

## AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF THE PROCESS OF THE MASTERY OF FEELING (VEDANĀ) IN THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM

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### ABSTRACT

This article aims to study three objectives: (1) to examine the place and impact of feelings in the life of human beings, (2) to study the meaning of feelings (Vedanā) in Theravāda Buddhist Perspective, and (3) to examine the methods proposed in Theravāda Buddhism to deal with Vedanā. The research findings show that Vedanā, according to its exposition in the Tipiṭaka, is characterized in different ways as either pleasant (Sukha), painful (Dukkha), or neither painful nor pleasant (Adukkhamasukha) as bodily (kāyika) and mental (cetasika), as well as worldly (sāmisa) and unworldly (Nirāmisa). In addition, the research also indicates that Vedanā plays a crucial role in developing insight, and eliciting the appropriate responses to the four noble truths, ultimately leading to liberation. The importance of Vedanā in the practice of mindfulness (Satipaṭṭhāna) has been indicated in both the Tipiṭaka and notably in several contemporary Burmese meditation traditions associated with Satipaṭṭhāna, which can be concluded that vedanā plays a key role in the practice of Satipaṭṭhāna.

## Introduction

Throughout his ministry of forty-five years from enlightenment to passing away at the age of eighty years, the central focus of the Buddha's teaching was suffering and path to end suffering. Due to ignorance, sentient beings respond unwisely to sensual objects through the six sense doors and create mental defilement which will eventually cause suffering and repeated birth in the cycle of existence (*samsāra*). The Pāli word *Vedanā* is translated into English as feeling or sensation. When a sensual object is received through one of the six sense doors—namely eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind— a corresponding sensation is said to emerge. Its intrinsic nature lies in the act of experientially processing the object, while its core function involves discerning the metaphorical essence or the flavor inherent to the sensual object.

In general, whenever the word *Vedanā* is used, it may give the impression of being a physical or mental pain. *Vedanā* refers to the affective tone of a sense experience which can be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. The *Atthasata Sutta* of the *Vedanāsamyutta*,<sup>1</sup> systematically lists classifications of feelings, including two, three, five, six, eighteen, thirty-six, and one hundred and eight types.<sup>2</sup> Among these categorizations, the three types of feeling are the most prominent one across numerous *suttas*. They are pleasant feelings, painful feelings, and neither painful nor pleasant feelings.

These three types of feeling arise from the contact (*phassa*) of the six sensory organs while the three latent tendencies of desire for sensual pleasure, aversion, and ignorance underlie them. Through ignorance of the reality of their conditioned, impermanent (*anicca*), suffering (*Dukkha*), and non-self (*anatta*) nature, the unenlightened ones identify with them and react to them with craving, aversion, or boredom leading to confusion of mind. The Buddha has shown that this unwise reaction to feeling plays a central role in creating mental defilements that lead to suffering and repeated existence in the cycle of birth and death known as *samsāra*. Having demonstrated the central role played by feeling in the causation of suffering, the Buddha has taught us the means to liberate ourselves from suffering by realizing the true nature of feeling through mindfulness and using it as a central tool in the path of liberation.

## The Concept of Feeling (*Vedanā*) in Theravāda Buddhism

In Theravāda Buddhism, *Vedanā* emerges as a foundational psychological concept. It appears in several groups of phenomena related to observable reality analyzed in Buddhism such as the five aggregates and the four foundations of mindfulness and it would be difficult to overstate its importance for meditation practice. *Vedanā* has been translated as feeling or

<sup>1</sup> SN IV 232.

<sup>2</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*, Vol II, (Boston: Wisdom Publication, 2000), 1280.

sensation. According to the early Buddhist discourses, there are three kinds of feeling: pleasant feeling (*sukha-vedanā*), painful feeling (*dukkha-vedanā*), and neutral feeling (*adukkhamasukha-vedanā*).

