



## HEDONIC HOTSPOTS, HEDONIC POTHOLES: VEDANĀ REVISITED

Akincano M. Weber

Buddhist Studies, Bodhi College, Totnes, UK

### ABSTRACT

For the last 100 years *vedanā* – a key Buddhist term referring to a process instrumental in the arising of desire (*tanhā*), grasping and identification (*upādāna*) – has been mostly translated as ‘feeling’ or as ‘sensation’. But is it really either? Informed by a review of the concept’s use in the Pali Suttas, the paper attempts to re-trace the term’s meaning in early Buddhist Psychology. The established renditions of ‘sensation’ or ‘feeling’ for *vedanā* are deemed misleading; it is suggested that they be replaced by the unwieldy but more appropriate notion of ‘hedonic tone’. After a brief appraisal of occidental attempts to chart hedonic territory, beginning with the Greeks, the work of early psychologists up to recent neuropsychological research, the insights of an ancient contemplative tradition are found to look remarkably fresh and to be particularly pertinent for a deeper understanding of aspects as different as attentional governance, mindfulness training, addiction and ultimately a vision of happiness beyond gratification or avoidance.

**Abbreviations for Pali Sources:** Vin: Vinaya (Engl. transl. as *Books of Discipline*); D: Dīgha Nikāya (Engl. transl. as *Long Discourses*); M: Majjhima Nikāya (Engl. transl. as *Middle Length Discourses*); S: Saṃyutta Nikāya (Engl. transl. as *Connected Discourses*); A: Aṅguttara Nikāya (Engl. transl. as *Numerical Discourses*); Dh: Dhammapadam (Engl. transl. as *Dhammapadam*); Sn: Suttaṇipāṭa (Engl. transl. as *Suttaṇipata*); Vbh: Vibhaṅga (Engl. transl. as *Book of Analysis*); Dh: Dhammasaṅgaṇī (Engl. transl. as *Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics*); Ps: Papañcasūdanī (not translated); Vism: Visuddhimagga (Engl. transl. as *Path of Purification*); As: Atthasālinī (Engl. transl. as *The Expositor*)

Whatever is felt is included in suffering (S iv 216/SN 36.11)

### Introduction

This paper attempts to re-trace the allegedly obvious meaning of the term *vedanā* in early Buddhist Psychology – a concept for which Western Buddhists and Indologists still struggle to find appropriate terminology. Given the centrality

of the term in Buddhist Psychology, an appraisal of *vedanā* is desirable; in current Buddhist and secular mindfulness worlds alike the teaching on *vedanā* is not given the place it takes up in the old contemplative psychology of the suttas. As the discourse between Buddhist concepts and their Western interpreters goes into its next round – informed by the spread of meditation, better translations, a growing understanding of the Indian and Occidental history of ideas, the input of 150 years of psychology and the recent interest of cognitive and affective sciences' in meditation – it seems worthwhile to take a fresh look at *vedanā* and what learning applicable to today can be gleaned from the insights of an ancient contemplative tradition.

## A little history

Back in 1844, the eminent French Sanskritist Eugène Burnouf<sup>1</sup> – a man who's massive 'Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme Indien' was read by Schelling, by Schopenhauer, by Emerson, Thoreau and Nietzsche – kindly quotes his German Indologist colleague Goldstücker, as explaining the term *vedanā* 'as kind of irritability ... only in a larger sense'.

For almost 150 years, Western Pali dictionaries and lexicographers have laconically suggested that the meaning of *vedanā* is either 'sensation' or 'feeling' – terms that (a) are neither exactly synonymous and (b) of which the latter is as notoriously vague as it is popular.

Based on both textual inquiry and practical contemplative exercise, my understanding is that both 'sensation' and 'feeling' are problematic translations and that neither of them does justice to what is meant by *vedanā* in Early Buddhist teachings. While we can ascertain fairly exactly what the term means in its Indian Buddhist context, we seem to lack an equivalent for it in West European languages. It is therefore suggested that we naturalise the Indian concept into our thinking – rather than continuing to wrestle it into one of its current, yet unsatisfactory renderings.

Encountering the above-mentioned translations of *vedanā* in meditative teachings we are left with a number of questions: 'If' *vedanā* is 'sensation' or 'feeling' – which of the two is more accurate? And indeed: what *precisely* do we mean in our own language when using either of these two terms? Could *vedanā* mean something else altogether? Are there correlates for what Buddhist texts call *vedanā* in Western thinking, and in Western Psychology?

'Feeling', the English term most translators<sup>2</sup> have opted for when rendering *vedanā*, is a notorious semantic contortionist – morphing according to context into a bewildering display of denotations; these range from 'mood', 'sentiency', 'subjective emotion', 'affect', 'perception', 'conscious state', to 'sense of touch', 'impression' and occasionally even to 'thought'; any of these meanings can be intended by the term 'feeling', as is borne out by examples easily found. Any translator, unless they explicitly narrow the term down to a singular meaning,

must in view of the sheer range of its applications consider ‘feeling’ as one of the worst possible candidates for rendering the Buddhist technical *vedanā* since all the different English meanings will invariably be conflated with the Buddhist concept the term purports to translate.

In view of *vedanā*’s use in the Pali texts, the term ‘sensation’ is similarly problematic. If a sensation is ‘an impression produced by impulses conveyed by an afferent nerve to the sensorium’ – so a standard medical definition<sup>3</sup> – then such an impulse is rather the precursor of *vedanā*, rather than *vedanā* proper, and would, in Buddhist terms, be part of the process called ‘contact’ (*phassa*) or, more precisely, ‘a tangible’ (*phoṭṭhabba*). While the contemplation of bodily tangibles and somatic experiences is central to the practice of establishing mindfulness, such practices have their own place in the *Satipaṭṭhāna* schema under the heading of contemplation of body (*kāyanānupassanā*), from which the contemplation of feeling-tones (*vedanā*) are explicitly differentiated.

Likewise misleading seems the equation of *vedanā* with feeling’s close relative ‘emotion’ – a term without exact equivalent in early Buddhist psychology. Emotions invariably involve affective and volitional aspects. The closest we come to this Western notion in Buddhist Teachings is the third dimension of *Satipaṭṭhāna*-exercises, the ‘contemplation of mind-states’ (*cittānupassanā*), which indeed covers conative and affective dimensions of experience. But then, these too, are explicitly distinguished from the practice of contemplating *vedanā*.

Given the old texts’ recurrent suggestion to understand *vedanā* as a single mental evaluative process forming three possible – and mutually exclusive – reactions to mental and physical stimuli as either pleasant, unpleasant or neither-unpleasant-nor-pleasant, I render *vedanā* as ‘feeling-tone’ or, preferably, as ‘hedonic tone’, from Greek *hēdonē* for ‘pleasure’. This latter term is a psychological concept, in English usage since the late 19th<sup>4</sup> century and apparently introduced as a translation of Wilhelm Wundt’s notion of ‘*Gefühlston*’, a concept he later elaborated into his three-tiered affect theory that still underpins many of today’s affect theories. The Oxford English Dictionary, identifies hedonic tone as ‘the degree of pleasantness or unpleasantness associated with an experience or state ... that can range from extreme pleasure to extreme pain.’<sup>5</sup> In choosing this term I am following a number of scholars who have used the notion of ‘hedonic tone’ since the early ‘60s of the last century to render *vedanā*, e.g. K.N. Jayatilleke, Padma De Silva and Ross Reat; many others have followed them in more recent years.<sup>6</sup>

Admittedly, the prevalent translations of ‘feeling’ or ‘sensation’ would be a lot less awkward than ‘hedonic tone’. However, they are not just misleading – one construing *vedanā* into the affective tone of an experience (e.g. ‘feeling’, ‘emotion’); the other by identifying it with a felt somatic quality (‘sensation’): both, therefore, notably miss *vedanā*’s crucial piece – the mind’s evaluative response to experience on an axis of pleasure, indifference and displeasure.

In the following I will try to illustrate the meaning and function of the term *vedanā* in early Buddhist teachings by sampling a few key Pali *sutta* passages, hoping to clarify and to contextualise *vedanā* in psychological terms. I will stick mostly to *sutta* material to avoid getting bogged down in later doctrinal developments.

