The Body and the Three Characteristics

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 36:03

My job is just to put what we're doing in the context of the Buddha's teaching.

In terms of his own particular passage, the Buddha, remember that one of his awakening moments, when he first begins to get this disaffection with life, with the ordinary way that he was living, was when after a party he saw everybody dishevelled, puking, all the usual stuff that you see after a party. And he saw these bodies hanging around, and it brought a certain disgust about the whole body to him. The body draws you into indulgence.

Now, that would have been his understanding when he practiced these mortification exercises that he went into. There would have been a presumption that the body is really the one to blame. So, if you didn't have hunger, you wouldn't have greed, full stop. So when you look at all our appetites, basic appetites, our sexual appetites, our eating appetites, all that sort of stuff, it's all grounded in the body. And it would seem that the signals come from the body. And therefore it's easy to make the mistake that, well, it's the body that's at fault. And somehow I've got to subdue the body, I've got to keep the body down. And in doing so I can control the body, and in doing so I can control the mind.

And to a certain extent I think that's true. But that sense of controlling the body is again coming from a center within us which presumes it has this control. And that's one of the definitions of self. One of the definitions of self is that I am in control.

And what happened to the Buddha in his fasting, mainly fasting, was that he just got terribly thin and almost seemingly took himself to a point of death. He talked about holding his spine through his stomach. So that's pretty thin. And at some point he came to recognize that these exercises weren't actually getting him anywhere in the sense that he was still suffering. That's the point. Having done those exercises, he came to the conclusion that they were useless, they weren't on the path to liberation, and they were actually suffering, they were actually causing suffering, even though, while you're doing them, there may be a release, a temporary release from hunger. Those of you who fasted know that after two or three days, there's no appetite really, the body's just feeding itself, frankly.

So that was his own personal rejection of a philosophy or an idea which was current at the time that it was through mortification of the body that one became liberated. It was the body that was holding the spirit down, this *atta*, this self, you see. And once that was done away with, then it would be liberated.

The next thing, of course, the next big awakening moment was seeing these three, what came to be called, messengers from the gods, which is basically sickness, old age and death. And as the myth goes, I'm sure

you know it, he's out on his little hunting party and he comes across somebody who's sick, then there's somebody who's very old and rockety, rickety, and then somebody who's a corpse. And each time he says, what is it? And will it happen to me? Is it? And it was that connection with what he saw as being something horrific and himself that drew, shall we say, a certain horror about life, about his situation, recognizing that all beings move towards death one way or the other. If they grow old enough, they just get very sick and lose energy and all that sort of stuff.

So it was that connection with the body that made him seek the end of suffering, because it manifests, suffering in that sense manifests in the body. And his first effort was to escape the body completely through what we now call the *jhānas*, the absorption states. So in so doing you're creating a mental state and I think he would have understood at that time that the mind or it was understood at that time that the mind could separate from the body so if you began to engender these beautiful states within yourself through mantra practice through breathing just watching the breath calms the body etc. calms the mind and you go into these beautiful states that therefore either upon death, or if you were clever enough before it, you would leave the body and enter one of these realms, you see.

And again, to his disappointment, while he was in those states, no problem. When he came out, he was still sad sack, he was still depressed old Gautama, you see, Siddhartha Gautama.

So he then begins to practice in a completely different way, through really this memory from childhood, where he's watching his father doing a ploughing ceremony, that memory awakens in him a way of observing the body, a way of actually investigating the process. Rather than trying to do something with it, rather than trying to change it, he actually discovers a way of just observing it. So in a sense he's entering into a scientific field, he's entering into a psychology. He's interested in how does suffering arise, right? He's left that question as to why, because when you ask why, you start getting into metaphysics, you start wondering why it is, why do all beings suffer, that sort of stuff. But when he actually draws himself into this mode of observing his mind, observing his body, the question that's coming up is how does it come, how does this happen? And that's where he eventually becomes liberated and through the liberation begins to describe this dependent origination.

And dependent origination always begins at the point of contact. And the main point of contact is this contact between the body and the mind. So it's not as though what the Buddha said that there was a mind-made body. It's quite clear about that. There's a physical body and a mind-made body. And this mind-made body has the same characteristics as the physical body in the sense that it's not permanent. It itself is a collection or an aggregate of energies. It's not substantial, but it's still something separate from the physical world.