## The Role of Feelings (*Vedanā*) in the Life of a Human Being

The Pāli term *vedanā* is derived from the root “*vid*” and carries the meaning to know, to feel, to sense, or to experience. Thus, the Pāli word *vedanā* has commonly been translated into English as feeling or sensation. *Vedanā* has been enumerated in seven different ways in the *Samyutta Nikāya*. In the following discussion, a brief definition of each type of enumeration will be presented. In the *Suttas*, the Buddha occasionally present feelings within different enumerations: two, three, five, six, eighteen, thirty-six, and one hundred and eight. In the *Atthasata sutta*, the Buddha says feelings can be classified in general as bodily feelings (*kāyika vedanā*) and mental feelings (*cetasika vedanā*).<sup>3</sup> The bodily feeling is the feeling that arises based on the body. It can further be classified into unpleasant bodily feelings (*kāyikadukkha*) and pleasant bodily feelings (*kāyikasukha*). On the other hand, the mental feeling is the feeling that arises from the mind, not dependent on the body. It can also further be categorized into mental pleasant feelings (*cetasikasukha*) and mental unpleasant feelings (*cetasikadukkha*).

The Buddha has described three types of feelings; pleasant feeling (*sukha-vedanā*) painful feeling (*dukkha-vedanā*) and neither painful nor pleasant feeling (*adukkhamasukha-vedanā*).<sup>4</sup> In the *Majjhima Nikāya*, these three types of *vedanā* are described as both physical and mental as follows. Whatever is felt bodily or mentally as pleasing and soothing may be called *sukha-vedanā*. Whatever is felt bodily or mentally as painful and hurting may be called *dukkha-vedanā*. Whatever is felt bodily or mentally as neither soothing nor hurting may be called *adukkhamasukha-vedanā*.<sup>5</sup>

Feeling (*Vedanā*) also can be classified as five distinct types, known as the fivefold classification,<sup>6</sup> namely *sukha-vedanā* the feeling of pleasure, *dukkha-vedanā* the feeling of pain, *somanassa-vedanā* the feeling of joy, *domanassa-vedanā* the feeling of displeasure, and *upekkhā-vedanā* the feeling of equanimity, or neutral feeling. Whatever bodily pleasure, whatever bodily comfort, and pleasant comfortable feeling born of bodily contact may be called *sukha-vedanā*. Whatever bodily pain, bodily discomfort and the painful uncomfortable feeling born of bodily contact may be called *dukkha-vedanā*. Whatever mental pleasure, mental

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 1281.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 1260.

<sup>5</sup> Bhikkhu Nāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1995), 401.

<sup>6</sup> S II 428.

comfort, and the pleasant comfortable feeling born of mental contact may be called *somanassa-vedanā*. Whatever mental displeasure, mental discomfort, and painful uncomfortable feeling born of the mental contact may be called *domanassa-vedanā*. Whatever feeling, whether bodily or mentally, that is neither comfortable nor uncomfortable may be called *upekkhā-vedanā*.

Feeling (*vedanā*) can be classified as six-fold in accordance with the source from where it arises. They are as follows: *Cakkhusamphassajā vedanā* is feeling arising from eye contact. This is possible when there is eye contact. *Sotasamphassajā vedanā* is feeling arising from ear contact. This is possible when there is ear contact. *Ghānasamphassajā vedanā* is feeling arising from a nose contact. This is possible when there is nose contact. *Jivhāsamphassajā vedanā* is feeling arising from tongue contact. This kind of feeling arises when there is tongue contact. *Kāyasamphassajā vedanā* is feeling arising from a bodily contact. This kind of feeling arises when there is contact of an object with the body. *Manosamphassajā vedanā* is feeling arising from a mind contact. This kind of feeling arises when there is mind contact.

In the *Majjhima Nikāya*, a categorization of eighteen kinds of mental exploration are enumerated. These are further divided into three groups, which includes six kinds of exploration with joy, six kinds of exploration with grief, and six kinds of exploration with equanimity. On perceiving a form through any of the six senses the relevant kind of consciousness arises with a pleasant feeling, unpleasant feeling, or neutral feeling.

