

Ruth King  
Week 2, *Ungripping the Heart and Mind*  
March 13, 2017  
“Intimacy with Impulses”



Welcome back to week two of practices that unrip the heart and mind. Last week, we spent time practicing how to cultivate calm by using the body and the breath in a body scan, and also by abiding or resting in stillness. This week, I'd like to talk about the practice of intimacy with impulses. What we want to do here is use an awareness of our *vedana*, or our sensations. What we want to do in this practice is work with the second foundation of mindfulness, which is *vedana*, or feeling tones. At the point of any contact that we have with consciousness, we have an experience of either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. What we then tend to do is move quickly into a story we have about what we're experiencing. That often grips us. What we want to practice is seeing what experience we may have prior to that, and how that [experience] actually influences how we become gripped, or even ungripped for that matter.

In the Buddhist teachings, *vedana* is about feeling tones. [It's not about] feelings, per se, or emotions, but what the tone is—the climate, the weather—at the point of contact we make when we hear, smell, taste, or think something. In the teachings, it's either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. We look at the body, it's in the realm of sensation, and we invite. We drop below our story line. We're really asking and looking to see what it is that's happening in the body that informs a certain kind of reactivity or grip-ness. For example, if we're having a thought of anger, we might notice that the body is tight. Instead of calling it anger in that moment, we might simply say “unpleasant, tightness, unpleasant.”

Warmth is pleasant. A fast pulsing heart is unpleasant. Heaviness is pleasant. We want to look at the body's experience and see what's happening. We want to note it, and then we want to name it either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. What this practice does is shift us out of the story and bring us into the body. What we can then begin to notice is the fleetingness of experience and sensation. After a while, we can begin to see that when something feels pleasant, we tend to want it more. When something feels unpleasant, it tends to drive us away. When something is kind of neutral or vague, we don't give it much attention at all.

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The best way to work with *vedana* is through practice. Let's practice together. I invite you once again to take a position of relaxed awareness. Take a moment to connect with the body and breath the way we learned last week. Really take your time to relax in your seat and connect with the body and the breath. Invite the question, "What's happening?" Are you thinking, planning, or worrying? Do you feel edgy? Relaxed? Just notice what's happening. You don't have to notice everything that's happening. This is just a gentle invitation. You're just checking it out. What's happening? As you notice what's happening, you can ask, "Is it pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral?" Just on occasion, as you notice what's happening, ask, "Is it pleasant, unpleasant, or neither?"

[Proceed] without judgment. Keep the body relaxed. Gently whisper, "What's happening? Pleasant? Unpleasant?" Take your time. Through a soft awareness, invite this inquiry. Notice how it changes: experience is impermanent. Allow the changes. Relax. No judgment, just a simple curiosity. What's happening? I've found this practice to be really powerful, mainly because it takes me out of my head and into my body. It also allows me to simplify the static that I'm having and [notice] the habit of trying to figure everything out in my head. Just asking what's happening interrupts that habit of trying to figure something out, or [trying to sustain] the effort that we put into our lives. The core of what grips us is over-efforting, or working unwisely to find ways to be present.

What this does is drop us into an inquiry that's more fundamental. When we can see that it's unpleasant, then it gives us an opportunity to develop a relationship with [that which is] unpleasant. It gives us an opportunity to be present to what's pleasant. Mostly, it gives us a pause before we fly into action or reaction, before we first have made the choice. This is a beautiful practice of being present so that we can make choices and see our impulses and our habits. We can become a bit more intimate with our impulses instead of being driven by them.

What I would like you to do over this next week is to continue this practice of sitting and asking these fundamental questions: “What's happening? Is it pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral?” Then, notice what happens as you continue to give your attention to riding the experience of *vedana*.

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Rollo May says, "Freedom is the capacity to pause between stimulus and response." This is what that practice supports us in doing; [it helps us] pause after the stimulus of contact that we have in this aggregate body of ears and noses and tastes. These are experiences that remind us that we're alive, but we don't have to be habituated in just a ball of habit. We can actually pause to become a bit more still and present to what's driving us so that we can be more choiceful.

The homework is to continue the practice. Also, I find that when I'm in the heat of a disturbance, or if somebody really annoys me, or if I find myself being gripped on the inside by a thought, I can just back off and ask myself, "What's happening? Is this unpleasant? Pleasant? Unpleasant?" Sometimes I just acknowledge, "Oh, this is unpleasant." That's all it has to be. It doesn't have to be the story I have about it. This is a practice you can carry with you in your life, to just be with the simple impulse itself without reactivity. Enjoy your practice and I'll see you next week.