

Study Guide to MN 46

Mahadhammasamadana Sutta

The Great Discourse on Ways of Undertaking Things

(reading MN 45 first is recommended)

In his teaching, the Buddha often broke down human experience to its basic building blocks. One of the cornerstones for much of human behavior is the feeling tone accompanying experience. In a variety of ways the Buddha tried to highlight the role of feeling tone. For example, he taught that understanding the basic feeling tones (*vedana*) of pleasant, unpleasant and neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant is a key insight on the path of liberation (*sukha-vedana*, *dukkha-vedana*, *adukkham-asukkha-vedana*). This is seen most clearly in the teaching on dependent origination where the presence of feeling tones is the condition for the arising of craving (*taṇhā*) which conditions clinging (*upādāna*) and the arising of suffering. Some of the Buddha's disciples also gave important teachings on *vedana*. In an important passage, the nun Dhammadinnā explains the close connection feeling tones have to passion, aversion and ignorance (MN 44.25). She states:

The underlying tendency to lust/passion underlies pleasant feelings. The underlying tendency to aversion underlies painful feeling. The underlying tendency to ignorance underlies neither-painful-nor-pleasant feelings.

It is not that passion, aversion and ignorance are inherent in the feeling tone, but rather that the unliberated person has the tendency to react to feelings in this way.

MN 46 offers an analysis of human behavior on the basis of the pleasant or unpleasant feeling tone associated with the behavior. Behavior has an immediate feeling tone while it is being done and it has a future feeling tone that comes with the consequence of the behavior. Taking these together the “four ways of undertaking things” are

1. **painful** behavior with **painful** consequences
2. **pleasant** behavior with **painful** consequences
3. **painful** behavior with **pleasant** consequences
4. **pleasant** behavior with **pleasant** consequences.

According to MN 46.10-13, taking into account the consequence of actions is a key component of wisdom. The second element of wisdom is having the ability to then act on this knowledge by avoiding some activities and cultivating others. To be wise, a higher order of consideration needs to be made than the simple avoidance of pain and pursuit of pleasure. Because some pleasant behavior leads to painful consequences, it is important to be able to avoid some pleasures. And because some painful behavior leads to pleasant consequences, it is important to have the ability to endure some unpleasant things.

MN 46 begins with the Buddha assuming that most people have wishes and desires. He does not criticize this. In fact in MN 46.4 he indicates that even a noble disciple of the Buddha has wishes that some things increase and some things decrease. The fulfillment of these wishes is not left to chance but rather is explained as depending

on engaging in and cultivating the appropriate behavior. This is a restatement of the basic karma teaching that our actions have consequences and that we can choose the actions that have beneficial consequences.

Reflections:

1. In your Buddhist practice, when is it useful for you to endure unpleasant experiences? When is it useful to engage in pleasant ones? What pleasant activities are useful to refrain from?

How successful are you at avoiding pleasant activities that bring painful consequences? How well can you endure unpleasant situations that may be beneficial to endure? What approaches and strategies work and don't work for you in avoiding what should be avoided and enduring what should be endured?

Try to expand your understanding of what might be the useful and not useful consequences of certain activities. Can unpleasant situations become beneficial if you find a way to practice with the unpleasantness? What are some of the possible benefits that come if we apply our Buddhist practice to situations that are otherwise not beneficial?

2. MN 46 explains the future consequences of behavior in terms of where a person is reborn. It is common for religions to teach renunciation of pleasure in this life in order to receive some wonderful reward in the next. Do you think this is what the Buddha was teaching? How might the Buddha's teachings provide safeguards from the possible abuses coming from focusing on rewards in the next life?

In thinking about the future consequences of your actions, do you include consideration of the impact it will have in a future life? How can you try to better take into account the consequences in this life?

In the fourfold analysis of "the ways of undertaking things" there is no explicit mention of taking into account the consequences of our actions on others. Do you think this is an omission or that this consideration is implicit? In what ways might it be implicit in the analysis?

Notes:

The term *dhammasamādāna*, which is in the title of this discourse, is a bit ambiguous, partly because of all the possible meanings of *dhamma*. *Samādāna* means taking, taking upon oneself, undertaking, acquiring. *Dhamma* can be translated broadly as 'things', as Bhikkhu Bodhi does in this passage. It can also mean practices, action, or behavior. It can also mean the truth, the lawful patterns of causality, and justice. The meaning of *dhamma* in *dhammasamādāna* is perhaps understood in context of the four options for creating pain or pleasure that are presented in the sutta.