## Vedanā in the Pāli texts

The term *vedanā* is used widely in the Pali texts: in the Monastic Discipline, throughout the five Nikāyas and also in the books of the Abhidhamma. Emerging contextually from its use across this range of texts is a key notion of mind, naming a decisive dimension in human experience sometimes referred to as the *flavour*, the *taste*<sup>7</sup> or the *tone* of any experiential event. The crucial ingredient of this flavour is its *hedonic tone* – its degree of pleasure, displeasure or indifference. The *suttas* leave no doubt that *vedanā* is of greatest import to human beings; one passage, recurring several times in the *Numerical Discourses* (*Aṅguttara Nikāya*), plainly states that ‘all things converge on hedonic tone’.<sup>8</sup>

*Vedanā* is a spectrum term, ranging from pain (*dukkha*) to pleasure (*sukha*) and across a middle zone of hedonic indifference (*adukkhamasukha*). *Vedanā* – in each of its three shades – is an entirely subjective quality of consciousness and not the objective property of an event in experience; its respective hedonic tone hinges on a range of other subjective factors (intensity of stimulus, context of experience, availability and receptivity of mind, degree of attentional focus, etc.) thus, there are strictly speaking, no objective *vedanā*. For this reason I prefer rendering the third *vedanā* – the unwieldy ‘neither unpleasant-nor-pleasant’ – as the unequivocally subjective *indifferent* rather than as the occasionally used ‘neutral’; the latter seems more easily misconstrued into an objective property of an experienced thing rather than the subjective response to it.

Doctrinally, the ancient Pali *suttas* are quite clear about the role of *vedanā* and place it consistently in a number of well-known models Buddhist Psychology employs to describe the mind, namely as:

- a *nāma*-factor and one of the five universal functions of mind present at any moment of experience,<sup>9</sup>
- a link in the most common form of the chain of dependent arising (*paṭi-casamuppāda*), invariably between ‘contact’ and ‘desire’,<sup>10</sup>
- the second of the five aspects of human experience (*khandha*),<sup>11</sup>
- the second establishment of mindfulness in the *satipaṭṭhāna*-exercises<sup>12</sup>
- the second step in the sequence outlining the perceptual process.<sup>13</sup>

The noun *vedanā* is, derived from the root  $\sqrt{\text{vid}}$  and the verb *vedeti* a causative form meaning ‘to make known’, ‘to make felt’ or, more broadly, ‘to experience’. As an abstract noun *vedanā* is based on the past-participle *vedita* ‘made known, brought to understanding’. Thus, *vedanā* could literally be translated ‘a known’ – It

is through *vedanā* that this world is 'known.' And what is known of our world in this way is quite specifically the hedonic realm: the dimension and degree of pleasure and pain, the comfort and discomfort in our experience of this world<sup>14</sup>.

The *Nikāyas* present different descriptions of *vedanā* – and thus some challenges for our understanding. The most common definition of the term in the discourses identifies three kinds: as either pleasant feeling-tone (*sukha-v*), as unpleasant feeling-tone (*dukkha-v*) or as neither: 'not-unpleasant-not-pleasant' (*adukkhamasukha-v*).<sup>15</sup>

Another description found throughout the *Khandha Saṃyutta* identifies six kinds of *vedanā*<sup>16</sup> based on the 'six sense-organs' (*saḷāyatana*): hedonic tones arising from visual stimuli, from auditory, gustatory, olfactory, tactile & interoceptive and lastly from 'mental' stimuli (*manas*).<sup>17</sup> This description, too, appears immediately plausible since, (a) it confirms the connection of hedonic tones to the preceding stage of contact (*phassa*) in the scheme of dependent arising, and (b) likewise corroborates *vedanā*'s ubiquitousness in connection to sensory experience as a *nāma*-factor and universal mind-function.

In the schema of the five aggregates (*khandha*) *vedanā* occupy a category of their own. The aggregates, more simply 'aspects of experience', are an early Buddhist device to refer to what we might call an individual's experience. They are epistemological rather than ontological in nature and comprise the totality of an individual's inner and outer world; the major thrust of this exposition is an understanding of and the reconciliation with the insubstantiality and impersonal nature of experience. In the scheme of these five aggregates *vedanā* is grouped as one of the four *arūpa-khandha*<sup>18</sup>, the 'formless aggregates' connected to mental experience.

Although the *Cūḷavedalla Sutta* lists *vedanā* as 'mental' and 'bound to mind' and on that account as a *cittasaṅkhārā*,<sup>19</sup> a 'mental formation', *vedanā* is explicitly not part of *saṅkhārākkhandha*, the aggregate of mental formations. Instead, *vedanā* occupy a category of their own in the five aggregates, namely the aggregate of feeling-tone. Whilst at a first glance this may appear puzzling, closer inspection reveals that this makes good sense. *Vedanā* as the hedonic dimension of experience is neither intentional nor volitional – we cannot choose to have this or that *vedanā*, in fact we cannot choose to have or not have *vedanā* at all. And while all *dhammas* in the aggregate of *saṅkhārā* are characterised by being volitional, *vedanā*, precisely, is not.

*Vedanā*, as a response to sense-contact, is an evaluative process; the three possible feeling-tones comprising the single aggregate of *vedanā*, whilst quite different from each other, combine to form a single response to sensory experience. There is only one kind of evaluating process in this: Evaluating something as 'pleasant' is not a different kind of evaluation from evaluating something as 'unpleasant' or 'indifferent'. To experience any sense-contact as pleasant, unpleasant or neither-nor is not to have different kinds of sense-contact but one evaluation thereof. This explains why feeling-tone in the schema of the

five aggregates occupies their own place. Interestingly, the *vedanākkhandha* is placed between the body and the last three mental aggregates – likely an indication of the significance *vedanā* has in connecting bodily and mental aspects in human experience. It could be said that such a connection works insofar as whatever takes place in the body is felt by the mind in the form of *vedanā* and, conversely, the mind state's hedonic flavour is translated into embodied expression.

As mentioned the *Cūḷavedalla Sutta* defines feeling-tones as 'mental' and 'connected to the mind'.<sup>20</sup> Correspondingly, in the exposition of *nāma-rūpa*, they are part of *nāma* and understood as cognitive phenomena. However, the discourses acknowledge elsewhere that while hedonic tones are *mental responses* to stimuli these latter can be both mental *and* bodily (*kāyika*) events:

Whatever, friend Visākha, is a bodily or mentally pleasant and agreeable feeling-tone: that is a pleasant feeling-tone. Whatever, friend Visākha, is a bodily or mentally unpleasant and disagreeable feeling-tone: that is an unpleasant feeling-tone. Whatever, friend Visākha, is a bodily or mentally neither agreeable nor disagreeable feeling-tone: that is a neither-unpleasant-nor-pleasant feeling-tone. (M 44.22/M i 302-3)

Yet it seems counter-intuitive to understand feeling-tones as entirely mental and cognitive (*nāma*) functions. What about the visceral *vedanā* of waking up at night with the fire-alarm going, the body already tense and with goose-bumps – yet the mind still trying to find a cognitive grasp and situational understanding of what's happening? Common sense tells us that both painful and pleasant feeling-tones intimately involve the body and the mind. It is interesting that the mental and bodily distinction in the Pali *suttas* is not as dualistic as may appear at a first glance. An example of this can be seen in the similes for the four absorptions (*jhāna*) – positively most mental states – where bodily, indeed sensuous analogies for the experience of pleasure (*sukha*) are used: the practitioner is encouraged in the process 'to leave no part of their body un-pervaded with the pleasure of their happiness'. Even in the fourth *jhāna*, where *sukhavedanā* has subsided entirely, the practitioner is still described with a somatic analogy as 'sitting and pervading all of her body with pure bright mind'.