The thirty-six kinds of *vedanā* are enumerated as follows: six types of joy based on the household life, six types of joy based on renunciation, six types of displeasure based on the household life, six types of displeasure based on renunciation, six types of equanimity based on the household life, six types of equanimity based on renunciation. These six types refer to the *vedanā* that arises through contact with each of the six external sense objects with their respective sensual organ. These six types are applied to joy (*somanassa*), grief (*domanassa*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*) and are subdivided into *vedanā* based on the householder's life and *vedanā* based on renunciation.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the one hundred and eight kinds of *vedanā*<sup>8</sup> have been described as the above thirty-six kinds of *vedanā* in the past, the above thirty-six kinds of *vedanā* in the future, and the above thirty-six kinds of *vedanā* at present.<sup>9</sup> In summary, the number of *vedanā* expounded varies depending on the context in which the *Dhamma* is being explained. The enumeration of *vedanā* can range from two, three, five, six, eighteen, thirty-six, or one hundred and eight depending on the context.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 1066-1071.

<sup>8</sup> SN IV 231-2.

<sup>9</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*, Vol. II, 1281.

The Pāli terms *sāmisa* and *nirāmisa*, the rendering of which are translated as worldly or carnal and unworldly or spiritual, respectively, are commonly used. In this study, I will retain the Pāli terms *sāmisa* and *nirāmisa*, respectively. Here it can be seen that *vedanā* is further divided into *sāmisa* and *nirāmisa* in a six-fold classification which can be summarized as follows: pleasant feeling through sense desires *sāmisa sukha vedanā*, pleasant feeling devoid of sense desires *nirāmisa sukha vedanā*, painful feeling through sense desires *sāmisa dukkha vedanā*, painful feeling devoid of sense desires *nirāmisa dukkha vedanā*, neutral feeling through sense desires *sāmisa upekkhā vedanā*, neutral feeling devoid of sense desires *nirāmisa upekkhā vedanā*. In sum, it is apparent from the *suttas* that *sāmisa vedanā* pertains to *vedanā* that leads to unwholesome states and that it should be abandoned, whereas *nirāmisa vedanā* pertains to *vedanā* that is wholesome and that should be cultivated.

In the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, *vedanā* is defined as a universal mental factor, the *cetasika* with the function of experiencing the intrinsic flavor of the object. The *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, expounds five kinds of *vedanā* as follows: the threefold classification of feeling, such as pleasure, pain, and equanimity. Together with joy and displeasure, it is fivefold. Pleasure and pain are found in one, displeasure in two, joy in sixty-two, and the remaining equanimity in fifty-five.<sup>10</sup> Wholesome resultant body consciousness is the only one accompanied by pleasure *sukha*. Unwholesome resultant body consciousness is the only one accompanied by *dukkha*. There are sixty-two kinds of consciousness accompanied by joy (*somanassa*). Only two types of consciousness connected with aversion are accompanied by displeasure *domanassa*. All the remaining fifty-five types of consciousness are accompanied by indifference or equanimity *upekkhā*.

In the *Paṭiccasamuppāda* (Dependent Origination), feeling (*Vedanā*) is identified as the root that gives rise to craving (*taṇhā*), which, in turn leads to suffering (*dukkha*). In order to remove the cause of suffering *dukkha* which is identified as craving (*taṇhā*), one must not allow *vedanā* to connect with *taṇhā*; in other words, one must practice *Vipassanā* meditation at this juncture so that *avijjā* becomes *vijjā* or *paññā* wisdom. One has to observe *vedanā* to experience and comprehend the truth of its arising and passing away, its characteristic of being *anicca*. Through *Vipassanā* meditation, as one experiences *vedanā* in the proper way, one comes out of the delusion of *nicca saññā* perception of permanence by the development of understanding or knowledge of its impermanent nature. This is practiced by observing with equanimity the arising and passing away of *vedanā*.

<sup>10</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi, *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, The Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha, (Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 2000), 115-117.

## The Meaning of Vedanā and the Way to Master it in Theravāda Buddhist Perspective

The teaching relating to a clear understanding of *vedanā* in connection with liberation is practically assessed here in terms of its significance in the realization of the Four Noble Truths. The importance of *vedanā* in relation to the Four Noble Truths will be explored in the following sections. The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* will be explained in brief and outlining its distinctive characteristics. In order to comprehend the significance *vedanā* in the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna*, it is essential to first understand its role in path towards liberation.