And that, of course, goes against our principles, received wisdom from a lot of materialist scientists these days, who reduce everything simply to chemicals and what's measurable. But in the Buddha's understanding, they were two different forms of energy. And I think we contact this other form when you

contact your own qi, because I don't think that's measurable by any scientific standard. But you can feel it, you can feel the energy. And that energy can then move into these mental powers, such as healing. Healing is actually a mental power. It doesn't belong to the physical body.

So that separation of the body and mind is one of the first insights that you have on the trail of liberation. In the process of what we call the vipassanā insight process, the first thing is to recognize that the body and mind are actually two different systems. And when you look into the body, I think one of the first things that sort of surprises you is how little you actually experience of it, unless it goes wrong and you might feel a pain or something. But there's lots of the body that we're completely unaware of and haven't a clue how it works.

Just a simple thing like toenails. I mean, you're not a toenail, as you would say, be an emotion, are you? You can see it, you can feel it, but it's only on the outside. You can't sort of get into the toenail. You can't be, in that sense, a toenail. And yet there it is, growing, just like our hair, or like mine was. And it's just growing, and we haven't a clue what the process is. We just presume that it knows what it's doing.

And we also know that things like the marrow of the bone is constantly creating red corpuscles. When we breathe, we're told that there's this exchange of carbon dioxide with oxygen, but did you ever experience that? See what I mean? There's a whole, there's a lot of things that the body's doing which we're completely unaware of, and it's being seemingly guided, it's being run by systems that we are completely unaware of, these autonomic systems.

One of the most amazing things that I came across is the way the eye works. Because when you look at a picture, the eye seems to be darting here and everywhere. If you look at the picture of the eye actually moving. And it's picking up little pixels and sort of taking them into the brain. But what we keep seeing is the whole picture. We don't see the eye moving at all. It's the most strange thing. And then the brain is able to create a picture which it then somehow launches back onto the retina so that it gives us the impression that we're actually seeing. We're actually seeing the whole picture or we're looking at the whole person. And we haven't a clue that all this stuff's going on, but it's not for, you know, clever little cameras hidden in pictures watching people's eyes. There's one at the National Gallery that shows you how that happens.

So it's that as you begin to investigate the body, even at this intellectual level, you begin to realize that you're an alien within this frame. Like there's this sense of me. You've got this me, me in there, but it's not in control at all. And that's how, that's why we're terribly upset and baffled as to why illnesses arise within the body over which we not only don't have a control, but didn't even know it was there, you know. Autonomic diseases, you know. Things like multiple cirrhosis and stuff where the body seems to just do its own thing. I had a student down in Gaia House and his body started eating his own liver. Can you figure that out? for no apparent reason. I mean, they've got drugs to sort of delay the process, but it's that whole business of suddenly recognizing that where as a child we think we are the body, we are the body. There's

no distinction really in our mind.

Slowly, he's going to realize actually there is this sense of self, there is this sense of a me, a presence within this body, which it can superficially move the body about. You can wave your arms in the air and stuff like that. When it comes to the real things that you do want to have control over, which is the health of the body and the longevity of the body, and we don't particularly want to die, no control whatsoever.

And that coming in contact with that may raise within us you know these fears these anxieties and what not and what that is measuring is this delusion that the Buddha talks about as to where is this me where is it so in the Buddha's teaching the investigation of the body the contemplation of the body is absolutely crucial in undermining this essential delusion about who we are see

I mean the other delusions are to think that we are an emotion, to think that we are feelings, to think that we are thoughts. If you look at it from more of a Western point of view, there's the body, there's the heart with its feelings and emotional life and all that, and there's the mind with its thought life. And through meditation, through your vipassanā, you're taking an objective stance outside these three areas and recognizing that there's a distance between that which is observing and what's being observed. And it's that distance which is, as it were, informing this, that which is looking, that it's not that. It can't be that. You can't be an object. You can only be the subject. Yeah?

So these exercises that we were doing the one about the repulsive nature of the body is right there within the discourse on how to establish right awareness in other words right understanding leading to right understanding and that particular exercise is an interesting occasion in the scriptures, which is rather strange really, in terms of the Buddha's general teaching, where some monks have been practicing this repulsiveness of the body all through the rainy season, that's three months thinking about how repulsive the body is.

