

Wat Pah Nanachat Talks series II, Part 3 of 3

DHAMMA QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Interpreted into English by Santikaro Bhikkhu

Dhamma Q&A given at Suan Mokkh on 31 December 1991

Foreign-born monastic disciples of Venerable Ajahn Chah, led by Ajahn Sumedho, made a second group pilgrimage to Suan Mokkh to pay respects to Tan Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was held in high esteem by Ajahn Chah. Tan Ajahn spoke with them about the fundamental Law of Nature at the core of the Buddha's realization and teaching. Tan Ajahn spoke in Thai and Santikaro Bhikkhu interpreted into English live. All Ajahn's teachings are now available on:

www.suanmokkh.org,

<https://soundcloud.com/buddhadasa> and

<https://www.youtube.com/@buddhadasabhikkhu7829>.

The following is a transcription generously made by a Dhamma volunteer. If you noticed possible improvements to the text and would like to contribute, please kindly contact the volunteer and the Buddhadasa Indapañño Archives in Bangkok

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❖ *“Some people explain that the kind of tendencies for when we build up defilement or defiled tendencies, that somehow this is connected with the body. Maybe we kind of store them in different parts of the body, or that there is some connection. And then at times these arise as vedanā, as feelings, and then if one is mindful of them, you can kind of come to terms with the vedanā and the supposed underlying defiled causes. But if you don't, aren't mindful of it, then you just get caught up in the thing over and over again. Is this Buddha's thinking or not?”* ❖

~ Response by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu ~

When we come to investigate the feelings, or the *vedanā*, we must investigate them in two aspects. The first aspect as *hetu*, or cause, the other aspect as *phala*, or result. So we have to look at them in both ways. Vedanā as cause, the causal aspect of them, are the vedanā that arise from the *āyatana*, when the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind are stimulated by forms, sounds, odors, tastes, touches, and mental objects, then there arises sense consciousness and contact. Dependent on contact arises the vedanā. These are the vedanā that are arising all the time, arising constantly in our lives. There's just vedanā after vedanā, endlessly. We must manage this aspect of vedanā with mindfulness and wisdom. Instead of just letting them happen and getting caught up in them, we need to mindfully and wisely understand how they naturally arise and then not get caught up in them. This is the first aspect of vedanā.

The second aspect of vedanā is vedanā as the cause of all actions. All the actions that human beings do can be traced to the vedanā. All karma can be traced to the vedanā, because the vedanā

give rise to *dhamma-taṇhā*, sensual desire, or desire for sensuality and sex, *bhava-taṇhā*, desire to be and become, and *vibhava-taṇhā*, the desire or craving to not exist, to destroy, to annihilate. These different kinds of cravings come from *vedanā*, and then are the source of all karma, of all actions. So all the things people are doing, all the things they are saying, are caused by the *vedanā*. We can say that this kind of *vedanā* now dominates the world, or rules the world. It's the *vedanā* that rule our worlds because all the things we're doing arise out of, or are caused, stimulated by the *vedanā*. So there're these two aspects of *vedanā*, both as cause and as result.

When the *vedanā* happen, and there's not sufficient mindfulness and wisdom, then *sukha-vedanā*, pleasant feelings, give rise to *rāgānusaya*, the tendency towards *rāga* or lust, and then unpleasant feelings, *dukkha-vedanā* give rise to *paṭighānusaya*, the tendency towards ill-will and aversion, and then *adukkham-asukhā*, the *vedanā* which are neither positive nor negative, pleasant nor unpleasant. These give rise to *avijjānusaya*, the tendency towards ignorance, towards not knowing and misunderstanding. So the different *vedanā*, if they're not properly understood and managed, then help to build up these tendencies towards defilement, which then further make it easier for more defilements to arise.

(Translator note: I was a bit confused in my translation. *Vedanā*, when you look at it in terms of its causes, then *vedanā* arises from contact. So not *vedanā* as the cause, but the causes of *vedanā* come from sense activity and contact. When you look at *vedanā* in terms of its results, then the result or fruit of *vedanā* is *taṇhā* or craving, which leads to all our actions.)

One sentence captures the essence of the *vedanā*: All of life – the entire universe of life – is under the power of the *vedanā*. All life without exception is under the power of the *vedanā*. Once the *vedanā* arise, then the mind starts seeking and searching for these *vedanā*. The mind begins to search and scramble after the *vedanā*. This is the meaning of *taṇhā* or craving. Once the mind starts seeking and searching for *vedanā*, scrambling after the *vedanā*, this is *taṇhā*, which then leads to all of our actions. In fact it's more or less the same thing, but we have two names for it. First there's just the *vedanā*, and then there's the mind scrambling and searching and seeking after the *vedanā*. In reality it's pretty much the same thing, but we can give different names to emphasize the two sides of it. The important thing to notice is how once *vedanā* arise, the mind begins to scramble and search after them. So we can say that the *vedanā* carry all beings along. The *vedanā* are leading the lives of all sentient creatures. So once the *vedanā* arise, life begins to move according to the direction of the *vedanā*.

