

60.12

Aṭṭha,sata Sutta

The Discourse on the 108 | S 36.22

Theme: The various forms and sets of feelings

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2013, 2023

1 Sutta summary and significance

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY

The **Aṭṭha,sata Sutta** (S 36.22), the discourse on the 108, is a brief but comprehensive listing of the various sets of feelings used in the teachings recorded in the suttas, that is, sets of 2, 3, 5, 6, 18, 36 and 108 feelings. These 7 sets of feelings are classified respectively according to (2) location, (3) quality, (5) spiritual faculty, (6) sense-contact, (18) (mental) exploration, (36) household versus renunciation (secular versus spiritual), and (108) time the past, future and present.

1.2 SUTTA SIGNIFICANCE

The 7 sets of feelings are also listed (without elaboration) in the **Pañcak'aṅga Sutta** (S 36.19). There, as here, we see the Buddha stating that the teaching is *versatile* and can be explained metaphorically (*pariyāyena*) with the usage of different teaching lists. This is the *spirit* of the Dharma, which can be expressed in different wordings and formulas. Hence, we should keep an open mind to use the teaching to see the same true reality from different teachings.¹

This is not to cavalierly claim all religions teach the same thing (they certainly do *not*), although there are some overlapping teachings and truths. However, when we keep an **open mind** of not being caught up with the words and worldliness of religions and dogmas, then “everything is teaching us,” that is, when we are willing and ready to learn. What we learn, or rather realize, here is the *natural* true reality of things, not the private truths and fabricated dogmas of religions for controlling and exploiting followers.

1.3 RELATED SOURCES

In the Aṭṭha,sata Sutta, the Buddha only lists 7 sets of feelings and the types of feelings for each set without elaborating. A similar listing is found in early texts such as the Daṭṭhabba Sutta (S 36.5)² and the **Bahu,vedaniya Sutta** (M 59).³

There is an essay on **the feeling aggregate** (SD 17.3), which should be consulted when studying the Aṭṭha,sata Sutta.

2 Feeling in modern psychology (in brief)

2.1 MODERN PSYCHOLOGICAL VIEW OF FEELING

2.1.1 The American Psychological Association definition (2015)

2.1.1.1 The APA *Dictionary of Psychology* (2nd edition, 2015) defines **feeling** as follows:

¹ Pañcak'aṅga S (S 36.19/4:223-228), SD 30.1.

² S 36.5/4:207 (SD 17.3(5)).

³ M 59/1:396-400 (SD 30.4).

feeling *n.*

1. a self-contained phenomenal experience. Feelings are subjective, evaluative, and independent of the sensations, thoughts, or images evoking them. They are inevitably evaluated as pleasant or unpleasant, but they can have more specific intrapsychic qualities, so that, for example, the affective tone of fear is experienced as different from that of anger. The core characteristic that differentiates feelings from cognitive, sensory, or perceptual intrapsychic experiences is the link of affect to appraisal. Feelings differ from emotions in being purely mental, whereas emotions are designed to engage with the world.

2. any experienced sensation, particularly a tactile or temperature sensation (eg, pain, coldness).

This is probably the key definition of feeling in modern psychology, even of “feeling” in the modern academic understanding. Also, as we see above, there are 2 psychological definitions of “feelings”: (1) is the key psychological definition, and (2) is broad practical or ordinary usage of “feeling.” We will discuss more about (1).

2.1.1.2 Next, we notice that in this modern psychological definition of **feeling** there is an overlap between feeling and emotion: “fear” and “anger” have different “affective tone,” which are “intrapsychic qualities” (they are features of the mind itself). In early Buddhist psychology, feelings (*vedanā*) and emotions (*saṅkhārā*) are clearly different categories.

In early Buddhism, feelings are basically *affective* qualities as reactions to pleasant objects, unpleasant objects or neutral objects. As noted in the Aṭṭhasata Sutta, these feelings can be categorized into 7 sets, that is, by (1) location, (2) quality, (3) spiritual faculty, (4) sense-contact, (5) explorations, (6) household versus renunciation, and (7) time (the past, future and present).

2.1.1.3 The early Buddhist definition of **emotion** (*saṅkhāra*) also differs from the modern psychological view, where “feelings differ from emotions in being purely mental, whereas emotions are designed to engage with the world.” Firstly, in Buddhism, both feelings and emotions arise with worldly engagement, that is, through the senses and through thinking (by the unawakened mind). The term “non-worldly” or “spiritual” (*nirāmisa*)⁴ refers to such experiences when they are free from greed, hatred and delusion (even momentarily).

