The Body as Meditative Object

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 36:32

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

What I want to centre on tonight is the body really and just show you how in the Buddha's teachings the body is so important, just our physicality.

The first thing is to understand what he means by *dukkha*. This word translates literally as hard to bear, but we translate it variously as - well, it used to be translated as suffering but these days people prefer unsatisfactoriness. But it's basically the whole gamut of human misery from the smallest little irritation to existential angst. So it's the whole stretch of human misery that is included in this word *dukkha*. And I think one thing we might confuse *dukkha* with is ordinary pain, the pain of the body. So he talks about dukkha-dukkha, which is the suffering of ordinary physical pain.

Once we're clear that the process of liberation isn't about getting rid of physical pain, then it becomes more possible because you can't imagine the body not having pain for heaven's sake. So he himself had pain. There's a lovely bit in the scriptures where he asks Ānanda to take over because he's got a bad ache in the back, and he falls ill as you know. In fact he died in the end from gastroenteritis from eating food that was off. So it's not as though he stopped suffering physical pain, but that's not where the suffering lies. As long as we're clear on that, and then he points out of course in the second noble truth that it's desire which is the cause of suffering. And what he means by that is the psychological trigger.

And it's really here that we're looking at suffering - how we constantly form this relationship with the world of either wanting it or not wanting it. So there's the suffering in the body caused by the body, and the suffering in the body caused by the mind. And that's what we mostly come across when we sit.

Normally speaking, if you're sitting, if your posture is comfortable and you've overcome the knees business - the exploding knees - then it's normally just the tightness, the sickliness, the shakings, all that. All that becomes the mind in the body. And it's being able to distinguish that and being able not to be afraid of it, to get over your fear of what's coming up.

And sometimes we might make the mistake of saying, "Oh, well, this is physicality because when I move, it goes." But as soon as you sit, this energy, this chi that we talk about this thing in the morning, it's rising up the body. And as it rises up the body, it starts shaking these parts that are held within the body - parts of the body in the stomach and the abdomen and the chest and the head and the shoulders, all these areas.

And as that shakes, that's what we experience. We experience this pain.

But it would be wrong to think of it as pain which is going to cause us more suffering. This is the pain of release. So if you think of a clenched fist around a case - we don't have that anymore because of wheelies - but if you really want to know what it's like carrying a big case, well, fill one up with bricks and walk around with it for a while. And then when you let go of it, you get this excruciating pain as your hand opens up. But actually that's the hand releasing this pent-up pain, which we're not aware of when it's clenched.

So all these pains that we get in the body through meditation, which we can be pretty sure are not physical, are this release, the release of *dukkha*, as the Buddha would mean, this internal suffering. And the interesting thing is that the body is like a sounding chamber - it makes things worse, it makes things very obvious. You might in your meditation, when you are deep and profoundly meditating, you might actually experience the separation of the mind from the body, of the mental state of depression from what it's actually doing to the body, from anger from what it's actually doing.

And these little experiences point out to you that the mind is more subtle, it's not so painful. It's when it touches the body and the burning begins and the tightness begins and the disease starts, the psychosomatic disease, that we suddenly realize, we suddenly are in contact with the strength of that mental process within the body. So the body is subject to mental states and it can disturb that cellular base. But we know that don't we?

So the body in a sense is mirroring back to us the mental state, makes it very obvious. And in that case it's like a sounding - it's like an alarm bell. So if for instance you come home every night from work with a headache, something's wrong. I mean if you blame the work that's ridiculous - there's something wrong with the way you're working which is causing a headache. It can be as simple as that. If you're suffering a lot from indigestion, then maybe you ought to look at the amount you're eating and when you're eating it - a constant drip feed I think they call it, grazing, grazing throughout the day, biscuits and things like that.

So that's the one - that's the main thing to be clear about. The body has its own suffering and the mind has its own suffering, but they are like milk and water - they saturate each other and that's why you get these psychosomatic diseases.

Now in the Buddha's biography he goes through this leaving of home which is a tearing away from sensual pleasure. There was, of course, there must have been some misery about leaving his family and his newborn child. But something had happened within his psychology which made it seem vain, made it feel as though it was going nowhere. And I think that one of our motivators in the spiritual life is to see the emptiness of sensual pleasure in itself. I always like to quote - what's his name? Yeah, Woody Allen, thank you. It's funny because you know my little quote. And he says, just having sex is an empty experience. But as empty experiences go... I mean, that's it, isn't it?

