

Pascal Auclair

*Moving beyond the Mirage: Practicing with Buddhism's Five Aggregates*

Week Two: "The Second Aggregate: Feeling Tone"

December 11, 2017



Hi, this is Pascal Auclair. We are in the second week of exploring the five aggregates.

Today we are going to talk about the second aggregate. The second aspect of reality (feeling tone) is worth paying really close attention to because of all the suffering that can come from an unwise relationship with this aspect of our life. This particular aspect is what we call the feeling tone.

Let me explain myself here. Any experience that we have—be it something heard, smelled, tasted, a thought we have, an emotion, or any phenomena that happens to a human being—comes with a tonality of pleasure, displeasure, or neither one nor the other.

Can you recognize this in your experience? You taste something [and think,] *Mm, wow I love the taste of this chocolate, or this thought is uncomfortable and unpleasant to feel.* If we didn't have that, if we were to put that aspect of our life on mute, I think we would actually not recognize life. We would say, "Wow, there's something missing here that's really, really prevalent in our experience."

There is a standard way that human beings are in relationship with this aspect of their lives. When something is pleasant, not always but often, human beings will cling to it. It's pleasant. "Mm, more. I want to keep [this sensation]. I want the recipe. I want another bite." Or, say you like [somebody's] voice, or they smell good and you want them to stay, you want to see them again. Or you have a beautiful encounter with something, a sunset, or a meeting with friends and [you say], "Oh when do we do this again?" There's this way that we get attached: We fear losing [the person or experience]. We want to protect [the sensation]. We can get pretty aggressive or fearful about losing pleasure.

When human beings have an experience that is unpleasant, invite them to check this out. When human beings have an experience that is unpleasant, often they will become bugged and agitated and resentful and confused and maybe aggressive. They'll want to destroy the unpleasantness, or they'll think something is wrong.

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That's a [common] experience. It's an unwise response to something that the Buddha seems to have described as the winds of life. Pleasure comes and it goes. Displeasure, pain, disagreement, and disagreeable things happen. We have a very complex and charged relationship, I would say, with these aspects of our experience.

Human beings [shut down] when it's unpleasant. They get all excited and reactive. One other thing that the Buddha seemed to have pointed out—and I like that this is 2,600 years ago—was, "Unwise beings, when they meet with something disagreeable or unpleasant, not knowing what to do, start looking for something pleasant." Is that true in your experience?

I've seen this so many times in my own experience where, you know, I'll hang up the phone when I've heard something that didn't please me and I'll turn and go straight to the ice cream to get a fix. It was unpleasant, so let me fix that unpleasantness that I can't bear or don't know what to do with. Let me replace it with something pleasant.

You [may] think, *Oh, but some of the stimulation we experience, some of the thoughts, some of the things said to us, some of the things heard or seen, they're actually not pleasant nor unpleasant, they're kind of neutral.* Think of, maybe, the experience of the breath in meditation. For many of us, not for all of us, at certain times the breath will be pretty neutral. It's not like, "Oh I love the breath," or, "I hate the breath." It's just, "There is a stimulation; there's something happening but it doesn't appear as pleasant or unpleasant."

When there is something that is neither pleasant nor unpleasant it makes [human beings] confused. They don't notice it. They might get agitated because it seems like nothing is happening. When I teach meditation and something neutral [happens] I get a little bored because I [can't] actually connect with it. I start fantasizing, thinking about pleasant things because I [can't] just be with the simplicity of wind in the trees. I want something more pleasant. I even think of something potentially unpleasant happening. So hooked am I on [what is] pleasant and unpleasant that, rather than having a neutral experience, I would actually prefer to think of an old thing that happened in the past. Something that was disagreeable, so I could chew on it for a little

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while until the bell of the meditation rings. We have a conflictual relationship, we could say, with pleasure and displeasure and the absence of pleasure and displeasure.

To help us with this addiction we have to pleasure, this constant use of our senses as a radar to find potential pleasure or create potential pleasure, [constant use of] our whole system to live in preferences, [constant] looking for pleasure and avoiding and fearing displeasure (which is a way to live that is kind of exhausting), we can actually tune into that aspect of experience with curiosity and maybe let go of the value of preferences [such as,] "I would prefer this or not this," and just meet pleasant experience directly with curiosity to discover what is that experience actually.

Similarly, I can do this with unpleasurable experiences. Instead of rejecting them, hating them, wanting to avoid them when they come (often I have no choice and I'll have to be with displeasure and emotion that is not fun to feel, afflictive emotion), the meditative mind will actually turn toward the experience and allow itself to know this experience fully. What we might discover here is that these experiences of pleasure, displeasure, and neutrality are actually pretty ephemeral. They last one moment.

Think of chocolate. Bite into chocolate. If you stay present you'll see the taste arise. It's a big hit of pleasure (if [chocolate] is something that is pleasurable for you) and then it will vanish. If we're not careful what tends to happen is we think,] *Mm. More. I want more. I want that hit again!* We might fixate and make it very solid [by thinking,] *I love chocolate. It's good, it's pleasant.* But if we're there for the whole duration of the pleasure trip we might discover that it's actually extremely ephemeral. It doesn't have that much depth. Other things have more depth. We might find that in our practice, benevolence, honesty, integrity are more juicy in a way than the hit of pleasure at the sense doors.

