhāya vedanāya phutṭho samāno tassā vedanāya samudayaṃ ca atthaṅgamaṃ ca assādaṃ ca ādīnavaṃ ca nissaraṇaṃ ca yathābhūtaṃ nappajānāti. tassa avijjānusayo anu-*
seti.