

Body Contemplation

June 9, 2021

The passage we chanted just now talks about having goodwill for beings that are born and those seeking birth. The Buddha was a good example of someone who had goodwill for both kinds of beings. Think about the way he taught body contemplation. It's good for you while you're alive, and if you die, it's good to keep in mind. It's a good practice to have done when the mind is trying to figure out where to go. While you're alive, it's good for dealing with lust or with any kind of pride around your body.

In the forest tradition, they teach two kinds of body contemplation. One is taking the body apart into its component parts, visualizing the different parts one by one by one—although they also recommend remembering that the body, as you take it apart like this, is not made out of neat organs like you see in an anatomical diagram. Everything is all covered with blood, even the bones. It's good to think about the fact that here is this human body—which the Buddha said is the most captivating sensual object in the world; if you're looking for happiness in the human plane, this is the central place—yet what is it made out of? Its beauty goes only as deep as the skin. And even the skin itself, if you were to take it off, would be nothing to look at it, just a pile of skin. Yet people are so infatuated with this.

The Buddha taught body contemplation as a way of getting out of that infatuation, protecting yourself not only from your own defilements, but also from other people's defilements. A lot of defilements are built around your possessiveness around the body, your identification with the body, the idea that it's beautiful, the idea that it's better than other people's bodies. We can do a lot of stupid, foolish, and harmful things based on the defilements that come out of those beliefs. At the same time, if you're attached to how you look, there's always the question: Do you still look good? That question makes you an easy mark for other people. You want to look good in their eyes, and they'll be happy to tell you what you want to hear because they have designs on you.

Think of the case of the nun going through the forest. A libertine comes up and talks to her about how lovely she is. He invites her to leave her life as a nun. She says, “What is there in this body that you can look at all?” “Your eyes,” he says. “Your eyes.” He goes on and on and on about her eyes. Fortunately, she’d contemplated her body so that she was not infatuated with her eyes or any part of her body at all, which meant that she was immune to his designs. She finally says, “Well, if you like my eyes, here, here, have one.” She plucks one out and offers it to him. Of course that scares him: a woman that bold, a woman that brave. He backs off.

The fact that she had done this contemplation was what saved her. The story ends with her going to see the Buddha, and just looking at him, the eye that she had plucked out grew back: symbolic of course, of the fact that her inner eyes were very clear. And because she was clear about the nature of the body, that’s what saved her.

The other contemplation that’s popular in the forest tradition is imagining your body as it ages and then decomposes at death. Ajaan Fuang would often have students who, as they were meditating, would get a vision of themselves sitting in front of themselves. He’d say, “Okay, imagine that body in one year from now, two years, three, four, five, ten, twenty, thirty. Watch it decay. And then when it dies, one day after it’s dead, two days, three, four, five, as it swells up, gets livid, breaks open, and then dries up to the point where there’s nothing left but bones.”

He would then have them burn the bones so that there would be nothing but dust and ashes. Then he’d have them go from the dust back through the bones, reversing the various stages of decomposition back to the body as it is in the present moment, to remind yourself that this is the fate of this body you’re sitting in right now. That’s what it’s going to become. Again, that’s to get rid of any sense of attachment around it.

This is how the teaching helps when you’re passing away as well. Ajaan Fuang noted this when he was teaching meditation in Bangkok. He taught at a funeral monastery and sometimes on a Saturday evening, when there were very few people coming to see him—on Saturdays most people would come in the middle of the day—he’d walk around the monastery a bit and stretch his legs. He would come back and say, “You know, the number of people who die and don’t leave their

bodies is really large.” You wonder what he saw. You can imagine people identifying themselves with their bodies, then being pushed out, but not imagining anything else, and not knowing where to go: what would it be like to hang around the body as it decomposes.

The purpose of this is to realize that once you’ve left this body, you don’t want to hang around. There’s nothing of any value here. It also reminds you if you go to any other body, the same thing is going to happen: the same 32 parts of the body and then the death again, decay, death, more decay. When will we have had enough? If you come back to the human realm, this is it: This is the most riveting sensual object in the human realm, the one that excites the most fantasizing. But when you look at it objectively, this is all you get: The parts that you like are right next to parts that are disgusting. You can’t have one without the other, so why take either?

The purpose of this contemplation is to lift your sights, to realize that there must be a better way of finding happiness. Think of the Buddha’s graduated or step-by-step discourse, talking about the virtue of generosity, the virtue of observing the precepts, the rewards of generosity and virtue in terms of sensual pleasures in the human realm and heavenly realms, but then the drawbacks of sensuality. The text even calls it the *degradation* of sensuality.

Think of all the degrading things you do for sensual pleasures, but then even if you get the best sensual pleasures, you’re going to have to lose them. When you lose them, you fall down again, and you have to start being good again. It just goes around and around and around and it goes *nowhere*.

What’s the allure? Your perceptions of beauty around the body. The body is not the problem. The problem is with your perceptions. You want to perceive the body as beautiful to feed your fantasies, and this is the way we deal with sensual pleasures of all kinds. The real pleasure is in the embroidery, the fabrication around the actual feeling of pleasure: our thoughts of the kind of sensual pleasures we’d like and the sensual pleasures we’ve had.

The free play of our imagination is what keeps pulling us back—because, in that free play, you can lie to yourself, and the mind *likes* to lie to itself. After all, what are the actual objects of sensual pleasure? They all have their drawbacks, but in the mental image you create around them you can erase the drawbacks. You can

have all the fun you want, but then it keeps pulling you back to these same old things, the same old disappointments.

Here again we see the Buddha's compassion, his goodwill for us in setting these teachings out, so that we begin to see how the mind has been lying to itself. You can ask yourself: How much longer do you want to be taken in by your own lies?

Ajaan Maha Boowa talked about doing body contemplation to the point where he'd just look at a human body and immediately would take it apart. In fact, it got so in his imagination that it would fall apart on its own. He began to wonder: Was he done with sensual desire? There had been no moment of insight, though, that had told him, "Okay, this is the point where it's done." So he started imagining a beautiful body to test his mind. It took several days, but finally, on the third or fourth day, there was just a little bit of a stirring of a feeling of liking for that body. So he realized that his sensual desire was not gone. What to do now? He came to see that the issue was with the perception of attractive and the perception of unattractive, and the desires behind those perceptions: the fact that we *want* to lie to ourselves.

So look into that desire, right there, because that's the key to why we keep on suffering. We cling to the things that make us suffer, and this is why we like to lie to ourselves: so that we can keep on clinging, thinking that that's the only way to find happiness. So look at that, try to figure that one out, and you will have gone far in unlocking a lot of the secrets of the mind, the secrets of its ignorance and its craving.

That's what the Buddha tells us, out of his compassion. He's giving us this meditation as a protection. It's listed as one of the guardian meditations. So it's up to us to actually do the meditation, to get that protection, and even though it's listed as a painful meditation topic.

As he said, contemplation of the body leads to the deathless. Look into it to see how that's so.