

The Meaning of the Body

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Everything in life is fabricated. It's all put together. And it doesn't just fall together on its own. A lot of effort goes into putting things together. And because we have to put so much effort into life, we want to make sure that our effort is well directed, our energy is well spent. Otherwise you can waste whole lifetimes of a lot of effort, a lot of hard, hard work, and have nothing really to show for it.

As the Buddha pointed out, the best use of our efforts is to find those spots where the whole fabricated system opens out to something unfabricated. Everything else that's fabricated he said to look at as means. Even our intermediate goals along the path are means to a further end, so we have to learn to look at them just as that, as means. Even our relations with other people should be regarded as means to this higher end.

Now, this would sound selfish and calculating if it weren't for the fact that our goal is one that gives no harm to anyone at all. Look at those reflections on the four requisites. Just the fact that you're born with a body means that you're a big consumer of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. So one of the kindest things you can do for anyone is to get yourself out of the system. Think of all the suffering that goes into keeping you fed and clothed and sheltered and making sure your health stays good – all the work from the plants on up: the people who have to grow the plants, the people who have to buy the plants, transport the plants that so you have food to eat. Someone once traced a sweatshirt from Uzbeki cotton, through Iranian mills and South Korean factories, and finally showing up in a Gap warehouse in Kentucky. And that's just clothing. It goes all over the world a couple of times before it gets to you, just to meet your need for protection against the elements. The fact that you have this body means that you're constantly consuming and that a lot of work goes into meeting the body's needs.

So the issue is how to get the best use out of the body, because someday you're going to have to throw it away. If you don't let go of it nicely, it's going to push you out, and before you go you'll probably have to put up with disease and all the other problems that come as you begin to lose your grip: This part of the body stops functioning, that part stops functioning, you grow incontinent.... So you want to learn how to look at the body not as an end in and of itself but as a means, as a tool in the practice leading to a happiness beyond the body.

If you expect too much happiness simply from having a body, you're making unrealistic demands on it. It's the same with relationships. If you're expecting a relationship to provide you with all the happiness you want in the world, it's

going to be a difficult relationship. Often, subconsciously, that's the kind of relationship we have with our own bodies. So learn how to look at the body in its true nature so that you're not surprised when it grows ill and does funny things as it grows ill.

Once, when I was in Thailand, I was one of a group of monks visiting a man in the hospital. He had developed liver cancer and didn't know how much longer he was going to live, so he wanted to make some merit. That's why we went. Unusually for his generation in Thailand, he'd been a fitness freak and had been very proud all the way up through his fifties that he'd stayed slim and trim while all of his friends had gotten paunchy. We talked about how he should meditate, but he kept complaining about how ashamed he was that his stomach had bloated up from the liver cancer and that he was no longer in good shape. He couldn't focus his mind on the breath, all because he had developed unrealistic expectations about the body's potential for health. But if you learn to expect that the body's going to grow diseased no matter how well you care for it, disease is not such a shock or a problem when it actually comes.

This is one of the reasons for that contemplation on the 32 parts of the body — to realize there's the potential for all kinds of stuff to happen in the body, to realize that that's the body's nature. As long as you latch onto it as yours and develop pride around it, if you look at its health as a goal in and of itself — whether through exercise or natural foods or whatever else — you're setting yourself up for a problem. But if you see it simply as a means to a higher end, you're in a lot better shape.

So when you find the mind growing concerned about the body — and many times it's amazing, as your life gets more and more simplified as a meditator, how you can get more and more obsessed with the body, making sure that it's healthy, making sure it's getting the right food and medicines — you have to develop a sense of proportion around those issues so that you can focus on using the body for other things. After all, it's one of the foundations of mindfulness, one of the frames of reference. You have to learn how to be on friendly terms with it. It's funny: We contemplate, "Filled with all sorts of unclean things," and at the same time, "Be friends with the body." But that's an important part of being friends with people: being very clear about their shortcomings so you don't demand too much out of them, and at the same time gaining a clear sense of where their strengths actually lie.

And the body *does* have a lot of strengths. It's a good place to stay. As long as you're alive you can take it as a frame of reference. As the Buddha said, it's one of the ways of creating an island for yourself. As he was about to die, he told his monks, "You can't depend on the Buddha. You can't depend on the person of the Tathagata, because like every other person his body is going to have to go." So he reminded all of his followers to make themselves an island. He said, "How do you do that? Take the body in and of itself as your frame of reference, ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with regard to the world."

That's one of the four ways of creating your island. In other words, you take the body just as it is, as you're immediately experiencing it. And one way of doing that is to stay with the breath coming in, going out, being with the sensation of the breath.