The famous simile of the two darts<sup>21</sup> offers an interesting clarification regarding the mental and bodily distinction: An uninstructed person, identified as at the beginning stages of practice (*assutava puthujjana*), is experiencing a physical pain; this is likened to a dart. Reacting to this physical pain they compound their bodily suffering with mental anguish and aversion likened to a second dart, thus they experience both physical and mental forms of suffering and feel as if they were hit twice. A learned and realised practitioner (*sutava ariyasāvaka*) also experiences the initial dart of physical pain; yet they don't compound their bodily pain with the mental dimension of suffering – the lamenting, anguishing and aversion of the beginner – and are thereby spared the second dart.

The interesting part here lies more in the distinction of a primary and a secondary type of *dukkha* rather than the physical and mental nature of the *vedanā*; after all, the primary *dukkha* could as easily have been of a mental nature – we react with lamenting, aversion and anguish as much to mental events in experience as we do to physical ones. And why we often can't change the primary unpleasant bodily or mental 'what' of an experience – an injury, an illness, a slight, a loss, a grief – we can develop tremendous freedom and maturity in the 'how' we meet and hold that primary pain in our secondary, contextualised, response to it.

That *vedanā* are both bodily and mental is borne out by a further distinction of the term into five categories whereby pleasant or unpleasant *vedanā* based on mental (*cetasika*) stimuli – in distinction to bodily (*kāyika*) forms of pleasure (*sukha*- and *dukkha-vedanā*) – are sometimes referred to as *somanassa*, 'mental ease' and *domanassa*, 'mental discomfort', respectively<sup>22</sup>:

And what, practitioners, is the pleasure faculty? Whatever bodily pleasure there is, whatever bodily comfort, the pleasant comfortable feeling born of body-contact: this, bhikkhus, is called the pleasure faculty.

And what, practitioners, is the pain faculty? Whatever bodily pain there is, whatever bodily discomfort, the painful uncomfortable feeling born of body-contact: this, bhikkhus, is called the pain faculty.

And what, practitioners, is the ease faculty? Whatever mental pleasure there is, whatever mental comfort, the pleasant comfortable feeling born of mind-contact: this, bhikkhus, is called the ease faculty.

And what, practitioners, is the displeasure faculty? Whatever mental pain there is, whatever mental discomfort, the painful uncomfortable feeling born of mind-contact: this, bhikkhus, is called the displeasure faculty.

And what, practitioners, is the indifference faculty? Whatever feeling there is, whether bodily or mental, that is neither comfortable nor uncomfortable: this, bhikkhus, is called the indifference faculty. (S 48.36/S v 209)

Here the last category called 'indifference faculty' (*upekkhindriya*) consists of the above identified 'neither-nor' hedonic tone (*adukkhamasukhā* v.); it should not be mistaken with the lofty notion of equipoise or equanimity that uses the same Pali term *upekkhā* – e.g. in the teaching of the *brahmavihāra* or, as occurring in the 3rd and the 4th *jhāna*. While this latter is an invariably ethical quality and considered part of the aggregate of formations (*saṅkhāra-khandha*)<sup>23</sup> the *upekkhindriya*, we are concerned with here, refers to a hedonically indifferent *vedanā*, that is neither particularly lofty nor intrinsically wholesome and, in distinction to the former, part of *vedanā-khandha*.<sup>24</sup> The above *sutta* passage also testifies to indifferent *vedanā* on the basis of bodily stimuli – contrary to the later Abhidhamma tradition that maintains somatic stimuli to be either producing pleasant or unpleasant but no indifferent *vedanā*.

In the *Cūḷavedalla Sutta* mentioned above the nun Dhammadinnā continues to explain to her former husband Visākha what *precisely* constitutes the pleasantness or unpleasantness of the respective *vedanā*:



Pleasant feeling-tone, friend Visākha, is pleasant when it persists, unpleasant when it changes, unpleasant feeling-tone is unpleasant when it persists, pleasant when it changes, neither-unpleasant-nor-pleasant feeling-tone is pleasant when known, and unpleasant when unknown.

In view of Dhammadinna's initial statement that there are three types of hedonic tone, here, somewhat surprisingly, the third category of neither-unpleasant-nor-pleasant seems entirely resolved into one of the first two: when touched by 'knowing' (*ñāṇa*), neither-nor *vedanā* becomes either 'pleasant' or, when such knowing is absent, 'unpleasant'. (The commentary glosses knowing as 'recognition'.)

In regard to the same matter the carpenter Pañcakaṅga and the monk Udāyin argue in the *Bahuvēdāniya Sutta*<sup>25</sup> about the correct number of *vedanā* taught in the Buddha's Dharma – the latter claiming three forms (pleasant, unpleasant and neither-nor), the former insisting on only two forms (pleasant and unpleasant) declaring 'this neither-unpleasant-nor-pleasant feeling-tone has been stated by the Blessed One as a peaceful and sublime kind of pleasure' – i.e. resolving the neither-nor hedonic tone in a similar way as in Dhammadinnā's exposition cited above. The two disagreeing practitioners each fail to convince one another, and Ānanda, overhearing their conversation, later asks the Buddha about the correct number of *vedanā* in his teaching. There he learns that both of the disputants are right, and that indeed 'in different presentations (*pariyāyena*) the Dhamma has been shown in different ways'. This is followed by the Buddha's acknowledgement that beside the twofold and threefold exposition the two protagonists above have put forth an exposition of the 5, 6, 18, 36 and 108 kinds of *vedanā* that have been taught. Ānanda is also told 'that people unwilling to concede, allow and accept what is well stated and well spoken by others' are likely to take 'to quarrelling, brawling and disputing'. The *Sutta* moves on to other topics but later seems to tacitly concede the carpenter Pañcakaṅga's point, when – talking about the 4th *jhāna* – it refers to neither-unpleasant-nor-pleasant feeling-tone as 'a pleasure more sublime than the previous pleasure'.

The commentary on the *Sutta* appears undecided in the matter of Pañcakaṅga's and Udāyin's contention: referring to the presentation of *vedanā* in 'two kinds' it glosses with 'bodily and mental' rather than siding with Pañcakaṅga's 'pleasant and unpleasant',<sup>26</sup> but later points out that the *Sutta*, in seeing the neither-nor *vedanā* in the fourth absorption as 'sublime pleasure', does indeed support Pañcakaṅga's point.<sup>27</sup>

The above passages from the *Cūḷavedalla* and *Bahuvēdāniya Suttas* seem to suggest that the third type of *vedanā* is not a separate class distinct of the two former types but better understood as a 'zone of indifference', a sort of hedonic no-man's-land on the spectrum of displeasure to pleasure – rather than a distinct 'neutral point'. Occasionally in translation, this third type of *adukkhamasukha vedanā* seems to take on a life of its own and, reified into an entirely 'neutral' category, as if removed from the binary axis of pleasure and displeasure, and



is sometimes even seen as unilaterally laudable<sup>28</sup> – when indeed the texts only support what they state: a hedonic event that is experienced as neither pleasant nor unpleasant, and, outside of a *jhāna*-context, mostly associated with the underlying tendency of not-knowing.<sup>29</sup> Looking for hedonic tones in experience, empirical intuition tells us that in the ‘pleasant’ and in the ‘unpleasant’ category, experiences can occur in differing degrees of intensity. If the third type of *vedanā* was to be an entirely separate category one would expect the same to hold true for it as well, yet it seems hard to find an experiential correlate for, say an ‘intensely neutral’ or even a ‘gently neutral’ experience.

Hedonic indifference is generally due to a number of factors: lack of attentional availability, weakness in the intensity of the stimulus or absence of receptivity. Any of these factors can quickly shift, as indicated by the *Cūḷavedalla*’s passage on ‘knowing,’ and thereby move the event out of the zone of hedonic indifference into the subtly pleasant range, or, lacking such recognition, experiencing it as unpleasant. Examples, easily verified in contemplative practice, would be: an increase in recognition of an indifferent body tone fosters attention, this is followed by a lowering of the threshold intensity needed for the stimulus to become more clearly acknowledged, this latter, now consciously noticed, is suddenly perceived as pleasant experience. Conversely, the mind’s availability and receptivity may diminish, and an experiential event of hitherto indifferent tone turns noticeably unpleasant.

