

The World of the Body

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The whole world, the Buddha said, is to be found here in the body, and by “world” he means not only planet Earth, but the whole universe. The origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path to the cessation of the world all lie right here. There’s a sutta where someone asks the Buddha how big the universe is. Does it have an end? Does it not have an end? It’s one of those questions he put aside, but he did say there’s no way you can get to the end by walking or traveling, but you can get to the end by coming inside.

We tend to think of the Buddha as being down on the body, and there are times when he does talk about all the negative aspects of the body, but he also talks about the positive aspects. We’ve got this body that we can use to practice, and we can learn how to understand how the mind causes itself suffering by examining the body, by staying with the breath, trying to be centered here in the body, because it’s right in here where things are going to become clear. When you’re focused on the breath, you’re right next to the mind, so the intentions that are causing suffering, the whole process of becoming that starts with potentials that we then actualize, are all going to be found right here. So try to make the most of this awareness.

Of course, you’ll be dealing with the negative sides of the body as well. Number one: pain. There’s aging, illness, and death. These things all come as part and parcel of being born and gaining this body to begin with, but the Buddha doesn’t just have us reject the body. He doesn’t say that it’s going to be leaving us someday so we might as well just not pay it any attention. You’ve got to care for it.

There’s a great passage in a collection of Ajaan Lee’s Dhamma talks. It’s not actually part of a Dhamma talk. It was a conversation recorded there. A guy comes to Ajaan Lee and says, “My friends have been harassing me. They know that I’m a practicing Buddhist and they say, ‘If this body of yours is not self, why won’t you let us hit it?’ How should I respond to them?” Ajaan Lee replies, “Tell them you borrowed it. You’ve got to take good care of it, because when you return it to the owners, you want to return it in good shape.” So we do have to take care of the body—not obsess about it, but take care of it well enough so that we can still function and we can use the body as our place for learning.

This is what contentment means. We’re born with bodies that have their genetic problems and their inevitable aging, illness, and death, but we take care of them so that we can use them properly.

When I was staying with Ajaan Fuang, he was always very careful about the things we had at the monastery. Whether they were nice things or not nice things, we took care of them. He made that very clear. I'd been raised in an environment where it was easy to get new things when the old things wore out, but over there, there was no guarantee that if something wore out it was going to be replaced, so you took good care of it. You knew that someday it would wear out, but you took good care of it nevertheless. Even simple things like the rags that we used to wipe our feet on: Ajaan Fuang told me about when he was with Ajaan Mun. Ajaan Mun would take the rags, and if he noticed they had gotten torn, he would sew them, patch them up.

So even though this body is like a rag in the sense that it gets worn down very easily, you look after your rag until you can't repair it anymore. Try to get the most use out of it so that when you *do* have to let it go or when it starts misbehaving, you won't get too upset. It's an interesting attitude. You care *for* it, but you have to not care *about* it. It's going to do its thing. Many times we feel that we have a special relationship with our body, that if we take good care of it, it's going to take good care of us. Then we feel betrayed when it doesn't hold up its end of the bargain. But you have to remember, though, that it didn't agree to the bargain at all. We were the ones who moved in, took it over without asking permission, and so whatever it's going to do, it's going to do. In the meantime, we have to get the most use out of it, caring for it when we can, and when we find that there are things we cannot change, we have to let it go.

What does it mean to get use out of the body? You develop the perfections, skillful qualities of mind. These are things that actually make life worth living. They give meaning to life. We're born into this world with the desire to be born but without any clear notion about the motivation for our desire: why we wanted to be born or what we wanted to do with ourselves. That develops over time.

Look at the world as a whole. In the Buddha's view, the world has no purpose at all. There's no designer. There's no one setting a purpose for the world. As one of our chants says, there's no one in charge. If you think about that in one way, it's a little scary, but if you think about it another way, it means that you're free to choose the purpose of your life. You don't have to subsume your desire for happiness under some larger purpose that somebody else has established for you.

In Ajaan Fuang's words, nobody hired us to be born. We are the ones who wanted to be born, and now we have the choice to make the most of that. As for the perfections, starting with generosity and going down the list—generosity, virtue, renunciation, discernment, persistence, endurance, truth, determination, good will, and equanimity—whatever we can do to develop these qualities, they

give meaning to life, because they're the things that will be left when we have to leave the body.

So this world we have inside: We put it to use for the purpose of the mind. You think about that list of perfections and you can ask yourself: Which qualities am I still lacking in? Because awakening requires all of them.

If you were to ask which one is the most all-encompassing, you'd probably have to say determination. In other words, you're the one who makes up your mind where you want to go, how you want to go about it. Once you've made up your mind, you've got to stick with it. Otherwise, you develop something and then you drop it for a while, and then you develop some more and then you drop it for a while, but it never builds up momentum. So all the perfections require determination. You have to have the firm determination that this is what you want out of life. You want to find out why the mind creates unnecessary suffering and you want to put an end to it. That's a worthwhile goal, because as you understand that problem in the mind, you begin to understand and solve a lot of other problems as well.

So we've got this body that we have to care for that will eventually leave us, and we don't know when it will leave or how much grief it's going to give us before it goes—when it suddenly decides to do things that we never thought we'd give it permission to do, but it doesn't have to ask for permission anyhow. As I said, we're the ones who moved in. There was no agreement. So it's up to us to make the most of the fact that this is what we have now, that we *know* we have right now. As for a few moments down the line, we don't know about those, but we do know that have this breath, this breath, this breath, so you make the most of each breath as it comes. That way, when the time does come to part, you'll be parting without regret, without a sense of missed opportunities. You've got the opportunity now. Try not to miss it, and try to maintain that attitude with each in-and-out breath.