

Unattractiveness

September 30, 2017

The monastery where Ajaan Fuang taught in Bangkok was a funeral monastery. They had a crematorium. There were lots of salas where coffins could be placed for making merit for dead people. Sometimes in the evening, when he didn't have any people coming to meditate with him, Ajaan Fuang would go out and walk around for a little bit of exercise. One evening he came back from the walk and said, "You know, the number of people who die and then stay around their bodies is not small." It makes you wonder what he saw as he was going past what he called the "body shops." This is a good thing to keep in mind when we look at the Buddha's teachings on contemplating the unattractiveness of the body.

It's one of the guardian meditations. Most often, it's regarded as a technique for overcoming lust. You think about taking the body apart: all the different parts inside the body—the lungs and the stomach and the intestines and the skin and the hair—and putting them in little piles on the floor in front of you. You realize how, when you take the body piece by piece like that, it's pretty disgusting. And yet, when we put it all back together again, we find it attractive. This contemplation is a good antidote to lust. It's hard to feel lust for someone's liver or for their intestines.

But you notice that in the contemplation of the body, it doesn't start with the other person's body. It starts with your own. Now, partly this is because, as the Buddha says, the reason we're able to lust for other people's bodies is because we have a strong attraction to our own bodies. Even if we think we hate our bodies, that our bodies are ugly, we're still very attracted to them. That can lead us to be attracted to other human bodies.

But there's an attachment that's not lust. There's just a sense of possessiveness, a sense of specifically who you are. There are a lot of unskillful things you will do to protect this body. And the contemplation of the unattractiveness of the body is also meant to cut that kind of attachment.

People who would come to meditate with Ajaan Fuang would often have a vision of their own bodies. He would have them take the image and age it. In other words, he would ask what would it be like in five years, ten years, fifteen years, twenty? What is it going to be like when it dies? Then you visualize it dead. Then you think of it decaying, day by day, and then finally being cremated until it's nothing but ash. Then he'd have you start with the ash and come back to where you are right now, realizing the intimate connection between where you are right now and the ash that's going to be left over. That's to help you step back from the body; step back from that attachment.

Ask yourself, what else do you have beside the body? Of course, what you've got is the mind. That's what we're focused on as we meditate. You realize you want to be able to put the

mind in good shape before it has to leave the body. Or even before then: You want the mind to be in good shape as it's going to age, because we can cause ourselves a lot of pain, a lot of suffering, if we try to fight aging.

When death is actually coming, there can be a lot more suffering if we're still attached to the body. The Buddha said this is one of our main reasons for fearing death. From fear of death you can do a lot of unskillful things just to stay alive. But if you realize that you've got the mind here, which is not the same thing as the body, and if the mind is trained, it doesn't need the body, then as the body ages and as the body dies, the mind isn't nearly as wounded as it would be otherwise. You can look at the body with more objectivity.

Now, there are some people who say that this contemplation of bodies is inflicting you with a negative body image. Okay, it may be negative, but it's not unhealthy. There's a healthy positive body image; an unhealthy positive body image; a healthy negative image, and an unhealthy negative image.

The unhealthy negative image is that your body is ugly but other people have beautiful bodies. That just leads to resentment, jealousy, and a lot of other unskillful states. The healthy negative image is realizing we're all in the same boat here. Everybody's body is made of these same kind of things: kidneys, intestines, whatever. So there's no reason to be jealous.

As for positive images, there's the unhealthy positive image when you see your body's better than other people's and you tend to take that for granted and start behaving in ways that are really unskillful. A healthy positive image is realizing that you're going to have to leave this body someday, so you might as well get some good use out of it, like meditating with it; using it to be generous; using it to be virtuous. There are good things you can do with the body. You focus on the breath, creating a sense of well-being in the body that creates a good foundation for the mind. That's something good you can do with it.

So knowing that we're going to have to leave the body but we have this body here right now, we can get some good out of it. That contemplation makes you more and more inclined to do what you can to get that good.

This is how contemplation of the unattractiveness of the body is a guardian meditation. As with all the other guardian meditations, you use it to the point where you're ready to get back to the breath.

If you're really inclined to be with the breath, it's a good place to be and the practice of meditation is a good thing to do. But, this contemplation also warns you that you can't take the breath as your final topic of meditation. After all, when the body stops breathing, there won't be any breath to follow. That's why Ajaan Fuang, when he was teaching meditation, got people to the point where the breath stopped; not because they were forcing it to stop, but simply because the mind was quiet enough. The body's oxygen needs were low. They didn't need to breathe, at least in any way that they could sense.

Then he'd have them think about space: space in the body; space around the body. When that perception of space was clear, when the sense of the body and the borders of the body had dissolved away, then he'd have you focus directly on your awareness. Make that the object of your meditation. And you realized, at the very least, that you could hold on to this when the time comes for you to leave the body.

He had a student, an old woman who was meditating on her own one night. A voice came to her and said, "You're going to die tonight." So, she figured, "Well, if I'm going to die tonight, I might as well die meditating." As time passed, she began to realize it felt like she actually was going to die. Her body was painful everywhere she could focus. She said it was like a house on fire: No matter which room you went into, it was not safe. She didn't know where to go until she thought of space. So she took space as her object, stayed there for quite a while, and then realized that everything in the body had come back to normal. So what the voice had said was not true, but she'd learned an important lesson: If you can't stay with the body, go to space. Go to consciousness. Don't be so attached to the body.

So if you feel attached to the body, it's good to look at its negative side in a healthy way so that you can then look at its positive side in a healthy way as well. Get some good use out of it. Then, when the time comes to go, you can put it aside. As Ajaan Lee says, "Wise people see that the death of the body is like taking off a set of old clothes." It's not you that you're disgusted with it. The body's simply something that you've used, and it's no longer of use. But before you put it aside, try to get good use out of it. Don't let your attraction to it lead you astray.