The *Bahuvēdaniya* makes another interesting point between pleasure (*sukha*) and the activity of feeling/ experiencing (*vedeti*): after going through a sequence of increasingly sublime forms of pleasures connected with immaterial absorptions it ends with the state of complete ‘cessation of perception and feeling’ (*saññāvedayita nirodha*) which is then happily described as the ‘loftiest and most sublime form of pleasure’ – when one would expect such pleasure to be absent after the falling away of feeling. The *Sutta* ends with the Buddha’s anticipation of reproaches by ‘wanderers of other persuasion’ that his last statement would amount to a contradiction in terms – to which his pre-emptive response is this:

When they say so, they are to be told, ‘It’s not the case, friends, that the Blessed One describes only pleasant feeling as included under pleasure. Wherever pleasure is found, in whatever terms, the Blessed One describes it as pleasure.’

In a very similar vein to *saññāvedayita nirodha* above, Nibbāna is also described elsewhere as *parama sukha*, as ‘the greatest ease’.<sup>30</sup> It is the topic of another brief and enigmatic exchange with the monk Udāyin. The elder Sāriputta exclaims in Udāyin’s presence: ‘Nibbāna is pleasure, friend; Nibbāna is pleasure, indeed!’ The incredulous Udāyi responds: ‘How can there be pleasure when there is nothing felt?’ To which Sāriputta replies: ‘Just this is pleasure (*sukhaṃ*), friend, that therein there is nothing felt (*vedayitaṃ*).’<sup>31</sup> As the Buddha in the *Bahuvēdaniya Sutta* above, here Sāriputta explains a sequence of increasingly refined meditative experiences that each, from a subsequent perspective, are, despite all subtlety, still forms of affliction. We are left with a notion of pleasure (*sukha*) that goes

beyond that of a hedonic tone (*vedanā*) that is, even in the sequence of its increasingly subtler forms, still indeed the 'kind of irritability' that Goldstücker intuited it to be 170 years ago.

A further interesting perspective on *vedanā* is found in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas*, where in the section on feeling-tone the contemplative exercise to distinguish *sāmisa*- and *nirāmisa-vedanā* is suggested. *Sāmisa* means – 'fleshly, raw, untreated'; it is used both literally and figuratively. Literally, the term means 'sensory', as referring to experiences on the basis of the five physical senses of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and tactile sensing and the pleasure or displeasure obtained from these. At S iv 236 *sāmisa* is explicitly identified with experiences of the *pañca kāmaguṇa*, the 'five cords of sensuality'. These experiences are then contrasted with 'non-sensory' (*nirāmisa*) ones, consisting of the pleasure obtained from meditative absorptions. Figuratively, *sāmisa* also can mean 'sensual' (lit. 'bait', 'material gain'). The *Dhammadāyada Sutta*<sup>32</sup> contrasts this in a figurative sense to *nirāmisa*, a non-sensual and non-material attitude focused on the Dharma. The pair of terms are often rendered, somewhat confusingly, as 'worldly' and 'unworldly' whereby the literal meaning of 'sensory' vs. 'non-sensory' is blurred.<sup>33</sup>

The *Sīvaka Sutta* makes clear that feeling-tones experienced (*vedayitāni*) are not to be understood in deterministic ways, namely, that the view put to the Buddha by the wanderer *Moliyasīvaka*, 'Whatever a person experiences whether it be pleasant or painful or neither, all that is caused by what was done in the past' is inaccurate. The Buddha responds, initially giving seven different reasons for the arising of *vedanā* that have little to do with one's past actions: (1) bile; (2) phlegm; (3) wind; (4) the union of bodily humours; (5) changes in the season; (6) unpleasant surprises; (7) sudden attacks from without. Only the eighth reason acknowledges 'ripeness of one's actions' (*kammavipāka*) as the possible condition for experiencing a particular *vedanā*.<sup>34</sup>

The pragmatic attitude of early Buddhist teaching in regard to *vedanā* is evident from the *Kiṭṭagiri Sutta* where the Buddha has the difficult job of convincing a number of recalcitrant monks to the recently established practice of not eating in the evening. In the course of their exchange it becomes obvious that whether feeling-tones are experienced as pleasant, unpleasant or indifferent does not intrinsically determine that subsequently arising intentions and ensuing actions are karmically wholesome or unwholesome:

'Practitioners, have you understood me to teach the Dhamma in such a manner: "Whatever a person experiences, whether pleasant, painful or indifferent, unwholesome qualities diminish in him and wholesome qualities increase"? – 'No, lord.'

'And haven't you understood me to teach the Dhamma in this way: "When someone experiences a specific kind of pleasant feeling-tone, unwholesome qualities increase and wholesome qualities diminish; but when someone experiences another kind of pleasant feeling-tone, unwholesome qualities diminish and wholesome qualities increase. When someone experiences a specific kind of painful feeling-tone, unwholesome qualities increase and wholesome qualities diminish; but

when someone experiences another kind of painful feeling-tone, unwholesome qualities diminish and wholesome qualities increase. When someone experiences a specific kind of indifferent feeling-tone, unwholesome qualities increase and wholesome qualities diminish; but when someone experiences another kind of indifferent feeling-tone, unwholesome qualities diminish and wholesome states increase”?’ – ‘Yes, lord.’ (M i 475/M 70.6-7)

The teacher then proceeds to explain why, on the basis of his own understanding and experience, he suggests giving up (*pajahati*) pursuits leading to specific forms of pleasant, unpleasant and indifferent types of hedonic tone; while at the same time suggesting to take up (*upasampajjati*) the pursuit of other pleasant, unpleasant and even indifferent forms of hedonic tone. These suggestions are entirely based on the pragmatic value and the skilfulness or unskilfulness of qualities arising in the mind subsequent to the experience of *vedanā*. Thus, rather than being concerned with the hedonic dimension itself the Buddha is interested in relating to it under the perspective of ethical action and salvific usefulness.

While we can’t choose to intentionally ‘have’ or ‘not have’ *vedanā* we instinctively and often unconsciously seek and avoid pleasant, unpleasant and indifferent feeling-tones. The *Kiṭṭāgiri Sutta* acknowledges this and the text encourages us to pursue – or put up with – anything on the spectrum of pleasant to unpleasant including the indifferent if it brings about liberative qualities in the mind; if it doesn’t, the recommendation is to give up such a pursuit irrespective of its pleasant, unpleasant or indifferent nature.

### Similies for *Vedanā* in the discourses

Beyond interpretative efforts based on textual inquiry by assembling expositions, squaring lists, identifying definitions and tracing contextualised usage the scriptures also offer a number of similes that help to illustrate the experiential quality of *vedanā*. Many of these images are from the section dedicated to *vedanā* in the *Connected Discourses*.<sup>35</sup>

Pleasant, unpleasant and neither-nor feeling-tones arising in the body are likened to the guests of a guest house where people come from the east, west, north and south to lodge; the guests are from the different social classes – nobles, brahmins, merchants and workers come and lodge there.<sup>36</sup> Feeling-tones have something coincidental and adventitious, their coming and going is often beyond our say or authority.

A similar image likens feeling-tones to various winds that blow in the sky: coming from all directions, some of them hot or cold, dusty or without dust, gentle or strong; the same accidental nature holds true for pleasant, unpleasant and neither-nor feeling-tones.<sup>37</sup> As in the image of guests, the message is that we should not contend or get agitated by what is beyond our control and instead aspire to clear comprehension of the nature of feeling-tones.

In another image the aggregate of feeling-tones (*vedanākkhandha*) is compared to a bursting bubble on the surface of water when it is raining: any closer inspection would reveal the bubbles to be insubstantial, hollow and short-lived.<sup>38</sup> In line with much of the focus in the exposition on the *khandha*-s, that elucidate the lack of a core essence at the heart of human experience, this image here illustrates the transience and insubstantiality of feeling-tones.

