Contemplating the Unpleasantness of the Body (Asubha)

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 21:20

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

This evening I thought we would have a look at the contemplation of the body. The Buddha actually offers us quite a few ways of doing this, but I'm going to focus on the asubha contemplations, which translates as the repulsive or unpleasant parts of the body. It's going to be really wonderful.

The purpose of this exercise is to undermine our wrong relationship to the body, whereby we own it—something that we have or that we are. We say things like, "I have a headache" or "I've got weak knees." But then, of course, we also say, "I am ill." So there's this dual relationship we have, both of which happen to be wrong and lead us to suffering. That's the purpose of the exercise. There are other purposes, but I'll mention them towards the end.

It's good to begin such an exercise by reminding ourselves how precious this life is. Here we experience joy and woe, just like animals do, but we have this developed intelligence, this intuitive intelligence, which has come, according to Buddhism, through countless births. Because of that, we're in this place and we're able to make our way out of suffering.

There are other realms, which you can also think of as mental states. The hell realm includes people who are deeply depressed or experiencing one of the more severe mental illnesses. There's the animal realm, where people get drunk. There's the insatiable hungry ghost realm, where people chase money all the time. There's the human realm, of course. And then there are the angry gods—unfortunately, we've got lots of experience of that at the moment with Ukraine and Gaza and Sudan. Finally, there are the happy gods, all those multi-billionaires sitting on their yachts. In those areas, there's not much hope of finding liberation because nothing is pushing them. It's this lovely place of being both happy and unhappy, and an inability to maintain that happiness, that leads us to seek the end of it all.

Obviously we can't be here without a body—that's number one. It's through the senses that we experience the world. Virtually everything we come to know has come through the senses. It's through the body we relate, communicate, and express ourselves. Through the body we work, we do things, we help others—in other words, creating good karma. And in virtually every meditation technique, the body is always central to the process.

So before we go into these asubha contemplations, these disgusting contemplations, it's always good to apologize to the body for any harm we've done it. I have this little verse which you can repeat after me, and that gives you a starting point for this sort of contemplation.

Just closing your eyes for a moment: "Whatever harm I have done to you in thought, word and deed, by way of greed, hatred and delusion, intentionally or unintentionally, I'm heartily sorry for it, and I determine from this day on to treat you with due care and respect."

This puts us into a good relationship with the body.

Now, this is what the Buddha tells us in the Dhammapada: "Having understood that this body is like foam, having realized its mirage-like nature, having cut off Mara's flower-tipped arrows, one should make himself invisible to the king of death."

These flower-tipped arrows are the little pushes we get—just for that extra bit of cake, do this, do that—led by greed. And then he says: "Knowing that this body is like foam, fully awake to the mirage-like nature, cutting off Mara's flowers, one goes unseen by the king of death." In other words, once we've cut out our wrong relationship with the world, we can presume that dying will no longer be something to be feared.

I'm taking this exercise from the Girimananda Sutta. It concerns Girimananda, who is sick. Ananda has gone to the Buddha and asked, "What can we do for him?"

Examining our body from the soles of the feet and down from the tips of the hair, we proceed downward: the hair on the body, the nails, teeth, skin, muscles, sinews, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, spleen, lungs, intestines, bowels, undigested food, bile, pus, fat, tears, blood, saliva, snot, feces, stools, and urine.

Now, if you encountered some sense of disgust with any of these, bring it back to mind and get in touch with that relationship. What does disgust really feel like? And then ask yourself: is it necessary? Can we change our relationship to it by seeing it differently? Through understanding its function, its biological purpose, its scientific reality?

In this way, we come to accept the body just as it is.

But then the Buddha reminds us of all the things that can go wrong. And this is meant, of course, to give us that *saṃvega*—that sense of urgency to continue our practice.

This body has much suffering and many drawbacks. This body is beset with many kinds of affliction, such as the following: diseases of the eye, the inner ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, the head, the outer ear, the mouth, the teeth and lips. There is cough and asthma, catarrh, inflammation, fever, stomachache, fainting, dysentery, gastric pain, cholera, leprosy, boils, eczema, tuberculosis, epilepsy, herpes, itch, scabs, smallpox, scabies, hemorrhages, diabetes, piles, pimples, ulcers, and cancer. Afflictions stemming from disorders of bile, phlegm, wind, or their conjunction. Afflictions caused by changing weather, by not

taking care of ourselves, by overexertion, or as a result of past deeds—cold, heat, hunger, thirst, defecation, and urination.

And so he asks us to meditate observing the drawbacks of this body. It is simply recognizing that the body is subject to disease, that it has not gone beyond disease, that it is of a nature to fall ill. This contemplation is meant to help us begin to see the body in a different way—to take care of it, but not to be enthralled by it.

By the way, on that list, I added cancer. I don't know whether they had cancer in those days; it's not listed in the original.

Now, what happened was that the Buddha did give this teaching about the unattractiveness of the body, speaking in praise of perceiving unattractiveness and in praise of developing this perception. And he went off then for seclusion for half a month.

When he came out, he said to Ānanda, "Why does the Saṅgha of monks seem so depleted?"

"Because, Lord, the Blessed One with many lines of reasoning gave monks the talk on unattractiveness, spoke in praise of developing the perception of unattractiveness. The monks, thinking 'The Blessed One with many lines of reasoning has given a talk on unattractiveness,' remained committed to developing this perception in many modes and manners. And they, ashamed, repelled, or disgusted with the body, sought for an assassin. In one day, ten monks took the knife. In one day, twenty monks took the knife. In one day, thirty monks took the knife."

"It would be good, Lord, if the Blessed One would explain another method so that this Saṅgha of monks might be established in understanding."

I cannot imagine what the Buddha must have felt when he discovered that this contemplation he had given his monks had driven them to suicide—and seemingly to monks helping others to commit suicide.

In fact, it was on this occasion that he declared the first *pārājika*, which is a rule for monastics that results in the loss of ordination if broken. Anything to do with killing another person became forbidden. Following this tragedy, he gave them the contemplation of *jhāna* instead, to produce beautiful mental states.

Of course, you need time to do that sort of practice. So another approach is offering gratitude to the body.

Before we do that, let me remind you of the purpose of this exercise. It is meant to encourage detachment from the body and especially to undermine that relationship of identity. It can sometimes be used, particularly in the monastic orders, to cool sexual impulses. The idea is that when some erotic thought comes to mind, you remind yourself that this body is also not particularly attractive, and this allows the sexual energy to die away. If a person were simply to continue developing that disgust of the body, they would lose their sexual impulse completely. The practice also serves to undermine society's emphasis on

physical beauty and attractiveness.

So what I am going to ask you to do is go through the body in the same way, from the top of the head all the way down to the toes. As you move downward and visualize each part of the body, simply say thank you. Give it a purpose if you wish. For instance, to the skin you might say, "Thank you for the protection you give this body." Take your time going down, and when you finish, simply move into the meditation.

This is the practice of offering gratitude to the body. I think you will find that all the cells jump up and down with great joy. Finally, their work is being appreciated.

Let us sit in silence and begin moving down through the body, saying thank you to all its different parts.

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