All the movements and actions of human beings are dominated by the *vedanā*. These attempts to explore the solar system – the trips to the moon and the planets and all these things – sending all this technology out into space is solely for the sake of the *vedanā*. Even when we ordain as monks, we ordain in order to get certain kinds of *vedanā*. We hope that by being monks we'll get the kind of *vedanā* that we want, that we appreciate, that satisfy us. All aspects of life are moving after the *vedanā*, are set in motion by the *vedanā*.

You ought to be very careful to get to know these very dangerous things, the *vedanā*. People do good or make merit because of the *vedanā*. They do bad, they do evil things, because of the *vedanā*. And people do things which are neither good nor bad, meritorious or sinful, because of

the vedanā. Whether it's considered good or merit, whether it's bad or evil, or whether it's neither one or the other, it just depends on the vedanā that people are feeling.

Children go to school because of a certain kind of vedanā that they dream of, that they desire. And then graduating from school, a person works in order to get a certain kind of vedanā that they desire or seek. People get married in hope of certain vedanā. People then run their houses, their homes, take care of them, in order to get a certain kind of vedanā. All stages of life are dominated by the vedanā. The life of the *puthujjana*, the ordinary thick one, is just dominated by the vedanā like this. But the Noble Ones, the *ariya*, the *phra ariya jao*, have gotten control of the vedanā. They've seen through the vedanā, and the vedanā can no longer dominate them. They in a sense conquer the vedanā by practicing *vedanānupassanā*, the *satipaṭṭhāna*, the Foundation of Mindfulness, which is contemplation of the vedanā. Through contemplating these positive and negative feelings deeply, then one gets free of their power. If one totally conquers the vedanā, then there is Nibbāna. When the vedanā have no more power to dominate and concoct the mind, then there is Nibbāna.

As we've said, the vedanā rule every form of life. Plants seek a certain kind of vedanā, and the animals, like the dogs, seek vedanā as well. Human beings are spending their whole lives chasing after vedanā. And even the devas – the celestial beings, if they exist – they desire, they seek the vedanā. On all levels of life, the mind on that particular level is dominated and ruled by the vedanā. If we just carry on in the normal way, then we end up slaves to the vedanā. But by conquering the vedanā, one is freed. One only can find freedom by conquering these vedanā.

You've all probably heard these things before, but don't yet understand them, that vedanā is the condition for taṇhā, craving. And taṇhā is the condition for *upādāna*, attachment. And then because of attachment there is dukkha. If we can conquer feeling, conquer vedanā, then at the same time we conquer craving, attachment, and dukkha. So if we understand this and then can practice it, then we can free ourselves from all dukkha by conquering the vedanā.

Vedanā is the cause of selfishness. Vedanā concocts attachment, ego, and selfishness, and then this selfishness is the cause of all kinds of problems for others and for ourselves. As soon as selfishness arises in the mind we behave in all kinds of harmful ways, harming not only others but ourselves as well. And all of this destructiveness and harmfulness is caused by the vedanā. The crimes in our world – the wars, the rape, the lies, the deceit, the corruption, the pollution, the destruction of the forests and environments – all of this is because of selfishness, which happens because we're ignorant. The vedanā arise and we don't understand them, so we behave very stupidly because of this lack of true understanding of the vedanā.

Positive vedanā give rise to certain kinds of selfishness, and then negative vedanā give rise to other kinds of selfishness. For example, certain kinds of feelings cause men and women to love each other, husbands and wives love each other, but because of other vedanā then we have husbands and wives beating each other up, and even killing each other. Because of the vedanā parents love their children and children love their parents, but we also have children who kill their parents because of selfishness, which comes from not understanding the vedanā. Because we're ignorant of the vedanā, all these forms of selfishness can occur and then in turn cause all the problems in this world.

The vedanā can make us friends and the vedanā can make us enemies. Please get to understand these vedanā very carefully. So this is vedanā in terms of its causes and its results.

❖ “*In terms of the wheel, of paṭiccasamuppāda (dependent origination), where does it break in terms of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness?*” ❖

~ Response by Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu ~

If there is genuine *vedanānupassanā*, contemplation of the vedanā, then we’ll be able to manage or master paṭiccasamuppāda right from the start. From the beginning of the senses functioning, and then contact, and vedanā arising with vedanānupassanā, we’ll have it under control from the start. If we really have the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the four satipaṭṭhāna, then dependent origination won’t be a problem for us.

