

## *The Right Attitude to the Body*

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“This body of mine filled with all sorts of unclean things”: It’s no wonder Theravada gets a bad rap for having a negative view of the body. That’s because people don’t understand what this contemplation is for.

There’s really nothing wrong with the body. It just does its stuff. The problem is our relationship to it. We’re fiercely attached to it: lots of narratives, lot of ideas that we have surrounding the body. And they get in the way of our seeing what it really is good for, what its limitations are and what its potentials are as a means to true happiness. Because we want to take it off in another direction.

We want it to stay young forever. We want it to stay strong forever. We want it to be really attractive. And so we have to disabuse ourselves of those notions. The body ages. It never asks permission. It just does its aging thing. It doesn’t ask permission to grow sick. When the conditions are ripe, it’s going to get ill. When the conditions are ripe, it’s going to die. If your happiness depends on something like this, you’re in really bad shape.

But it turns out that the path depends on the body as well. You read the Buddha’s descriptions of right concentration: When the mind gets centered in the proper way, there’s a sense of ease and refreshment, and you knead that ease and refreshment through the body, let it spread out so that it fills the whole body. Because that sense of ease and refreshment filling the whole body: That’s your food on the path.

The Buddha compares right concentration to stores of food kept in a fortress, everything from rice up to honey and butter—tasty things that keep you strong, keep you alive.

The ease and refreshment filling the body is what acts as a lubricant for the practice. But to gain that particular sense of ease and refreshment, the mind has to let go of thoughts of sensuality, i.e., all the narratives and resolves you have for sensual pleasure out of the body.

So the problem is not with the body, it’s with your attitude toward it, your relationship to it. So you’ve got to create a new relationship, a new attitude, seeing it for what it is. It has its potentials, but it has its limitations.

One way of disabusing the mind of the idea that it’s going to gain true happiness through sensuality is to ask yourself, “What is the sensual thinking you’re most attached to?” It’s your ideas about the body. So you have to frequently remind yourself of its drawbacks again and again and again because it goes so deep in the mind, this idea that the body’s going to provide us with the true happiness through sensuality. That’s why we were born in the human

realm to begin with.

And for people who have a negative body image and a conflicted relationship to the body, it's because deep down inside there's still a sensual attraction but they're disappointed in the sensual attraction. Their body is not as beautiful as they'd like it to be. But they still hold onto the idea that it should be beautiful. They get all tied up in knots.

This is why the Buddha's reflection on the unattractiveness of the body is actually a healthy thing. It helps untie those knots. You realize that everybody's body is like this. The problem is not that the body has its unattractive side. The problem is that you want it to be attractive all the time. And then, when it's not as attractive or as pleasurable as you'd like it to be, you hate it. That's not the right relationship. The right relationship is to disabuse yourself of the idea that you'd find any happiness through a really beautiful body.

There's a story in the Commentary about the Buddha's half-sister, Rupananda. The story goes that when the Buddha returned to his home city, all the Sakyans decided they wanted to ordain, or a lot of them did. Nanda, the Buddha's half-brother, and Rupananda, his half-sister, got swept up in the enthusiasm. But when they actually found themselves ordained, neither one of them was very happy.

You've probably heard the story of Nanda. He wanted to disrobe, go back to his loved one. In that case, the Buddha took him up to heaven, showed him what the heavenly nymphs were like. He said, "Now, compared to these heavenly nymphs, what does your beloved one look like?" "She looks like a cauterized monkey with her nose burnt off." So the Buddha said, "Okay, I promise you that if you stick with the practice, you'll get heavenly nymphs after you die."

So Nanda stuck with the practice. Of course, the monks made fun of him, called him a hireling—in other words someone who's being paid wages to practice as monk, hoping for nymphs after he passed away. Nanda got really embarrassed about the whole thing, so he got more serious about the practice and ended up becoming an arahant. He went back to see the Buddha and said, "About that promise—the heavenly nymphs: I release you from the promise. I don't need them anymore." That's Nanda's story.

Rupananda's is not in the Canon. There's one verse devoted to her in the Canon where the Buddha points out a decaying body and says, "That body is just like your body." It was on realizing that that Rupananda was able to disassociate herself from her sensual desires around her own body. And she became an arahant as well.

The story in the Commentary is a lot more detailed, saying that when the bhikkhunis went to listen the Dhamma from the Buddha, he would always talk about the unattractiveness of the body. She didn't like hearing about this

because after all she had a really nice body, a really nice appearance. So she'd always sit in the back so that she wouldn't have to listen.

One day, as the Buddha was giving his talk, he created this vision for her to see of two really gorgeous women standing on either side of him, fanning him as he gave his talk. Rupananda saw them and was really struck by how beautiful they were. They were even more beautiful than she was. As soon as the Buddha saw that he'd gotten her attention, he then had the women in the vision get old, get sick, and then die and decompose. Rupananda realized that even the most beautiful bodies would end up that way. The realization hit her so hard that she was able to let go of her attachment to her own body and gain awakening.

So the problem is not with the body, it's with our attitude toward the body. We have all these desires based on it and they pull us in the wrong direction. Ideally, you want to see the body simply as a tool. And its best use as a tool in the practice is an object for right concentration.

You focus on the breath, you focus on the elements, i.e., the properties of warmth or coolness, energy, solidity in the body as you feel it from within. You take those as themes for your meditation so that you can develop a sense of ease, a sense of rapture, a really good solid base for your mindfulness and concentration. Then as you maintain this full-body concentration, getting more and more sensitive to how the energies in the body can be used to create even stronger states of concentration, you can ultimately let go of the body.

But it's interesting that they say in doing so you "touch the deathless through the body." That's because, one, it's through the practice of concentration, focused on the body; and two, where you sense the body now, that's where the deathless will appear. It's not going to appear anywhere else. It's like the body's hiding it. The deathless is there.

And it's not our efforts that are covering it up. Don't believe people who tell you that effort is an obstacle to realizing the deathless. The main obstacle is our attachment to the body, our attachment to unskillful mental states. So do what you can to clear those away, and the confusion and ignorance that fills the body right now will be replaced gradually by greater and greater awareness, until ultimately this spot right here where you're sensitive to the body becomes the means through which you're aware of the deathless. Those who practice jhana, the Buddha said, touch the deathless with the body, through the body.

So it's not that the Buddha was down on the body. He simply wanted to point out that we have the wrong relationship to it, the wrong attitude toward it. When you can learn how to use these contemplations for their intended purpose, you develop a much better attitude toward the body, so that the deathless, which is there but hidden, can be revealed.

It's not simply a matter of relaxing into the deathless. It doesn't happen

that way. As I said, our efforts aren't hiding the deathless. It's more like, as Ajaan Lee said, in saltwater there's freshwater, but you can't take saltwater and just let it sit really still for a while and hope that the salt's going to settle out. It'll stay there in the water. You have to put it through the process of desalination, and only then will the freshwater that's always been there appear. In other words, there has to be the effort of the practice to develop this right attitude, to develop this very refined awareness and sensitivity.

So it takes work and it goes against a lot of our proclivities. But if you understand the purpose of the work, it makes it a lot easier to put in the effort and put in the effort in the right way.

What this means is that you're not pushing the body away out of a neurotic fear or a neurotic hatred. You're just realizing you had the wrong attitude to begin with. You change your attitude, and the body becomes a vehicle for awakening.