

Contemplation of the Body

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People have a lot of resistance to contemplating the body as a topic of meditation. Some of them complain they already have a negative body image so why focus on the negative side of the body? Others say that body contemplation is a way of fostering aversion to the body, which is an unhealthy mental state. Others say they're not all that attached to their bodies, so why should they have to focus on the body? Or they'll refer to that story where the Buddha recommended contemplation of the body to some monks and then went off into the forest for a couple of months. The monks got so disgusted with their bodies that they started committing suicide, while others hired assassins to kill themselves off. When the Buddha came out of the forest, he found the community of monks was a lot smaller than had it been before, so he called the remaining monks together and told them to practice breath meditation instead. Some people cite this as proof that contemplation of the body is an unhealthy practice.

However, the fact that people resist this meditation so much shows that it's important. It's threatening, for it gets right to the core of our attachment. There's nothing in the world we're attached to more than our own bodies. That's why people have so many excuses for not focusing right here.

If you don't focus right here, what's going to happen? You're going to maintain your deep attachment to the body. It's not going to go away on its own. Some people think they can short circuit the process of attachment by going straight to their sense of self, thinking that by cutting out the sense of self they won't have to work on contemplation of the body because the work they're doing goes deeper, straight to the root. But attachment is like a vine: You can't find the root until you take hold of the nearest branch and trace it back. You can't really get to the root of your attachment to self until you've looked at where your most blatant day-to-day, moment-to-moment attachment is: right here at the body. The least little thing happens to your body and you can't stand it. A little bit of hunger, a little bit of thirst, too much heat, too much cold sets you running off. A little bit of illness and you go running for medicine. If that's not attachment, what is?

So it's important that we look right here. Otherwise we stay attached to the suffering the body is going to bring us. As we all know, it grows old, gets sick and then dies. If you don't think that's going to be suffering, then go spend some time with some very old people, some very sick people, with dying people. See how much they suffer. When I was back at my father's house two weeks ago, I

helped every day with the daily ritual of turning him over so my step-mother could take off his diaper. While she was doing that, I got to see what an old body with bed sores looks like, how an old body functions and doesn't function, how much suffering it brings when it's helpless, not only for the person in the old body but also for the people taking care of him. I also saw what it's like to be old and not to have trained the mind. The mind at a time like that is totally out of control because as the body gets weaker, your energy falls. The thoughts that come barging into the mind can take total control if you haven't developed the ability to counter them.

Then there are all the indignities of aging. It's as if the human body is designed to undercut any sense of pride we might feel. Other people have to wipe you; other people have to turn you over; whatever sense of privacy you used to have about your body gets thrown out the window. You can't control your urinating, can't control your defecating. Everything goes out of control. And it's good to contemplate this, not to develop a sense of aversion but to look at the universality of this bodily condition and to develop a sense of *samvega*, seeing how much effort goes into maintaining the body and then where all that effort ends up. If that's where you're looking for happiness, you're looking in the wrong place. That's what this whole contemplation is about. If you don't learn how to give up your attachment now while you're still healthy and strong, it's going to get harder and harder as the body weakens, as the body grows old.

So we have to develop a sense of *pasada*, a sense of confidence in the contemplation of the body. There's no way you're going to get over your attachment to the body if you don't look at it very, very carefully. The reason we're attached is because we don't look carefully. This is what the contemplation of the 32 parts of the body is all about: contemplating the body in terms of the elements, for that's all it is. What have you got here? Just physical elements. Wind, or energy. Fire, warmth. Water, coolness. And earth, solidity. Do they belong to you? No, they're all part of the world. As the saying goes, "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust." As long as we're alive, we take in the elements as we eat and we expel elements as we defecate, and then when we have to give the whole thing up, it all goes back into the elements as we die. So where are you going to find true happiness there? After all the effort that goes into the body, is the body true to you? Sometimes it does what you want but a lot of times it doesn't. When it starts getting old and grows sick and dies, it doesn't ask your permission. You'd think that after all the effort you put into it, it would show some gratitude but it can't. That's not its nature.

We're the ones who've been animating this thing. One of the images in the Canon is of the body as a puppet. We pull the strings for a while and then they snap; the pieces break down. It's good to develop a sense of dispassion and disenchantment for the body, to develop a sense of *samvega*, so that when it breaks down *we* don't break down, too.

