

Attached to the Body

April, 2001

We like to think that the mind is in charge of the body, yet when you look at the way most of us live our lives, it seems like the body's in charge. We worry about feeding it, giving it a place to sleep, all these other things that we decide that the body needs: food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. And that's not half of it. All the other things we think the body needs as well, like sex and other sensual pleasures.

But when you really look at the body, there's not that much there. Like the chant we had just now, *Ayam kho me kāyo*: "This body of mine." If you take the parts one by one by one, there's really nothing much there. And you begin to wonder: What's there to get all worked up about?

Yet when we try to use this meditation to give the mind a little bit more freedom, there's a big resistance because there's something in the mind that likes being attached to the body, that likes to see it as "us." We say we get a certain amount of pleasure out of the body, but when you really look at that pleasure, again, there's not that much to it. All the pleasure you've gotten out of the body in the past, where is it now? It's just in memories. And often the memory of that pleasure is not a happy memory.

We talk about our physical needs. But it's not really so much what the body actually needs. It's what the *mind* makes up: it's idea of what the body needs. In order to survive, the body just needs just a few things. It needs a little bit of food, a little bit of shelter, and it's okay. And even that much, the body doesn't ask for. As far as the physical elements of the body are concerned, the body could die and it'd be no big deal.

But it's a big deal for the mind because the mind identifies so much with the body. Pleasure is felt in the body: Well, the mind identifies with the pleasure. Pain comes: The mind identifies with the pain.

So we meditate on the 32 parts of the body as a strategy for getting to understand the mind. Why is the mind so attached to this physical heap we've got here? We meditate on the 32 parts to get a little bit more perspective.

As I said, there's not that much there. If you were to take the parts out and arrange them on the floor, what would you do? You'd probably run away. You couldn't stand to look at them, couldn't stand to smell them. And yet when they're all sewed up in the skin like we're sitting right here, right now, they seem to be okay, nothing disgusting at all.

We know those parts are in there and yet there's a part of the mind—a huge part of the mind—that creates a big blind spot. This blind spot: That's ignorance. That's why we suffer: the mind's ability to create blind spots.

Just the way surgeons can open up bodies and then go back home and sleep with their wives, or their husbands or whatever, and compartmentalize reality. What they saw on the operating table has nothing to do with how they live the rest of their lives.

And yet it's because of this compartmentalization that we suffer. We give so much

importance to certain sensations, so much importance to certain feelings in the body. And if we act on lust, we blame the body: "It was because I had this physical need that I had to do that." Lust is a big liar in that way. The body doesn't *need* lust. It's the mind that wants it. And so you can't blame the body. It's all in the mind.

So first we meditate on the 32 parts to get a better sense of perspective and realize, one, there's not much there, and two, it's not the body's fault that the mind is so enslaved. The mind has enslaved itself to the body.

Once you can pull yourself away a little bit from that attachment and really look at the mind's habits here, that's when you really start gaining useful insights into why there's clinging, why there's attachment.

You take the sources of clinging apart. There's clinging for sensuality: That's clinging to your passions. Remember, you're not clinging so much to the actual sensations; you're clinging to the passion itself. The sensations are just an excuse. They, in and of themselves, are not poisonous at all. They're not harmful in any way. But it's what the mind does to them: That's what's poisonous to the mind; that's what creates the suffering. It's your passion for your intentions: That's what Buddha says is sensuality.

So you have to look at those passions. In order to look at them, again, you have to separate the intentions, the ideas of the mind, from the objects.

As when you're dealing with anger: You have to learn how to look at anger as a state in and of the mind. But first you have to pry your attention away from the object of the anger so that you can look at the anger as a mental event.

And the same with lust and passion: You have to pry your attachment away from the object so you can start looking at the actual passion, the actual intentions in the mind to see them for what they are. Only then can you begin to realize why you want to get involved with these things.

Then there are other types of clinging as well. Clinging to habits and practices, clinging to views, clinging to ideas about who you are, what your self is. That's the classic list. But the big one you've got to deal with is the attachment to sensuality. Most people want to skip over that.

