

A Dog Walk and the Mechanics of Craving

Steve Lovinger March 2026

You're out walking your dog, working on leash manners. He pulls forward. There's an immediate tightening in your hand, a slight disruption in your stride. Something in the body registers: not good.

Before any thought forms, there is already movement toward correction—stop this, fix this, make it different.

This is the sequence the Buddha pointed to, playing out in real time.

In the Pali Canon, *vedanā* (feeling tone) refers not to emotion, but to the immediate affective quality that accompanies every moment of experience. Every contact—sight, sound, touch, thought—arrives already colored as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This is not abstract. It is continuous, fast, and largely automatic.

And it matters because it is here—at feeling tone—that craving (*taṇhā*) arises.

Your dog settles and begins walking beside you. The leash loosens. There's a subtle ease in the body. Without any deliberate intention, there is a quiet inclination: stay like this, keep this going. The same mechanism that produced aversion a moment ago now produces grasping. Different direction, same underlying process.

This is not a decision. It happens before any narrative about what is “good” or “bad.” The body registers, and the system moves.

What makes this easier to see on a dog walk than on a meditation cushion is that the sequence is compressed and physical. The pull, the correction, the release—they make visible what is usually too fast and too subtle to notice.

But the most important part of this process is not the obvious swing between pleasant and unpleasant.

It's what happens when nothing in particular is happening.

When your dog is walking well and you're no longer actively training him, there is no strong pleasure or pain. There is neutral feeling tone. And here, awareness often fades. The mind drifts—to plans, memories, fragments of thought. You continue walking, but in a very real sense, you are not there.

This is not accidental. Neutral experience does not trigger attention. It does not interrupt the system. It allows conditioned patterns to run without friction.

This is where *avijjā*—ignorance—operates most quietly and most effectively.

Pleasure and pain at least announce themselves; they can be noticed. The neutral passes unmarked, carrying the mind along on the current of habit. It is here, in the unremarkable, that the automatic nature of experience is most complete.

And most of life is like this.

The sharp peaks of pleasure and pain are occasional. The majority of experience is neutral, uneventful, and therefore largely unseen. If awareness only activates at the extremes, then most of life unfolds on autopilot—shaped by conditioning, but unobserved.

Your dog is running essentially the same process. Forward movement carries a pleasant tone; correction carries an unpleasant one. His behavior is governed by these shifts. The difference is not in the mechanism, but in the possibility available to you: the capacity to notice the sequence as it happens.

Not to stop it immediately. Not to control it. But to see it.

That moment of seeing—the brief gap between the arising of feeling tone and the automatic movement of craving—is small and often unstable. But it is enough.

That gap, however narrow, is where practice begins.

And it is most available not in the dramatic moments, but in the ordinary ones—the loose leash, the steady stride, the part of the walk where nothing in particular is happening.

You might notice it the next time you're out walking.