Unless sensuality, unless simple sensual experiences have some greater meaning, then they're fatuous, they're empty. I mean you enjoy them for a while but then they become empty in themselves. So there must have been that feeling and also a search for something more meaningful. And in his own process it was this whole problem of suffering. So that's what drove him away to seek the end of suffering.

And he tries to escape it by practicing these jhānic states, these absorption states. But of course they only last as long as you're in them, and when you come out you're still depressed and horrible. However he then gave up on that and practiced these mortification exercises - mainly not eating it seems, mainly starving himself. And you know he talks about being able to hold his spine through his stomach. Have you tried that? And he sort of... Certainly can't get anywhere near mine.

And the whole idea there, you see, is that it's the body which is the problem. And you get this in spiritual traditions, don't you? It's the body. It's sex which is the problem. It's hunger which is the problem. It's natural appetite to the body. And somehow you have to train the body. You have to batten it down. You have to beat it up. And then somehow the soul is released.

And of course if you've done a long fast - you know, some definitely beyond three days - you do feel this liberation from appetite, feel very light, the mind's very at ease, you feel at ease. Of course the body's eating itself and that's why it's given up - it's gone into famine mode. And that was the basic understanding of how to overcome desire.

It's not as though the Buddha was the only one who said desire was the cause of suffering. It was well known at those times. Even Socrates says it. I shouldn't say even Socrates. Socrates also said it. He's our hero, isn't he? Western hero Socrates. So this idea that somehow the fault was in the body just drove him to this really unhappy end.

And when he realized he wasn't getting anywhere, that's when he went off. And it was only because somebody gave him some rice pudding and he remembered something in childhood - at least that's the way I see the story - this incident in childhood where he's watching his father in the plowing ceremony. And it's that state of mind which opens up for him another avenue, which is not so much "How do I escape suffering?" - how can I jump out of it and find myself in a different place? But "How does suffering arise?" If you can see how suffering arises, surely you can see how to put an end to it. And that was why we call him enlightened. It was that that brings about his success, his liberation.

So the Buddha goes through that, and then eventually he doesn't dismiss the body then. It's actually very much deeply part of his teaching. So the whole of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* discourse, that's the discourse on how to establish this mindfulness that we keep talking about, leading to insight. The whole first part is about contemplation of the body. And the first part is, of course, about the breath.

And you see, he says here, well, I turned the wrong page here. He says here - so he's gone to the... Here a *bhikkhu* - we can say a meditator - gone to the forest, to the root of a tree, an empty hut, sits down having

folded his legs crosswise, set his body erect and established mindfulness in front of him. That means establishing mindfulness straight on. Ever mindful, he breathes in, mindfully breathes out.

And then - breathing in long, he understands "I breathe in long." In other words, you're in contact with the physicality of the breath. You know it's long, you know it's short, you know it's tight, you know it's loose. You're actually right there with it. And then he says, you know, breathing out a short breath, he understands.

And then he trains himself. See, the word training comes in. So first it's just mere contact, but then he trains himself: breathing in, experiencing the whole breath. Here it's translated the whole body of the breath, but it's like you're staying with the breath and you're experiencing the breath, the whole expiration of the breath. And then it's breathing in to tranquillize the body formation. So here he's telling us that just by watching the breath like this, the body itself begins to calm down. Breathing out, tranquillizing the body sensation.

And then he gives this image - he's very good at giving us metaphors, but we'll leave that. And then he says he abides contemplating, this breath, either in its internal factors. You're just watching the breath, you're feeling the breath, experiencing the breath. You can even do it outwardly by observing somebody breathe.

Or he abides contemplating the body as arising factors. He abides contemplating this body as vanishing. In other words, one breath completes, and that's it. It's finished. It's gone. You never get that breath again. The next breath out. So in that way you get this feeling that we're on this knife edge of time. There's only this moment. Breath comes, breath goes, that's it. You just hope for the next one.

Or else he is mindful "there is this body." Establishing, he establishes in him the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness. In other words, you're now drawn into the breath and you're there steady with it for insight to arise.

