

Inner Landscape, Part 2: Vedanā

Review

In the first reflection in this series, we began exploring the inner landscape — what we find when we look inside. We organized this exploration as a three-way conversation between our experience, the Buddha’s commentary, and the sciences of evolutionary psychology and neurology. We used the Buddha’s primary concern — alleviating suffering — to guide us.

We began with the question, “What is suffering?” At the very least it is something we experience. This begs the question, “What is experience?”

The Buddha suggested that experience could be categorized in five different *khandas* or clusters. We went through all five. However, we skipped lightly over the second *khandā*, *vedanā*, or the feeling tones of painful, pleasant, or neither.

This reflection picks up there and looks at *vedanā* in detail. It’s important to remember that even though *vedanā* is often translated as “feeling tone” or just “feeling,” it is not emotion. Emotions are complex. *Vedanā* is a component of emotion along with thoughts, beliefs, ideas and more. But *vedanā* itself is just pain, pleasantness, or neither.

Step-Child

Vedanā is the stepchild of the *khandas*. It has been misunderstood and overlooked — but I’m coming to believe it is central to developing an effective meditation practice or a happy life.

When the Buddha said, “All things

converge on *vedanā*,”¹ (*Anguttara Nikaya*, Nines, No. 14) — he was suggesting that *vedanā* is pivotal in our experience. It’s one of the five *khandas*. It’s the seventh link of Dependent Origination — right in the middle where it gives rise to *taṇhā* (craving). It’s the second of the Four Foundations of mindfulness. The four are body sensation, feeling tone (*vedanā*), mind and mind objects. This means *vedanā* is a primary object for mindfulness training.

Despite its importance, there is very little about it in the text. For example, the “*Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*” (*Majjhima Nikāya* 10) goes on for many pages about the first, third, and fourth foundation. But the second foundation, *vedanā*, has only one paragraph. In its entirety it reads:

And how does a person abide contemplating vedanā as vedanā? [That is, knows feeling tone directly on its own terms rather than through some other frame of reference.]

Here, when feeling a pleasant vedanā, a person understands: I feel a pleasant vedanā; when feeling a painful vedanā, they understand: ‘I feel a painful vedanā; when feeling a neither-painful-nor-pleasant vedanā, they understand: ‘I feel a neither-painful-nor-pleasant vedanā.’

When feeling a worldly pleasant vedanā [pleasant sense experience], they understand: ‘I feel a worldly pleasant vedanā; when feeling an unworldly pleasant vedanā [lower jhāna without taṇhā], they understand: I feel an unworldly pleasant vedanā; when feeling a worldly painful vedanā, they understand: ‘I feel a worldly painful vedanā’;

when feeling an unworldly painful vedanā [hindrance when in a jhāna], they understand: ‘I feel an unworldly painful vedanā’; when

¹*Anguttara Nikaya*, Book Nine, No. 14

feeling a *worldly neither-painful-nor-pleasant vedanā* [indifference], he understands: 'I feel a *worldly neither-painful-nor-pleasant vedanā*'; when feeling an *unworldly neither-painful-nor-pleasant vedanā* [equanimity], he understands: 'I feel an *unworldly neither-painful-nor-pleasant vedanā*.'

That's it. It doesn't even have my bracketed asides or highlights. The *Vedanā Samyutta* has a little more text, but it doesn't offer more explanation. We don't find much about *vedanā* elsewhere.

What the Buddha does say about *vedanā* is that there are three kinds: painful, pleasant, and neither-painful–nor-pleasant.

The terms painful, pleasant, or neither-painful-pleasant might suggest they are on a spectrum from unpleasant to pleasant. So I tended to mush them altogether into a scale that runs from unpleasant to neutral to pleasant or from painful to neutral to delightful.

But the Buddha's language suggests that there are actually three different kinds of *vedanā* experience: painful *vedanā*, pleasant *vedanā*, and a third *vedanā* that is neither of those.

Remarkably, 2600 years after the Buddha, neural science supports what the Buddha said: there are entirely different systems in the body for each of these three. So let's look at what science has to say about them.