Furthermore, emotions (*saṅkhārā*) are defined as “karmically potent” acts of the mind, speech and the body, that is, as thoughts, words and acts, respectively. In other words, they tend to be habit-forming and shape our lives and their qualities. Such emotions (lust, hatred, delusion, fear, and so on) keep us in the “loop” of cyclic life (*saṃsāra*). Only acting through non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion, and cultivating them are regarded as “wholesome” (*kusala*)—this is how we evolve into beings liberated from cyclic life and suffering.

2.1.1.4 Another point that seems unique to early Buddhism (not found in modern psychology) is the concept of “**neutral**” **feeling**. Modern psychology sees feelings (as it defines them) as being *emotionally loaded or coloured*, that is, they are either pleasurable or not pleasurable. This is a rather narrow conception of a very rich and engaging experience in our conscious lives.

It is helpful to see that in early Buddhism, **feeling** (*vedanā*) is part of our mental apparatus of learning or *how we learn and know things*. Every waking moment, feelings arise in us through our sense-experiences: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching. Meanwhile, almost at the same moment,

⁴ See SD 55.6 (1.1.1); SD 49.9 (2.2.3).

the mind, too, generates its own feelings **recalling** (through memory) past events, most of which are re-constructed or reinterpreted. The mind also **imagines** things from its present conditioned states about possible futures.

In addition to this mental editing of the memories and imaginations, the mind also tries to “make sense” of present events from how it is conditioned. It is rare that we see our experiences for what they really are (impermanent, etc), but we tend to evaluate or value-add them in terms of *greed*, *hatred* and *delusion*. On account of *greed*, we run *after* the experiences we see as pleasurable; out of *hatred*, we run *away from* experiences we see as not pleasurable; they tend to be coloured by how we recall similar past experiences. When we lack such past experiences with which to “measure” present states, our ignorance or *delusion* makes us ignore them.

2.1.1.5 Essentially, this describes how we act and react *karmically* in our daily lives: we are moved by our latent tendencies (*anusaya*) like puppets on the strings of greed, hatred and delusion. Whenever we react with *greed*, we feed the latent tendency of lust (*rāgānusaya*); when we react with *hatred*, we feed the latent tendency of *aversion* (*paṭighānusaya*); and when we react with *delusion*, we feed the latent tendency of *ignorance* (*avijjānusaya*).⁵

What has been described here [2.1.1.4] is essentially **how we learn things** (or not) and shape our personality and behaviour. We become what we *like*, *dislike* or *ignore*; we create our own karma, and we are our own karma. **Karma** is our intentional thoughts, acts and speech, whether we are conscious of them or not. In fact, in the unawakened, most of such actions are unconscious, habitual and conditioned. We tend to be creatures of habit. Feelings underlie all such experiences; **feelings** are the currency of our sense-experiences and thinking.

2.1.2 Feeling and religion

2.1.2.1 The best-known encyclopaedias of psychology, it seems, do not carry any articles or discussions on “feeling” or “feeling(s).” A rare article by John Ryan Haule⁶ entitled “Feeling” is found in **the Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion** (2010:323 f).⁷ The following critical discussion is mainly based on Haule’s article. Haule opens his article by defining *feeling* as “the conscious registration of an emotion or affect,” and adds that:

Emotion is a physiological state of arousal governed by the brain’s limbic system that places the body in an attitude of fear, rage, lust, disgust, etc. Emotions are *automatic responses* that occur before an individual has a chance to think about what is going on. Feeling occurs as the *conscious recognition* that an emotional state is already in effect.

(Haule, 2010:323; emphases added)

Like the Abhidhamma tradition, modern psychology generally locates the generation and process of *emotional states* in **the limbic region**. Early Buddhism, however, does not locate emotions, or feelings or any mental process in the brain but sees it as a “general” process that occurs with the *whole* bodily state, or to be exact, the whole *conscious body* (*sa,viññāṇaka kāya*).⁸

⁵ On the 3 latent tendencies, see **Sammā Ditṭhi S** (M 9,65-67), SD 11.14; **Anusaya**, SD 31.3 (8.2).

⁶ C G Jung Institute Boston, Chestnut Hill, MA 2467, USA.

⁷ (Edd) David A Leeming, K Madden, S Marlan, *Ency of Psychology and Religion*, NY: Springer, 2010.

⁸ On “the body (endowed with) with consciousness” (*sa,viññāṇaka kāya*): SD 17.8a (12.3); SD 56.1 (4.3.2.2) n.