We chant the 32 parts of the body so often that the chant has become almost automatic. You can do it without even thinking about what you're saying, so stop and focus on each of the 32 parts, one by one. Stop and visualize each one as you go down the list. Start with hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh. As you visualize each part, also try to have a sense of where exactly in your body the part is located. When you get to the skin, you realize you've got the whole body all surrounded right there. There's skin all around you, on all sides. Flesh is all over the place, with the bones at the core. Go through the various parts until you hit one that really strikes you, really hits home. Remind yourself, "Oh yeah, there's one of those in this body, too." And it really hits you how incongruous it is. You have a liver, a gall bladder, a large intestine, 24 hours out of the day. You've been carrying this thing around with you all the time— "this thing" being whichever part gives you a sense of how odd or disgusting or unclean or peculiar this body is, whichever part hits you in any way that's helpful for contemplating. Here you've been taking so much care of this, looking after it so much, and this is all you've got to show for all that effort.

We're not bad-mouthing the body, we're just looking at it for what it is. Ultimately we want to learn how to use it simply as a tool without attachment, but to counteract the attachment you've got to go very far in the other direction to counteract all the hype, all the slick advertising slogans you've used to sell yourself on the body: about how important it is, how essential it is, all the good things that come from looking after it very carefully, doing all the yoga, giving it exercise, eating all the right foods. You can do those things and yet still it's going to age, grow ill, and die.

One of the meditation techniques Ajaan Fuang liked to teach when people developed a sense of light in the body was to have them visualize themselves within that light. Sometimes they didn't even have to will it. The image would appear on its own right there in the light. They could see themselves sitting right in front of themselves. Then he'd say, "Okay, think about what the body is going to look like five years from now, then ten years, fifteen, twenty, on up to when you die. What is it going to look like when you die? Then if you keep it around the second day after you die, the third day, fourth day, fifth day: What will it look like then? After seven days, cremate it. Watch the cremation flames. And then what's left? Just some ashes and bones, and then over time the bones themselves will ultimately turn to ash. You've got nothing but a pile of powder. Then it gets blown away." Then he'd have them run the film backwards, reassemble the whole thing until you got back to the present moment to reconnect with the fact that what you've got right here is inevitably headed in the direction you just saw.

The benefit of all this is that when there's the least little delusion about the body, this contemplation helps to cut right through it. Then the desire for an ideal body, any thought that, "Other people may get old but I'm going to do yoga, I'm going to eat right, and I'm not going to get old as fast as they do": You

see how deluded and futile it is. This is not to encourage you *not* to take care of the body, but simply to watch out for any delusion that gets built up around it, so that when aging, illness, and death come you're more prepared.

Another reason to contemplate it is to ask yourself: Aging, illness, and death are coming – have you attained the state of mind that's going to be free from suffering when they arrive? If you haven't, how much time do you have? You don't know. So get to work right now. When the urge comes to cut short your meditation, remember this: How much more time will you have to meditate? Have you gotten to where you want to go? After all, this is the end of the story line for all of us. Aging, illness, and death: This is where it's all headed. You've got to be prepared. Otherwise you'll lie in bed hallucinating when you get old – seeing strange dogs in the corner and people committing suicide out in the yard – because the fact of your being old, the fact of your approaching death, is just too much for you to think about, too much for the mind to handle. The mind starts blocking things out. When it blocks things out in that way, it heads toward delusion. It tries to run away as much as it can from the unpleasant things, but you can't run away from them. They're right there. You have yourself trapped. The only way to get out of this trap is to dig down into the mind and uproot your attachments. That's where your hope lies.

When the Buddha points out the negative side of things, it's never just to stop at the negative side. It's to point you toward the Deathless. It's to remind you as a warning: This is the way things are, so what are you going to do to stay happy in the face of how they are? Only the Deathless can give you a secure refuge at a time like that. We like to think that life will come to a nice point of closure where the loose ends get tied up, where everything gets settled, as at the end of a movie or a novel, but that's not what happens. Everything just unravels, falls apart. Things don't come back together and resolve themselves nicely. There's a huge dissonance at the end of life as things trail off every which way. That's how the body comes to an end.