The conditional nature of feeling-tones, their production through sensory stimuli is pointed out by the conjunction and friction of two fire-sticks used to produce heat: the analogy describes the genesis of both fire and feeling-tone dependent on contact: when the sticks are separated and laid aside the heat subsides; the same holds true for feeling-tones. The sub-commentary explains that the lower stick is like the sense-base, the upper like a sense-object, contact corresponds to the friction between both and the heat is like the feeling-tone. In the same way heat is produced by fire-sticks feeling-tone is dependently arisen and contingent on contact.<sup>39</sup>

The transient nature of feeling-tones is also shown in the image of the oil-lamp where the oil is seen as impermanent and subject to change, as also is the wick, with the same holding true for the flame and the radiance. To claim that on the basis of impermanent materials and an impermanent flame a permanent radiance could be produced is untenable: with the exhaustion of the conditions the cessation of the consequence is inevitable. The *Sutta* uses a second image to make its point: in the same way as the shadow of a tree has as its conditions the root, the trunk, the branches and the leafage, likewise feeling-tones have contact and sense-objects as conditions and are therefore as ephemeral as these are.<sup>40</sup>

Painful feeling-tone is likened to a bottomless abyss for an uninstructed ordinary being: upon experiencing bodily *dukkha-vedanā*, he laments, grieves, is distraught and 'is one that has not risen up from the abyss, has not gained a foothold'. However, the instructed noble disciple, upon being touched by painful bodily experiences 'has risen from the bottomless abyss and has gained a foothold'.<sup>41</sup>

Grasping at and identification with feeling-tones in terms of a self is compared to a man being carried away by a powerful mountain stream and trying to rescue himself by grasping at various types of overhanging grass, reeds and trees to save himself – to no avail, as they all break off and he is being helplessly swept away down-stream.<sup>42</sup> The stark image conveys the futility of attempts to find a foundation for any notion of an unchanging self within the transient feeling-tones.

The well-known *Sutta* called 'The Dart' with its poignant image of being hit by a first and then a second arrow, distinguishing bodily and mental, i.e. primary and secondary types of *dukkha-vedanā* – has already been spoken of in a previous section above.<sup>43</sup> It opens perspectives on how unavoidable forms of discomfort and adversity need not be followed by secondary reactivity that makes up so much of our psychological suffering.

## Preliminary summary

Given that *vedanā* are one of five universal factors of mind<sup>44</sup> – present in consciousness with any experiential event – the implication is that they constitute three possible (and mutually exclusive) hedonic reactions to all our sensory, affective and cognitive experience.

If ‘contact’ (*phassa*), the precursor of *vedanā* in both dependent arising and the perceptual sequence, and is the mere impingement of a stimulus in the sensory field, *vedanā* differs from it as it is evaluative and has the specific subjective flavour of being agreeable, disagreeable or neither. In the light of its etymology and placement in Buddhist models of mind, *vedanā* can be easily understood as the pleasure/displeasure aspect in the act of knowing. If perception (*saññā*) provides a cognitive framing in the process of knowing, *vedanā* furnishes the hedonic frame for knowing a particular experience – thus providing this experience with a specific and subjective flavour or taste.<sup>45</sup>

What emerges from the different expositions on *vedanā* in the similes and passages examined above is that hedonic tone in the *Suttas* is seen as central in human experience: it is a place where somatic, cognitive, affective and conative dimensions intersect – or, as the *Suttas* have it, ‘converge’.<sup>46</sup> The hedonic ‘flavour’ of our experience in turn is described as having profound effects on mind-states – e.g. the sense of subjective well-being and a degree of ease or unease, both instrumental in our capacity for mental calm and stability. These latter being crucial for insight, *vedanā* has a direct impact on the extent of our meta-reflective perspective, the resulting transformative understanding and our sense of empathetic connectedness with others. The hedonic flavour also plays a crucial part in our behaviour – particularly in forming seeking and avoidance patterns – and governs much of our volitional functions, e.g. motivation, desire, ambition but particularly like and dislike. According to the *Suttas*, the arising of *vedanā* is, strictly speaking, *not* intentional and therefore outside of the domain of ethics. However: Since *vedanā* exert considerable influence on what happens in any ensuing response to a particular experience – i.e. attentionally, intentionally and affectively – they have the power to shape behaviour in ethically wholesome or unwholesome ways and their repercussions in the fields of motivation and action are so immediate that relating consciously, ethically and in psychologically realistic ways to *vedanā* becomes part of the grand ethicising project that is one of the major thrusts of Early Buddhist teaching.

## Western takes on *Vedanā*

*Vedanā* as the axis between pain and pleasure and the impact of hedonic experience on well-being and behaviour has not gone unnoticed in the Western world. Aristippus of Cyrene and Epicurus in the ancient world and Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill in the modern world are token voices on the subject. If Bentham

as says: 'Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain and pleasure*;<sup>47</sup> he practically echoes Buddhist language – the sovereign masters evoke the notion of '*indriya*' – the Sanskrit and Pāli term for 'sense-organ' – a dominant, governing force, a correlate to the Greek *dynamis*, 'a power by which we do as we do'.<sup>48</sup> It is interesting that the founders of the Cyrenaic and the Epicurian schools – not entirely unlike the Buddhist perspective on the ethical ramifications of pleasure and displeasure – saw the pursuit of 'maximising happiness' to be primarily an ethical question.<sup>49</sup> Aristotle, between Aristippus and Epicurus, saw in his *Nicomachian Ethics* well-being and happiness as requiring at least two crucial ingredients: pleasure and positive affect (*hedonia*) and a sense of 'flourishing', a purposeful and meaningful engagement in life (*eudaimonia*). Many thinkers through the ages have followed this view.

Other obvious Western references to the territory of *vedanā* are found in the study of affect and emotion, formulated initially by Kant and in the late 19th century more explicitly by Fechner and particularly by Wundt in his three-dimensional model of affects.<sup>50</sup> This model shows 'simple feelings' developing along three axes: a horizontal one of pleasure/displeasure, a vertical one of arousal/pacification and, diagonally positioned, along a third axis of tension/release; all of the axes intersect at what Wundt identified as the 'the zero-point or point of indifference'.<sup>51</sup> The model has undergone a few updates but basically still underpins most of the current theories of positive and negative valence in the study of affects. Wundt identified the practical difficulties of separating hedonic tones from emotional feeling responses yet acknowledged that 'feelings' can develop along all three, only two or even just one of these axes.

Another obvious connection point with Buddhist *vedanā* is Freud and his notion of a 'pleasure principle'. Here, too, we find a clear acknowledgement of the instinctual seeking of pleasure and avoidance of pain that lies at the root of much of our behaviour, ranging from the biological to the psychological.

Since the 1920s, beginning first in neurophysiology and later leading to some of psychiatry's more grisly experiments in the '40s and '50s, involving the implantation of electrodes into the brains of animals and humans, many studies have been undertaken to better understand the locus of particular brain functions and, amongst many other things, the biological basis and the physiological seat of pleasure.<sup>52</sup> Places subsequently identified as 'pleasure centres' by these earlier experiments were eagerly stimulated (initially by researchers, later often by the patients themselves) with electric impulses. However, after 50 years of research on brain-stimulation, such interventions did not bring the expected results – according to a contemporary assessment from two experts in the field: '... the discovery of the brain's alleged pleasure centre has not led to any breakthroughs in the treatment of mental illness'.<sup>53</sup> Worse, subsequent researchers found that the stimulation of these structures deemed pleasure centres 'to not actually produce pleasure at all' and to 'merely precipitate craving and hence the manic drive to self-stimulate'.<sup>54</sup>

A number of fascinating aspects of brain research in respect to happiness and mental and physical well-being have been made – amongst the more surprising ones is an endogenously produced cannabinoid, a fatty acid neurotransmitter called *anandamide* (from the Pali/Sanskrit word *ānanda*, meaning ‘joy, bliss, delight’ and amide) which may explain the substantial number of cannabinoid receptors in the central and peripheral nervous systems.

In regard to naturalising the Buddhist psychological concept of *vedanā*, even more promising seems the relatively recent discovery of ‘hedonic hotspots’ that magnify the experience of pleasure by increasing the *liking*-aspect of an experience. These hotspots differ from the old reward loops and pleasure centres previously thought to be responsible for feeling good, now thought to be more associated with desire rather than pleasure and enjoyment.<sup>55</sup>

Such separation of (a) pleasant hedonic tone, (b) the liking of an experience, event or state, (c) the craving for the repetition of that experience, leading to (d) actions deemed promising to repeat the pleasantness, yet often enough failing to do so – all this starts to look distinctly akin to a Buddhist understanding of the cycle of pleasure (*sukha-vedanā*), liking (*anurodha*), craving (*tanhā*) and compulsions to repeat the experience, i.e. grasping (*upādāna*).

