

A Lay Meditator's Perspective of Indifferent Feeling

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Feeling, vedana, is studied in texts as a universal mental factor, and is analyzed as threefold – pleasant, painful, neither-pleasant-nor-painful or indifferent feeling. It is also analyzed as fivefold - here pleasant feeling is divided into pleasure which is a bodily feeling, and joy or happiness which is mental; painful feeling is divided into pain which is a bodily feeling, and unpleasant feeling which is mental. 'In the Suttas the Buddha sometimes also speaks of feeling as twofold, pleasure (sukha) and pain (dukkha)' it is also said.

When painful feeling or unpleasant feeling is mentioned, it is distinctly understood. In meditation this painful feeling at the body door, or unpleasant feeling at the mind door is to be contemplated without turning attention toward self. Likewise the arising of pleasant feeling or joy at the body door and mind door respectively are to be taken note of. Pleasant feeling or joyful feeling, and painful feeling or unpleasant feeling is easily understood in the practice, and needs no further elucidation. The arising of painful feeling in an individual who is bodily hurt can be easily known by oneself or by others. So also the arising of joyful feeling is easily known by oneself or by others when a person sees or hears a beloved child.

Indifferent feeling that arises as things are done in daily life often goes unnoticed. Therefore indifferent feeling from a lay meditator's point of view will be discussed here. In so discussing, the use of similes will be supportive, and with the use of similes at the sense-doors, the explanation of indifferent feeling will be better understood.

For instance, on taking a beautifully prepared Asian curry, there would arise pleasurable feeling in one, while in another there would arise unpleasant feeling, as the curry turns out to be that of neem leaves which are very bitter. On seeing, at the eye-door it is only the visible object; the eye does not know it is bitter. On touching, the body-base which is conventionally known as the hand, cognized only softness, and does not know that it is bitter. Bitter taste will not be known by the eye or by the hand as these are not the doors responsible for cognition of taste. Only at the tongue door, with the water element which is conventionally called the saliva, will taste be cognized. In English it is said to be bitter; in other languages of the world there are different words to describe bitter taste. No matter how it will be called, bitter taste will not change its intrinsic nature or essence which is simply bitter taste. Again in English it is called neem leaves, while in other languages it will again have different names. But bitter taste will remain unchanged irrespective of how it is called in different languages.

At the tongue, it is only bitter taste. It will not give one a pleasant feeling, nor will it give the other an unpleasant feeling. It will not give a king a better taste, nor will it give a beggar a poor taste. It will not be biased toward a rich man and give him a better taste. It will not be prejudiced toward a poor man and give him a poorer taste. It will be bitter taste to an old man, it will remain bitter taste to a baby. At the tongue it is simply bitter taste, the ultimate reality, the paramattha, which is unbiased, unprejudiced toward anyone.

For some people in Myanmar as well as for some Asians, this bitter taste of neem leaves helps make the meal more enjoyable. But for many others it will almost spoil a good meal. In those who like bitter taste there will arise pleasant feeling; in those who do not like it there will arise unpleasant feeling. But bitter taste will remain bitter only, and will not be a good taste to one, or a bad taste to another. It is mind that thinks bitter taste is good; it is mind that thinks bitter taste is bad. At the tongue, it is bitter taste only; there is nothing good, there is nothing bad about bitter taste. The

tongue-consciousness that arises upon contact of tongue-sensitivity and bitter taste comes with indifferent feeling. On experiencing bitter taste, dependent upon the attitude of the individual, unpleasurable feeling or pleasant feeling, or again indifferent or neutral feeling, arises in mind.

To put this to practice, it is to be contemplated that the contact of bitter taste and tongue-base gives rise to tongue-consciousness. Bitter taste and tongue-sensitivity are matter. Matter by itself is not capable of knowing. Tongue-consciousness is mind which cognizes taste. It is only mind-matter arising, and not man tasting neem leaves. Knowing it is knowledge discerning mind and matter. Knowing that it is mind-matter arising, knowing that it is not man tasting neem leaves, is a significant stage in meditation practice in dispelling the wrong view of self. Two matter – bitter taste and tongue are causes. The contact of two matter gives rise to tongue-consciousness. Bitter taste and tongue-consciousness, with the aid of the water element conventionally known as saliva, are causes. Tongue-consciousness is the result. It is not man tasting neem leaves, but cause and result taking place. Knowing this is knowledge discerning causes. This tongue-consciousness is not that which is always there. Before the contact of taste and tongue-base, tongue-consciousness was nowhere to be pointed at. Only at the contact of the two matter, the resultant tongue-consciousness arises. It is the arising of mind-matter. It arises, and instantly passes away.

An example is given here as a mustard seed kept on a needle tip. As soon as a mustard seed is kept on a needle tip it falls off. It can be contemplated in the same way in other sense-doors.

On hearing someone speak a foreign language there will arise ear-consciousness. It will not be known whether these are words of praise or words of insult. It is not man that is being heard; it is not man that is hearing others' words. At the ear, it is sound only. When these words have been repeatedly heard, when these words have been remembered, and when the language have been learned, it will come to be known if these are words of insult or words of praise. Hearing words of insult, there will arise unpleasant feeling. The first time it was heard, when the language had not been learnt, there was neither pleasant feeling, nor unpleasant feeling. These were the same words that had been heard, but in the first time, unpleasant feeling did not arise, because in sound alone there is nothing good or bad. It is only sound that is heard. At the ear, there is nothing good or bad. With ear-consciousness, indifferent feeling arises. Because of concepts of man, it is mind that perceives sound as words of insults, or words of praise. In so perceiving the object as words of praise, or as words of insults, pleasant feeling arises in mind, unpleasant feeling arises in mind. But with ear-consciousness that hears only sound, it is only indifferent feeling. The transiency of this arising of ear-consciousness accompanied by indifferent feeling is so subtly fleeting that it is not perceived by ordinary persons, but can be known only from the Teachings of the Buddha. What is commonly experienced will be the pleasant or unpleasant feeling that arises on hearing words of praise, or of insults. For a third party who is not a direct target of insults, there may also arise in him indifferent feeling.

Contemplation is to be made on any of these ultimate realities - pleasant feeling, unpleasant feeling, indifferent feeling, or sound, or contact, or ear-consciousness, etc. Again when words of praise are heard, or when a loved one is seen, unpleasant feeling that arose on hearing insulting words will be found to have passed away; and there arises pleasant feeling.

Contemplating the passing away of unpleasant feeling is a step toward dispelling the wrong view of eternalism. But in place of the unpleasant feeling that has passed away, there arises pleasant feeling which takes place on seeing a loved one or on hearing pleasant words. When this replacement by pleasant feeling is contemplated, it is again a step toward dispelling the wrong view of annihilation. It can also be contemplated on the indifferent feeling that arises with ear-consciousness.

Contemplating the arising and passing away of these ultimate realities is knowledge of rise and fall. This nature of rise and fall of the conditioned realities is the noble truth of suffering. This is to be repeatedly practised so that finally there is no more arising of mind-matter which is the conditioned reality. At this moment when there is cessation of arising of mind-matter, there is the ultimate bliss, the termination of all suffering.