The impact of the cultivation of mindfulness is relevant to the fundamentals of the holy life and leads to revulsion, dispassion, cessation, peace, direct knowledge, and enlightenment, and *Nibbāna*. The Buddha, therefore, taught that exertion should be made to understand suffering and the way leading to the cessation of suffering.<sup>11</sup> As can be seen in the passage above, the Buddha emphasized two things: *dukkha* and its cessation. The basic fundamental teachings of the Buddha are framed within the Four Noble Truths, which constitute the very essence and the core of Buddhism.

It is clear from early Buddhist *suttas* that the experience of *vedanā* has a very special role in the understanding, realization, and practice related to the Four Noble Truths. As the Buddha emphasizes that to those who undergo feelings and experience *vedanā*, he elucidates: “monks, I make known: this is the *dukkha*. I make known: this is the arising of *dukkha*. I make known: this is the cessation of *dukkha*. I make known: this is the practice that leads to the cessation of *dukkha*.<sup>12</sup> In this section, *vedanā* in the context of liberation will be analyzed with reference to the realization of each of the four noble truths. Under each truth, a brief explanation will be provided preceding the analysis of *vedanā*.

This present research has indicated that *vedanā* has a very special role in the realization of the four noble truths and hence liberation. *Vedanā* is the tool by which we can engage in the practice related to the four noble truths. It is clear that *vedanā* fulfills each aspect and twelve modes, which the *suttas* indicate as being necessary to realize supreme enlightenment. It is apparent from the present research that the noble truth of suffering can be understood through *vedanā*. The noble truth of the origin of *dukkha*, craving, can be eliminated through *vedanā*. The cessation of *dukkha* can be realized through *vedanā* the noble truth of the path leading to the cessation of *dukkha* can be cultivated through the proper practice of the *satipaṭṭhāna*.

<sup>11</sup> Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya*, 1858.

<sup>12</sup> Frank L. Woodward, *The Book of Gradual Sayings (Ānguttara Nikāya)*, (Oxford: PTS, 1995), 160.

The four foundations of mindfulness in Theravāda Buddhism is connected to all the teachings of the Buddha. Also, the methods of mindfulness practice are found in different ways in various *suttas*. Moreover, the four foundations of mindfulness deal with the hindrances, aggregates and truths (*nīvarana*, *khandha*, and *sacca*). The Buddha taught how to eradicate mental defilements, to overcome pain grief, sorrow, and lamentation, and to attain enlightenment based on the instruction given in the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna sutta*. Even though in these teaching different approaches are adopted to deal with sensation, each approach is supposed to bring a good effect. However, the four foundations of mindfulness can be seen to be related to the entire teaching of the Buddha.

It may be concluded that everyone has the opportunity of realizing the ultimate truths relating to the nature of existence and to progress through to wisdom and purity of mind in the present life. In this study, it is shown that the insight development of insight (*vipassanā*) is based on the four foundations of mindfulness as taught by the Buddha and serves as is the major path in assisting everyone in achieving the final goal of Buddhism.

## **The Analysis of the Process of the Mastering Feeling (*Vedanā*) in Theravāda Buddhism**

The establishment of mindfulness through the contemplation of *vedanā* is detailed in the following passage. One is aware of having a painful feeling when one feels a painful feeling. The meditator notes hot, hot, or pain, pain whenever there arises hotness or pain. Thus he is mindful and he knows how feelings arise and then pass away. This is the establishing mindfulness by way of contemplation of feelings. Here mindfulness and contemplation of the arising and passing away of *vedanā* are emphasized. The importance of awareness and equanimity of bodily *dukkha-vedanā* is shown in the following passage.

As one progresses in mindfulness, one may experience sensations of intense pain, stifling or choking sensations, such as pain from the slash of a knife, the thrust of a sharp pointed instrument, unpleasant sensations of being pricked by sharp needles, or the sensation of small insects crawling over the body. One might experience the sensation of itching, biting, and intense cold. As soon as one discontinues the contemplation one may feel that these painful sensations cease. When one resumes contemplation one will have them again as soon as one gains mindfulness. These painful sensations are not to be considered something serious.