Or you can analyze the 32 parts of the body. Or the elements of the body: the warmth, which is the fire element; the motion in the body, which is the wind element; the cool and liquid sensations, the water element; and the solid and heavy ones, the earth element. Try to bring them into a balance, as a way of keeping yourself anchored in the present moment.

One of the reasons we do this is because there are not that many narratives around these things. The breath has one narrative: It's in and it's out, it's comfortable and it's not. That's it. Not much of a narrative. And it's a great dissolver for the narratives the mind spins for itself.

Once the mind spins its narratives, it snares itself, like a spider caught in its own web. Someone once said that the universe isn't made out of atoms, it's made out of stories. That may not be true of the physical universe, but the universe of our lives is certainly made out of stories, and often they're oppressive stories, stories that create a lot of suffering for ourselves and for the people around us. And yet we allow ourselves to get caught up in them.

A good way to cut through those narratives is just to stay with the sensation of the body in and of itself here in the present moment. This helps get you out of the narratives so that you can realize how unreal they are. At the same time, you see all the effort that goes into those narratives. And what do you get out of them? A lot of times it's suffering. Some narratives are useful, but the important point of this practice is that you put yourself in a position where you can choose which narratives you're going to get involved with and which ones you're not. Otherwise you're subject to everything the mind spins out.

So whatever way you have of making yourself comfortable with the sensation of the body in the present – working with the breath, working with other parts of the body, working with the elements – regard that as your island, as your safe haven outside of the narratives. That way the mind has a foundation. Once it has a foundation, it's not knocked over by things. Events in the world can go past you, they can go through you, as long as you're not latching onto things.

The sense of the body can provide a larger context for all your experiences of the world. Once you have this sense of being here in your foundation, then the experiences of the world are just sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations, all contained within this context of the body. This is not to deny that they have reality, but look, for instance, at your experience of color: How do you know that the sky is actually blue out there the way you see it? What's "blue" about the frequency of the light waves scattered by the molecules in the air? The "blue" is all in your brain's reactions to the impulses sent in by the eyes, that's all. It's something experienced in the context of the body. All the objects of the senses are experienced here in the context of the body. When you realize that, it helps

make this context a lot stronger; the foundation gets more deeply set. It's more all-encompassing, less likely to get knocked over by things.

So the body is good grounding for concentration practice. It's also a good object for insight practice, developing insight into the whole issue of which actions are skillful, which ones are not; which mental qualities lead to suffering, which mental qualities lead to the end of suffering; which assumptions pile on suffering, which assumptions are part of the path. The word "*sañña*" has as one of its meanings "assumptions," the way you label things.

For example, there's the way you label pain. Some of the ways you label it cause it to build up, make it more and more of an issue. Or you can label it in other ways that cut through the issues. One way of dealing with pain – once the mind settles down and can actually look at pain and not feel threatened by it – is to ferret out, when you have a feeling of pain, exactly which sensations are the pain sensations and which sensations are the body sensations – again, the four elements: solidity, warmth, coolness, movement.

We tend to glom the whole thing together, but when you start taking it apart and seeing it as specific, separate sensations, you begin to see how fleeting pain is, just like pleasure. The actual sensations of the body are more lasting, and the pain sensations come and go, come and go, come and go, sometimes in very quick succession. Even in a part of the body that seems to be nothing but a mass of pain, you can start ferreting out the different sensations to see which sensation precisely is the pain there and which are other sensations – heat, solidity – that have somehow gotten glued to the pain by your labeling. If you label them in a different way, they get unglued. Instead of your hip or your back or your leg being a whole mass of pain, you realize there are just these fleeting sensations of pain together with other fleeting sensations. This makes pain a lot less threatening. It also shows you the power of your perceptions, that what you thought was a given was actually something you had glued together yourself. This makes you want to turn around and look at the whole process of labeling things in the mind in other areas as well.

So in all these cases you're using the body as an aid in the practice, which is aimed at pursuit of true happiness. If you're looking at the body as a goal in and of itself, it's going to disappoint you – *big time* – but if you learn to use it as a tool, the happiness that results as you use it wisely gets more and more solid, more and more secure. As you get more self-reliant in this way, you lean less on other people. Your efforts produce more happiness both for yourself and for the people around you because you spend less time weighing everyone down with your unnecessary burdens.

So developing a balanced attitude toward the body is a very important part of the practice. And to develop that balance we have different tools: Some tend to emphasize the shortcomings of the body; others, the importance of the body. Instead of saying that you like some tools and don't like other tools, remember that all the tools have their function, they all have their time and their place. The

more tools you master, the better off you are because you have tools for any situation – whatever comes up.