

A Healthy Body Image

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Heedfulness, the Buddha said, is the basis of all skillful qualities: realizing that there's work to be done and you don't have much time to do it.

When the Buddha asked the monks how often they practice mindfulness of death, some were saying, "I think about death once a day." He said, "Heedless." "Twice a day." "Heedless." They worked down till finally one monk said, "Each time I breathe in, 'May I live for the rest of this breath so I can practice.'" And that's when the Buddha said, "Ah, this monk is heedful."

We have very little time. At the moment, it seems like we have a lot. But once you've got a body, you're open to all kinds of dangers from within and without. So you've got to use the body while you have it to develop as many good qualities as you can.

People tend to think that having a positive image of the body is good and a negative image is bad. But actually there's healthy positive and unhealthy positive. There's healthy negative and unhealthy negative. The Buddha wants you to have both a healthy positive and a healthy negative image of the body.

Unhealthy negative is when you see other people's bodies as being beautiful and yours is not. You get worked up about that, trying to figure out some way to make yourself beautiful—appealing to others, appealing to yourself. When that thought takes over, you waste an awful lot of time on the appearance of the body.

And then what does it do? It gets old. Maybe not so quickly that you feel an immediate sense of danger around it, but it's quick enough. No one ever ages too slowly. It's always a surprise, that this is what the body does as it gets old: the things you used to be able to depend on, it doesn't do for you anymore. And the fact that the body repairs itself when it's young disguises the fact that it's constantly wearing away.

It's like the chlorophyll in leaves. We're always surprised in the fall when leaves turn yellow and red, and we wonder what happened. Actually, the green left them. The red and the yellow were already there, hidden.

And it's the same with the body. Use it, it wears down, wears down, wears down. When it's young, it can repair itself. But then after a while it stops repairing. And all of that energy you put into the body—where does it go?

On the other hand, when you have a positive image of the body, it can be unhealthy, too. When the body is attractive, you start doing unskillful things, thinking unskillful thoughts, saying unskillful words. That's why it's unhealthy to

have a positive image based on the beauty of the body.

What's positive about the body is the fact that you can use it to practice. You can sit here and meditate, develop a sense of fullness and ease, even rapture in the body. That allows the mind to settle in and be able to watch itself clearly.

As for the healthy negative image: That's when you realize that everybody's body is made up of the same stuff. There's a liver, there's a spleen, there are kidneys. There are intestines and all that crap in the intestines—literally. And the stuff in the stomach.

People get upset when you say the body's unclean—but look at it. If you put any part of the body on a plate, would you want to eat it? Would you use it to decorate your house? Where would you put it in the house? Would you festoon it for Christmas?

The purpose of this is not to get you depressed or to develop a sense of disgust. It's more to realize: What's of essence in here?

We're fortunate that we can take this body that's made up of all the stuff that goes into it and we can actually meditate with it. We can do good things with it.

But if you're obsessed with the looks of the body, that obsession gets in the way. That's why the unhealthy positive image and the unhealthy negative image really are a burden. They really are an obstacle to the practice.

So it's good to think about what's of value here in the body, realizing that it's going to give you only a certain amount of time to practice. So while it's strong enough to sit, you sit. While it's strong enough to walk, you walk. Mindfully. With concentration.

When they talk about being wakeful: You spend the time—when you're not lying down to sleep—walking and sitting, cleansing the mind of unskillful qualities: greed, aversion, delusion, lust, fear, jealousy, all the unskillful things that can come up. When you've got the strength, that's the best use of your strength.

So the body is good for some things. The Buddha didn't bad-mouth the body all the time. He just pointed out: What's really good about it? What's useful about it? What's it useful for? What's the best use of it? Focus on that. That's your positive healthy image.

Back when Ajaan Mun was teaching the monks and nuns in Thailand... You have to remember they were mainly sons of peasants, daughters of peasants, people whom the rest of society tended to look down on, and they were used to being looked down on. They couldn't have helped but have some scars on the mind.

So he'd remind them, "What have you got? You've got the 32 parts of the body. That's all you need to practice."

You don't need to have a high education. You don't need to have a high status in society. You don't need to have a lot of wealth. You don't have to be smart in the way the world measures smart. But you do have to be intelligent enough to realize that there's suffering and it's a big problem and here's a path to put an end to suffering. And it's rare that you can find such a path, so you want to make the most of it.

All the great ajaans were people who had enough wisdom to realize that this opportunity was something really valuable. And it was a good use of their bodies.

So when you find that you need to fast, to do without food, to do without sleep in order to practice, don't worry about what it's going to do to your looks or do to your health. In the short run, you can do without these things, and the body, as long as it's able to put itself back together again, is there to be used.

Because there'll come a time when it won't put itself back together again and you have to lower the amount of time you can spend pushing yourself in the practice.

The body's giving you the opportunity right now. So what are you going to do with it? It's giving you the opportunity for a lot of things. But here's the best use: training the mind, so that it doesn't have to come back and be subject to the disadvantages of having a body again.

As the Buddha points out, once you've got a body, it's a target for sticks and stones and other weapons. You have ears that can hear unpleasant sounds. You can hear pleasant sounds but you're also open to all kinds of other stuff as well.

We practice so that the mind can go beyond needing to have a body, but we need to use the body in the meantime. So look after it in a way that's helpful to the practice.

As for looking after it in other ways—making it look good, making it look attractive—there are dangers there you've got to watch out for.

Learn to develop both a healthy negative and a healthy positive image of the body. And that'll help you along.