

Study Guide to MN 59

Bahuvedanīya Sutta

The Discourse On The Many Things To Be Felt

A disciple of the Buddha, mindful,
 Concentrated, comprehending clearly,
 Understands feelings and the origin of feelings,
 Where they finally cease,
 And the path leading to their passing away.
 With the passing away of feelings
 A bhikkhu is hungerless and fully at peace.

Samyutta Nikaya 36.1

MN 59 recounts the Buddha's mediation between a monk and a layperson quarreling over his teachings on feelings (*vedana*). The two debated whether the Buddha taught that there are two kinds of feelings or three. In response, the Buddha explained he not only taught both these ways of categorizing feelings, but also classified feelings in other ways as well. He went on to say that if people got attached to one of these ways and didn't accept other ways of categorizing feelings then it would be expected that they would end up fighting over this. In contrast, if they were able to concede to other approaches to understanding feelings then it can be expected that they will:

Live in concord, with mutual appreciation, without disputing, blending like milk and water, viewing each other with kindly eyes. (MN 59.5).

This beautiful description of people living together in harmony is a reminder that the teachings on feelings and on cultivating greater and greater happiness/pleasure should not be taken in isolation of a fuller picture of what the Buddha taught. The main point of the passage is that arguing over theory is often counterproductive.

The Buddha then takes the occasion to describe different forms of pleasure (*sukha*), each one lovelier and higher than the previous. Starting with sensual pleasure, he progressively describes the pleasure born from seclusion (from the five hindrances) that defines the first *jhana*, the pleasure born from concentration belonging to the second *jhana* and so forth through six more states of deep meditative absorption. The Buddha ends by describing a particular form of pleasure/happiness beyond the first eight that is called the "cessation of perception and feeling" Because the latter attainment is called pleasurable even though there is no feelings in the state, the Buddha adds that he does not describe pleasure only:

in reference to pleasant feeling: rather, friends, the Tathagata describes as pleasure any kind of pleasure wherever and in whatever way it is found.

Notes:

1. Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of MN 59.6 uses the same English phrase to translate both *kāma* and *kāmasukha*. The passage may be better understood if they are translated differently:

There are these five strands of sensuality (*kāma*). What five? Forms cognizable by the eye that are wished for, enjoyable, pleasing, likeable, connected with sensuality and leading to passion (*raga*). Sounds cognizable by the ear... Smells cognizable by the nose... Flavors cognizable by the tongue... Tangibles cognizable by the body... These are the five strands of sensuality. The pleasure (*sukha*) and delight (*somanassa*) arising dependent on these five strands of sensuality are called sensual pleasure (*kāmasukha*).

2. As MN 59 states, the Buddha used a variety of ways for describing feeling tones. A very important classification is found in the Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (MN 10.32). Here the common threefold classification of pleasant, unpleasant, and neither-pleasant-nor-pleasant is first listed. This is followed by dividing these three feeling tones into two broad categories, i.e., those that are *sāmisa* and those which are *nirāmisa*. The first literally means "of the flesh" or 'with the flesh.' The second means 'not of the flesh.' Bhikkhu Bodhi translates these as 'worldly' and 'unworldly'. Some translators have translated the first term as 'sensual' and 'carnal'. The second term is sometimes translated as 'spiritual.' The distinction is between those feelings that arise in dependence on the five sense doors making contact with sense objects versus those feelings that arise in connection to meditation and cultivating the path of liberation. The tremendous happiness and pleasure associated with the Buddhist path are *nirāmisa*.

Reflections:

1. The unnecessary quarrel between the monk and the carpenter suggests that we should be careful how we hold the Buddhist teachings. Might there be varied – sometimes even seemingly inconsistent or contradictory – ways of teaching a path to liberation? If so, how do you evaluate different understandings of the Dharma? How do you hold your own understandings? Have you ever quarreled with someone about what the Buddha really taught? How might you disagree with someone while continuing to see them with 'kindly eyes?' How might you resolve the quarrel?
2. What have been the more important or influential experiences of *sukha* that you have experienced? Would you classify these as either *sāmisa* or *nirāmisa*? In what beneficial ways have you been affected by these experiences? Do you have any sense that there may be forms of *sukha* more sublime and excellent than what you have so far experienced?

Further readings on *vedana*: MN 140.23-24. Also the Connected Discourses on Feeling in the Samyutta Nikaya (section 36)