They are not manifestations of disease but are considered to be common factors always present in the body and are usually obscured when the mind is normally occupied with more conspicuous objects. When the mental faculties become keener one is more aware of these sensations. With the continued development of contemplation, the time will arrive when one overcomes them and they cease altogether. If one continues contemplation, firm in purpose, one will not come to any harm. Should one lose courage, become irresolute in contemplation and discontinue for a time, one may encounter these unpleasant sensations again and again as one's contemplation proceeds. If one continues with determination one is most

likely to overcome these painful sensations and may never experience them again in the course of contemplation.

Here by observing the conspicuous nature of bodily *dukkha-vedanā* one has the opportunity to see its impermanent nature of arising and passing away clearly, as stated by Mahāsī Sayādaw in his explanation of the practice. If the meditator's concentration on it is strong enough, the unbearable pain keeps decreasing in intensity as he is taking note of it and may disappear altogether. For some, the pain will vanish completely and suddenly as if removed by hand.<sup>13</sup> It is also explained in the instructions, that when there is no *dukkha* or *sukha-vedanā* to take note of, the meditator reverts back to noting the usual, neutral phenomena of rising and falling of the abdomen. This is contemplating *adukkhamasukha-vedanā*. The following instruction is given by reputed teachers of meditation.

While thus contemplating a neutral feeling, if a pleasant feeling arises, attention should be switched on to it. Similarly, attention should be given to any unpleasant feeling that happens to arise. When taking note of the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings as they arise in this manner, personal knowledge confirms that they are not everlasting. This is discerning each kind of feeling as it occurs in the continuity of the present.

Mahāsī also explains how through the observation of the rise and fall of *vedanā*, the meditator can realize the impermanent nature of *vedanā*. The meditator who has advanced to the stages of *udayabhaya* and *bhaṅgañāṇa* finds that *vedanā* vanishes and ceases section by section, bit by bit. The ordinary phenomena of rise and fall are also found to be passing away section by section, bit by bit. When pleasant feelings and neutral feelings appear in turn, they are separated and do not appear as one continuous phenomenon or process. Similarly, unpleasant feelings appear along with neutral feelings, and they are noted as two distinct feelings. The meditator observing in this manner perceives each feeling or sensation to arise and disappear instantly, and this drives home the fact that feeling is not everlasting. Therefore, the meditator clearly perceives how pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings with respect to sense objects vanish immediately after they have arisen, and he realizes with personal knowledge that all feelings are of an impermanent nature.

Elsewhere, Mahāsī explains how through observation of *vedanā* as impermanent, meditators can realize *dukkha* and *anatta*, and become convinced that things are not permanent because it is noticed that they arise and vanish at every time of noting. This is an insight into impermanence. Also, one usually experiences many painful sensations in the body, such as tiredness, feeling hot, and painful aching, and at the time of noting these sensations, one generally feels that this body is a collection of suffering. This is also insight into suffering. Then at every time of noting it is found that elements of matter and mind occur according to their respective nature and conditioning, and not according to one's wish. One is, therefore,

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<sup>13</sup> Mahāsī Sayādaw, *Great Discourse on Not Self*, (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1996), 105-106.

convinced that they are elements they are not governable, and there is no person or living entity. This is an insight into the absence of self.

In conclusion, it is clear that the technique of Mahāsī Sayādaw emphasizes observation of *vedanā* as the most important of the four areas of *satipaṭṭhāna* in part of the practice. Here the awareness and equanimity in relation to *dukkha vedanā* are emphasized because of its conspicuous nature. However, here *vedanā* is not the sole emphasis relating to the practice. The emphasis in this tradition is relating to noting all occurrences, such as bodily movements, thoughts, feeling, etc. Nonetheless, it can be seen that through the observation of *vedanā*, the meditator can realize *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta*.