Other recent neuropsychological research speaks of ‘motivational salience’, a type of attention and cognitive process that moves or prompts a person’s behaviour towards or away from a particular object, situation, process, perceived event or outcome. Here again, the similarity between Buddhist psychological maps of hedonic response to sensory, affective and cognitive experience and the conceptualisation of the same territory in contemporary neuroscience seems striking. Motivational salience (from Latin, *salire* ‘jumping forth’ – a state or quality by which something stands out relative to its context) comes in two forms: ‘incentive salience’, referring to the pleasant and inviting dimension of an experience which in turn causes ‘appetitive’ or ‘approach’ behaviour that is associated with seeking increase, desired outcome and pleasant stimuli. Its opposite, ‘aversive salience’ is the antipathetic form of motivational salience referring to the unpleasant and repellent dimension of an experience which in turn causes ‘avoidant’ behaviour that is associated with attempts to decrease, undesirable outcome and unpleasant stimuli.

The parallels to a Buddhist understanding of the connection between pleasant hedonic experience and the underlying tendency to desire (*rāgānusaya*) and unpleasant *vedanā* and the tendency to resistance and rejection (*paṭighānusaya*) seem obvious:<sup>56</sup> both the age-old contemplative psychology and neuroscientific research agree that the habituated response to hedonically pleasant experience undergo a pattern of amplification in liking followed by seeking repetition of that experience while unpleasant experiences, again amplified by disliking, trigger the wish to push the experience aside or avoid it altogether.

While ‘liking’, which is connected with hedonic tone, and ‘wanting’, connected with appetitive behaviour, usually converge in our experience or occur at a



speed that some contemplative training is needed to identify their separateness, they are in fact different things. A poignant reminder of this comes from both Buddhist teaching and from recent research on addiction. While we indeed often like what we want, we can come to want things that we have stopped liking altogether. In Buddhist language this means that *taṇhā*, craving, may initially occur on the basis of gratification (*sukha-vedanā*) but soon enough, and amplified by liking (*anurodha*), starts to occur already on the basis of *anticipated* gratification. In disturbing ways, this even holds true if the actual enjoyment or gratification does not take place any longer: we can become addicted to something we may have long stopped liking.

In the words of neuropsychology: In addiction, the liking (pleasure or gratification value) of a drug becomes dissociated from the wanting (desire or incentive value) due to the sensitisation of incentive salience for anticipated gratification. With time a user may want the addictive substance more and more while liking it less and less as tolerance develops to the drug's pleasurable effects. In the simplest of terms: 'Addiction is the continued use despite adverse consequences'.<sup>57</sup>

Generally, the wanting pattern (incentive value) is associated with the mesolimbic dopamine system and the liking (hedonic/gratification value) with some opioid hotspots in the limbic structure.<sup>58</sup> Unsurprisingly for the contemplative practitioner the researchers find wanting can be more easily stimulated than liking:

What are the neural bases of pleasure 'liking' itself? A much more restricted brain circuit appears to mediate hedonic 'liking' rather than incentive 'wanting'. The generation of pleasure 'liking' is more restricted *neurochemically*: opioid stimulation but not dopamine stimulation in some limbic structures can enhance 'liking' (whereas 'wanting' is enhanced by both). 'Liking' is also more restricted *anatomically*: enhanced by opioid 'hotspots' but not by the rest of the same limbic structures (even if the entire structure can enhance 'wanting'). And 'liking' generation is also more restricted as a brain *circuit*, requiring unanimous activation of multiple hotspots simultaneously (whereas 'wanting' can be enhanced by a single hotspot). In short, enhancement of pleasure 'liking' is restricted and fragile, and brain pleasure systems are relatively recalcitrant to activation compared to 'wanting' systems. Consequently, our limbic mechanisms may consign us more often to states of desire than of pleasure.<sup>59</sup>

Because our capacity for wanting, the incentive value, and our capacity for actual enjoyment, the gratification value, follow widely discrepant curves we keep wanting things beyond what they are capable of giving us in terms of goodness or pleasure, sometimes even things that we have stopped liking. Such a dissociation between wanting and liking can make wanting unjustifiably intense or compulsive as in addiction, where the wanting completely exceeds any anticipated goodness, often against one's explicit intentions and persisting in the face of not being matched by the actual pleasure experienced.

This is not only true for addiction. The true pathos of desire from a Buddhist point of view is that the wanting of anticipated gratification inevitably keeps exceeding the actual enjoyment and gratification: not only does the enjoyment often enough not live up to the expected gratification but the reinforced appetitive behaviour and follow-through on desire leaves us with a strengthened pathway of wanting. The desire fulfilled still feeds the underlying tendency and strengthens the pathways for further desire. The thirst remains insatiable *precisely* because we keep following through as obtaining what should quench it reinforces the original thirst.

### The problem with *Vedanā*

Hedonic tone is present in consciousness with any experiential event. *Vedanā* play a crucial role in the governance of attention, are highly likely to trigger appetitive and avoidant behaviour and form reactive cognitive and affective pathways and behavioural patterns. While many of the weaker sensory stimuli received during everyday life tend to be received faintly and to stop before triggering further emotional reactions, hedonic tones are also powerful propellants for strong emotions. In Buddhist terms: *vedanā* appear in many instances directly connected to desire (*taṇhā*) and aversion (*paṭigha*); they are highly prone to being grasped at and identified with (*upādāna*) and, in the case of indifferent *vedanā*, are associated with forms of not-knowing – all of which in turn contribute to a range of specific distress-patterns (*dukkha*).

*Vedanā* rules. In the absence of any conscious training in mindfulness, deliberate intention and focussed discernment, our involuntary attention is mostly governed by an excitatory pattern found already in the simplest amino acid structures. It's called *irritability* – a living organism's ability to respond to changes in its environment: if it feels nice, approach; if its not nice, move away.

As the hedonic bias of seeking and avoidance governs *involuntary* attention, any attempt to cultivate *voluntary* attention deviating from that bias entails effort and skill. Besides creating cognitive distractions and leading to forms of affective discontent, the mostly unconscious habitual patterns of involuntary attention create considerable obstacles to contemplative training. The mind on the path of meditation needs learning skills to acquire attentional continuity and spatial stability *irrespective* of the hedonic flavour and the salience of a particular experience. It also needs patience to weather the involuntary patterns and dedication in the application of these skills.

Given the brevity of most hedonic experiences we are often preoccupied with the subsequent cognitive, affective or behavioural processes without recognising that the trigger for our states, feelings and actions has been the presence or absence of a specific hedonic tone. While appetitive (desiring) and avoidant (aversive) patterns are easily discernible, the indifferent (nescient) aspect is often neglected and leaves its victims foggy, bored and confused.

Hedonic tone is a major component of mind wandering and one of its forms, called autobiographical rumination, is particularly notorious for inducing dysphoric mind-states; it chiefly consist of thinking about oneself in ways that reify the notion of a self-construct.<sup>60</sup> Buddhist teaching refers to this tendency in a number of ways – as an explicit ideology (*attavādūpādāna*), as implicit self-view (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*), as subtle forms of appropriation and identification with the contents of our experience called ‘I-making’ or ‘mine-making’ (*ahaṅkāra*, *mamaṅkāra*), finally as one of many types of conceit (*māna*), all of which are compounded by conceptual proliferation (*papañca*), the tendency to discursively fan-out in different directions.

