The Unattractive Nature of the Body

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 29:05

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and self-awakened one.

I thought we'd do another little exercise this evening. We've done a few in the past couple of years. And this one is basically based on the body. So the body in the Buddha's teaching is just part and parcel of it. And he wants us really to undermine our identification with it, our possession of it. We'll say things like, "I have a headache." See, I have a headache. So somebody has a headache. But of course, "I am ill." So there's a bit of confusion there as to how we relate to this body of ours.

One thing he puts to us is to really come to terms with our relationship to the body, especially, specifically those parts that we find unattractive, repulsive even, disgusting almost. And there are three parts to this. First of all, we begin by recognising the preciousness of the human life. And then we do this business of relating better to the body as a mammal. I mean, we are animals at the physical level. And then to find a way to balance that through the process of gratitude.

If we think about the preciousness of this birth, the Buddha gives us a metaphor. He says, suppose there's a turtle in the ocean and it only comes up to breathe once every hundred years. And in the whole ocean, there's only one log. How fortunate to come to the surface and bump his head against that log. So that's how fortunate we are to become human beings. And of course, the great fortune is to have come across the Dharma.

Obviously we can't be here without the body. That's simple enough. It's through the senses, through the senses of the body, the outer senses that we experience the world. And everything that we learn comes through them. What we hear, what we see and so on. It's through the body that we relate, we communicate, we establish relationships, we express ourselves. Art, things like that. It's through the body we work for the benefit of ourselves and others. So there's a moral element there, which is, of course, our *kamma*. And finally, in virtually all techniques, the body is included. It has to be because it's there. You have to acknowledge that the body is here. So in our practice, of course, it's the breath.

Having acknowledged that, having acknowledged the preciousness of the human birth, we can now just spend a moment apologising to the body for what we may have done to it, for what harm we may have done to it. So we might have put it in dangerous situations, we might have put substances in it which has not done it very good, and so on and so forth.

So if you wish, you can repeat after me this little verse: "Whatever harm I have done to you"—that's the body—"in thought, word and deed, by way of greed, aversion, fear and delusion. Intentionally or unintentionally, I am heartily sorry for it. And I determined from this day on to treat you with due care and respect."

So now we can get on to the 32 parts that the Buddha goes through, which is the unpleasantness, the unattractiveness, the repulsiveness, call it what you want, of the body. And here's a verse from the *Dhamm apada*: "Knowing this body is like foam, fully awake to its mirage-like nature, cutting off Mara's flowers, one goes unseen by the king of death."

So the body is foam. There's no reality to it. It's a mirage-like nature. It's something that is also an extension of our minds. Cutting off Mara's flowers. So Mara is not the sort of torturing devil of Christianity. He's more the tempter that you find in Islam, tempting you to devote your life to sensual pleasure. And that's why he offers flowers. They're attractive, you see. Now, if we can get rid of all that as an attachment, then, of course, the king of death, meaning spiritual death, doesn't see us. That's what it means.

Now, the purpose of this meditation is, first of all, to encourage that sort of detachment from the body, or non-attachment, should I say, non-attachment. So you can understand that people who are in the medical profession, I mean, they have to have a certain detachment to what the body is capable of manufacturing. It's also a way of cooling erotic impulses. So this is important if you're a monastic. So basically, when something erotic arises in the mind, when you see the impurities of that body, it tends to scupper it. It tends to take the imagination. The imagination disappears on the wonderfulness of it.

So as you know, beauty is skin deep. And that's part of it too, that we don't worry about our physical beauty anymore. The body is the body. It's just the way it is. You have to be, as they say, happy in our skin.

So I'm going to now read through these 32 parts. And the idea is that as I mention a word, the image, the relationship will come to mind, and you want to get in touch with that reaction. Because that reaction is telling us how we relate to that part of the body. So it could be equanimous, it could be no reaction. On the other hand, there could be some level of repulsiveness, disgust, et cetera. So you've got to accept that. You've got to let that come up, you see, and just acknowledge it. So this is the part of the exercise of getting in touch with our relationship to the body.

So I'm going to read these parts, the Buddha's own 32 parts, I think he said. So if we just settle for a moment, you see.

So here's the first one. Hair on the head, the scalp, dandruff. Body hair. Nails. Teeth. Skin. Muscles, flesh. Tendons. Bones. Bone marrow. Kidneys, heart, liver. Diaphragm. Spleen. Lungs. Intestines. Bowels. Undigested food. Faeces. Bile. Phlegm. Pus. Blood. Sweat. Fat. Tears. Saliva. Nasal mucus. Synovial fluid—that's around the joints. Lymph.

Now, just go back to the one that gave you the most sense of disgust or dislike, call it what you wish. Just go back to it and just get in touch with that feeling, with that reaction. And just see if you can change your view of it, maybe from a chemical point of view, a functional point of view.