Another Burmese Vipassanā teacher Mogok Sayādaw also describes how to develop insight by the contemplation of feeling. Meditation on feeling will lead a yogi to the same deep insight into the nature of the mind-body process as a meditation on consciousness. It will lead to the breaking up of the chain of dependent origination, the cycle of rebirth and suffering. Where do we observe feeling? Feeling arises whenever there is the conjunction of three phenomena: sensory organ, object, and consciousness. The impact of these three is contact. The proximate cause of feeling is contact. Therefore, feeling is not to be purposely searched for. It arises whenever and wherever there is contact. Feelings arising from the eye base, ear base, nose base, and tongue base are always neutral. Feelings arising in the body are either pleasurable or painful.

It is important to note that feeling as described here is not used as a sensation which is its other often used meaning but only refers to the pleasant, neutral, or unpleasant quality of a sense object. Sometimes one may enjoy pleasurable sensations, especially when in favorable and pleasant surroundings. At other times one may experience pain and be dissatisfied with unfavorable surroundings, or the state of body or mind. Sometimes one may experience neutral feelings in relation to one's present experience. Mogok Sayādaw formulated and laid down an easy method of classifying feelings to be observed in meditation.

The important point for the yogi is that he must contemplate on feeling where and when it arises. It has been a practice elsewhere to fix attention on the chest or on the head, but feeling appears anywhere in the body whenever there is contact, so it cannot be said that this sort of practice is right. It is like aiming an arrow at a wrong target. Nobody can fix feeling in any particular place. It will arise wherever there is the impact of a present sense object. If a yogi believes that the feeling he meditates on in one moment is the same one as in another moment, he has a long way to go. It should be cognized and seen with insight that each feeling is transient, impermanent, and never remains the same for two consecutive moments. If the yogi fails to cognize and perceive with insight wisdom that feeling is impermanent, he is still off the track. It is generally and wrongly believed that feeling is one long continuous experience, but with mindfulness and concentration the yogi will see all feeling as arising and ceasing moment to moment.

The yogi should dwell meditating on the arising of feeling and perishing of feeling, both separately and concurrently. It is important for the yogi to remember that feeling is not to be sought after purposely. It is generally believed that when one gets pain, ache, or illness, it is called feeling, but feeling is more than that. It is prevalent all the time. Feelings arise depending on each of the sense bases the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind at each moment of consciousness. There is not a single moment that is free from feeling, so the yogi should try to cognize and comprehend the arising and perishing process. The nature of all five of the aggregate will become clear as the aggregate of feeling is understood fully.

The arising and perishing process shows that feeling is impermanent and the comprehension of this is true insight. When the yogi can practice to the point where there is no intruding defilement or distraction between his observation of impermanence and insight, the experience of *nirvāna* is within reach. In order to gain this higher wisdom, the yogi should dwell first on feeling itself, then go further and concentrate his mind on the arising and vanishing, until he eventually sees clearly that feeling dissolves and is experienced as only a process of arising and vanishing phenomena. This is important, for now whenever he contemplates on feeling in place of simply noting the feeling, it dissolves and he fully comprehends the process of arising and vanishing. This is treading on the path of insight.

The contemplation on arising and vanishing is not a new technique. It is believed to be an ancient path taken by innumerable Buddhas, and enlightened ones of the past. It is the technique of stopping the cause in order to prevent the effect. What this means can be understood in terms of the process of dependent origination. The doctrine of dependent origination shows that because of feeling there arises craving. So the cessation of feeling brings the cessation of craving, and cessation of craving is the path to *nirvāna*, to freedom. This whole process comes about as a result of the confidence, effort, and wisdom of the yogi. He can see in his own mind that the cessation of feeling brings the non-arising of craving. Therefore, it brings the end of defilements, for desire does not arise on the cessation of feeling. This end of defilements allows the attainment of *nirvāna* in this very life.