Beyond being instrumental in the creation of self-notions, *vedanā* are also a seedbed for forming other views. Often such views can be thinly veiled rationalisations for prior likes and dislikes or be part of approach or avoidance behaviour in regard to the pleasant and unpleasant feeling-tone beneath them. In the *Chapter of Eights*, one of the sources for ‘quarrels and disputes’<sup>61</sup> is identified as hedonic reactions – ‘holding things dear’ – and the simple fact of encountering pleasant and unpleasant feeling-tones. Several other texts outline that the overcoming of the ‘intoxication with views’ (*diṭṭhāsava*) entails a profound discernment of the nature and the effects of feeling-tones, specifically their arising, their passing away, their capacity to satisfy and their danger.<sup>62</sup>

Because hedonic tones exert their influence at a stage before we form intentions it is crucial to notice and bring to consciousness their occurrence, the kind and the intensity of a specific *vedanā* in sober and effective ways; such assessment is instrumental for the subsequent formation of wholesome intentions and helps to attenuate unwholesome ones; it’s also instrumental for instilling realism in respect to the nature of feeling-tone and the hedonic dimension of our lives in general.

*Vedanā* are decisive in the formation of long-term tendencies to craving, aversion and ignorance.<sup>63</sup> Irrespective of the success in obtaining hedonically pleasant or avoiding hedonically unpleasant outcome the mere affirmation of the desire to do so inevitably strengthens the pattern and increases the likelihood and strength of recurrent desire, resistance and unawareness.

## Contemplating *Vedanā* – the task

The practice of ‘contemplation of hedonic tone’ (*vedanūpassanā*) is central to the meditative training of the Buddha. In the words of an eminent interpreter of Buddhist teaching, contemplation of feeling is a key factor and has ‘always been highly regarded as an effective aid on the path’.<sup>64</sup> In respect to its position in the chain of dependent arising, *vedanā* is considered the ‘weakest link’ and the preferable point for contemplative intervention.

While the proper context for such intervention is either formal meditative exercise or dedicated contemplative investigation beyond the possibilities and the space of this essay, here are some mere headings of themes and practices.<sup>65</sup>

A first point is to acknowledge the domain of *vedanā* proper and to bring sustained mindfulness to it – e.g. using the *Satipaṭṭhāna* scheme as a rough map of the ‘raw materials’ in our experience to discern the hedonic dimension amidst the somatic stuff (*kāya*), the affective/conative stuff (*citta*) and the discursive stuff (*dhammā*).<sup>66</sup>

The section on contemplation of feeling-tones in the *Satipaṭṭhāna* texts is surprisingly terse and suggests a distinction of *vedanā* into the familiar three forms of pleasant, unpleasant and indifferent. A further distinction suggested, as mentioned above, is *sāmisā* and *nirāmisā*, hedonic tones based on sensory/material and non-sensory/immaterial experiences.

An effective example of the former distinction in formal meditation is a non-analytical, simple question of ‘pleasant’ and ‘unpleasant’ upon noticing that the mind has wandered off the chosen meditative task (e.g. breath). Combined or as a second focus may be added the distinction of ‘mental’ or ‘physical’.

Already a few hours of this will lead to a scratch-list with these categories and make one aware of the preponderance of not only a specific *vedanā* type but also of their immediate origin. Indifferent feeling-tones, rather than being reacted to with boredom or perceived as lack of stimulation and trigger for sensual diversion, can be known fully and appreciated as restful and calming.

– Recognising that *vedanā* are subjective and not object-inherent; that they are highly impermanent and conditioned by a variety of factors; in consequence experiencing the same object doesn’t necessarily deliver the same hedonic response. Any deeper investigation into feeling-tones will reveal the impersonal nature of mind-states, experience and *anattatā* in general.

Learning to minimise sensory input and to slow down the process of sensory stimulation will allow us to distinguish between immediate feeling tone and mental/emotional evaluative reaction. This is considered to be instrumental in establishing insight into the possibility of choice, and foster the ability to stop the reactive merry-go-round of seeking and pushing-away in respect to triggers.

Hedonic tone and emotions can be separated: if we don’t have a choice in terms of pleasure and displeasure, we certainly do have a say in consenting or not to subsequent desire, aversion and ignorance. Often *vedanā* will have to be contemplated *post hoc*, or as John Peacock has pointed out, ‘by its traces in the sand’ rather than in its immediacy.

The teaching on dependent arising can also be used outside of formal practice. There will be plenty of opportunity for breaking the chain: most elegantly between *vedanā* and desire (*taṇhā*); somewhat more heroically between *taṇhā* and grasping (*upādāna*), if desire has already arisen but is willingly held rather than followed through; even though most poignantly, after *upādāna* has taken hold, the breeze of becoming (*bhāva*) has passed and we find ourselves thrown

onto the cliffs of *dukkha*, it is still possible to break the chain by acknowledging responsibility and paying the price – without further indulging in drama, self-blame or looking elsewhere for scapegoats.

Despite all individuality and difference, *vedanā* are central to humans and their experience across the board. That is, we all want to enjoy pleasure, gain satisfaction and obtain happiness in some way. Four great contemplations suggested many times in the discourses are an effective tool in meeting *vedanā*: weighing up the arising (*samudaya*), the going under (*atthaṅgama*), the gratification (*assāda*) and the danger (*ādinava*) inherent in a particular experience, attitude and behaviour. This instils realism into our notions of pleasure, safety and control – as much as in regards to power, stability, and ownership. Contemplating these four gives rise to a fifth contemplation called ‘leaving behind’ (*nissaraṇa*) that brings about transformation of the patterns of seeking and avoidance.

Lastly: All states of deeper stillness begin with the ability to create a sense of ease.<sup>67</sup> Learning to find such easeful abiding within an imperfect situation is a skill necessary for calm and unification of mind (*samādhi*). In psychological terms this process can have a number of stages and begins with self-soothing skills, and goes on to the pacifying of discursive and affective processes; it entails generating interest and zest with regard to lethargic dispositions, then stabilising, strengthening and refining continuity of attentional focus. After this comes a finding of the constancy of the object, and proceeds to the establishment of a stable object-independent field awareness, developing and finally deepening into unification of mind.

Contemplation of *vedanā* matures into the realisation that feeling-tones are not the ineluctable causes for the forms of desire, aversion or frustration that deepen the ruts of our suffering. The promise is a life free of reactivity, a greater capacity for contentment and an understanding of happiness beyond gratification or avoidance – a happiness not sheltered from, but in the face of transiency, and the inherent unsatisfactoriness of conditions and insubstantiality.

In a poignant recognition of our existential position a passage in the *Numerical Sayings* has the Buddha say:

But it is for one who *feels* that I proclaim ‘This is suffering’, and ‘This is the arising of suffering’, ‘This is the cessation of suffering’ and ‘This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering’. (A i 176/AN 3.62)

## Notes

1. In what is probably the most impressive scholarly work on Buddhism in the 19th century (Burnouf 1876, 445). The first edition was published 1844; the book has recently been re-translated into English and been published: Burnouf (2010).
2. Eg. C.A.F. Rhys Davids, Horner, Bhikkhus Nyananponika, Bodhi, Thanissaro and Analāyo, Walshe, van Gorkam, Gethin, Hamilton. Fewer have opted for ‘sensation’: Guenther, Johansson, Boisvert.
3. Frank and O’Toole (2003).