So you can see the process - getting in touch with the body, the breath as body, as feeling, as sensation. And then you begin to realize that this sensation is just arising and passing away. And then you're actually there just watching this, and as that concentration grows, the focusing, the steadiness of attention, with that curiosity, you begin to have these slightly deeper insights into what the body is.

Then he goes on to about the four postures. So when I'm walking, the meditator understands "I am walking." In other words, you're aware of walking. When you're standing, you're aware of standing. When you're sitting, you're aware of sitting. When you're lying down, you're aware of lying down. It's simple, see? But it's always centered on the body. It's not some airy-fairy imaginative state. So you're actually aware of the body and its sitting posture, aware of the body walking and so on.

And then he goes on to just daily activities. I mean, here it's centered on the monastic life. So he's full awareness of wearing his robes, carrying his outer robe and bowl. He acts in full awareness when eating, drinking, consuming food and tasting. You're right there with it. It is the body, yeah? He acts in full

awareness when defecating and urinating. We'd rather be reading magazines. He acts in full awareness walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep. Can you catch your last breath? Difficult. Waking up, can you catch the first breath? Difficult. Talking and keeping silent.

Now you have to remember here that this awareness isn't self-awareness. Often we get confused about that because in the meditation practice, sitting practice, we become the observer, the feeler. So there's a sense of self-awareness. Remember that's a split consciousness really. One minute you're doing and the next minute you're aware of yourself. It's a little mirror image going on in the mind.

So when he's talking about awareness here he's not talking about trying to be aware of oneself doing something. It means just being absorbed into what you're doing, just being aware.

This isn't difficult for us to understand. DVDs, films, yeah? You turn it on and then you wake up two hours later and they say "That was a good film." You know, where have you been for two hours? You've been absorbed into the film. What's the difference between that and an absorption which is going to bring about an insight? It's your intention.

So if your intention is to enjoy the film because you're a film buff and all that and you just want a break, and that's then what you get back is an attachment to films as dummies. You need something in your mouth to suck.

So if you go into film with more the intention of a right attitude, which would be something to learn, something to understand, then you come out with the understanding. I mean, a film itself can engender a right attitude. Have you seen that film Spirited Away? Yeah, see, wonderful, isn't it? And just watching that, you don't have to have a right intention to watch it. The film itself has the right intention for you. So when you come out, you just feel lifted by it and, you know, a lovely experience.

Same with music. Whatever music you're listening to, it's going in, isn't it? It's affecting you. The books you read. Even the adverts you look at. You've got to be careful, eh? So everything - remember, an act of attention is an act of intention. Once you've grasped that, then you're wary. As soon as you look at something, it's gone in.

Then the next section is about the foulness of the body. So that's what we did this morning a little bit. And, you know, he's... in the body there are head hairs, body hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, large intestine, small intestine, contents of the stomach, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat. Shall I go on? Fat, tears, grease, spittle, snot, oil of the joints. I mean, he's got it all there in your eye. He ends up with your eye.

And just as though there were a bag with an opening at both ends full of all sorts of grains such as hill rice, red rice, beans, peas, millet and white rice, and a man with good eyes were to open it and review it thus - he would say "Well this is hill rice." So it's a case of getting in contact with the body as foulness.

Now that gives us a downer on the body so we think we have to hate the body because it's foul. But it's not that. It's a case of accepting the body as body as it is. And what you're looking at, which we did this morning, is this sense of disgust, sense of dislike. Is that necessary? You know, people who work in hospitals, nurses, people who help nurses, they have to get over that, don't they? So there isn't that reaction to blood and people with incontinence. You can't be a nurse, can you?

You can't do it. And yes, of course, when we do that exercise on foulness, you can do it very quickly. You can do it any time of the day. These exercises aren't specifically—you don't have to do them for hours on end or something. It's like just a moment's reflection. But that has to be balanced with the importance of the body, and else it gets too much.

It has to be balanced by pouring loving-kindness into the body. So there's an incident in the scriptures where these sets of monks have been in the jungle, and they've been practicing foulness of the body to get this sense of non-attachment to the body. That non-attachment was now highly developed to the body, but when the Buddha saw them, he realized there was something missing, which was this loving-kindness. So he gave them the practice of loving kindness and they all became liberated. That's the story. So you can see it's a very strong practice for non-attachment, but then somehow you've got to re-engage.