According to early Buddhism, **emotions** are “psychological states of arousal” that put the mind (not the body, at least not the body alone) “in an attitude of fear, rage, lust, disgust, etc.” The last 2 sentences of Haule’s definition of emotion above, especially when he says “emotions are automatic responses” and that feeling “occurs as the conscious recognition that an emotional state is already in effect,” are only partly true. In some ways, this agrees with the feeling process described in early Buddhism (in the unwholesome or worldly mind), but it can also be restrained or cultivated by the wholesome mind. We will briefly discuss in the next section.

2.1.2.2 Before we go on to see how early Buddhism explains, first, that there are feelings (and how they arise), and then there are emotions, let us read further what Haule says about **feeling** (from the Jungian perspective):

In Jungian psychology, **feeling** is—along with thinking, sensation, and intuition—one of the four “psychic functions” for apprehending the two worlds, inner and outer. While “sensation” (the five senses) determines that something is there before me and “thinking” determines what it is, feeling evaluates the people, situations, and objects that I meet. Feeling establishes that something is attractive or disgusting, benign or threatening, gratifying or enraging, etc; and it does so on a hierarchical basis, determining which object is more lovable or inspiring than another. Because it sets the world in order, Jung calls feeling a “rational” function, along with thinking. Sensation and intuition are “irrational” in that they only register the psychic facts that come before one, establishing no order among them.

(Haule 2010:323)

Haule’s remarks here about feeling come remarkably close to those of early Buddhist psychology, but reading his article as a whole, I must say he is merely trying to interpret Jung’s ideas about feelings and emotions. Even then, there are too many unclear and uncertain ideas about feelings and emotions compared to the practical, cohesive early Buddhist psychological system, at least concerning the two key topics.

“**Sensation**,” for example, is neither defined nor detailed in Haule’s article. Hence, we can take it to mean (1) as a countable noun, “a feeling that you get when something affects your body”; or (2) as an uncountable noun, “a general feeling or impression that is difficult to explain; an experience or a memory.”⁹ Either definition is too broad to be psychologically useful.

In early Buddhist psychology, sense 1 refers to any physical **sense-experience** or sense-based activity (*āyatana*), and sense 2 refers to **emotions** (*sankhārā*), our karmically potent mental reactions to feelings and states. It is important here to note that while the sense-experiences are *felt*, the emotions are the *intention* behind our acts, speech and thoughts. The significance of this psychological structuring of our experiences will be briefly explained next.

2.1.2.3 Haule’s article continues:

In using the rational, ordering capability of **feeling**, an individual may remain self-possessed and take charge of the circumstances that present themselves in the moment. By contrast, **emotion** occurs as a psychological “shock” that lowers the level of mental functioning and narrows the field of awareness. Adequate everyday living, therefore, requires a capacity to use’s [sic] one’s feeling in order to survey in detail the full world-picture unfolding before one without the

⁹ Both defs from *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, 6th ed 2000, 10th ed 2020.

distortion of an overwhelming emotion. A differentiated and dependable “feeling function” is essential for satisfying and nuanced interpersonal relations and for social behavior, in general. (Haule 2010:323)

From Haule’s quote, he seems to be using “the rational” for “ordering capability of feeling,” with which we have some kind of “ordering capability of feeling.” Haule seems to say that feeling helps us “remain self-possessed and take charge of the circumstances ... in the moment.” This, according to him, is the “**feeling function**.” From Haule’s explanation of Jung, it seems that because feeling responses are hierarchical we automatically decide that “this is better than that; that is worse than this ... “

Early Buddhism describes 2 kinds of feeling processes: the worldly or unwholesome process and the wholesome or cultivated process. **The worldly feeling process** lacks “free will”: it is merely our reflex action or conditioned reaction to sense-experiences by way of perception (*saññā*). Hence, how I experience feelings in themselves, they are not karmically potent. For example, when I see, hear, smell, taste, or touch [feel] something unpleasant, this is not, as a rule, due to my karma but to other **natural orders of things** (such as the laws of physics).¹⁰

Feelings arise depending on how we **perceive** them after they have arisen as mind-objects, that is, as sights, sounds, smells, tastes and thoughts. The fact that we do experience something is, as a rule, due to some natural order of things—not always as a result of past or present karma. That we see, hear, smell, taste, feel or think of something may be due to the laws of physics (light, sound, smells, etc), the laws of heredity (like skin colour, being prone to certain ailments), mental processes (the way we are conditioned to think or behave), and to nature itself (the way things are, like gravity, physical causes and effects); karma is only *one*, the 3rd, of these 5 natural orders or things.

