

Martine Batchelor

Meditation Month 2019: Four Practices for a Firm Foundation

Week Three: “Noting Pleasant, Unpleasant, and Neutral Sensations:

Exploring Feeling Tone”

March 15, 2019



Hello. My name is Martine Batchelor, and I am the teacher for this year’s Tricycle Meditation Month. Welcome back to our third week of the four part series of practices for a firm foundation. We are exploring the basics of meditation in order to develop a firm foundation for our daily practice. In the first two videos, we looked at developing mindfulness and compassion through the breath and body meditation and through listening meditation.

How about the homework? Did you try meditative, creative, wise, listening? How was that? Was it helpful? How about listening to sound and the music of life for the second piece of homework? Did you find that helpful?

In week three, we're going to try to develop mindfulness of feeling tone, which builds upon what we have done before. We're going to go back to the breath, the body, and sound, but we're going to add a little element to the mindfulness.

Today, I would like to introduce mindfulness of feeling tones. I don't mean feeling as in anger, happiness, joy, sadness, or fear. I mean feeling tone. It's a tonality that we experience upon contact through the senses. When I hear something, when I see something, when I smell something, taste something, I have a sensation. Even when I think, one moment I don't have a thought and the next moment I have one, so there is a tonality.

Feeling tone refers to the basic tonalities of pleasant, unpleasant, and neither (or neutral for short). Whenever we are in contact through the senses we have this tonality: they really influence our life. We experience a pleasant tonality when we see a chocolate cake or we have a wonderful sunny day—this is pleasant. If we hurt ourselves or if somebody says an unpleasant word to us this is unpleasant. This can greatly influence what we say and what we do. When something very pleasant happens and then it stops, just at the stopping it becomes unpleasant. You might not notice that it's unpleasant, but you might find yourself saying something nasty to somebody who has not done anything. The idea is to become more aware of that aspect of our experience.

It's not a scientific analysis but it's just to observe. This kind of meditation will help to increase the range of our experience. On a range of zero to ten, pleasant feeling generally has to be over five for us to notice it. But for unpleasant feeling, it only has to be minus one on a range from zero to minus ten for us to notice it. This meditation will help us extend the range from zero to ten in terms of pleasant feeling. For unpleasant feeling, this practice helps us see that minus one is not minus five or minus ten.

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The next thing we're going to notice is the fact that it changes. That's where looking deeply and questioning is so important, so we can really notice when we have a pleasant feeling tone. How long does it last? How does it influence me? If I have an unpleasant feeling tone, how long does it last? How does it influence me?

Neither pleasant nor painful feeling, also known as neutral feeling tone, is interesting because if we understand this neutral tone, it can actually be peaceful. If we are neutral and we interpret it as boring, then it becomes unpleasant. The category of neutral is interesting because it can move to pleasant or unpleasant according to how we perceive it. Of course perception can influence tonality. What I like to do in the meditation is to see if I can notice with friendly mindfulness the tonality of experience upon contact, whether it's with the breath, sensation, or sound. Shall we try it out?

Again, find a comfortable position. The back is straight, the shoulders are relaxed, and then first gently bringing our intention and attention to the breath.

We notice the breath coming in, maybe a little cooler, and we notice the breath going out a little warmer. When the breath comes in a little cooler what is the tonality of that sensation or that contact? When it comes out a little warmer what is the tonality of that contact? Possibly fairly neutral. How is it to be with that neutrality, resting our attention on something relatively neutral?

Moving our attention to sensations, let's first focus on the sensation of contact. Maybe noticing the hands resting on each other or on the lap, maybe the feeling of the clothes on the shoulders. What's the tonality of that contact? It might feel fairly neutral. How do I respond or react to that fairly neutral tonality? Then we might move our attention to a sensation, a specific sensation in the body somewhere. It may be a little sensation on the face, a little sensation in the knee or the shoulder. Bringing our attention to that, going inside the sensation, is there a little tonality? Is it a little pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral?

If the sensation disappears does the tonality go with it or does it continue? If the sensation continues does the tonality remain the same?

Now moving our focus to sound, opening to the sound of the world, to the music of life. When we hear a sound what's the tonality of that contact: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral? As the sound goes, does the tonality go with it? If the sound continues, does the tonality remain the same?

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Now turning our attention to thoughts, if we suddenly have a thought, what's the tonality of that contact? If we remember something somebody told us which was kind, what's the tonality of that? If we remember a conversation that was unpleasant, what's the tonality of that? If we are daydreaming, what's the tonality of that? If we are ruminating, what's the tonality of that? When the thought stops or when we come back to the breath, the body, or the sound, does the tonality go with an echo of it?

Now turning toward mindfulness itself. When we are mindful in a friendly way, what's the tonality of that?

Thank you for meditating with me. I hope this was helpful.

For the homework, I would suggest that we work with visual contact, which is something you cannot really do when you sit in meditation with the eyes closed or half closed. In your daily life, whether you are in the supermarket, in nature, or you see people in the street, and you notice the contact of seeing something—a person, a tree, a flower—what's the tonality? If you see it briefly, what's the tonality? If you see it for a longer period of time, does it make the tonality change? Have a try.

Thank you for listening and for your commitment and sincerity. I hope that you can continue with this practice on the feeling tone. Please have a good week. Goodbye.