And he sees them coming towards him and maybe has a discussion with them or whatever, but he recognizes that they've gone over from seeing the body as repulsive to actually being repulsed by the body. There's two different things, right? The reason we're doing that exercise is to go beyond disgust of the body. But we're not... If you go too far about the repulsion of the body, to your dismay, you may find you're getting more disgusted with the body. So it's a case of investigating the body to catch that sense of disgust that we have about it, or the sense of ugliness we have about it, and then to allow that to pass away, you see, so that we then become equanimous with the body. The body is just as it is, and we're perfectly content with the way it is. That's where we want to get to.

So he saw that maybe they'd gone over the edge. So he gave them the practice of loving kindness towards the body. And all these tales end off marvelously. They all became fully liberated through this practice. The commentaries always gloss that with after 25 years in the forest or something like that.

So the exercise that we were doing at the beginning concerning the business about finding areas of the

body that we have this disgust towards, that may be a too stronger word sometimes, but it's the only word that sort of gets across that visceral feel about certain things of the body. and the bit about our self-image. We're using it to actually get in contact with the fullness of that self-image that we have of ourselves and then to allow the feelings around that self-image to really come up clearly in the mind and to observe them and observe them long enough to see that in fact they die away because you're no longer feeding in to that delusion.

And that's important if if these feelings of disgust or fear and all that sort of stuff around the body come up and we don't wait long enough we don't see that the process of just observing just feeling just allowing these things to express themselves is actually the therapy if you if you if you stay until they come up strongly then you say I've had enough of this and walk off And you may be under the impression that actually all you're doing is just lifting up the disgust and feeling disgusted all the time.

So these exercises have to be taken, you have to sort of practice them until you see that in fact it's fading. If you've got the patience to stay until it completely faded, that's even better because then that really is undermining the conditioning. But if you haven't, at least to see the way it goes.

That's not only within the body, but of course within our emotional life. When we feel depressed or we feel anxious, if we can just go into the body, see, forget the mind. Remember, emotional states are always developing themselves through the mind. That's how they develop themselves through stories. That's why when you go into vipassanā, the teacher is not at all interested in your stories. Either historical, whether they're true or not, they're not actually part of the process of healing. It's letting them go and getting down to the root feeling that's been there, the rooted mental state, emotional state. Allowing that to arise and to let it express itself, to expend itself, and in so doing you see this fading away. So that's how it also works in terms of just our emotional life in general. Just to be able to hold on in there and wait for it to slowly fade away.

So that's part of the teaching around *dukkha*, which means suffering, hard to bear, hard to bear. And there are three types of suffering. So the first one we've been discussing is what's called the dukkha dukkha. It's the suffering of ordinary pain. And with that, there comes the pain that is caused by identity, which we contact through sickness, old age and death. And that's a very strong meditation. I mentioned this business of the charnel grounds and the cemetery meditations. And, you know, it's just one of those paradoxes that if you spend a moment every day just contemplating one's own, the possibility of sickness or rage and death, and then to, you always have to balance it with loving kindness towards yourself, it actually has the ultimate effect of taking away irrational fears about sickness or rage and death.

One of the things about sickness is that the mind produces a future. So as soon as you're sick it's always going to be like this. As soon as you've got something wrong with the body, the mind immediately creates this huge plan where you're going to keep suffering forever. But actually when you come down to the experience of the sickness, just as it is in this present moment,

All you have, and I'm talking about just ordinary illness—I mean obviously there are some which are extraordinarily painful—all you have is discomfort and some disability. You know, you have to get out, you can't do what you normally do. And when you come into an ordinary illness, I'm talking about flus and colds and things that aren't so bad, when you come into that sort of present experience of the illness, it's okay. But the mind wants to go beyond it. The mind, first of all, is very negative. It wants to create this terrible future. It's going to get worse. And secondly, it wants to escape. So we're constantly in contradiction with what's actually happening.

But when all that goes, and we just clear the mind of all that, we just sink into the present moment—and that's why there's this constant reminder to be present in the present moment—what you find with most illnesses is this discomfort and a disability. And it's bearable. That's the point. It's bearable. There are very few illnesses that one would consider to be completely unbearable.