2.1.2.4 In some cases, the natural orders may occur to us as a result of some past or present karma. When we do not react negatively—with more greed, hatred or delusion—these situations do not have any serious or significant hold on us; we do not suffer as much as we would if we reacted negatively to them.

Another interesting point here is that many, even most, of our reactions to such situations—arising on account of any of the 5 natural orders—*physics, heredity, karma, psychology* or *natural phenomena*—are reflexive actions or conditioned reactions that are technically “unconscious.” They are, as a rule, morally neutral events; they have no karmic significance or impact on us (at least at the moment of their arising).

Then, we **perceive** (*sañjānāti*)¹¹ feelings *aesthetically* as being pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, but we react no further to them, except to see them simply as seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling [touching] or thinking. This is what the whole habit of **wise consideration** (*yoniso manasikāra*) trains us to do; we regard these experiences as being conditioned and impermanent. In this way, our response to them actually creates wholesome karma, since there is no greed, hatred or delusion. [4.1.1.1]

2.1.2.5 However, for most of us—who have no training in wise consideration (or “Vipassana” in the lingo of sectarian Buddhists)—we are likely to perceive our sense-experiences and thoughts in terms of our **memories**, that is, our perception of the past. Conditioned by memories of past events:

¹⁰ There are the 5 natural orders of things (*pañca,niyāma*), ie, those of (1) heat (*utu,niyāma*, incl the laws of physics), (2) seeds (*bīja,niyāma*) or heredity, (3) karma (*kamma,niyāma*), (4) mental processes (*citta,niyāma*, incl psychic phenomena), and (5) nature (*dhamma,niyāma*), ie nature itself, such as dependent arising, the nature of buddhas, gravity, instincts and tropisms: DA 2:432; DhsA 272; SD 5.6 (2).

¹¹ On this perception (*saññā*), see SD 17.4 (esp 2.2).

- we tend to react to a mind-object that reflects a *good* memory as a **pleasant** feeling;
- we tend to react to a mind-object that reflects a *bad* memory as an **unpleasant** feeling;
- we tend to react to a mind-object of which we have no memory as a **neutral** feeling.

Perceiving in this manner, our reactions are karmically rooted in *greed* or *hatred*, and certainly in *delusion*. We are then likely to *desire* what we perceive as a pleasant experience; we are likely to *reject* what we perceive as an unpleasant experience; and we tend to *ignore* what we have no memory of.

We have now intentionally coloured these perceptions so that they become **negative emotions** (*saṅkhāra*), with the following karmic consequences:

- when we desire what we see as pleasant, we feed the latent tendency of **lust** *rāgānusaya*;
- when we reject what we see as unpleasant, we feed the latent tendency of **aversion** *paṭighānusaya*;
- when we ignore what we see as neutral, we feed the latent tendency of **ignorance** *avijjā'nusaya*.

Although **feelings** play a major role in early Buddhist psychology, it is highly significant to see that they are not depicted in a negative way. In fact, feelings are karmically neutral experiences—that is, when we understand them as conditioned and impermanent, we should not react to them in a negatively emotional manner. Feelings become negative emotions when they are invested with greed, hatred or delusion. Unsurprisingly, then, we have numerous sets of feelings, even up to 108 of them; they play a vital role in early Buddhist aesthetics [4].

3 Abhidhamma on feeling

3.1 COMMENTS ON ABHIDHAMM'ATTHA, SAṅGAHA, 3.2 VEDANĀ, SAṅGAHA (ABHS: BRS 115 F)

3.1.1 Analyses of feeling

3.1.1.1 The Compendium on Feeling opens with this statement:

“Therein [in the Abhidhamm'attha Saṅgaha] compendium of feeling there are first 3 kinds of feeling, namely, pleasant, painful and that which is neither painful nor pleasant. Again, feeling is analysed as fivefold: pleasure, pain, joy, sorrow, and equanimity.” (*Tattha vedanā, saṅgahe tāva tividhā vedanā: sukhā, dukkhā, adukkha-m-asukhā cā ti. Sukhaṃ dukkhaṃ somanassaṃ domanassaṃ upekkhā ti ca bhedenā pana pañcadhā hoti*) (Abhs 3.2).