In this way, it is maintained that *vedanā* is the meeting ground, the crossroads where mind and body interact, and where our true nature is revealed in a vivid, tangible way. Although physical in nature, *vedanā* is also one of the four mental processes; it arises within the body and is felt by the mind. Whatever arises in the mind is accompanied by sensation.<sup>14</sup> When mental objects thoughts, ideas, imaginations, emotions, memories, hopes, and fears come into contact with the mind, sensations arise. Every thought, every emotion, and every mental action is accompanied by a corresponding sensation within the body.<sup>15</sup> This implies that *vedanā* cannot be separated from the other three areas of *satipaṭṭhāna* which cover both body and mind. By observing the sensations throughout the body, the awareness becomes sharper and subtler and the entire process of mind can be observed. In this way, the observation of *vedanā* is the

<sup>14</sup> Vipassana Research Institute, "Vedanā in the Practice of Satipaṭṭhāna," *Sayāgyi U Ba Khin Journal* 1 (1991): 257.

<sup>15</sup> William Hart, *The Art of Living*, (Igatpuri: VRI, 1998), 91.

most direct and tangible way to experience the entire mind matter phenomenon leading to liberation.<sup>16</sup>

In practicing *Vipassanā*, one's task is simply to observe sensations throughout the body. As one perseveres in meditation, one soon realizes that one's sensations are constantly changing. Every moment changes occur in every part of the body, in the form of electromagnetic and biochemical reactions. Every moment, even with increasing rapidity the mental processes change and are manifested in physical changes. By the practice of *vipassanā bhāvanā*, one experiences the reality of impermanence directly in the framework of the body.

Moreover, through the equanimous observation of *vedanā*, one can reach a stage where one can realize the five *khaṇḍhas* as *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta*. By simply observing objectively and equanimously feeling the sensations in one's own body in a proper way, one can easily reach a state where even the most solid parts of the body are experienced as they really are nothing but oscillations and vibrations of subatomic particles (*kalāpa*). What appears solid, hard, and impenetrable at the gross level is actually nothing but wavelets at the subtlest, ultimate level. With this awareness, one can observe and realize that the entire *pañcakkhanda*, the five aggregates, are nothing but vibrations, arising and passing away. This realization of the basic characteristic of all phenomena as *anicca* leads one to the realization of *anatta*. The various sensations keep arising in the body whether one likes it or not. There is no control over them, no possession of them. They do not obey our wishes. This in turn makes one realize the nature of *dukkha*. Through experience, one understands that identifying oneself with these changing impersonal phenomena is nothing but suffering.<sup>17</sup>

Awareness and equanimity are thus the essence of this meditation tradition. Both are essential, and they must be equally strong. Every sensation gives rise to liking and disliking. These momentary, unconscious reactions of liking and disliking are immediately multiplied and intensified into great craving and aversion, into attachment, giving rise to *dukkha* now and in the future. Instead of trying to keep one experience and avoid another, to pull one close, to push another away, one simply examines every phenomenon objectively, with equanimity, with a balanced mind. One examines the sensation dispassionately, without liking or disliking it, without craving and aversion, or attachment. Instead of giving rise to fresh reactions every sensation now gives rise to now give rise to nothing but wisdom, *paññā*, and insight that it is impermanent, bound to change, arising and passing away. When one develops equanimity one does not react. Gradually, by maintaining awareness and equanimity toward sensation, one eradicates past conditioning.

A non-reacting mind produces no new conditioning. The law of nature is such that the old accumulation of conditioning in the flow of consciousness will automatically rise to the

<sup>16</sup> Vipassana Research Institute, "Relevance of Vedanā to Bhāvanāmaya Paññā," 22.

<sup>17</sup> Vipassana Research Institute, "Significance of the Pāli Term Dhuna in the Practice of Vipassanā Meditation," 25.

surface to be eradicated when no new *sankhāra* are given as input.<sup>18</sup> By remaining aware and balanced, one achieves a few moments in which one does not react and does not generate any *sankhāra*. Those few moments, no matter how brief, are very powerful and they set in motion the reverse process, the process of purification. Therefore, observing every sensation with equanimity, one gradually weakens and destroys the tendencies to craving and aversion. The cause of *dukkha* is *kamma*, the mental deed, that is, the blind reaction of craving and aversion, the *sankhāra*. When the mind is aware of sensation but maintains equanimity, there is no such reaction, no cause that will give rise to suffering. The entire effort is thus to learn how not to react, how not to produce new *sankhāra*.