And I mentioned this morning, when pain gets to a point where we're not learning anything from it, then it's good to put an end to it. Try to put an end to it. And I'm not suggesting there that in extreme cases one should commit suicide. That's always a moot point in Buddhism. Generally speaking, it's quite clear the Buddha didn't support suicide. But there are two instances which, shall we say, are interesting.

One is of a monk who is despairing about his practice, and in his despair, he kills himself. And when the Buddha comes along, he says that, no, in that moment of dying, he actually became liberated. So one presumes that even in that desperate moment, just to be able to take the position of the observer and to actually see what's happening in a very clear way would liberate you from delusion. But I wouldn't chance it. I wouldn't risk it, personally.

And the other one is, an interesting one, is of an Arahant—he's fully liberated—who is suffering, obviously, from some very severe, very painful state. And in those days, of course, they wouldn't have had anaesthetics in the sense that we have. So in that terrible pain, he says to the Buddha, he's going to take the knife, that's how he would express it, and he kills himself. And the Buddha didn't say—the Buddha doesn't make decisions for you. If you watch the Buddha, if you come to the Buddha with a question, he doesn't say, "Don't do this or that," he just says, "Do what you think is fit." So, in other words, you're the one who has the responsibility. You don't go to the Buddha and say, "What would you tell me to do?" He's not prepared to do that. He always says, "Well, you do what you think is fit."

So, he commits suicide. But you have to be careful of that because this particular person was fully liberated. So, in a sense, one has to put a question mark over that.

So that's looking at it from the point of view of suffering, the suffering which is caused by pain. And the distinction we have to make is that pain is pain coming from the body and it's not suffering. Once we can get that angle on it of observing it, allowing it to be, relaxing around it, being open to it, then it's not actually causing suffering.

And the second thing is this sense of impermanence. One of the things that the self defines itself by is that it's permanent. It never changes. It's always happy. I mean that's how you define a spirit or self or a soul or something. And the whole process of observing impermanence is one of the routes whereby you can liberate yourself. So just to bring it up as a daily little meditation that things change, everything changes. It stops you clinging on to things, stops us from expecting things to be as they ought to be. It's us which put these oughts and musts on situations.

But it's just relaxing around that and accepting that everything is impermanent, everything is in a process of change. And that this change is impossible to know in any absolute sense which way something is going to change because there are so many factors that come into any given situation. So you simply don't know. And resting in that situation of don't know is very difficult for us. Because one of the things that the self wants to do is to be in charge, to be in control. And if you want to be in control, you've got to know. So all these little things that come up for us are quite little awakeners which point to this essential delusion that lies within us.

Now the gift of investigating *dukkha*, investigating this sense of suffering that we have about things, is of course happiness. Because you move towards being at ease with the world as it is. One of the gifts of impermanence is that you begin to let go much more easily. And you begin to realize in the Buddhist world that there's nothing in the world worth holding on to. And if you keep repeating that to yourself, let it sink in—there's nothing in the world worth holding on to, nothing in the world—it's all that sinks in that there is actually nothing in the world worth holding on to, and that makes us very easy with things, and it expresses itself through an easy generosity, an easy forgiveness. You don't hold on to things.

And then finally there's this self, this idea of who we are. So the investigation of the body is constantly undermining that basic identity. And it's understandable it comes to us at birth. Very shortly after birth, at some time in early childhood, there's a growing idea of me as opposed to something else. I mean, they tell us, psychologists tell us that up to about the age of four, we don't seem to have an object. It's just one mass of swimming sensations. And it's all us. There's no distinction between me and somebody else.

And out of that looms the first object, it seems, your mother. And then we move to this point where everything around us is objective to us. So by the age of, I don't know, somewhere between two and three, I suppose, one is quite clear that I'm me and everybody else is not me. I might not phrase it like that, but it's quite clear.

But that child is entirely the body. There's no distinction between somebody in the body, observing the body—they are just the body. And I often say, well, if you want to know what it's like to be a body self, just catch the next time you trap your finger in the door. Because just for that one glorious moment, you are the pain. There's just that complete flooding of your consciousness—pain. You are the pain. That's the body self. And that's why physical pain to children is all the more acute than it is to an adult.

Now all we're doing in this process of liberation is turning the inside world into an outside world. So just

as the child has turned this complete me into something objective, the world that it can feel, see and talk to, so as we move inward, that's all we're doing.