As we can see here, the Compendium keeps to the suttas in its listing of the kinds of feelings, though this is not as comprehensive as listed in, for example, **the Aṭṭha,sata Sutta** (S 36.22) or **the Daṭṭhabba Sutta** (S 36.5) [1.3].

3.1.1.2 Analyses of feeling. In Abhidhamma, feeling (*vedanā*) is a universal mental factor (*cetasika*), which functions as the experiencing of the “flavour” (*rasa*) or moral quality of a mind-object. Since some kind of feeling accompanies every consciousness (*citta*), feeling serves as an important variable in terms of which consciousness (*citta*) is classified. Here, the Compendium's main concern is to classify the totality of cittas¹² by way of the kind of feeling that arises accordingly.

¹² In Abhidhamma writing, “citta(s)” is the anglicized term for the conscious moment or “mind.”

3.1.1.3 The 3 kinds of feeling. Feeling is here analysed either as threefold or as fivefold. When it is analysed simply in terms of its *affective* quality, it is threefold: pleasant, painful, and neither-painful-nor-pleasant. In this threefold classification, pleasant feeling includes both bodily pleasure and mental pleasure or joy, and painful feeling includes both bodily pain and mental pain or displeasure.

3.1.2 The 5 kinds of feeling (Vism 14.128)

3.1.2.1 When feeling is analysed by way of spiritual faculty (*indriya*), it is seen as being fivefold. These 5 types of feelings are called faculties because they exercise “lordship” or control (*inda*; Skt *indra*) over their associated states regarding the affective mode of experiencing the object.

In the fivefold analysis of feeling, the pleasant feeling of the twofold scheme is divided into *pleasure* (bodily) and *joy* (mental); the painful feeling of the threefold scheme is divided into *pleasure*, *pain* (bodily and mental); and neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, which is identified with *equanimity* or neutral feeling.

3.1.2.2 In the suttas, the Buddha speaks of feeling in various ways [1], such as twofold, as pleasure (*sukha*) and pain (*dukkha*). This is a loose or metaphorical (*pariyāya*) method of analysis, arrived at by merging the blameless neutral feeling in pleasure and the blameworthy neutral feeling in pain.

The Buddha further declares that “whatever is felt is included in suffering” (*yaṃ kiñci vedayitam taṃ dukkhasmiṃ*, S 36.11/4:216). In this statement, the word *dukkha* does not have the narrow sense of painful feeling but the broader meaning of *the suffering inherent in all conditioned things* on account of their impermanence.

3.1.2.3 Pleasure (*sukha*) has the characteristic of experiencing a *desirable tangible* object, the function of intensifying associated states, manifestation as bodily enjoyment, and its proximate cause is the body faculty. In other words, it is some *form* of sense-object (of the body) that the mind delights in.

3.1.2.4 Pain (*dukkha*) has the characteristic of experiencing an *undesirable tangible* object, the function of withering associated states, manifestation as bodily affliction, and its proximate cause is also the body faculty. In other words, it is some form of sense-object that the mind does not delight in.

3.1.2.5 Joy (*somanassa*) has the characteristic of experiencing a *desirable mind* object, the function of partaking of the desirable aspect of the object, manifestation as *mental* enjoyment, and its proximate cause is tranquillity. In other words, it is some form of mental object (especially a thought) with which we feel at peace (at least for the moment).

3.1.2.6 Displeasure (*domanassa*) has the characteristic of experiencing an *undesirable mind* object, the function of partaking of the undesirable aspect of the object, manifestation as mental affliction, and its proximate cause is the “heart-base.”

According to the Commentaries, **the heart** serves as the physical support for all consciousness (*citta*) other than the fivefold sense-consciousness and mental states; they each take their respective sensitivities (functions) as their bases. **The heart-base** is not expressly mentioned even in the canonical Abhidhamma. The closest hint, as such, is found in **the Paṭṭhāna** (the 7th and last book of the Abhidhamma),

which alludes to “that matter in dependence on which *the mind element and mind-consciousness element occur*”¹³ (Paṭ 1.4).

The Commentaries, however, subsequently specify “that matter” to be the core of the heart itself as **the heart-base**, a cavity situated within the physical heart.¹⁴

3.1.2.7 Equanimity (*upekkhā*) has the characteristic of being felt as neutral, the function of neither intensifying nor withering associated states, manifestation as peacefulness, and its proximate cause is consciousness without zest.

