

The Body Doesn't Care

March 25, 2019

I went down for a blood test this morning. In the waiting room, there was a big TV screen alternating bits and pieces of TV shows with advertisements for the blood test company. One of the advertisements had a woman reading a letter that was supposedly from her heart.

The idea was that the report on her blood test was a message written from her heart, telling her she had to get her life in shape and how much the heart wanted her to live long enough to see her grandchildren graduate from school and get married. And I kept thinking, “Your heart doesn’t care at all about your grandchildren, or about how long you live.” It just pumps away when the conditions are right. And when the conditions are not right, it doesn’t ask permission. It doesn’t send a letter saying, “Goodbye, it’s been a nice life—a nice time together.”

Your heart doesn’t care. It gets clogged up with cholesterol; it doesn’t care. It gets healthy; it doesn’t care. It just does its thing. We’re the ones who care. And we latch on. We like to think that we have a special arrangement with our bodies. Other people’s bodies get sick? They’re not in good shape. We take good care of our bodies, so we think the body owes us something, is grateful, and will do things for us in return. But it doesn’t. It knows nothing at all.

It’s good to think about this. It’s one of the reasons why we recite that chant so often on the different parts of the body. This is all the body is. And what does it mean? What does your liver mean? What do your tears mean? Some of these things mean something to you. But in and of themselves they don’t mean anything.

And yet it’s because of our concern for the body, our attachment for the body, that they have meaning, and a lot of other things have meaning for us as well. The things we want in order to keep it good looking, the things we want in order to keep it comfortable, well fed, well sheltered: They have meaning for us simply because of the body. If the body weren’t hungry, food wouldn’t be attractive at all. What is this: muscles of animals, plants growing in the dirt? It’s because the body needs to be fed that we find these things attractive.

So it’s good to step back from your attachment to the body to realize how many of your other attachments depend on it, and how meaningless it is in and of itself. This doesn’t mean the body’s no good at all. After all, without the body, we

couldn't practice. But when you can see *that* as the essence of the body—the good you can do with it—that's an important shift.

Otherwise, we're like those people I read about in Salt Lake City. There's a company there that figured out a way to freeze-dry you when you die to keep your body the same forever once it's dead. There are people signing up, and someone went to ask them, "Why are you doing this?" One person said that she'd been putting so much energy into keeping her body fit that she didn't want to see it go to waste after she died. But, what meaning does that have? Either you're gone—in which case, it's just a dead body hanging around—or you hang around the body yourself, which means you can't go on to a better life.

Either way, attachment to the body drags you down and creates burdens for other people, too. So the question is, "What do you do with the body?" Well, you do good with it. That's the essence of the body. The Buddha talks about finding the essence in your body, meaning that you learn how to practice generosity, you use the body to learn about the Dhamma, you use it to practice virtue and meditation. This is where you can find something of essential worth inside the body.

We had the question the other day at the Q&A, "What is the essence of the teaching?" The essence of the teaching is release. Release can be found through the practice as we do it with the body. In fact, they say that release is actually touched at the body, which means that it's a total experience. It's not just an idea; it's a total experience. So as we sit down to meditate, sitting here with our bodies, remind yourself of what's actually good about the body. What's good about the body is that you can create a sense of well-being through the breath. Then, as you get to know the breath, you get to know the mind.

There have been some people who've asked, "Why do you focus on the breath? After all, when you die, the breath is going to end, and where will that lead you?" Well, if all we learned about was the breath, then we would be in trouble. But the fact is that, as you're getting the mind to stay with the breath, the breath is like a mirror for the mind. You begin to see things in the mind you wouldn't have seen otherwise. In particular, when you follow the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation as they relate to the processes of fabrication, you see how the way you breathe has an effect on how you experience the body. Then you see how your perceptions and feelings around the breath, as the Buddha says, fabricate the mind. And the way you talk to yourself as you remind yourself of these instructions is going to fabricate the way you experience both body and mind.