The question then is: Will the mind go the same way as well? We have the choice. This is our opportunity – the practice – so we contemplate the unattractive side of the body to develop a sense of *samvega*, to encourage us to practice and dig deeper. As the Buddha said, mindfulness immersed in the body ultimately leads to the Deathless if you do it right. If you do it wrong and develop a sense of aversion like the monks in the story, then – as the Buddha advised them – go back to the breath. That will help dispel the aversion in the same way that the first rains of the rainy season dispel all the dust that has filled the air during the hot season.

But that doesn't mean you stop doing contemplation of the body. It simply means you have to learn how to do it skillfully, so that the sense of *samvega* is always there, inspiring a sense of *pasada* in whatever way will give you some release, provide the escape, so that – as the sutta says – you'll be happy even when ill, happy even when aging, happy even when you die. But because our

attachment to the body is so strong, we need strong medicine to counteract it. Body contemplation is not something you do once every now and then. It's something you have to do repeatedly. You have to keep coming back to this theme because it's the only thing that will keep you sane, the only thing that will provide real release.

If you find yourself resisting this practice, look into that resistance to see exactly what it is. It's usually a disguise for your attachment. The body isn't the problem; the attachment is the problem, but to deal with the attachment you've got to focus on the object where the attachment holds on very tight. When you really look at it, you see that the body's really not much, it's not worth much, and yet your attachment builds up so many narratives, so many desires around it.

So this is a topic of meditation you need to have close at hand at all times because these attachments come up in all kinds of ways at all times. You want to be ready for them, on top of them. As the body continues doing its thing – it wears down here, wears down there, this illness comes up, that illness comes up – you'll be prepared.

In Thailand they have the tradition of printing books at funerals, and in the beginning of each book there will usually be a little biography of the person to whom the merit is dedicated. A lot of the best Dhamma books in Thailand are the ones printed at funerals, so as you read these Dhamma books you can't help but look at some of the biographies. They all follow the same pattern. The person was doing well, had a happy life, wife, husband, children, whatever. Then after a while he or she started to develop a particular ailment, maybe a little bit of kidney problem, a liver problem, maybe a heart problem. At first it didn't seem too serious, the medicine took care of it, but after a while it became more and more chronic, more and more troublesome, ultimately to the point where doctors couldn't do anything. They just had to throw up their hands, and although they did their best, the person died.

And it's ironic: The human mind has the tendency to think, "Well, that's them. Somehow I'm different." But you're not different. Look at yourself; look at all the people around you. What disease will strike down the person next to you? What disease will strike down that person over there? What disease do they already have inside them that's ultimately going to do that? What disease is inside you? The potential is already there, doing its work.

One of the contemplations I'd frequently do in Bangkok, as I was riding a bus, would be to remind myself that "All the people in the bus have a funeral ahead of them. There's going to be a funeral for this person, a funeral for that person, a funeral for that person over there. It'll hit all of them. And me, too." And it's funny: You might think that this sort of thinking is pessimistic or sad, but it's not. It's liberating. It's a great equalizer. You don't get tied up in the particulars of liking this person or not liking that person, being worried about this or that issue in your life. You know it's all going to end in death. And that

thought frees you to focus on things that really *are* important, like the whole issue of attachment.

Try to see this practice as liberating, because it is. If you appreciate that fact, you find you get more and more mileage out of it. If you have the right attitude toward contemplation of the body, it can take you far. It can provide a lot of freedom even in the midst of aging, illness, and death, in the midst of all the indignities and pains and problems of aging, illness, and death, for it helps point you in the right direction, to the part of the mind that is free.

The last time I saw Ajaan Suwat, shortly before his death, he mentioned that his brain was beginning to malfunction, that it was giving him all sorts of weird perceptions. But he added, "That thing I got through the meditation, though, that hasn't changed; it's still there," which is why the suffering of the body didn't weigh on his mind, why the weird perceptions produced by the brain didn't deceive him. He showed that it's possible not to suffer in the process of growing ill and dying. And when something like that is possible, you really want to aim all of your efforts in that direction. As one of the chants says, don't be the sort of person who later regrets that you didn't take advantage of the opportunity to practice when you were still healthy and strong.