

Bodies & Minds Outside

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When describing the various ways of developing or establishing mindfulness, the Buddha talks about being focused on the body in and of itself, internally, externally, or both. And the same with feelings, mind, and mental qualities: You can focus on them either internally, externally, or both. Internally, it's pretty obvious what he's talking about: your own experience of body, feelings, and so forth. But what about externally? If you believe that mindfulness means simply being aware, how are you going to watch other people's feelings or mind states? Actually, though, mindfulness means keeping something in mind. And that means that you keep in mind that other people are experiencing their bodies, feelings, and mind states as well. This then becomes a very useful instruction in that it reminds you to compare what you've got with what other people have, and there are lots of different ways you can benefit from this kind of contemplation.

For instance, with the body: You reflect that your body is made out of the four properties. And it's the same with other people's bodies. I remember when I was young, I used to think I had a special relationship to my body. We were on good terms. I took care of it and I thought it would be nice to me in return. But as you get older, you realize that your body is there not because it wants to be, or because it's happy to be there. After all, it's just made out of the food you ate. You took it over. When it's going to do its body thing, it's just going to do its body thing. No matter how well you care for it, no matter how wonderful the food or how good your exercise program, your body is going to age. It's going to grow ill and it's going to die, just like everyone else's. This helps give you a realistic check on your relationship to your body, or what you can expect out of it.

But it also helps to reflect that if you think about where you'd like to be reborn, there's going to be another body. And it's going to have the same problems that this one does. No matter how good things get—say, you decide you want to be a bodhisattva—you have to come back and be born again and again and again, and you have to eat again and again, and you have to find clothing and shelter, all of which places a huge burden on other people and other beings. So it gets you thinking: Maybe the best thing would be to go to a formless realm. Okay, but in the formless realms—if you get there—it's very difficult to do any kind of contemplation. So you've got to come back to the form realm again, and to the problems of having a body again. The best thing is to get out.

So this kind of reflection is both a good equalizer and a good inducement to samvega.

As for your body image, it's good to equalize that, too. Try that reflection on the 32 parts of the body to think of what you've got. The Buddha always advises that you start with your own body first, and then think about other people's bodies: the same 32 parts, and more. The 32 parts are just for starters. You can ask yourself, which one of those parts would you like to put up here on the altar? Which one would you like to see on a plate? Which one, if it's liquid, would you like to bathe in? Well, none of them. Everybody else's is the same. If you have an especially high regard for how you look, think about what's inside. If you have a low regard for how you look—and we have a lot of that in our culture because of the unrealistic body images that we see in the media—it's good to realize that with all those beautiful bodies, all you have to do is just take off the skin, and you wouldn't be able to look at them. So this reflection is a good equalizer.

I was talking to some Dhamma magazine editors the other day and mentioning that if you have a low body image or negative body image, this kind of analysis can actually be really good for you in that it reminds you that everybody else has just the same parts you have. Those editors had never heard the idea before, which tells you a lot about American Dhamma.

So reflection on bodies inside and out is meant to be an equalizer and to give you a sense of samvega. Not to say that the body is bad—just that it's not the sort of thing you want if you're looking for something beautiful. However, it is something to look for if you want a tool to practice with. After all, when you're sitting in meditation, what's doing the

sitting? The body. When you focus on the breath, you're focusing on the body. When you practice jhana, you fill the body with pleasure and rapture so that you can settle down comfortably in it. When you do walking meditation, you've got to use your body. To listen to the Dhamma, you need the ears. So you realize that the best use for this body is to practice the Dhamma. If you ever aspire to another lifetime, you want a body that's able to practice the Dhamma. But to keep these priorities clear, you have to strip away any idea that the body's worth lies in looking good. Realize that that's a major distraction, and contemplate hard to counteract any tendencies in the mind that tell you otherwise. Otherwise, they'll sneak in and take over.

That's the body.

As for feelings, you reflect on the fact that you have feelings of pleasure, pain, and neither-pleasure-nor-pain. You love pleasure and you hate pain. Then you reflect on the fact that other people have the same pleasures and pains. Here again, the reflection acts as an equalizer and as a spur to samvega. On the one hand, it helps to equalize your sense of compassion and goodwill. You realize that if your happiness depends on other people's suffering, they're not going to stand for it. You can't say, "Excuse me, this is my happiness, and so you'll just have to let me continue enjoying it because it's so special." They'll say, "This is my suffering. It's special, too. I don't want it." This is an equalizer in that it makes you realize that your happiness forces you to take other people's happiness into account.

But the same reflection can be used to induce samvega. You realize that wherever you're going to be reborn, there's going to be pleasure, there's going to be pain. There are heavens where it's exclusively pleasant, but then when you leave those heavens, you come back down to pain. And sometimes it's really hard. The higher you go, the harder you fall. I've told you about some of Ajaan Fuang's students who were extremely difficult people. Nothing was ever good enough for them. And his comment was that they were devas in their previous lifetimes. They still hadn't adjusted to the fact that they were human beings again.

Being a deva and having all that pleasure is no guarantee that it's going last forever. Sometimes it makes it harder to come back. So again you can take this reflection as motivation to practice really seriously, to see if you can go beyond that.

As for mind states, they entail the same sort of reflection. On the one hand, it's an equalizer. Whatever you're experiencing in your mind, other people are experiencing the same sorts of things. And what they're experiencing, you've experienced before. This can help with compassion and empathetic joy. There's that passage where the Buddha talks about seeing people who are extremely wealthy and realizing you've been there before. When you see people who are extremely poor or ill, you've been there before as well. This helps to equalize things to counteract resentment or pride.

But this reflection can equalize things in another way. You can think about people who are faced with the same mental problems that you have: the mind when it's depressed, the mind when it's scattered. All the great meditators of the past and the present have had just exactly the same kinds of problem. Yet they were able to get past them.

In the same way, when you're sitting with pain, realize that other people have sat with pain, too, and yet they were able to keep sitting with it. What did they have that you don't have? They had persistence. Where did they get that? It wasn't that they were born with it. They developed it. You can develop it, too. This way, the reflection on other people's minds can lift you up. When you hear about people sitting long hours of meditation, you say, "Why can't I try that, too?" When you run into pain, you have to realize they ran into the same pain. What did they do? They must've done something. The fact that someone has set an example like this opens your mind to possibilities that you wouldn't have thought of before. As the Buddha said, without him as our admirable friend, we wouldn't have thought of the path. But the fact that he's there as an example, and the noble disciples are there as examples, opens our minds to the possibility that maybe we can follow the path as well. This kind of equalizing helps to inspire you to greater heights.

Reflection on other people's mind states is also a good reflection for fairness. When you see other people acting on their unskillful mind states, it gives you a chance to see what you

look like when you act on yours. It's not a pretty sight. For example, we all have a tendency to want to straighten other people out. We want this person to be that way and that person to be this way. But when other people try to straighten you out, how do you feel? The Thais call this putting other people's heart in your heart, and your heart in theirs: in other words, realizing that what you feel is what other people feel. If you ever want to straighten anything out, well, you've got your heart here that needs straightening out first.

And so focus right here—because this is where you really can do the work.

This is where all this reflection on bodies and feelings and mind states outside has to come back to: to what you're doing with your body, your feelings, and your mind states. These are the things you're responsible for. But by casting your thoughts out in that wide net for a while, you get some perspective on what you're doing right here. If you do it skillfully, it can really be an aid in the practice.

So don't neglect this part of the meditation, because it really can help your motivation, it can help you develop the right attitudes, and help you think of possibilities you may not have thought of before.