

Vedana

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

Vedana means feeling: the pleasant, painful or neutral tone of an experience. It is distinct from contact, which brings an object into awareness, and from craving, which reaches toward or resists what is felt. In dependent origination *Vedana* is the seventh link, between contact and craving. This position gives it a particular usefulness for self-study. A feeling may be unmistakable without telling us what a situation means or which response will serve it best.

In the standard Buddhist Twelve Links order, *Vedana* is the seventh link. It follows *Phassa*, contact, and conditions *Tanha*, craving. H.P. Blavatsky's *Theosophical Glossary* gives the older spelling *Vêdâna* and defines it as "sensation; perception by the senses." *The Key to Theosophy* also lists *Vedana* among the five *skandhas*, the attributes through which personality is formed, becomes conscious of existence, and communicates with the world.

This is important because *Vedana* is not the immortal Self. It belongs to the composite personality, the changing stream of embodied and mental experience. Yet it is not trivial. The way feeling-tone is repeatedly received leaves traces. Pleasant sensations may become habits of attachment. Painful sensations may become habits of resistance. Neutral sensations may become habits of dullness. Feeling passes quickly, but the pattern of response becomes character.

Vedana is practical because it concerns the moment before the mind has built a story. A pleasant taste arises and the mind says, "more." A painful word is heard and the mind says, "enemy." A neutral moment appears and the mind says, "nothing is happening," then wanders into distraction. Yet before these movements harden, *Vedana* is only feeling-tone. The link has not yet become craving.

Feeling is not the whole of emotion. A sustained resentment, for example, includes remembered events, interpretation, intention and repeated attention as well as an unpleasant tone. Naming that entire complex *Vedana* would conceal the very distinctions needed for understanding. The narrower term helps us notice what is simply being felt and what the mind is adding to it.

Professor Iyer gives the psychological key in "The Mahamudra of Voidness". One must confront the confused notion of oneself identified with bodily desire, proclivities toward pleasure, and avoidance of pain. This is the *Vedana* knot. The human being does not merely experience pleasure and pain; the human being builds identity around them.

Self-grasping quickly takes ownership. The body feels pleasure, and the false self says, "mine." The body feels pain, and the false self says, "I am wounded." The heart feels warmed, and the

false self says, “I must possess this source.” *Vedana* becomes bondage not because feeling is wrong, but because feeling is appropriated by the self that craves continuity.

The Voice of the Silence warns the disciple not to tarry in the pleasure-grounds of senses. Pleasant *Vedana* is subtle because it does not appear dangerous. Pain announces itself as trouble, but pleasure often arrives as promise. It says, “stay here,” “repeat this,” “make this last.” The pleasant becomes binding when it is mistaken for the good.

Painful feeling deserves care. The teaching must never become an accusation that someone suffers because they are spiritually deficient. Bodily pain, loss and injury have conditions that cannot be reduced to an inward attitude. The practical inquiry concerns the additional burden of self-grasping where it is present: a demand that pain define the whole person, or that every future moment repeat its story. Relieving suffering and examining that added burden can proceed together.

“The Nachiketas Flame” relates *Vairagya* to freedom from domination by pleasure and pain. In the passage, Professor Iyer discusses their lack of ultimate authority over spiritual identity. This is a contemplative perspective, not a claim that comfort and injury are ethically interchangeable. Compassion still distinguishes what nourishes a being from what harms one.

This is radical because most human beings organize life around gaining pleasure and avoiding pain. Yet two persons may undergo a similar pleasure or pain and draw entirely different meanings from it. The event does not dictate the value. *Vedana* becomes educable when *Manas* stops being hypnotized by the felt tone and begins to ask what truth, duty, compassion, or self-knowledge may be present.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception can begin with an ordinary preference. A volunteer feels disappointed when a group chooses someone else’s proposal. The feeling is real, but its unpleasantness does not prove that the decision was wrong. Remembering the people the project serves creates room to examine the proposal on its merits. The disappointment may remain for a while, even as cooperation becomes possible.

Neutral feeling deserves equal attention. Much useful work offers no immediate excitement: preparing a room, checking a detail, waiting while another person finds the right words. If only the pleasant receives our interest, these quiet occasions of service are overlooked. To recognize a neutral tone without fleeing into stimulation is to discover that meaning need not announce itself as pleasure. Attention can remain available because the task matters.

A pleasant feeling may be received with gratitude instead of grasping. A painful feeling may be received with patience instead of resentment. A neutral feeling may be received with

wakefulness instead of dullness. Each response alters the next link. Feeling does not have to become craving. It can become inquiry, detachment, tenderness, or vow.

The mango metaphor in “The Mahamudra of Voidness” is a perfect *Vedana* discipline. One must become as tender as the pulp of the mango toward the faults of others, feeling with their suffering and pain, and as hard as the mango stone toward one’s own faults. This avoids two errors: sentimental softness toward oneself and harsh judgment toward others.

To feel with the suffering of others is not to collapse into their pain. It is to let painful *Vedana* become compassion without losing discrimination. This is exact compassion: tender enough to feel, strong enough to serve, and clear enough not to turn another’s pain into one’s own drama. *Vedana* is one of the seed-points of Human Solidarity.