So, talking about pleasure, displeasure, and neutrality at the sense door, the Buddha used the image of the bubbles. He said, "Check this out. How impermanent, how ephemeral these experiences are." You'll hear a sound, a disagreeable sound. Often what the mind will do is hear or taste something and leave reality. It won't stay there. It will leave reality. "Why is this sound

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there? I hate this sound. It's in my way." We're not actually in connection with reality anymore; we're in connection with our preferences, our ideas about things. The Buddha seemed to have said, "Stay there and feel. See how it arises and passes away." So the analogy of the bubble is used. The particular analogy in the text of the *Phena Sutta* is about when it rains, about how when the drops of rain fall on a puddle little bubbles surface. They pop. [The Buddha] said, "Our experiences of pleasure and displeasure are like that. They are ephemeral and conditional. They need certain conditions to arise."

It's interesting to bring attention to this aspect of reality so that we can be a little less hooked by pleasure and displeasure, a little less reactive but able to actually meet it. [So that we're] able to meet it and feel it fully. Many [pleasurable] things we don't feel fully because we're busy thinking, *I need more of this. I need to move here. I'm in the country for a few moments. It's beautiful. I need to move here. Why am I in the city?* The Buddha said, "Pay attention. You'll see it will arise and it will pass." This way we'll find freedom from this very ephemeral, conditional aspect of our experience that we put so many of our eggs in.

We might find that the actual full-presence encounter with pleasure or displeasure and neutrality is actually absolutely bearable and has more value than the pleasure or the displeasure itself. It's the capacity to meet something disagreeable. Let's say there is a conflict in my life and I say, "Wow. Conflict. Not understanding each other is so painful or disagreeable." Can I actually stay with that instead of blaming the other, blaming myself, or blaming God? To actually stay and say, "Wow. This is how it is. This is how it is right now." This is what we call the opening of the heart. Compassion can arise. "Wow, it's hard for us to understand each other." I'm not getting all rigid or fearful. I'm actually accepting [the experience], bringing my interest to the experience of discomfort.

In the same way with a pleasurable experience I can [think], "Wow, feel that. So beautiful, this moment. And now it's gone. Wow." The ephemeral nature of experience opens my heart so that I can be free in the middle of experience.

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What else to say about this aspect of experience that is so rich? Look into your experience [this week]. Often we think that the pleasure is in the object, in the thing, and we fuse the two together when actually [they're separate]. It's a little bit more conditional than that. I'll give you an example. Imagine somebody you love caressing your hair. Try. Stroking your hair gently. Imagine this. It feels good, it's somebody you care about, they care about you, and they're just doing this. Imagine the same thing four hours later. They're still stroking your hair. Maybe you would go, "Don't you have things to take care of?" It's the same thing. It hasn't changed. It went from pleasurable to unpleasurable. It was not the thing itself. It's more complex than this. It's circumstantial. It's conditional.

Imagine there was a bone on the floor. To me it would be unpleasurable to have a bone in the middle of this room. But if a dog came in it would say, "Wow! Far out! Bone!" It would see this as pleasurable. So [pleasure or displeasure does not exist in] the thing. It's ephemeral and it's changing and it depends on my history, my culture. It's changing and dependent. By paying attention to pleasure, displeasure, and neutrality, we will [develop] a wise way to be with [these states] so that we can have an experience of freedom.

Something else [we do] is appropriate these bubble-like experiences. We're like, "My pleasure. I was having a good time until you said that and busted my pleasure bubble. Mine." Was it actually mine or did it belong to the circumstances? Pleasure arose and vanished. Now it's gone. Can I be free, having what I want or not having it? This is the freedom that the Buddha seems to be talking about.

At the time of the Buddha there was this practitioner, a woman named Dhammadinna. She was very well known for her wisdom and her depth of understanding. One time while meeting her ex-husband, Dhammadinna had a conversation about feeling tone as a particular aspect of experience. [As a reminder, feeling tone is] not the sound itself, but the pleasure that I get from it that co-arises with it. It's not the taste, the particular sweetness, but the pleasure aspect. It's not the thought but the fact that it's a pleasant or an unpleasant thought. When Dhammadinna was talking to her ex-husband he said, "Tell me a few things about pleasure and displeasure." She

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said something like, "Pleasure, when it ends, it's unpleasant. Unpleasantness, when it ends, it's pleasurable." One aspect that intrigues me a lot, and I'm going to paraphrase here, [is that she] says something like, "Neutral experiences, when they're met without presence or mindfulness, when they're met in a superficial way, they tend to be unpleasant. When they're met with a lot of care, with presence, with fullness, they tend to become pleasant." I would invite you to actually check this week, is that true?

I know that in meditation the breath seems particularly neutral for me, not something extremely pleasurable or unpleasurable. Without mindfulness, my attention was not very refined. It was kind of boring, and it would get me agitated, and it would end up being unpleasant. But when I actually learned to calm my mind and really pay attention, to let my attention actually infuse the experience of breath, to feel it almost like water would come into a sponge, then suddenly it became full. I don't know how to say it. An experience of contentment would arise. I wouldn't need to suddenly become somebody else or be somewhere else or experience something else—just this. Breathing would become a rich experience. To me, this is freedom because it means not much seems to be happening, but if I tune in I'll actually notice something. Silence. Silence, when met superficially is like, "Wow, there's nothing happening." It's boring. But if it's met with curiosity, with fullness of presence, then something opens up. I see it as a portal actually. Something opens up.

That's what we call intimacy by the way. The capacity to be with [pleasure] without wanting to secure it and acquire more of it, the capacity to be with displeasure without falling apart in despair. The capacity to be with neutrality, things that are neither pleasant nor unpleasant, without tuning out, becoming indifferent, disconnected, and then [desiring] something else because life seems like not enough.

I invite you to explore this this week. Next week we'll go further along with the aggregates.

Thank you.