In the last reflection we noted that neuroscience suggests experience arises out of the information flowing through our system. There is more information than we can possibly attend to. *Vedanā* may be the signal that says, "This information needs more attention."

Painful vedanā

Painful *vedanā* signals threat — a safety concern or imbalance may need attention. This might be a threat to physical integrity: there's a bear in the front yard or there's

rattlesnake on the path. It might be a psychological imbalance like an insult or something is out of place: "Who put the glass in the wrong cupboard?" "Daddy, Billy is putting his hand on my side of the car seat!"

There is a neural system in the body that specializes in picking up signals of pain and threat. We experience them as fear, aversion, anger, hatred, uneasiness, imbalance, and so forth.

All these are painful even if they aren't physically painful (yet). They may only be mentally uncomfortable. But they are uncomfortable and alert us to a possible danger and push us toward fight or flight.

These signals are sent (mostly) to the most primitive part of the brain — the lower brain stem. Indeed painful *vedanā* feels primal.

Pleasant vedanā

Pleasant *vedanā* relates to something the organism needs or wants in order to feel satisfied: food, sleep, water, shelter, sex, and so forth

There is a neural system in the body that specializes in picking up signals of pleasure. When activated, pleasant *vedanā* lures the organism toward an object to satisfy the need.

These signals are sent (mostly) to the brain's limbic system. When satisfied, the brain tends to release dopamine.

We experience these signals as liking, sweetness, desire, pleasure, and so forth. They create a kind of stickiness of mind that latches onto a pleasant object

Neither-painful-nor-pleasant-vedanā

Neither-painful-nor-pleasant-*vedanā* arises when the body is awake but the mind is not. The needs for safety, satisfaction, or anything else are dormant. The pain and pleasure systems are quiet. There is very

little signal of any kind. The brain's arousal systems are quiescent.

When the mind is quiet, attentive, relaxed, undisturbed by pain or pleasure, it can become quite equanimous. We feel present, alert, and comfortable.

However, since we aren't paying attention, there is a risk that we will miss something important and fall into delusion or confusion. There may be a threat to our safety or possibility of need satisfaction that won't be met because we missed it. Without any arousal, we can be quiet, relaxed and inattentive without awareness. This is unwholesome *vedanā* that is neither-pleasant-nor-painful.

We may experience this *vedanā* as: boredom, stupor, thickness or density of mind, inattentiveness, lack of presence, ho-hum mind, fogginess, indifference, fatigue, and more.

Connection vedanā

There may be another kind of *vedanā* that Rick Hanson calls a need for connection. It is not neutral. It has an arousal quality that can be positive or negative. So it sounds like painful or pleasurable *vedanā*. However it doesn't deconstruct into need for safety, satisfaction, or mental attentiveness.

In evolutionary terms, it seems to be more recent — emerging in higher mammals in the last million years or so.

For example, on a whale watch a friend of a friend saw three grey whales protecting seals from being eaten by several orcas. He wondered what would motivate whales to take care of seals? What's the evolutionary advantage of that?

One advantage is complex but compelling. Intelligent species have complex brains that take a long time to mature. Since they rely more on intelligence than hard-wired instincts to survive, they are relatively helpless until they mature and learn. Bees are born adults. But

humans, orcas, and whales (to name a few species) have prolonged childhoods. They depend on parents for protection and wisdom in order to survive. Without their parent's care and compassion, intelligent children would not grow into adults.

One primary attribute of intelligence is flexibility – the capacity to adapt and learn from experience. So in intelligent creatures, caring and compassion are not narrowly focused. They are generalized and may arise in many situations.

There is no specific evolutionary advantage for whales to protect seals. But there is a huge advantage for a generalized instinct to care for smaller, more helpless creatures.

So wired into us is a huge sensitivity to children in particular and babies in general. If we show a human a picture of a baby person, monkey, lion, wolf puppy, horse, bird, or turtle, we think they're cute. From a human perspective, there is nothing cute about a baby turtle. But recognizing it as a young animal can trigger feelings of warmth, caring, and protection.