So then he reminds us of the drawbacks of the body. So he also asks us to contemplate the fact that there are diseases and he holds a whole list here which is not at all comprehensive of course. Diseases of the eye, the inner ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, the head, the outer ear, the mouth, the teeth and the lips. Cough, asthma, catarrh, inflammation, fever, stomachache, fainting, dysentery, gastric pain, cholera, leprosy, boils, eczema, tuberculosis, epilepsy, herpes, itch, scabs, smallpox, scabies, haemorrhage, diabetes, piles, pimples and ulcers, affliction stemming from disorders of bile, phlegm, wind or their conjunction, afflictions caused by change in the weather, by not taking care of yourself, by overexertion or as a result of past deeds, cold, heat, hunger, thirst, defecation and urination.

So there's a nice little list to contemplate. What the body is capable of giving us.

So there are these two parts, but the main part is to bring parts of the body to mind that we find in some way difficult to be with equanimously and just keep working on it until that sense of disgust disappears. Disgust, of course, is a natural reaction, but I think it should be when you put something horrible in the mouth.

Now, he gave this teaching to a group of monks, you see, or to the *sangha* that was at the monastery in Vesālī. And then he went off. The Buddha went off to do two weeks by himself. He often went off for quiet abidings. So you can imagine that, you know, there comes a time when he's got lots of visitors, lots of monks, you know, and he just needs to get away for a bit of a rest. And what he would do is go off into the forest by himself. Just for a couple of weeks, you know.

Anyway, having given this talk to the monks, he comes back and he says, "Ānanda, why does the *Sangha* of monks look so depleted?" In other words, where have all the monks gone? And he says, "Well, because Lord, with many lines of reasoning, gave monks a talk on the unattractiveness of the body, spoke in praise of the perception of unattractiveness, spoke in praise of the development of the perception of unattractiveness. And the monks, thinking, oh, the Blessed One, with many lines of reasoning, has given a talk on the unattractiveness of the body. They remained committed to the development of it, in many modes and manners, they, ashamed, repelled, and disgusted with the body, sought for an assassin. In one day, ten monks took the knife. In one day, twenty monks took the knife. And in one day, thirty monks took the knife. It would be good, Lord, if you could explain another method so that this *Sangha* of monks might be established in understanding."

So I can't imagine how he felt when he came back from his rest to find that all these monks had committed suicide because of his teachings. So what he does is he gives them the exercise of practising these absorptions.

But there's another way that we can relate to the body, which, shall we say, balances this whole business. And that is by offering gratitude.

So this little exercise, what we're going to do is go through the body in a different way. And we're going to recognise what the body does for us. So, for instance, the skin is our outer protection. It does other things too, but whatever comes to mind, whatever comes to mind that a particular part of the body does, you say thank you. And that's all you do. All you're going to do is say thank you. And you just keep saying thank you to all the parts of the body.

So if we just settle for a moment and then I'll suggest another way that you can go through the body and do this.

So just starting at the top of the head, and just come down the body and just say thank you to our protecting skin. All the way down to the toes. It's like you're showering yourself with gratitude.

Coming back to the top of the head there. And just sink into the skull, the bones. And just saturate it with your gratitude. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. All the way down the body, just following the skeleton. It holds the marrow, of course, where all the blood cells are created, all the way down to the toes.

And if we come back to the top of the head, and this time we sink into the brain, and we just keep saying thank you. And then follow the nervous system all down the body. All the way down to the toes.

And coming back to the top of the head. And this time we go into the muscles of the face. Just massaging them with this gratitude. And then follow the musculature all the way down to the toes. It's massaging your muscle with gratitude.

And then coming back to the heart in the body. Filling the heart with gratitude. And then just follow the blood every which way, just saying thank you, feeding the body.

And coming back to the head offering gratitude to our eyes and to the ears and to the nose. To the tongue and teeth, these are all our senses. And to the larynx, the voice.

Sinking into the chest, say thank you to all the organs there. Coming down into the midriff, the stomach, liver area, all the various organs. Down into the abdomen, the various systems.

Thank you to our hands. And thank you to our feet. And finally, thank you to the whole body, the whole physical organism.

So this organism made up of billions of cells, some guest cells, billions of guest cells. They can't help but be jumping for joy. Finally, their work has been acknowledged.

So this exercise then balances the unattractiveness of the body. We feel grateful that we have a body. So now you can spend as much as you want on this exercise. I'll put a PDF up on the website. But actually, once you know what you're doing, it's just a two-minute job, you know, just in the morning, just to

acknowledge that there are parts of the body that we don't particularly like, et cetera, just to spend a moment thanking it.

And that can't be doing us harm, can it? All those negative feelings, all that negative relationship we have with the body can't be doing it any good. It's a way of suppressing what the body does.

So this brings us to the end of this lovely little exercise. I can only hope that it will further you on your path to complete and total liberation.

Sādhu, sādhu, sādhu.

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