To practice satipaṭṭhāna you need all four, you can’t just practice one, so we need all four. But the aspect of the satipaṭṭhāna that’s most important for human beings is vedanānupassanā, so that we can regulate or manage, we can keep the vedanā from dominating us. Without true contemplation and understanding of vedanā, then we become the slaves of positive and negative feelings. If there’s real vedanānupassanā, contemplation of the vedanā, that’s the crucial element in keeping dependent origination from causing us problems.

With *kāyānupassanā*, contemplation of the body, you can keep the senses from becoming problems. The senses will be mindful of them and they won’t become any problem for us. They won’t lead to attachment and dukkha.

And then for *cittānupassanā*, contemplation of the mind, we have even more mastery of the mind, because on an even deeper level, we can keep the vedanā from creating thoughts or perceptions which are trouble for us.

Dhammānupassanā, contemplation of dhammas, is the ability to manage all things which are the basis for attachment, so then we can control or we can manage all attachments. We master all the things that are opportunities for attachment, then attachment can no longer run our lives or take over our minds.

All natural things can be distinguished into two categories, the one are those which have a positive quality or characteristic and those which have a negative quality. If we really got the Foundation of Mindfulness, which is contemplation of dhammas, or dhammānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna, then we can master all these positive and negative qualities so that no dhammas, no things, no natures, will have any power over us.

The translator then asks, “It sounds like you can’t really separate the Four Foundations of Mindfulness – we need to develop all of them together?” And his reply is you need to know which satipaṭṭhāna is appropriate in each circumstance, but ultimately you can’t separate them.

We develop all of them according to the circumstances. So the main thing is to have satipaṭṭhāna, to have the mind grounded through mindfulness, and then depending on the circumstances, it's either of the body or feelings or mind or Dhamma. So one is mindful of these things, but exactly what one is mindful of depends on the circumstances in the mind.

Remember one sentence here, “Sati, mindfulness, can master the vedanā.” Sati masters the vedanā. All the different kinds of vedanā that there are – positive and negative and in between – all the various kinds of vedanā are mastered by sati, by mindfulness. If we are mindful, then we can keep these vedanā from becoming trouble.

❖ *“Does mathematics exist in reality, in nature, or only in the mind?”* ❖

~ Response by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu ~

Mathematics can come in two forms: the stupid kind and the intelligent kind. The stupid kind of mathematics just develops ego, leads to an ignorant self. For example the Samkhya philosophy in India, which is very logical and mathematic-like, leads to a firm belief in a self. So the mathematics which is under the power of ignorance then just leads us to ideas and concepts of self, which create trouble for us.

Or for example, take Descartes, who said “cogito, ergo sum” (“I think, therefore I am”). This is an example of the logic of ignorant mathematics that leads to “I think therefore that I have a self” or “I am a self.”

❖ *“In terms of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, to what degree can they be practiced in ordinary life, and to what degree do they require formal meditation and a strong level of samādhi or concentration?”* ❖

~ Response by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu ~

The Buddha distinguished the Foundations of Mindfulness into four aspects or levels to make it easier for our study and practice of the satipaṭṭhāna, which just means the practice of mindfulness – starting on the lowest level of the body, then the vedanā, then the mind, and then Dhamma. But in practice, the thing is to be mindful of what we need to be mindful of. In some situations we need to be mindful of the body, sometimes the vedanā, sometimes the mind, sometimes Dhamma. The thing is to be mindful of what we need to be mindful of. But in the end we can summarize all of the satipaṭṭhāna to be mindful of the reality that these things are not self, to be mindful that whether it's the body, feelings, thoughts, mind, or any kind of Dhamma, that there's no reason to take it as a self, that it shouldn't be taken as 'me' or 'mine.' If we have real mindfulness, we can master the vedanā, and then it won't lead us into the illusion of self anymore.

It's kind of like modern science where we make distinctions, and then in order to study things in more detail and with greater precision so we can analyze something into its parts and then investigate those parts in more and more detail. But then in the end we have to bring all these parts together to understand it as a whole as well, and then we're able to use that thing usefully. If we thoroughly understand it by using this means of analysis, then we can understand it. It's the same with the human being. We analyze the human being into its different functions, into the different subsystems that make up life, in order to understand each of them in great detail, understand them thoroughly. If this knowledge is comprehensive, then we'll know how to use life beneficially. If we understand all the different aspects of life, then we can live it in the most beneficial way. So this approach of modern science of analyzing things into its parts and subsystems can be useful for a more precise understanding, and then it leads to all kinds of inventions and new techniques and things if we know how to use it properly.

There's a natural secret to this division of satipaṭṭhāna into four levels that each one makes it easier to study and investigate the next level. It's like each one supports the next. By practicing contemplation of the body, this makes it easier to contemplate the vedanā. Contemplating the vedanā makes it easier to contemplate the mind. And contemplating the mind makes it easier to contemplate Dhamma. So each level of satipaṭṭhāna supports and promotes a higher level, a deeper contemplation. If we understand this principle and use it wisely, it will make our practice more efficient, and a little easier.