Professor Iyer also teaches that the notions of “mine” and “thine” attached to pleasure and pain, joy and suffering, are arbitrary and false. This deepens Universal Brotherhood. My pain is not merely mine; it belongs to a field of suffering shared by countless beings. My joy is not merely mine; it can become gratitude and service.

There is also a responsibility for the setting in which feeling is met. Constant comparison may turn a simple pleasure into anxious competition; attentive companionship may help a painful hour become less isolating. The student can consider what repeated habits encourage, while allowing human responses their complexity. Recollection grows through patient practice rather than through contempt for vulnerability.

The teaching is not suppression and not indulgence. The middle way is lucid recognition: this is pleasant, this is painful, this is neutral. The feeling-tone is seen without immediately becoming selfhood. A space opens. In that space, *Buddhi* may illumine *Manas*.

Vedana is tender because human beings are vulnerable through feeling. They are moved by comfort and discomfort, approval and rejection, beauty and loss, touch and absence. The teaching should not be used to shame that vulnerability. It should help the student hold it wisely. To feel is human. To be ruled by feeling is bondage. To understand feeling is the beginning of freedom.

The final lesson of *Vedana* is that feeling is a hinge, not a master. Pleasant feeling need not become attachment. Painful feeling need not become hatred. Neutral feeling need not become sleep. When *Manas* no longer rushes after pleasure or recoils from pain, *Buddhi* can guide the response. *Vedana* becomes not a prison of sensation, but a delicate place of awakening.

Glossary

Aggregates — The changing factors through which personal experience is analysed; see *Skandhas*.

Atman — The universal Self or spiritual principle; also written *Atma*.

Becoming — Conditioned arising and continuation; *Bhava* is its particular use within dependent origination.

Buddhi — The spiritual soul or vehicle of *Atman* in Theosophy, associated with intuitive discernment and the illumination of *Manas*.

Catenated — Linked in a connected series; used of the causal relations among the *Nidanas*.

Dependent Origination — The Buddhist teaching that conditioned existence and suffering arise through interdependent causes; the Twelve *Nidanas* give a standard twelvefold exposition.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception — Widening understanding to include relationships, circumstances and responsibilities omitted by an isolated personal view.

Ego — A centre of self-reference; Theosophy distinguishes the enduring spiritual individuality from the temporary personal ego.

Evanescent — Passing quickly; transient rather than permanent.

Hinayana — A historical and contested designation for Buddhist teachings seeking liberation; spelled *Hînayâna* in the quotation. Its appearance preserves the source's terminology.

Human Solidarity — Recognition of shared human dignity, vulnerability and interdependence, expressed through considerate responsibility.

Impartite — Undivided; used in the source for the Self beyond the divisions of personal pleasure and pain.

Karma — The law of ethical causation and adjustment; actions and motives bear consequences within a wider order.

Manas — The thinking principle in Theosophy; its higher spiritual individuality is distinguished from the personal ray. Manasic means pertaining to *Manas*.

Nidana — A causal link or condition; the Twelve *Nidanas* describe the arising of conditioned existence. *Nidâna* is a historical spelling.

Personality — The temporary personal constitution, memories and roles of one life, distinguished from the enduring individuality in Theosophy.

Phassa — Pali for contact: the encounter of a sense-base, object and corresponding consciousness; the sixth link in dependent origination.

Rupa — Form or material embodiment; one of the *skandhas* and the form aspect of *Namarupa*.

Samkhara — The spelling used in the Key's list of the *skandhas* for mental tendencies; related to *Sankhara* and *Samskara*.

Samskara — A formation, impression or tendency; its exact function depends on context. *Samskaras* is the plural.

Sanna — Pali for perception or recognition; rendered abstract ideas in the historical passage quoted in *The Key to Theosophy*.

Skandhas — The aggregates or changing factors of personal experience. *Skandha* is the singular; historical Theosophical translations of the factors differ from current Buddhist terminology.

Tanha — Pali for thirst or craving, especially the thirst for continued personal existence in Theosophical exposition; the eighth link in dependent origination.

Transcendent — Beyond a particular field of limits or relations; not simply elsewhere in physical space.

Ubiquity — Presence throughout a field; the cited essay speaks of the widespread reality of human suffering.

Universal Brotherhood — The spiritual kinship of beings, expressed through care extending beyond personal or sectarian boundaries.

Vairagya — Dispassionate detachment; freedom from domination by attractions and aversions, supporting steady practice.

Vedana — Feeling or sensation, particularly the pleasant, painful or neutral tone of experience; the seventh link. *Vedanā* and *Vêdâna* are alternate spellings.

Vinnana — Pali for consciousness, the third link and one of the five aggregates; *Viññāṇa* is the diacritic form. The Key's historical translation gives mental powers.

Voidness — Absence of independent self-existence; a metaphysical and contemplative teaching, not a synonym for mere nothingness.

Yoga — A discipline of integration and spiritual realization; in the cited discussion, the Yoga psychology of Patanjali.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. H.P. Blavatsky, “Nidâna”, *The Theosophical Glossary*, p. 232.