4. See Katz, L. D. 2016. Pleasure. In: E. N. Zalta, ed. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2016). Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. (cf. 1874, 426); On Wundt's three-tiered affect theory see (1896).
5. OED, 1999, 2nd ed. CD-ROM v2.0.
6. See Jayatilke (1963, 341), De Silva (1976) and Reat (1987, 23). More recently Bhikkhu Anālayo has been using the term as well.
7. From *The Expositor*, a commentarial Abhidhamma work. 145–6.
8. ... *vedanāsamosaṇṇā sabbe dhammā* A 8.83/A iv 339; A 9.14/A iv 385–6; A 10.58/A v 107.
9. '*Vedanā, saññā, cetanā, phasso, manasikāro, idaṃ vuccatāvuso, nāmaṃ.*' (M 9/M i 53).
10. E.g. Vin i 1, D ii 56, M i 262, S ii 1, A i 177; Ud 2, Snip 143. The apparent omission of *vedanā* in the *Kalahavivāda Sutta* (Snip 868–883) suggests the flavour of *vedanā* indirectly when we find in its place the notions of 'agreeable' (*sāta*) and 'disagreeable' (*asāta*), as the expected stage between 'contact' and 'desire'.
11. Often rendered as 'aggregates'. See e.g. the *Khandhavagga* in the *Connected Discourses* starting at S iii 1.
12. M 10/M i 59 = D 22/D ii 298; Vibh 195–6/Vibh 7.1.3.
13. M 18/M i 108.
14. Attwood (2012), Mylius (1997), and Stede and Rhys-Davids (1924). A discussion on *vedanā* is found in Rhys-Davids 1936, 299–300.
15. E.g. M 44.22/M i 302 *Cūḷavedalla Sutta* or S 36.5/iv 207 *Datthabba Sutta*.
16. E.g. S iii 59: *Chayime bhikkhave vedanākāya ... cakkhusamphassajāvedanā, sotasaṃphassajā vedanā, ghāṇasaṃphassajā vedanā, jivhāsaṃphassajā, kāya saṃphassajā vedanā, mano saṃphassajā vedanā.*
17. The six senses enumerated here refer to the sense faculties rather than the actual sense organs, which the Pali texts rarely refer to; the 5th sense (*kāya*) encompasses beside the sense of touch also proprioceptive and interoceptive experience.
18. Despite subsequent abhidhammic and later tendencies in Buddhist thought: The distinction of *rūpa*- and *arūpa-kkhandha* should not be construed into a substance dualism. *Rūpa* – in line with its original meaning as object of the sense of seeing – is not 'matter' but rather 'appearance', i.e. how matter is experienced. For discussions see Reat (1987) and Hamilton (1996).
19. *Saññā ca vedanā ca cetasikā ete dhammā cittappaṭibaddhā, tasmā saññā ca vedanā ca cittasaṅkhāro*"ti M 44/M i 301.
20. *Cetasikā dhammā* and *cittappaṭibaddhā* respectively M 44/M i 301.
21. *Salla Sutta*, S iv 207/S 36.6.
22. Lit. 'glad-minded-ness' and 'sad-minded-ness'.
23. The later and particularly the Theravādin Abhidhamma tradition refer to it as 'balance of mind' or 'impartiality' – *tatramajjhataṭṭā*, lit. 'keeping everywhere the middle'.
24. The use of the term *upekkhā* for both 'equanimity' and 'indifference', confusing as it seems, is well understood by the later tradition. In the *Path of Purification's* description of the 4th *brahmavihāra* both 'equanimity' and its near enemy 'domestic indifference' make use of the same term: *upekkhā* and *gehasitā aññāṇupekkhā* respectively.
25. (M 59/M i 396) For more on the *Bahuvedanīya*, see Martine Batchelor in this volume.).
26. *Kāyikacetasikavasena dve veditabbā* (Ps iii 114).
27. *Taṃ dassento pañcakaṅgassa thapatino vādaṃ upatthambhetuṃ imaṃ desanaṃ ārabhi.* (Ps iii 115) (See also Bhikkhu Anālayo's article for references to the Chinese

parallels of this Sutta and its commentaries and a different perspective on the matter.)

28. This may be connected with a misunderstanding of the simple hedonic indifference (*upekkhindriya*), outlined in the 5-fold scheme above, as genuine equanimity (*upekkhā*).
29. i.e. in the *Cūḷavedalla* (M 44.25/M i 303) and similarly in the *Chachakka Sutta* (M 148/M iii 285).
30. Dh. 203–4.
31. A 9.34/A iv 414–5: ... ‘*sukhamidaṃ, āvuso, nibbānaṃ. sukhamidaṃ, āvuso, nibbānaṃ*’ti. *evaṃ vutte āyasmā udāyi āyasmantaṃ sārīputtaṃ etadavoca – ‘kiṃ panettha, āvuso sārīputta, sukhaṃ yadettha natthi vedayitaṃ*’ti?’ etadeva khvettha, āvuso, sukhaṃ yadettha natthi vedayitaṃ.
32. M 3/M i 12.
33. The terms also appear in the Chinese versions of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* cf. Pāsādika (1998), Hanh (2006, 137, 146) and Anālayo (2011, 86–7, 2016).
34. *Sīvakasutta* S 36.21/S iv 230. The first seven read: (1) *Pitta-samuṭṭhānāni*, (2) *semha-samuṭṭhānāni*, (3) *vāta-samuṭṭhānāni*, (4) *sannipātikāni*, (5) *utupariṇāmajāni*, (6) *visamaparihārajāni*, (7) *opakkamikāni*.
35. *Saṃyutta*, the *Vedanāsaṃyutta*.
36. The Guest House, S 36.14/S iv 219.
37. The Sky, S 36.12/S iv 218.
38. A Lump of Foam, S 22.95/S iii 141.
39. The simile occurs twice: Uninstructed S 12.62/S ii 97 and Rooted in Contact, S 36.10/S iv 215.
40. *Nandakovāda Sutta* M 146/M iii 273–4.
41. The Bottomless Abyss, S 36.4/S iv 206.
42. The River, S 22.93/S iii 137.
43. *Salla Sutta*, S 36.6/S iv 207.
44. Contact (*phassa*), perception (*saññā*), attention (*manasikāra*) and volition (*cetanā*) are the others. (M 9/M i 53 = S 12.2/S ii 3) The Abhidhamma adds two further factors – one-pointedness (*ekaggatā*) and vitality (*jīvitindriya*). These factors of mind are operative in any single moment of experience.
45. A description from the Abhidhamma tradition’s commentary to the *Dhammasaṅgani* (*Atthasālini* i 109–110/*The Expositor* 145–6).
46. See footnote 8.
47. Bentham (1789, Ch. 1).
48. Conze (1975, 166 n. 20).
49. The demonisation of Epicure, particularly at the hands of Christians (e.g. Luther’s use of ‘epicurian’ as a plain invective in his diatribe against Erasmus), has little to do with any appreciation of the founder’s actual theory of pleasure. See Jones (1989) for a comprehensive history of the Epicurian tradition and its reception.
50. See Kant (1800), Fechner (1876) and Wundt (1896).
51. ‘Nullpunkt’ and ‘Indifferenzpunkt’ respectively.
52. Early experiments by Walter R. Hess in the 1920s (physiologist, Zürich) and John F. Fulton (neurophysiologist, Yale & Oxford) in the 1930s on animals were followed by Jose Delgado (physiologist, Yale) on psychiatric patients. Delgado invented the radio-equipped electrode that could be fully implanted in his patient’s brains; he also developed an early version of the pacemaker. Robert G. Heath (biological psychiatrist, Tulane) later known for his gay conversion therapy, followed with many experiments that helped to localise regions associated with pleasure and



offered patients the possibility to stimulate themselves via electric impulses (Horgan 2005, 2012).

53. Kringelbach and Berridge (2012).
54. Kringelbach and Berridge (2012).
55. Berridge and Kringelbach (2015).
56. See e.g. M 148.1/M iii 285.
57. Brewer (2017, 18).
58. See Birbaumer and Zittlau (2014).
59. Berridge (2009, 5–6).
60. See e.g. Killingsworth and Gilbert (2010) and also Metzinger (2013).
61. Also the title of a *sutta* in the *Chapter of Eights: Kalahavivāda Sutta* Sn 868–883.
62. *Salla Sutta*, S 36.6/S iv 207 and *Brahmajāla Sutta* D 1/D i 16.
63. M 44/M i 303 (*Cūḷavedalla Sutta*).
64. Nyanaponika (1983, 4).
65. For a fine summary see Bhikkhu Anālayo's lemma on *vedanūpassanā* in Malalasekera and Weeraratne (2009), vol. viii 517–521.
66. Such a distinction should be seen as preliminary rather than as the actual exercise suggested in the *satipaṭṭhāna*.
67. *Nirāmisā sukha-vedanā*.

## Disclosure statement

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## Notes on contributor

**Akincano M. Weber** is a scholar-practitioner, psychotherapist and Buddhist teacher. A former monastic for 20 years, he has studied Pali and scriptures, and holds an MA in Buddhist psychotherapy. He is co-founder of Bodhi College and guiding teacher of Atammaya Cologne, Germany, from where he teaches Dharma, Buddhist Psychology and meditation in secular and traditional contexts internationally [www.akincano.net](http://www.akincano.net).

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