The translator repeats the question, "Is it necessary to practice the satipaṭṭhāna in a formal way, or can it be done informally in ordinary life?" Tan Ajahn said the four levels of satipaṭṭhāna have been distinguished very well already. If one wants to start over and investigate on one's own, one can do that. But if we use these four levels that the Buddha taught, that will make things easier. All four satipaṭṭhānas need to be investigated in all postures, in all actions while standing, walking, sitting, and lying down. So we need to investigate all four of these while we stand, while we walk, while we sit, while we lie.

We have the principle of practicing the satipaṭṭhāna every time we breathe in and every time we breathe out. So there shouldn't be any confusion whether we're standing, walking, sitting, or whatever, we're breathing. Every time we're breathing we ought to investigate these satipaṭṭhāna.

❖ *"What is the role of saññā (perception) in paṭiccasamuppāda?"* ❖

~ Response by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu ~

Since it's not mentioned explicitly, saññā can be considered included in vedanā. This is a common principle throughout the suttas that what one feels, one classifies; one recognizes it and classifies it. So vedanā leads to saññā, and then saññā to saññā vedanā, which is a kind of volition or intention according to that classification. And then there is taṇhā. And so not being mentioned explicitly, we can borrow this principle that you can find throughout the suttas. We

can say that *saññā* is included in *vedanā* because it's inevitable. If we feel something, then we will classify it as happy or painful or good or bad or whatever.

When there's *vedanā*, then it's automatic that there will be some classification of that *vedanā*. And then when there's *saññā*, it's automatic that there will be *saññā vedanā*, a motivation or a kind of impulse of the mind according to that classification, to that *saññā*. So it's not necessary to mention *saññā* and *saññā vedanā* explicitly, because they follow from *vedanā* automatically.

If we speak more precisely, we can say that as soon as there is *vedanā*, then there is *manoviññāṇa* (mental consciousness) of that *vedanā*. Just like there's consciousness of sights and sounds, *vedanā* is in the mind and then there's the mind being conscious of that *vedanā*. Through this *manoviññāṇa*, then there arises *saññā*, recognition or classification, and then *saññā vedanā*. The Buddha however didn't mention this because you could make this incredibly complicated if you went into all this stuff every time. The Buddha said it's not necessary to repeat this arising of *manoviññāṇa* every time because it's always happening. So we just say *vedanā* is the cause of *taṇhā*, of craving.

We've got hopes for the *vedanā* all the time without being aware of it, and we're frightened that we're not going to get the *vedanā* we hope for. This subtle fear is there all the time without our being aware of it. So constantly our mind is both hoping for *vedanā* and afraid that it won't get the *vedanā* it seeks.

We're hoping for certain kinds of *vedanā* all the time according to our thoughts, beliefs, ideas, and all that. This is going on all the time without us being aware of it. It's become subconscious, this constant subconscious hope for certain kinds of *vedanā* that attract us, that we like.

That we want to be certain things, that we want to exist in certain ways, these hopes and dreams for becoming this and being that is at root due to our hoping for certain kinds of *vedanā*. We think if I'm like that I'll get these *vedanā* and I'll be so happy and satisfied, and everything will be wonderful. So all of our dreams and hopes come down to hoping for certain kinds of *vedanā*.

The kind of beings who are wandering around in sensuality have hopes and wishes for the *vedanā* that come from sensuality and sex. The kind of beings that are wandering around in forms, in materiality, are hoping for the *vedanā* that arise based on forms, on materiality. And then the beings that are wandering around in formlessness, in experiences which are immaterial, they're hoping and wishing and seeking the *vedanā* that come from formless objects, from nonmaterial experience. It's only through awakening and being free totally of self, it's only in *nibbāna* that one is one free of this constant seeking and hoping for the *vedanā*.

Please be very very careful, those of you who are monks and nuns. If you're not careful, your ordination will just be for the sake of getting better *vedanā*. You're maybe just wearing the robes in order to get certain kind of *vedanā* that you want, when in fact we become monks and nuns to eliminate the power of the *vedanā*, to get free of the *vedanā*. So be very careful that you haven't ordained just to get *vedanā*. Please wear these robes in order to get free of them.

We ought to try to tell all our human friends everywhere to do their best to conquer the vedanā, to conquer the vedanā and stop being slaves to them. This is something that we ought to share with our friends everywhere. This is the Buddhism that we must practice, conquering the vedanā.

That will be all for the questions this morning. Ajahn Buddhādāsa would like to offer all the monks a book as a souvenir or memorial object of your visit to Suan Mokkh.

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Transcribed by Bill Weir (arizonahandbook@yahoo.com) in July, 2023

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