And then finally, to really rub our noses in it, there's the nine charnel ground contemplation. And this brings us to this core problem about death and dying. So here, in those days, they used to throw the dead bodies on the charnel grounds, wrap them in white cloth and just leave them there for animals or nature, just to slowly corrupt.

In the commentaries, for those people who want to do this exercise—it's difficult these days, of course, you have to find somebody to kill and throw them out there and have a look at them and watch them. There's a lovely direction of not to sit windward. So he says, what the meditator is saying is, this body too, my body is of the same nature. It will be like that. It is not exempt from that fate. Not exempt from that fate, from that destiny.

The body has a destiny. As soon as there's conception, there has to come this moment where there's decease. That's why it's very good to visit graveyards. Oh yes, once a week, walk around the graveyard, see, just as this body is, mine will be. It brings a certain sobriety to life.

And then he goes through the whole thing. We were to see a corpse thrown aside, devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, dogs, jackals, various kinds of worms, see. This is what happened in those days. Good, eh? Interesting stuff. A skeleton with flesh and blood held together with sinews. I mean, he's obviously done this exercise. A fleshless skeleton smeared with blood held together with sinews. A skeleton without flesh and blood held together with sinews. Disconnected bones scattered in all directions. Here a hand bone, here a foot bone, a shin bone. And again, a corpse thrown aside, bones bleached white, the color of shells, bones heaped up, more than a year old, bones rotted, crumbling to dust.

See? Seeing the whole process from somebody who was alive and jumping around and full of the *joie de vivre*. And there he is, just a heap of dust. And even if we can't actually find somebody who might do this for us, at least we can go through that process of imagination. And that's why I think visiting cemeteries can be a good exercise.

So there you see, right there in this major discovery, the jewel of the collection—that's what it's known as—the Buddha is pointing out the importance of the body as a meditative object. And this brings us really to the *anattā* doctrine, the doctrine about not-self. The Buddha never says—he doesn't make the statement there is no self. The teaching is always about what is a self, what constitutes a self. Now, one of the important things, the two important things about a self, was that it was permanent—it didn't change—and it was in control.

So now, when you look at the body, we have this dualistic relationship. So we'll say something like, "I have a headache." So this I has a headache. When you're really bad, you say, "I am ill." So you see there's a connection there. And as soon as you say, "I have a headache," you've got a pain, you've got suffering. If you say, as you might do in meditation, "There's a headache," you've already abstracted yourself from it. If you say "The body's ill," you've already found a different relationship just by saying "The body's ill." As soon as you say "I am ill," that's it—you're ill, you are ill, and the suffering arises.

So just going over certain experiences of the body—what do we actually know of the body? It's a funny thing. You walk around and you really do think—most people think they are the body. Think they are the body.

Well, I was once with a friend and his father was there. He was getting to be slightly elderly, and we were talking about Buddhism—that just came up in the conversation. And I said to him, "Well, you know, the body's not real." And this old fellow barked at me. Yes, he did. He was dead in a couple of years, but he couldn't handle that statement: "The body's not real."

There's an unquestionable—for most people there's an unquestionable identity with the body. It doesn't occur to them to even think that they're not. And this, when you ask yourself, well, what do I know of the body? Like, for instance, at this present time, so I'm told, so I believe, because the science tells me, the marrow of my bones is creating red blood corpuscles. Have you ever experienced red corpuscles coming out of your bones? I mean, when you look into this body, you realize actually you haven't a clue what's going on. Have you ever experienced one cell dying and another cell appearing? Have you ever—I mean, you presume—when I breathe, oxygen comes in, carbon dioxide goes out. Have you ever experienced that? If I hadn't told you, you wouldn't know, would you?

I mean, remember, there was a time when, before Harvey and those people, we thought blood sort of swashed around the body. It didn't go through the veins or anything. It was just a bubble of blood. And that's why when something was wrong, you stuck a leech on it. Because they thought there was too much blood there. So he sucked the blood out and he felt okay.

So if you look into the body and just ask yourself little questions like that, then you realize actually you're an alien. You're stuck in this body and actually you haven't a clue what's going on. And that's why illnesses suddenly catch us. We don't know. We don't even know the body's falling ill sometimes. So those sorts of—this body is not me, not mine. Just little reflections like that.

