

An Undivided World

When we practice mindfulness of feeling, says **MELISSA MYOZEN BLACKER, ROSHI**, we strike right at the heart of dualism.

THE SECOND FOUNDATION of mindfulness in the four foundations of mindfulness teachings is called *vedanasati*. *Sati*, a Pali word, is often translated as “mindfulness” but really means something like “remembering” or “recollecting.” As for *vedana*, the Theravada teacher Bhikkhu Bodhi calls it the “bare affective quality of an experience.”

Another way to understand *vedana* is “feeling tone.” When we practice with this second foundation, often rendered as simply “mindfulness of feeling,” we notice the tone of our experiences as positive, negative, or neutral.

From the Zen point of view, all experiences are inherently neutral. It is our reactivity to them that creates our sense of good or bad, attraction or aversion, and much of our suffering comes from dividing the world into these two categories.

From one perspective, this is just common sense: we are attracted to pleasure and we try to avoid pain. But another view is voiced by the third Chinese Zen ancestor Sengcan in his poem “The Heart of True Entrusting”: “To set up what you like against what you dislike is the disease of the mind.”

When we bring mindfulness to the feeling tone of an experience, we can break down good and bad into discrete elements. We can get to know pain in its particularities. When we encounter

something we don’t like, we notice particular sensations in the body, specific emotions, and certain characteristic thoughts.

For example, when I have a headache, I can perceive exactly where the pain is, whether it’s big or small, steady or intermittent, cool or warm. I can feel my sadness, fear, or irritation. I can be aware of thoughts, like, “Why do I have a headache again? Oh no, this is terrible!” When I experience something pleasant, I can similarly break down the experience into its granular elements.

In meditation practice, we notice the arising of feeling-tones, and we bring careful, affectionate, and nonjudging attention to our preferences for some experiences over others. We see how thoughts, emotions, and sensations combine to create a concept of good or bad.

Through this practice of staying curious and attentive, without trying to change anything, the heart–mind settles into being with things as they are. We learn to live with everything that we encounter, wondering, again and again, how simply being alive is a blessing. ♦

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