So these processes of fabrication are what you're getting to know. And when you see the processes of fabrication, get really sensitive to them and understand

them, that's when you can learn to go beyond them. If you're not sensitive to them, you'll continue to mistake fabricated things for something that's reliable and that you can hold on to forever. Well, there are no eternal fabrications. If you're not sensitive to what's actually going on, you say, "Well, it seems sturdy enough to me." After all, you've got this awareness that seems to go from moment to moment to moment that's always there. That seems to be something solid and reliable. But the Buddha says, "No, that's fabricated, too." When you learn that lesson, you've learned an awful lot that will hold you in good stead while you're alive and as you die.

So when you approach the body in the right way, you can get some genuine good out of it. As for what remains, you can put it aside. As the Buddha says, when you've understood fabrication and let go of it to the point where you've seen the true Dhamma—in other words, you've had your first glimpse of the deathless—that allows you to face the death of the body with a lot less fear because you realize the death of the body doesn't touch the deathless. This is one of the reasons why we practice letting go so much—because of something we gain in return.

Look at the duties with regard to the four noble truths. The duty for the second noble truth, the cause of suffering, is to abandon it because it's when you abandon the cause that you can solve the problem of suffering. Look at the third noble truth: That actually is the abandoning, where you successfully abandon the craving. But there's an extra duty there on top of that, which is to be very clear about what's happening and to verify it for yourself that this is what you're doing and that the end of suffering is the result. So you need to do two things: Let go and be aware at the same time.

This is precisely why the path is effective because it's basically factors of letting go together with factors that develop qualities of alertness, awareness, concentration, and discernment so that you can really see and appreciate what's happening—to verify for yourself what's happening as you let go. It's not simply letting go, letting go, and that's going to be enough. You have to be alert to what you're doing as you let go because you're going to let go in stages. If you let go of everything all at once, that would include letting go of the path, and you'd be in a lot of trouble. You let go of the path only when it's done its work. In the meantime, you have to hold on.

So there's a skill in letting go. It has to be done with knowledge—as when you're concentrating here. The Buddha's instructions are that you stay focused—the word is *anupassana*—continuing to follow and watch one thing. In this case, the one thing would be the breath. At the same time, you subdue or let go of greed and distress with reference to the world. So you're developing your concentration,

alertness, and mindfulness as you let go of everything that gets in their way. You're holding on to the object of concentration as you let go of the hindrances. And behind all this, you hold on to the idea that you're going to benefit from this.

It's interesting that when the Buddha describes one of the motivations for letting go of things that are not-self, he says it will be for your long-term welfare and happiness. There's a "you" in that motivation. It's a provisional you, but there has to be a sense that you're going to benefit from this. You hold on to that because otherwise it's hard to let go of things. You need that as motivation. Otherwise you say, "Gosh, I've got these nice pleasures right now. It would be a shame to let them go because who knows when they're going to come again?" It's hard to follow any path that way.

But we're on a path where we sense that we're going to benefit from it, so we're willing to let go right now of things that are attractive to us. The Buddha never denies that the aggregates give their pleasures, but there's something better to do with them than just wallow around in the pleasures they provide. We can use the aggregates to create a path.

You can think of the aggregates as pieces of wood. You can take the wood and build a fire with it and burn yourself with the fire, which is what we do most of the time. Or instead of burning it, you can build a bridge to take you across the river. The aggregates have their uses. But the kind of determined, steady work that would be involved in building a bridge requires that you have a steady motivation. So you hold on to the sense that you're going to benefit from this. And you keep at it. As you let go, you let go of some things and hold on to others. Letting go is a skill. And it's only when the path has gotten you to the other side that you let go of it, too.

So there are some things we hold on to. Even here in the body, you hold on to the fact that you've got this body right now. Make the best use of it. Use it to be generous. Use it to be virtuous. Take care of it so that it has the strength to enable you to continue to practicing meditation. You hold on to just that much. But as for all the other attachments and stories and narratives and whatnot that we build around the body, those are best let go.

When you have this attitude toward the body and this attitude toward your mind, then—in Ajaan Lee's image—you've squeezed the juice out of them. Then, when the time comes, you can throw away the rind without any regret because you've got the nourishing part.