4 Early Buddhist aesthetics of feeling

4.1 THE BEAUTY OF THE DHARMA

4.1.1 “Beautiful in its beginning, beautiful in its middle, beautiful in its ending”

4.1.1.1 The Sāmañña,phala Sutta (D 2) records the Buddha as stating that “he teaches the Dharma, good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end” (*ādi,kalyāṇa majjhe,kalyāṇa pariyoṣanā,-kalyāṇa*).¹⁵ This phrase is often explained as meaning that the Buddha’s teaching comprises the 3 trainings—in moral virtue, in mental cultivation, and in wisdom—all of which are good or beautiful (*kalyāṇa*) since they train us in the wholesome (*kusala*). The teaching is also good in the sense of being valid and efficacious at all times: the past, the present and the future.

The phrase *kalyāṇa* is also found in the term *kalyāṇa,mitta*, “spiritual friend,” and its abstract noun, *kalyāṇa,mittatā*, “spiritual friendship.”¹⁶ This is a special term that refers to the “disciplinary” relationship between a teacher (especially a meditation teacher) and his or her pupil. “Disciplinary” here means both in keeping with moral virtue (the Vinaya discipline, for monastics, or the 5 precepts for the laity) and in terms of discipleship (training in the Dharma), that is, mental cultivation and the training in liberating wisdom.

4.1.1.2 In either case—as a description of the good dharma (*kalyāṇa,dhamma*) and as spiritual friendship (*kalyāṇa,mittatā*)—the adjective *kalyāṇa* can also be rendered as “good” or “beautiful,” since what is *good* is also *beautiful*, and both describe those qualities that help to liberate us on the path of awakening. Hence, the Buddha tells Ānanda—who thinks that “half” of the holy life is beautiful friendship—that **beautiful friendship** is the whole of the holy life (that is, the 3 trainings).

Moral training is beautiful in the sense that it allows us to renounce the unwholesome aspects of the body: by not killing, not stealing, and not committing sexual misconduct, we train ourselves to cultivate qualities of boundless love, compassionate charity and joyful contentment. This training is not an end in itself, but forms the basis for **concentration training** (or mental cultivation), that is, the refinement of joy and happiness beyond the bodily senses to a full and pure mental level. The bliss here is profoundly beautiful in that we are simply no longer inclined to bodily or sense-based pleasures; we can, at will, for as long as we like, enjoy dhyanic bliss.

¹³ *Yam rūpaṃ nissāya mano,dhatu ca mano,viññāṇa,dhatu ca vattanti, taṃ rūpaṃ mano,dhātuyā ca mano,viññāṇa,dhātuyā ca taṃ,sampayuttakānaṃ ca dhammānaṃ avigata,paccayena paccayo* (Paṭ:Be 1:4, 7, 9, 10).

¹⁴ See Vism 8.111/256; SD 17.8c (7.2.2.4); SD 56.20 (2.2.2.4).

¹⁵ **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,40.2), SD 8.10.

¹⁶ See **Spiritual friendship: Stories of kindness**, SD 8.1; **Spiritual friendship: A textual study**, SD 34.1.

Even without dhyana (*jhāna*), but with some working level of **mindfulness and awareness** (*sati, sam-pajañña*), we are able to feel and share boundless love, compassion, gladness and equanimity. Although these 4 divine abodes are sometimes called “positive emotions” (since they generate good karma), they are really *beautiful feelings* that naturally inspire us to be kind, compassionate, joyful and peaceful towards others.

4.1.2 Aesthetics as philosophy

Aesthetics, as a sub-discipline of philosophy, is concerned with the nature and expression of beauty, especially in the fine arts. To an extent, it overlaps with Buddhist aesthetics in experiencing or expressing “beauty” by way of *sights, forms, colours, sounds, words, music, silence, smells, tastes, touch and thoughts or ideas*. **Buddhist aesthetics** is able to transcend the senses and the mind. Hence, it is not of the world, but it can well make sense of the world, as well as express ideas that are not necessarily inherent in the world.¹⁷

Aesthetics can mean anything to artists, or academic to art historians, or nothing to an abstract artist.¹⁸ In a short sentence, such an arrogant critic deprived aesthetics from all artists. Fancying himself a revolutionary overthrowing traditional art at its base, he had hardly rippled its surface. He said, “Aesthetics is to artists what ornithology is to birds.”¹⁹ Birds have no idea of ornithology (they don’t need it); an artist is defined by aesthetics.