Here's another example: I woke up one morning to find Lila, our feline family member, curled up next to me, her body pressed against my chest, her front paws on my shoulder, and her chin resting on my chin. She was fast asleep.

All intelligent species seem to have a deep sensitivity to relationships, even to creatures who are a different species.

This 4th *vedanā* is more complex than the first three and probably relates more to the neocortex. The neocortex comes much later in evolution. Connection *vedanā* may not be possible without a neocortex of some significance.

It can be a strong urge or weak, positive or negative. Depending on life experience it may be strengthened or weakened. But it seems necessary for survival of intelligent creatures.

As I said earlier, connection vedanā doesn't really deconstruct into a need for safety or a need for satisfaction. It's experienced as an urge to connect — to be in heart-felt relationship with another person or group of people. And without enough connection, it may be experienced as loneliness, isolation, or disconnection. One of the most painful experiences for a human may be being shunned, ostracized, or rejected.

After hearing Rick Hanson talk about the possibility of connection vedanā and exploring it in my own practice, I have spoken with several other teachers about it. None of them accepted it. They see it as a variation of the three classical types of vedanā.

However, I do notice in my meditation that many of my random thoughts are in the form of explaining something to somebody. Sometimes there is an earnestness to my inner voice to try to connect with the person I'm talking to in my mind. It's as if I want the person to understand me so they'll connect with me a little more.

Perhaps I'm hypersensitive to relationships or maybe there is some of this in all of us. And whether we think of it as a fourth vedanā or a just a variant of the first three, I have found it very helpful to be more attentive to how it works.

Buddha

Vedanā and connection vedanā may not be in the text so much. But it's not completely absent either. Here is a passage from the "Maggasamyutta," *Samyutta Nikāya* No 41.2(2):

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling among the Sakyans where there was a town of the Sakyans named Nāgaraka. Then the Venerable Ānanda approached the Blessed One. Having approached, he paid homage to the Blessed One, sat down to one side, and said to him: "Venerable sir, this is half of the holy life, that

is, good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship." "Not so, Ānanda! Not so, Ānanda! This is the entire holy life, Ānanda, that is, good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship. When a bhikkhu has a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, it is to be expected that he will develop.

The Buddha seems to place a lot of importance on healthy, heart-felt compassion. Still, the Buddha was a guy. So he may not have emphasized relationship as much he would have if he had been a woman.

Or maybe relationships aren't emphasized in the text because his teachings were passed down through patriarchal cultures that stressed individuality more than relationship — the Buddha's teachings about relationship may have been diminished by unconscious bias.

Considering these possibilities, it may be helpful to correct the distortion in the transmission of the Buddha's teachings by looking at it more carefully.

Vedanā Meter

Remember, vedanā signals a need for safety (from a threat or imbalance), satisfaction (of a need), clarity (in confusion), or connection (with others). We tend not to notice the signal because we're too busy acting on it.

If a saber-toothed tiger walks up the path and we get engrossed in how awful that makes us feel inside, we're more likely to be eaten than if all our attention is riveted on the tiger. If we see a lovely piece of fruit and get engrossed in how lovely it might taste, some other creature may get it before us. If we see a beautiful/handsome person and get engrossed in how good that makes us feel, they're more likely to pass us by than if we attend to them.

So these signals impel us to quickly focus attention on the beast, food, or person rather than our inner feelings. We may not

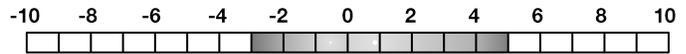
notice the vedanā.

The Buddha suggested it is very helpful to see vedanā as vedanā — to notice the signal itself apart from the object that triggers it. But he didn't offer any techniques for doing it. We may have to come up with our own.



circular car speedometer. Zero on the left is the most painful. Ten on the right is the most wonderful. Five in the middle is neutral.

The first image in my mind was a horizontal bar that ran from -10 on the left (torture) to 0 in the middle (neutral) to +10 on the right (bliss).