In sum, according to this tradition, all four facets of *satipaṭṭhāna* can be attended to and accomplished through *vedanā*. The systematic observation of *vedanā* with awareness and equanimity is the essence of this practice. It is essential to understand the three characteristics of the five aggregates. One must therefore directly experience impermanence, suffering, and non-substantiality within one selves. Importance is given to impermanence because the realization of the other two will easily follow when we have experienced deeply the characteristic of impermanence.

## Conclusion

The multiple processes of Feeling (*Vedanā*) are characterized as *sukha*, *dukkha*, or *adukkhamasukha*, and may be bodily and mental and *sāmisa* and *nirāmisa*. Some of the *Abhidhamma* explanations of *vedanā* are evident. The *Abhidhamma* sheds light on the important relationship between *vedanā* as a mental factor and consciousness. However, interestingly the *Abhidhamma* suggests that *adukkhamasukha* *vedanā* can only be mental and not bodily. Moreover, when consulting dictionaries *adukkhamasukha* is defined as neutral, making no reference to anything bodily or mental. The term *adukkhamasukha* as explained in dictionaries and in other sources is somewhat vague and not clear. This obviously poses some difficulty to learners of Buddhism and is an issue that needs to be clarified since there are clearly two different explanations for this term.

Moreover, the *Abidhamma* presents an explanation according to which the arising of bodily *dukkha* and *sukha* *vedanā* is through the sense of touch, while *vedanā* arising through the other doors are always *adukkhamasukha*. This is inconsistent with the *suttas* which state that all six sense bases serve as the condition for the arising of *dukkha*, *sukha*, and *adukkhamasukha* *vedanā*. Therefore, we need to examine further why these differences exist and the implication this poses for our interpretation of the *Tipiṭaka*. More research needs to be attempted on this topic because as highlighted by the present and previous research, it is clearly a very important aspect of the teachings of the Buddha.

<sup>18</sup> Vipassana Research Institute, “Significance of the Pāli Term Dhuna in the Practice of Vipassanā Meditation,” 26.

This present research has indicated that *vedanā* has a very special role in the realization of the Four Noble Truths and hence liberation. *Vedanā* is the process by which *dukkha* arises and contemplation of this is how its cessation can be realized. It has been seen that *dukkha vedanā* is itself painful. However, all *vedanā*, including *sukha* and *adukkhamasukha* are *dukkha* in a wider sense because of their impermanent nature. The present research has also shown how *vedanā* is a key link in the chain of *paṭiccasamuppāda*, serving as the main condition for the arising of *taṇhā*. However, it has also been exemplified here that contemplation of *vedanā* has a crucial role in the liberation from *dukkha*. When *vedanā* is no longer approached with lust, aversion or ignorance, the underlying tendencies do not lie latent, and craving ceases and an end to *dukkha* is made. The present research also found that *vedanā* is crucial in the path to liberation, as the subject of one of the four *satipaṭṭhānas*. Although in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* itself does not emphasize *vedanā* as the most important area of *satipaṭṭhāna*, other *suttas* in the *Tipiṭaka* do suggest that *vedanā* has a key role in the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna* because of its crucial role in liberation. The present research found that the *suttas* indicate that the full understanding of *vedanā* particularly in terms of its impermanent nature of *vedanā* is the path to liberation.

The research findings also show that a difference exists in the emphasis of *vedanā* in three Burmese *vipassanā* meditation traditions. The technique by *Mahāsī Sayadaw* emphasizes *vedanā* as one of the four areas of *satipaṭṭhāna* to be included. And then, the technique taught by *Mogok Sayadaw* emphasizes its dependent origination. Through the mastery of dependent origination his center tries to lead the followers to reach the final goal of the meditation practice. In contrast, the technique taught by *S.N. Goenka* emphasizes solely the observation of *vedanā* bodily sensations, through which the three other areas of *satipaṭṭhāna* can also be observed. However, irrespective of emphasis, these traditions highlight the importance of equanimous observation of *vedanā* in the realization of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*.

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