And then you look at the changing nature of the body. That's something we only catch every so often. Suddenly, you're middle-aged, your face has dropped. Suddenly you reach 60 and your face has dropped. Something else has happened. It's like, normally speaking, not even aware of it. You look at your face in the mirror and it's the same one you had yesterday. We don't see this constant little change until one day you look at—oh God! So why do we drive ourselves to these little shocks? See, if every day you looked in the mirror and you thought, "That wasn't there yesterday," remember, this face changes, your whole body changes every seven years. So every time you look at your face in the mirror, just remind yourself: you weren't here yesterday. You weren't here seven years ago. Every atom in the body, seemingly, is exchanged. So it's just those little reflections every so often.

There is aging. And it's inescapable. Absolutely inescapable. That brings terror to the heart. There is time. The arrow of time just moves towards dissipation. It's the second law of thermodynamics, isn't it? Going from order to disorder. You cannot stop it. It just moves that way.

And these little reflections are frightening, but the fear and the frightening part of it is the measure of our delusion. So what you do is you feel the fear, you allow the fear to express itself, and then slowly the fear begins to dissipate. As the fear dissipates, so is your delusion about what's real and what isn't real.

Then there's dependency. And in a society like ours, most people don't have problems getting hold of food, water, shelter, but when we look at these disasters around the world—what an awful suffering. Like these floods in Australia kicked everybody out of their homes, and suddenly, or famines, or just any natural disaster that you see where people are just thrown completely out of their comfort zone. And it's massive suffering. It really is very painful, isn't it? You only have to imagine yourself—if you lost everything today and you went out on the streets. It's tough.

So then you get that sense of the body. The body is so dependent on what the environment can give. The food, the shelter, the housing, the medicines. So that means that it's not me, not mine. See, the idea of me and mine is that I'm in control. I'm in control of the body. It's me. But then I find that actually the body has its—I don't have that complete control. Full stop.

It's very similar to when you drive a car. So when you drive a car, you do have the impression that you're in control, and then it stops or it's a tire burst or the electrics go, the light stops. It's just like the body. And yet when you're driving it, you get this feeling of, I'm in control. And it's when things go wrong that we're suddenly thrown back on ourselves that in fact we don't have this control.

And of course, in working with the body like that, what you're trying to do is establish an ease with it. This

is the way it is, not going against the nature of things. And that's what the self does. It always tries to concretize, to grab things, to hold it as it always is. But as soon as you're with the idea that things are in a process, things are changing, and you just go with it. So there's a release.

There's a lovely phrase from the Buddha about detachment, or non-attachment—that's the better word, non-attachment. When you really grasp, I mean at that really deep, fundamental, inner understanding about impermanence—the I is impermanent, everything is impermanent—there's nothing in the world worth holding on to. And if you take a phrase like that, which I'm going to suggest we do on Monday on spiritual reading, and you just play around with that phrase: There is nothing in the world worth holding on to. There's nothing in the world worth holding on to. There's nothing in the world worth holding on to.

See, you play around with it. And it's like a little drip feed. It slowly begins to realize that there is nothing in the world worth holding on to. And that comes a sense of relief. Because in loosening your grip, you lose nothing. All you lose is the tightness of your grip. Because the world is as it is. And that's what we mean by non-attachment. That's what we mean by non-attachment.

So when it comes to the actual practice of it, it's always to undermine these delusions. A delusion at least is half gone once you realize it is a delusion. I mean, you're almost there really. Then it's just the practice of bringing that to mind whenever an occasion arises. You don't have to go searching for dead bodies. It's just when one arises, that's the time to contemplate dead bodies. And that's what we did in this exercise.

So we start by undermining these wrong relationships. First, this whole area about the relationship to the body as mine, the disgust with it, the way that we're affected by how we view ourselves on that line of being impossibly ugly to impossibly beautiful. Where you sit on that line has effect on your self-esteem—that's what they tell you. How do you undercut that so that your self-esteem has nothing to do with how you look?

And then there's the contemplation of the body as pleasure. So the body offers us beautiful pleasures through the ear, the loveliness of music. And it's through recognizing the attachment to that. And remember that you don't realize how attached you are to something until it disappears. You don't realize how important eyesight is to our well-being until we lose it. And so just contemplating these things. So should disaster hit us, should tragedy hit us, at least it doesn't come as something impossible.

I always remember years and years and years ago, I can't remember now, but there was a policeman and he got into a shooting thing or something and lost a part of his legs.

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