Here's a simple technique created by one of my teachers, Tony Bernhard. He calls it a "mental app" which he named "The Vedanā Meter." Rather than installing the app on our smart phone, we install it in our mind. His version focuses only on the pleasant and painful dimensions of vedanā. Here's how it works:

You walk into the doctor's office and say, "My foot is sore." The doctor asks, "On a scale from zero to ten where zero is pain-free and ten is excruciating, how intense is the pain?"

After a moment's reflection, it's easy to give numbers: "In the morning, it's usually a two. In the evening it's a six. Right now it's four and a half." Those numbers are measures of painful vedanā.

We could also set up a measure of pleasantness: "On a scale from zero to ten where zero is boring and ten is total delight, how is eating that cookie?" "...petting a kitten?" "...spring flowers?" "...your favorite music?"

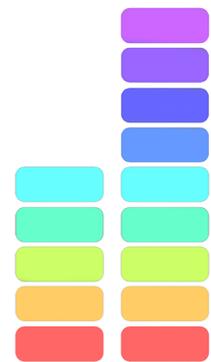
The Vedanā Meter has both scales. The pain scale runs from pain-free to the worst intensity you could experience without blacking out. The pleasant scale runs from ho-hum to the loveliest rush we could know without blissing out.

It's also possible to combine both scales into one that runs from intense pain on one end to neutral in the middle and intense pleasure on the other end.

To create your vedanā meter, imagine such a scale in your mind. You can design it any way you like. Tony's looks like a

Another yogi's vedanā meter resembled a stereo equalizer with different scales for different frequencies.

The mental images are just metaphors. So use whatever comes most naturally for you. Once you have mentally created your meter, the next step is to "calibrate" it. Here's a way to do this:



Close your eyes for a moment and bring an image to mind of your meter. Once you have it, have a friend read the following words to you. Or if you're alone, you can read them to yourself.

Notice how your meter responds to each. What's important is not what you think about the phenomenon but how pleasant or painful it feels. See how these register on your meter:

- Chocolate ice cream
- Child on a swing set
- A glass of milk
- A hug
- In-laws
- Your father
- Public speaking
- Dog poop
- Donald Trump
- Sun on your face

Your 1st grade teacher

Stubbing your toe

Once you're familiar with how your meter responds to a variety of experiences, you're ready to bring it into meditation and life. For example, what does your meter register for this moment? Then notice it in other situations as you move through your day or various objects come to mind in meditation.

When I first tried out my app, it seemed pretty simple — perhaps even simplistic. But the results were unexpected.

To my surprise, I realized I'm basically happy most of the time. My meter is usually in the 3 or 4 range. As the day flows along, it sometimes dips to a -4 or -5. Sometimes it rises to a 6 or 7. But mostly it hovers in a moderately positive range.

This threw me a little. If you ask me at a random time how I'm doing, the first thoughts that pop into my mind are complaints. Those negative thoughts are the product of childhood conditioning a long time ago. Yet today, my thoughts still tend to say "I'm a -2 today" when my actual vedanā meter is usually more of a +3. I didn't realize how different my thought content could be from my mood.

Another surprise was how much I enjoy thinking. While meditating, I often view a thought sprint as an annoyance. But when I'm thinking, the meter can go up to a 6 or 7. The thought content can be negative while the process of thinking can be pleasurable.

Seeing how pleasurable thinking can be has made it easier to not fight thoughts. I understand the mind's attraction to them. Rather than push them away, I can take in the pleasant vedanā and release the thought content. The underlying uplifting quality can be healing if I don't fight it. I don't have to get lost in the content of the thoughts. That content can be released. I just rest in the pleasantness behind the specific

thoughts and let it radiate outward.

Another observation I've had and heard from others is what happens when vedanā is in the negative range. If I see that feeling tone with dispassionate interest, the meter tends to move in a positive direction on its own.

I've come to appreciate that vedanā — the pre-verbal painful and pleasant dimensions of everyday experience — may be so subtle as to be under-noticed. Yet it may have tantalizing insights to share if we learn to listen to its moods with an opening heart and a quieting mind.

Wanting meter

As I mentioned earlier, one difficulty in recognizing vedanā is that it is a signal, which can trigger an urge. The *Pāli* terms for these urges are *taṇhā* or *chanda* meaning respectively unwholesome or wholesome desire.