There's a conference going on in New York later this year on Buddhism, and one of the discussion panels is going to be on renunciation. Now, when the Buddha talked about renunciation he was talking about renouncing sex, renouncing sensual passions of all kinds. And yet I don't think that that's going to be on the agenda. Everybody wants to skip over that. They say, "Let's go to a more profound level, the renunciation of selfishness, the renunciation of the 'I' attitude" or whatever. Well, you can't renounce the "I" until you've taken apart sensuality. You're not going to understand the sense of "I" until you've taken apart your sensual attractions, your sensual passions.

This is why we've got to focus a lot of energy on this issue. Otherwise, the mind will never be free. It'll always be a slave to its passions. And it'll blame the body; it'll blame just anything it can think of.

But the real danger lies within. Sensuality is one of the *asavas*, one of these effluents

that comes flowing out of the mind. If we're not careful, this effluent turns into a flood. It carries us off.

So you've got to stem the flood from the very beginning by seeing that it all comes down to things that are really not that much. A little urge appears in the mind, there's a sensation that feels bad, and so you try to create a sensation that feels good: either at the eyes, ears, down through the senses. And the mind is able to build up so much around those little sensations. You have to look at the mind's ability to create and also its ability to turn a blind eye. Because wherever there's passion, a blind eye is being turned to something—because when you really look at the body to see what it really is, you realize that you have to be blind to an awful lot of it to be attracted to it.

So we're very patient in this practice. We go through the parts very patiently. Watch when anger arises, watch when passion arises, just to see these things as separate events and not turn them into big issues by putting them all together. The more you put them together, the more overwhelming, the more powerful they seem.

But when you start taking them apart, saying, "Well, what was that feeling of passion based on?" It was just this little thing here and that little thing there, this little feeling here, that little idea there. On their own, there's nothing much. But it's our ability to turn a blind eye to the fact that there's nothing much to them: that's when we can create big things out of them. So we have to watch out for this tendency of the mind to create issues where there's really no need for an issue at all.

This blind eye, this blind spot we have in the mind, is not just a big empty space. It's actually quite full: full of strange ideas, full of strange assumptions that we have to learn how to take apart. We have to learn how to de-think our thinking, take apart our assumptions. Is it really true that the body's worth being attached to?

It's useful as a tool. Without the body, we couldn't do the practice. But beyond that, what real good does the mind get out of it?

Ajaan Suwat often liked to ask that question I asked earlier in the talk. Think of all the sensory pleasures you've had in the past. Where are they now? They're gone. What's left is just a memory. And sometimes the memory of a past pleasure is painful.

So where does all this get the mind, aside from just keeping it in the round so it keeps coming back, coming back, coming back? Never finding satisfaction, never coming to a point of completion at all.

The only completion is when you pull away, build up qualities of mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment in the mind. Start taking these as food for the mind rather than looking through old trashbins for your nourishment.

The food that comes from the practice is a kind of food that can make the mind strong enough so that one day it can stand on its own, so that it doesn't need to feed on anything else. It's not deluded into thinking that it has to feed on anything else. It's got everything it needs inside.

So this is why that chant is repeated so often. Every morning when we chant, there's *Ayam kho me kāyo*: "This body of mine." We do this repeatedly because the mind is so

slow to pick up this message. But it's such an important message. This is our big attachment sitting right here. And it's the most blatant one. If you can't deal with the most blatant attachment right here, there's no way you're going to get to the subtle ones.

So think about this. It's not only a topic for discernment, it's also a topic for concentration. As you think about these things, it helps the mind calm down. And when you get into a good state of concentration, and you've got this kind of thinking in the background, it helps keep the mind in that concentration. Of course, the more concentrated you are, the more subtle the discernment becomes to pick up on these attachments, to pick up on the way the mind lies to itself.

So the two qualities go hand-in-hand: tranquility and insight as a way of bringing the mind to freedom—so that it no longer has to be a slave to its ideas about the body. It can instead be totally independent.