A survey of the use of the term vedanā (“sensations”) in the Pali Nikāyas

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For my parents, Ivor and Patricia Salkin.

… When the mind’s free
The body’s delicate.

*King Lear* III. iv.11-12
Acknowledgements

Many people have made this thesis possible. I owe a great debt to all my teachers and to all those who helped me in diverse other ways.

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Statement of Originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any University, or which has been previously submitted for any degree or diploma. It contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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Sean Salkin
**Abbreviations used in this thesis**

The abbreviations of the titles of Pali texts are those adopted by the *Critical Pali Dictionary*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CPD</td>
<td><em>Critical Pali Dictionary</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>MW</td>
<td>M. Monier Williams, <em>Sanskrit-English Dictionary</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>PED</td>
<td><em>Pali Text’s Society’s Pali-English Dictionary</em></td>
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Introduction

This thesis takes as its starting point certain statements made by the meditation teacher S.N. Goenka, of which the following is typical:

[W]hatever arises in the mind, the Buddha discovered, will be accompanied by a physical sensation. Hence, whether the meditator is exploring the mental or the physical aspect of the phenomenon of “I”, awareness of sensation is essential.

This discovery is the unique contribution of the Buddha, of central importance in his teaching. Before him in India among his contemporaries, there were many who taught and practised sīla [morality] and samādhi [concentration]. Paññā [wisdom] also existed, at least devotional or intellectual wisdom: it was commonly accepted that mental defilements are the source of suffering, that craving and aversion must be eliminated in order to purify the mind and to attain liberation. The Buddha simply found the way to do it.

What had been lacking was an understanding of the importance of sensation. Then as now, it was generally thought that our reactions are to the external objects of sense—vision, sound, odour, taste, touch, thoughts. However, observation of the truth within reveals that between the object and the reaction is a missing link: sensation. The contact of an object with the corresponding sense door gives rise to sensations; the saññā assigns a positive or negative valuation, in accordance with which the sensation becomes pleasant or unpleasant, and one reacts with craving or aversion. The process occurs so rapidly that conscious awareness of it develops only after a reaction has been repeated many times and has gathered dangerous strength sufficient to overpower the mind. To deal with the reactions, one must become aware of them at the point where they start; they start with sensation, and so one must be aware of sensations. The discovery of this fact, unknown before him, enabled Siddhattha Gotama to attain enlightenment, and this is why he always stressed the importance of sensation.¹

¹ S.N. Goenka, The Discourse Summaries, Talks from a Ten-day Course in Vipassana Meditation,
In this striking statement Goenka gives paramount importance to sensations, which is his translation of the Pali term *vedanā*. This thesis is an exploration of the use of the term *vedanā* in the Pali Nikāyas. The first chapter focuses on passages in which *vedanā* features in descriptions of practices which lead to liberation from suffering. The second chapter is an extension of the first, studying the use of the term *vedanā* in passages dealing with the causal sequence which has profound soteriological significance, the *paṭicca-samuppāda* (“dependent origination”).

The third chapter looks at passages in the Nikāyas which deal with mental and physical aspects of *vedanā*. Goenka places great emphasis on the role that bodily sensations play in the meditation technique that he teaches:

> Vipassanā means a special kind of vision: observation of the reality within oneself. This is achieved by taking as the object of attention one’s own physical sensations. The technique is the systematic and dispassionate observation of sensations within oneself. This observation unfolds the entire reality of mind and body.²

This chapter examines texts from the Nikāyas which put *vedanā* in physical and mental contexts. It also places this issue in the broader context of descriptions of physical and mental aspects of other phenomena in the Nikāyas. Some attention is paid in this chapter to conflicting views of various Pali commentaries on these passages.

The fourth chapter surveys passages in the Nikāyas which highlight *vedanā* in their descriptions of the workings of kamma (Skt. karma).

An important preoccupation of this thesis is an examination of passages in the Nikāyas in which Pali terms related to *vedanā* play significant roles, in particular, the terms *vedayita*, *vedaniya* and the verb *paṭi-saṃ-vid*. In the second chapter we see how the verb *paṭi-saṃ-vid* seems to stand in for *vedanā* in certain presentations of the *paṭicca-samuppāda*. In the

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² *Igatpuri, India, Vipassana Research Institute, 1997*, p.58.
third chapter, it is noted that these terms occur in passages which describe combinations of mental and physical events. They also play an important role in descriptions of the working of kamma, as seen in the fourth chapter.