Psychologists and neural scientists call these "drive states" — we want to do something and are gently or strongly compelled to act. If the urge is for safety or balance, the vedanā signal will be unpleasant: pain, fear, aversion, or anger that urges us to fight or flight. Anger tends to trigger aggression. Aversion tends to trigger flight.

If the urge is for satisfying a need, the vedanā signal will be pleasant: a sweet desire or wanting that draws us toward the object. If the urge is for connection, the vedanā signal might be loneliness or disconnection.

So there is the signal (vedanā) that can trigger a drive state (*taṇhā* or *chanda*) that moves us toward or away from the object. The drive states themselves (*chanda* and *taṇhā*) can be so strong that they mask the vedanā. We are less conscious of the signal and more conscious of the object or the drive to move toward or away.

Nevertheless, it is possible for

something to be strongly negative and slide off us like water off a duck. And it's possible for something to be strongly pleasant, and have very little urge to act.

So it's important to be able to notice not only how painful or pleasant something is but also how strong the urge is to do something about it. Some things can be very pleasant but I'm fine whether I have it or not. Sometimes I'm compulsively driven. And sometimes I'm in between.

Taṇhā is a good candidate for a mental app. Tony Bernhard calls it a "Wanting Meter." Rather than measuring pain or pleasantness, it measures the intensity of desire or aversion — wanting to be rid of something or wanting something.

We can create a Wanting Meter in a manner similar to creating a Vedanā Meter: produce a mental image of a scale that runs from powerful aversion to neutral to powerful desire. Then add numbers to the scale. That's it.

The Wanting Meter may not need to be pre-calibrated. We pre-calibrated the Vedanā Meter by thinking of various painful and pleasant sensations and seeing how the meter responded to each.

But the intensity of wanting is not tied as directly to raw sensations. For me, chocolate often produces pleasant vedanā. Sometimes I crave chocolate; other times I can take it or leave it. The pleasantness of chocolate may stay the same but the strength of wanting can vary widely.

An insulting remark might trigger hatred or mild annoyance or indifference or even slight pleasantness that someone is actually paying attention to me.

Thoughts might be fueled by a powerful craving to solve a problem or by a faint wondering.

Since the intensity of desire or aversion for a specific object can vary, pre-calibrating the Taṇha Meter is less effective or necessary. We can simply start using it.

Vedanā Meter 2.0

The Vedanā Meter I described does not envision all aspects of vedanā — just the painful and pleasant dimensions.

Relational vedanā

As I became aware of the possibility of another kind of vedanā — relational vedanā — a little checkbox appeared next to the meter in my mind. If the vedanā had anything to do with relationships — even if only the mind explaining something to someone — that little box was checked. Sometimes, instead of a checkbox, there was a light that was on or off.

Neither-pleasant-nor-painful

As I became aware that neither-painful-non-pleasant vedanā was more than a zero point on the other scales, I added another scale that went from clear mind to thick-foggy mind.

But adding that to the mental image made it more complex. The complexity became a distraction. So I dropped it but remained attentive to how clear or blurry awareness was even without a new scale.

Depending on your temperament, you may find it helpful to upgrade your Vedanā Meter to version 2.0 that includes a relationship relevance indicator and a mental-clarity scale. Or you may find it more helpful to keep in simple.

Freedom

Without the urge to move away from or toward, there would have been no evolutionary advantage to the signal. So once an urge is active, the signal has done its job and may recede into the background. That is one reason vedanā is hard to notice.

Taṇha is seen as the weak point in the chain of Dependent Origination. It's seen as the easiest place to release tension and stop the flow toward suffering.

When we relax tension, we may notice the vedanā — the signal that triggers the taṇhā. With that awareness, we become familiar with a place before the taṇhā arises. There is a tiny bit of tension in vedanā. If we can see it and relax, taṇhā is stopped before it can even start.

We don't have to alleviate suffering. All we need to do is relax the tension before suffering arises.

That puts us on the path to true freedom.