We could perhaps say something like “an artist creates beauty freely just as a bird flies.” **Buddhist aesthetics**, then, is not some “theory of beauty,” but a state or habit of living a beautiful life that does not desire the unattainable (objects of lust) but works for the attainable (the path and nirvana). However, the activity and state of a Dharmafarer, like the nature of birds, is not bound by an external system devised to categorize or explain things, but fly freely on the wings of wisdom and compassion.²⁰

4.2 PERCEPTION AS AESTHETICS

4.2.1 A feeling for beauty

It was earlier mentioned [2.1.2.4] that “we **perceive** (*sañjānāti*) feelings aesthetically as being *pleasant, unpleasant or neutral*, but we react no further to them, except to see them simply as seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling [touching] or thinking. This is what the whole habit of **wise consideration** (*yoniso manasikāra*) trains us to do: we regard these experiences as being conditioned and impermanent. In this way, our response to them actually creates wholesome karma, since there is no greed, hatred or delusion present.”

This paragraph, in fact, succinctly gives a good (even literal) description of **early Buddhist aesthetics** (or hereon simply “Buddhist aesthetics”).²¹ The word **aesthetics** is rooted in the modern adaptation of Greek *aisthetikos*, “of or pertaining to *aistheta*, things perceptible by the senses, things material (as

¹⁷ See Leonard Koren, *Which ‘Aesthetics’ do you mean?: ten definitions*, Point Reyes: Imperfect Publ, 2010:8.

¹⁸ See eg Richard Woodfield, *The Art Bulletin* Sep 2001; review of Michael Kelly (ed), *Ency of Aesthetics* 4 vols, NY: Oxford Univ Press, 1998. [[researchgate](#)]

¹⁹ Barnett Newman (1905-1970), an American artist critically regarded as one of the major figures of abstract expressionism, and one of the foremost color field painters, said this to Harold Rosenberg at the gallery reception in New York, 1948 (cited in B J Rush, “Aesthetics—Gone with Gregor? Letter to the editor,” *Studies in Design Education Craft & Technology* 6,2 1974).

²⁰ See SD 60.6 (2.2.1.2).

²¹ For a brief discussion on **Buddhist aesthetics** as the beauty of moral values: SD 59.14ab (1.2.3). See also: SD 46.5 (2.1.2); SD 50.16 (1.1.1); SD 60.1c (9.8.2 (6)). On Japanese Buddhist aesthetics, see SD 60.1c (19.6).

opposed to *noeta* things thinkable or immaterial), also ‘perceptible, sharp in the senses’; from the verb stem *aisthe-*, ‘feel, apprehend by the senses’.”²²

Modern conceptions of aesthetics have, of course, outgrown its etymological roots. However, since we are examining Buddhist aesthetics, this is an excellent historical background to begin with.

4.2.2 Beauty as feeling

Buddhist aesthetics, based on our understanding of the suttas and practice of Dharma, refers to the qualities or the study of qualities of what is beautiful (*subha, sundara*) and what has the attributes of pleasantness (*piya*), radiant joyfulness (*pasāda*), zest (*pīti*), happiness (*sukha*), peace (*santī*) and so on. Such qualities may be inherent in a person, a teaching or text, an object, in nature,²³ or a mental state. In terms of our own experience of *the aesthetic* or action that is *aesthetic*, it is said to be “good” (*puñña, kalyāna*) or “wholesome” (*kusala*) or “beautiful” (*kalyāna*).

Although we speak of the “good,” “wholesome” or “beautiful” as an experience or action, it is really a **feeling** (*vedanā*) that may arise through our senses or our mind. Such feelings may further be sense-based, hence more likely to be “sensual,” even “sensuous,” or they may be mental or supramundane. Although the sensual and sensuous forms of aesthetic feelings may arise from good karma, by the very nature of such feelings they are impermanent, and feed our desire for more.

Hence, Buddhist aesthetics also has a spiritual level, which is more than being “good karma”; it has the capability of liberating us from the sense-based level to the mental level, where we directly experience goodness and beauty. On this mental level, these wholesome states often work as the conditions for a calm and clear mind that is able to see fully and directly into true reality. This is the highest sense and purpose of early Buddhist aesthetics for those who seek or walk the path of awakening.

Hence, we may theoretically speak of such aesthetics as being instrumentally good, or intrinsically good, or both, or neither. Such differentiations, however, will make no sense of aesthetics when they are experienced by the liberated mind (that is, the Buddha or any arhat).

— — —

²² *Oxford English Dictionary* 2nd ed ver 4.0 2009:206 sv aesthetic.

²³ The Pali for “nature of things” is *dharmatā*; the natural physical world is *loka, esp okāsa,loka*, “the spatial world” [on the 3 worlds: SD 15.7 (3.5.1 (2)); SD 17.6 (3.1.3.2)]; reality, esp true reality, is *yathā,bhūta* or *tathatā* (“suchness”).