A number of modern writers on the texts of the Nikāyas have commented on the importance of the role of vedanā. Thus Nyanaponika, translating vedanā as “Feeling”:

Through actual experience it can thus be confirmed that the ever-revolving round of Dependent Origination (pañicca-samuppāda) can be stopped at the point of Feeling, and that there is no inherent necessity that Feeling is followed by Craving. Here we encounter Feeling as a key factor on the path of liberation, and, therefore the Contemplation of Feeling has, in Buddhist tradition, always been highly regarded as an effective aid on that path.³

To my knowledge, however, none of these writers has ever followed up comments like these with any kind of study of this term as it is used in the Nikāyas, let alone thorough, detailed and systematic study that the above statement would seem to call for.⁴

The writers who have made comments like these have strong connections with the Theravada tradition.⁵ Those western scholars who have written on the texts of the Pali Nikāyas from a critical point of view almost invariably make no indication that vedanā could have any special significance. Their preoccupations lie elsewhere. Commenting on the increasing number of monographs concerned with Buddhist thought in the last twenty-five years, R. Gethin notes that

by far the majority gravitate towards those aspects of the Nikāya thought-world that immediately capture the imagination of the mind nurtured in the traditions of modern western philosophy: conditioned arising (pañicca-samuppāda), the absence of a substantial self (anattā), and nibbāna. In these scholars have seen reflections of

⁴ Nyanaponika’s book The Contemplation of Feeling, referred to in the above footnote, is not, as its title may imply, a thorough study of the use of the term vedanā in the Pali texts, but a translation of the Vedanāsamyutta of the Sañññatthakathā, as well as some extracts from other suttas, with a brief introduction.
⁵ See for example those cited at the beginning of the second chapter of this thesis.
some of the classic preoccupations of western philosophy such as causality, the logical contradictions of difference and identity involved in the notion of change, the concept of the person and personal identity, and the metaphysics of the absolute. I do not wish to suggest that one is mistaken in seeing such reflections, but only that reflections can be misleading. The point is that in Buddhist thought discussion of patīcca-samuppāda, anattā and nibbāna is not pursued as an end in itself but subordinated to the notion of the spiritual path, which is hardly true of the discussion of causality, change and metaphysics in western thought. The danger is that we rather hastily translate the Nikāyas into terms that are more congenial to us without having first understood the original language.⁶

The important passages on vedanā in the Nikāyas come for the most part as part of descriptions of practices which in the terms of these texts lead to a cessation of dukkha (“suffering”). Western scholars have somehow overlooked the importance of the role vedanā, an importance which my survey of the use of this term clearly shows it has.

This thesis focuses on the texts of the Nikāyas. In her recent study, S. Hamilton explains why she chooses to use these texts as the focus for her research. Her comments apply also to my own situation:

I ... wanted to see what the earliest Pali material had to say on the subject before it was significantly adapted or elaborated as the Theravāda tradition developed. This approach is not so much intended to suggest that there is a pre-Theravāda form of Buddhism as to look at the primary texts without reference to how the tradition has interpreted them in later material.⁷

She notes that she is aware that this approach is “somewhat controversial,”⁸ and in a later study she discusses the dangers of “synchronic essentialism”⁹:

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⁸ Ibid., p.xxx.
In effect, this is synchronically analysing a large, ancient, and undatable collection of texts without taking into account how they in all probability changed over a period of time. While one can thus come up with what seem to be the essentials of what they say, it may be that because the material developed incrementally there was never a time when the tradition itself viewed it in quite that way. I do no see a way around this problem ... Having said that, given the way the Pali Buddhist texts were preserved and compiled I do not see how anyone could treat the *Sutta Piñaka* other than broadly synchronically. Any attempt to take into account a diachronic perspective would immediately render one vulnerable to far more serious criticism ... 

In this thesis I also treat the texts of the Nikāyas synchronically. For the most part I have only examined the Nikāyas, but there are a number of places where I have included some discussion of the views of the Pali commentators on certain passages.

One faces many difficulties when dealing with the texts of the Nikāyas. In discussing and analysing them, I am constantly reminded of some comments made by R. Gethin:

> We are faced not so much with a single finished canvas as with a bewildering array of sketches and detailed studies which it is impossible to take in at once. Their subject is seen from different angles and in various aspects; it is viewed from near and afar.

My approach has been greatly influenced by the great German Indologist Wilhelm Halbfass. His sensitive approach to Indian texts has always struck me as worthy of imitation, though I fear that I often fail to fulfil the task that he outlines:

> ... it is our first responsibility to understand the Indian statements. But this in itself is a complex and elusive process. It requires, first of all, much learning, familiarization and assimilation. We have to be able to translate the texts into our own languages; we have to listen to them as carefully and patiently as possible; we

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have to be aware of their traditional cultural context and background. But we also have to be aware of our own background... Mere familiarization and assimilation are not enough; this has to be supplemented by conceptual analysis and clarification. We are not just dealing with words.

The relationship and transition between familiarization and clarification is complex and elusive.\(^\text{12}\)

The term *vedanā* is usually translated as “sensation” or “feeling”. For the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen to use this term untranslated.

My translations of Pali passages in this thesis are heavily indebted to the translations of Pali texts done by the Rhys Davids, I.B. Horner, F.L. Woodward, K.R. Norman, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Ñāṇamoli and Maurice Walshe.