“*Vêdâna*, or sensation; perception by the senses.”

Meditation thought: The Glossary uses sensation and perception for *Vedana*. The narrower Buddhist distinction of feeling-tone helps keep this factor separate from interpretation and craving.

2. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, p. 73.

“There are five *Skandhas* or attributes in the Buddhist teachings: ‘*Rupa* (form or body), material qualities; *Vedana*, sensation; *Sanna*, abstract ideas; *Samkhara*, tendencies of mind; *Vinnana*, mental powers. Of these we are formed; by them we are conscious of existence; and through them communicate with the world about us.”

Meditation thought: Feeling is one factor among the aggregates of experience. A painful or pleasant tone does not by itself describe the entire person who experiences it.

3. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, p. 74.

“This proves to you that while the undying qualities of the personality — such as love, goodness, charity, etc. — attach themselves to the immortal Ego, photographing on it, so to speak, a permanent image of the divine aspect of the man who was, his material *Skandhas* (those which generate the most marked Karmic effects) are as evanescent as a flash of lightning.”

Meditation thought: The passing quality of a sensation need not erase its ethical significance. What is assimilated through an experience differs from the experience’s fleeting material conditions.

4. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume I, p. 39.

“The twelve *Nidanas* or causes of being. Each is the effect of its antecedent cause, and a cause, in its turn, to its successor ; the sum total of the *Nidanas* being based on the four truths, a doctrine especially characteristic of the *Hînayâna* System. They belong to the theory of the stream of catenated law which produces merit and demerit, and finally brings Karma into full sway.”

Meditation thought: Feeling belongs within relations of cause and effect. Observing it is useful because a habitual response is itself one condition influencing what follows.

5. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Voice of the Silence*, p. 6.

“The WISE ONES tarry not in pleasure-grounds of senses. The WISE ONES heed not the sweet-tongued voices of illusion.”

Meditation thought: Pleasure can attract attention without supplying a trustworthy measure of value. Ask whether a pleasing experience leaves one more available to truth and to other beings.

6. R.N. Iyer, "The Mahamudra of Voidness", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 392.

"At a preliminary level and in the course of preparation for that meditation, one must come to grips with the confused notion of oneself that is identified with bodily desire, proclivities towards pleasure and avoidance of pain."

Meditation thought: The inquiry concerns identification with pleasure and pain. It must not be used to deny an injury or to make someone's suffering evidence of a personal fault.

7. R.N. Iyer, "The Mahamudra of Voidness", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 393.

"One must become as tender as the pulp of the mango towards the faults of others, feeling with them their suffering and pain. Yet one must also learn to be as hard as the mango stone towards one's own faults."

Meditation thought: Tenderness toward others is joined to honesty about one's own conduct. The mango image encourages patient responsibility, not harshness toward the fact of feeling.

8. R.N. Iyer, "The Nachiketas Flame", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 373.

"Two individuals, from seemingly identical experiences of pleasure or pain, may come to contrasting conclusions and derive radically different implications. Consider two persons who enjoyed identical dinners, containing ingredients guaranteed to produce an acute stomach-ache, such that both suffered severe gastric pains the next day. Similar facts yield no insights into the diverse meanings that persons might ascribe to their experiences."

Meditation thought: Similar sensations can be interpreted differently. The example separates the felt event from the significance a person gives it, while leaving bodily care fully important.

9. R.N. Iyer, "The Nachiketas Flame", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 373.

"Indifference simply means perceiving no essential difference between pleasure and pain because both arise from compulsive cerebral reactions to sensory stimuli. They are alike devoid of intrinsic meaning for that impartite Self which sustains its own transcendent conception of spiritual growth."

Meditation thought: The passage speaks from the standpoint of spiritual identity. Freedom from domination by pleasure and pain does not make harmful and helpful actions ethically equivalent.

10. R.N. Iyer, "Continuity and Choice", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume II, p. 278.

"The notions of 'mine' and 'thine', attached to pleasure and pain, to joy and suffering, are arbitrary and false."

Meditation thought: Pleasure and pain are not confined to private islands. Remembering their shared human field may turn attention toward companionship and practical relief.

11. R.N. Iyer, "Samadhi Pada", *The Gupta Vidya*, Volume III, p. 270.

"Whilst yoga psychology fully acknowledges the strength of the pleasure principle – the propensity to be drawn towards pleasurable sensations as if by a magnet and to be repelled by painful ones – it denies its relevance to real individuation as a moral agent."

Meditation thought: A strong attraction does not settle what a moral agent should do.

Recollection allows value and responsibility to enter where sensation would otherwise decide alone.

12. R.N. Iyer, "The Pledge of Kwan-Yin", *The Voice of the Silence*, p. 62.

"Where the vow involves a recognition of the ubiquity of human suffering and where one chooses to make one's own suffering meaningful and creative for a larger purpose, the vow has self-correction built into it."

Meditation thought: A vow can give suffering a purpose beyond self-preoccupation. Such meaning must be freely found; it should never be imposed upon another person as the price of receiving compassion.