Aṭṭha,sata Sutta The Discourse on the 108

S 36.22

1 Bhikshus, I will teach you a Dharma presentation by way of a **metaphor of the 108**. Listen to it.

2 And what, bhikshus, is the Dharma presentation of the metaphor of the 108?

- | | | |
|---------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|
| (1) The metaphor of | the 2 kinds of feelings | has been taught by me. |
| (2) The metaphor of | the 3 kinds of feelings | has been taught by me. |
| (3) The metaphor of | the 5 kinds of feelings | has been taught by me. |
| (4) The metaphor of | the 6 kinds of feelings | has been taught by me. |
| (5) The metaphor of | the 18 kinds of feelings | has been taught by me. |
| (6) The metaphor of | the 36 kinds of feelings | has been taught by me. |
| (7) The metaphor of | the 108 kinds of feelings | has been taught by me. |

3 (1) And what, bhikshus, are **the 2 kinds of feelings**?²⁴

The bodily and the mental.

kāyikā ca cetasikā ca

These, bhikshus, are the 2 kinds of feelings.

4 (2) And what, bhikshus, are **the 3 kinds of feelings**?²⁵

Pleasant feeling,
unpleasant feeling,
neither unpleasant nor pleasant feelings.

*sukhā vedanā
dukkhā vedanā
adukkha-m-asukhā vedanā*

These, bhikshus, are the 3 kinds of feelings.

5 (3) And what, bhikshus, are **the 5 kinds of feelings**?²⁶

The pleasure faculty,
the pain faculty,
the joy faculty,
the displeasure [sorrow] faculty,
the equanimity faculty.

*sukh'indriya
dukkh'indriya
somanass'indriya
domanass'indriya
upekkh'indriya*

These, bhikshus, are the 5 kinds of feelings.

6 (4) And what, bhikshus, are **the 6 kinds of feelings**?²⁷

Feeling born of eye-contact,
Feeling born of ear-contact,
Feeling born of nose-contact,
Feeling born of tongue-contact,
Feeling born of body-contact,

*cakkhu,samphassajā vedanā
sota samphassajā vedanā
ghāna samphassajā vedanā
jivhā samphassajā vedanā
kāya,samphassajā vedanā*

²⁴ See SD 17.3 (4.2).

²⁵ See SD 17.3 (4.3).

²⁶ See SD 17.3 (4.4).

²⁷ See SD 17.3 (4.5).

Feeling born of mind-contact,
These, bhikshus, are the 6 kinds of feelings.

mano,samphassajā vedanā

7 (5) And what, bhikshus, are the 18 kinds of feelings?

The 6 explorations accompanied by joy,
The 6 explorations accompanied by displeasure,
The 6 explorations accompanied by equanimity.

cha somanass'upavicārā

cha domanassupavicārā

cha upekkhūpavicārā

These, bhikshus, are the 18 kinds of feelings.²⁸

8 (6) And what, bhikshus, are the 36 kinds of feelings?²⁹

The 6 types of joy of the household life,
The 6 types of joy of renunciation,
The 6 types of pain of the household life,
The 6 types of sorrow of renunciation,
The 6 types of equanimity of the household life,
The 6 types of equanimity of renunciation.

cha gehasitāni somanassāni

cha nekkhammasitāni somanassāni

cha gehasitāni domanassāni

cha nekkhammasitāni domanassāni

cha gehasitā upekkhā

cha nekkhammasitā upekkhā

These, bhikshus, are the 36 kinds of feelings.

9 (7) And what, bhikshus, are the 108 kinds of feelings?³⁰

The 36 feelings [§8] in the past,
The 36 feelings in the future,
The 36 feelings in the present.

atītā cha-t-tiṃsa vedanā

anāgatā cha-t-tiṃsa vedanā

paccuppannā chat-t-tiṃsa vedanā

These, bhikshus, are the 108 kinds of feelings.

This, bhikshus, is the Dharma presentation by way of a **metaphor of the 108**.

— evaṃ —

231216 231220 240327 240411

²⁸ See **Saḷ-āyatana Vibhaṅga S** (M 137,8/3:217-219), SD 29.5. Further, each type of feeling becomes sixfold in terms of the 6 sense-objects. See also SD 17.3 (4.6).

²⁹ See SD 17.3 (4.7).

³⁰ See SD 17.3 (4.8).