

# You Are Not Your Feelings

*or Growing Up, Phase II*

December 25, 2015

Joel Stevens

# You Are Not Your Feelings

## *or Growing Up, Phase II*

*Now, one who says, 'Feeling is my self,' should be addressed as follows: 'There are these three feelings, my friend — feelings of pleasure, feelings of pain, and feelings of neither pleasure nor pain. Which of these three feelings do you assume to be the self?' At a moment when a feeling of pleasure is sensed, no feeling of pain or of neither pleasure nor pain is sensed. Only a feeling of pleasure is sensed at that moment. At a moment when a feeling of pain is sensed, no feeling of pleasure or of neither pleasure nor pain is sensed. Only a feeling of pain is sensed at that moment. At a moment when a feeling of neither pleasure nor pain is sensed, no feeling of pleasure or of pain is sensed. Only a feeling of neither pleasure nor pain is sensed at that moment. Now, a feeling of pleasure is inconstant, fabricated, dependent on conditions, subject to passing away, dissolution, fading, and cessation. A feeling of pain is inconstant, fabricated, dependent on conditions, subject to passing away, dissolution, fading, and cessation. A feeling of neither pleasure nor pain is inconstant, fabricated, dependent on conditions, subject to passing away, dissolution, fading, and cessation. Having sensed a feeling of pleasure as 'my self,' then with the cessation of one's very own feeling of pleasure, 'my self' has perished. Having sensed a feeling of pain as 'my self,' then with the cessation of one's very own feeling of pain, 'my self' has perished. Having sensed a feeling of neither pleasure nor pain as 'my self,' then with the cessation of one's very own feeling of neither pleasure nor pain, 'my self' has perished.*

*Thus he assumes, assuming in the immediate present a self inconstant, entangled in pleasure and pain, subject to arising and passing away, he who says, 'Feeling is my self.' Thus in this manner, Ananda, one does not see fit to assume feeling to be the self.*

Buddha

Like many children, I loved water and swimming. When I was young, a friend of ours had a pool, so naturally I begged to go as often as possible. On one of those happy summer days that my mom took me, after some endlessly entertaining underwater acrobatics, I came up for air. Unfortunately for me, there happened to be a bee inhabiting that particular spot on the surface of the water, and I was promptly rewarded with a sting to my eyelid. As you might imagine for any young child, my reaction was loud and traumatic—I was pretty sure my world was going to end, and for several minutes, it really felt like it had.

Later, as an adult, I was playing as a bassist in a jazz trio. The venue had an outdoor patio looking over the hills of Austin, which was particularly nice at sunset. After finishing “All Blues”, I reached down to take a sip of my beer (compliments of the house). In another unfortunate happenstance, a bee had decided to take his own drink! Mid-swallow, I was alarmed to feel movement in my mouth and, very quickly, a burst of pain. After successfully removing the bee from my mouth, I soon realized that my discomfort was not yet over. A bit of oral exploration later, I discovered that the stinger was still firmly lodged in my tongue. Of course, as soon as I began to pull it out, even more of the toxin was released. Needless to say, it was not a very pleasant experience; however, I knew that the pain would pass, so after a bit of quiet cursing, we moved on to the next song and finished the set.

What was the difference between these two incidents? Why was the first a seemingly earth-shattering event and the second a fleeting bit of pain that left me with a memorable story? As we mature from children to adults, we almost universally come to the conclusion that most physical pain is not a significant

life-event—we no longer react to it in the same way we did as children. **In other words, we understand that we are not defined by our physical sensations**; instead, they are simply passing experiences of the body.

This same realization is not commonly applied to emotions, and particularly those that are negative. In the midst of anger or sadness, we typically identify ourselves as those emotions—we feel that we **are** that emotion and express it as such (e.g., “**I am sad**” or “**I am angry**”). While we experience them, it is hard to even remember not feeling that way or imagine that they will end. Indeed, we may often prolong or amplify the feelings by telling ourselves stories about what is happening.

Imagine a friend dismisses you abruptly, or perhaps you overhear a colleague disparaging your work—for almost anyone, feelings of hurt or anger instantly arise. Even worse, we might add to these negative emotions by thinking, “How could he have done that to me?”; “She must not like me anymore”; “I don’t deserve this”, and the like. However, there is no reason for us to self-identify with the emotions we feel, in the same way that we do not identify with the temporary physical sensations we experience. For example, if we stub our toe, we know that the pain will pass, and our identity is not wrapped up in that physical sensation. The same can be true for emotions: compare the stubbed toe to the hurt feelings—is either a new permanent aspect of our lives? The painful sensation of the stubbed toe mostly goes away after a few minutes, and the tenderness is usually gone in hours or days. In the same way, absent rumination feeding our emotional pain, our unpleasant feelings will soon dissipate.

As an experiment, take a moment to remember the last time you were upset and how long the original feelings actually lasted; in most cases, it probably was not all that long. You may even have trouble remembering what happened the last time you were upset! And, if you were upset for a long period of time, were you continuously thinking about what how you felt or replaying the event over and over in your mind?

The next time you are feeling sad or upset, consider approaching it the same way you might approach a minor physical mishap: think, “I’m experiencing sadness, but it will pass” in the same way that you might think to yourself, “My toe hurts, but it will be better tomorrow”. Thus, rather than despairing in a seemingly never-ending emotion, we can understand that it is temporary. We can also choose not to prolong or amplify the feeling by telling ourselves stories about the emotion itself, the injustice of its cause, or its ramifications in the future. Remember the advice the sage gave to the king seeking wisdom, “Whatever happens, before you call it good or bad, think ‘This too shall pass’. That way, you will always be at peace.”

**December 25, 2015**