So this body is the walls of this room. So you're looking at the walls of your own inner self, you might say. And the atmosphere of the room is your emotional life. And all the pictures and writings and all that are your thoughts. And when they all come together you get this human being. But by observing all that you are finding a very different place within yourself and that is the observer, the feeler, the knower, the experiencer. That level of consciousness has the ability to both understand and to feel and yet to be quite objective towards its experiencing.

And that objectivity, seeing the inner world as objective, is the process of undermining the delusion that we are the body, we are sensations, we are emotions, we are thoughts. So the exercises that we were doing was really also to do, especially the one about sickness, old age and death, observing that, getting in touch with that, is that process of deconstructing the whole of the world that we are creating and beginning to realize that there is something within that which has this power to understand.

And this knowing is what actually liberates itself, because the delusion lies in the looking. The delusion lies within the way we relate, and that is in our understanding. And the understanding is this knowing, this part of us which is our pure intelligence.

That's why I call this place Satipaññā, because *sati* is the passive form of the enlightenment which is that which receives—and that's why the exercise we do in standing is so important because it's actually developing that open-minded, open-hearted reception without any barrier—and the *paññā* is that very same faculty which sparks and understands the way things are. So one is passive and one is active.

The *paññā* is described as an intuitive faculty. So often you get this translated variously as intuitive awareness or awareness with intuitive intelligence or whatever. But that's the Buddha within. That's what we are. That's what's becoming awake. That's what's awakening to its circumstance.

So in doing these exercises, the ones to do with sickness, old age and death, and the disgust and the ugliness, and then also, I forgot to mention, the business where you recognize that a lot of our happiness is dependent upon the actual sense body. And once you realize that, you realize that there's potentially a lot of suffering. So this exercise is trying to undermine that by, as it were, recognizing that we don't have control. And in not having control, we have to accept the way things are. And in that acceptance, there is the peacefulness.

So always make a distinction between acceptance and resignation. Resignation is saying, "Well, this is the reason I can't do anything about it, and it's all horrible, and I may as well go and jump off a bridge." I mean, that's resignation. But acceptance is, "This is the way it is. This is the way it is." And in seeing the way it is, always something arises, some potential arises, because everything's moving, everything's changing.

And so finally, having undermined these different misunderstandings about how we create, about what happiness is, about impermanence and permanence, about self and not-self, we then have to, as it were, begin to take that understanding into an attitude. And that attitude is one of reconnecting with the body and that's why the love is so important. Because now having distance from the body and having seen that it's capable of creating a lot of suffering for us, we then have to go back into that body and embrace it in all its fullness.

That's the same with the mind. When you open yourself up to these negative emotions within us, and we're allowing them to express themselves, we then have to return to our emotional life, our heart, with loving-kindness to embrace it. And the same with thoughts.

So in so doing, we are developing a different relationship to the experiences that we're having in the world. And it's based upon this acceptance of the way things really are, the openness to allow the things that really are to express themselves, and then to pour back into the situation a really good energy. And that's the purpose of the exercises we're doing specifically to the body, but when we're doing *vipassanā* and then we end with *mettā*, we're doing it for the heart and the mind.

And very slowly, you see, there's this development, development of the spiritual life. That's what we mean by the spiritual life. As opposed to a simple psychotherapeutic life or a physical, a life based on just your physicality. The word spiritual is a bit—it's got all sorts of tags attached to it, but it's about the only word I think we have which makes sense. I mean, the other one you might use is the growth of consciousness, but these days that's becoming really somehow confused with the contents of consciousness. So it's all these words. But it becomes clear to us through our practice.

It becomes clear to us through our practice that there is something within us which can be entirely objective to the body, heart and mind, to the whole psycho-physical process, and yet be completely at one with it. And that's why, when you're in meditation, you're making this effort to objectify everything and to understand everything. When you're doing *mettā*, you're redirecting. But when you get up, you see, this is the point, when you get up—and that's why I stress it in the work period—your attention and care go into what you're doing. And there's a loss, at best, there's a loss of a sense of somebody doing something. And that's enlightenment in action. That's the process of awareness in action.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be liberated from all suffering and delusion and enter into that blissful state of *Nibbāna*, the deathless, sooner rather than later.

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