Mindfulness of the Body

Sally Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 56:24

I want to start tonight with some words of the Buddha from the first verse of the Dhammapada, a set of short teachings of the Buddha. This text goes:

Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief. Speak or act with an impure mind and unhappiness will follow you as the wheel of the cart follows the ox that draws it. Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief. Speak or act with a pure mind and happiness will follow you like your shadow, unshakable.

I've always loved this short teaching because it really points to the importance of understanding, training, and purifying the mind, and the happiness that can come from that.

But the Buddha also said, "Within this fathom-long body, with its thoughts and perceptions, is the world, its origin, its cessation, and the path leading to the cessation of the world—within this fathom-long body."

And so that points to the importance of also understanding the body and the nature of the body, and clarifying our relationship to the body. Even though I think the work of meditation is primarily the work of the mind and the cultivation of the mind—it's through the mind we mainly suffer and through the mind we find freedom—understanding the nature of the body and having a wise attitude toward the body, developing mindfulness of the body, is incredibly important. That's what I want to talk about tonight: mindfulness of the body.

If you think back to the beginning of this body—your body, virtually any body as far as I can see—it began in union. Union of egg and sperm in our case: mother's egg, father's sperm. There was that moment of union. But from that moment on, it's a constant process of separation and individuation. This miracle, really, of those cells separating and becoming unique—becoming cells of the skin and the liver and the tongue and the other organs, the muscles and the bones. It's quite amazing. This process starts immediately, separating and individuating. And of course, with birth, there's that separation from the mother and the cutting of the cord, and so we move more and more into separation.

But the newborn baby doesn't quite realize that it's separate. It takes some time. If you watch a baby, you'll see this process: "Oh, that's my finger. That hurts when I do that." Discovering toes and ears, really coming into this relationship to the body out of what was a state of intimacy and a sense of connectedness to everything. This sense of individuation happens, and you see a young baby or child begin to use the body to get what it wants—to reach or throw, to laugh or cry, to move around in the world—so that we use the body as our agent in the world, so we can get what we want.

Because of all these processes, it creates that original sense of self and separation, self and other, that we

separate and individuate. Also what happens is the body becomes most clearly or obviously simply me. I am the body. I look out of the body onto the world and I'm separate from the world. This process keeps deepening as we age.

At some point in that process comes self-consciousness. As we develop this awareness of the body and its sense of separateness, comparing starts to happen, and even shame can start to happen around the body that we used to be so easy and natural about. Of course, the archetypal image of this is Adam and Eve. When they lived in paradise in innocence, they were naked, and when they got some wisdom or understanding, they became ashamed of the body and had to cover it up. There's a whole long story about that, but it still ripples through our culture today.

So we learn all these different attitudes about bodies—about our own body and about other bodies. We can get into really training the body if we get into athletics or sports. You just had the Olympics, where we saw the pinnacle of what people can do if they train the body. Or many of us get into ignoring the body and just living from the neck up, without a sense of being embodied, being in the body—a kind of denial of the body. We can get into obsessing over and valuing the body, believing it's all about looks and appearance, that a certain type of look is better than another. Or we can fall into abusing the body because of some lack of self-care or self-worth.

All of us, to some degree or another, get into judging or comparing the body at some point in our development—and probably still to this day—because we have this sense of responsibility or ownership, even though when you look at the basics of the body, how little we have control over. What our hair is like or our skin is like or how tall we are—we have no control over that. But we have so much of a sense of self and ownership of the body that it creates all of these kinds of relationships, these attitudes toward the body. We can become obsessed with this relationship or these attitudes.

What's interesting, when we start to look a little more clearly at what's happened, is that our ideas about our body particularly, but even any body—

Our image of our body is often not accurate. It's really actually quite distorted. And many of us don't like our bodies. We look in the mirror and we don't like what we see.

Especially—and I think this might relate more to women—there's the terror of the changing room at a department store with the bright lights and the three-way mirror, where it seems like every flaw gets exaggerated. Bathing suit season is kind of the ultimate expression of that: having to go in there and try to squeeze into something where, it seems, the smaller they are, the more expensive they are.

But what we're doing there is comparing ourselves, usually to some idea or even more to an ideal of what a body should look like. And of course, it's always thinner, younger, and stronger than the one we actually have. Even as we age, what we used to be critical of at thirty-five—don't you wish you had that back now, at whatever age you are? Because there's always this sense of not-good-enoughness, this not-okayness that

we can carry around about this body.

The thing is that these ideals we're comparing ourselves to are actually fiction. Even more so these days, where virtually every image you see in a magazine, and certainly all the advertisements, is photoshopped—to some amazing extent, actually. There are whole websites that just document photoshopping and the distortions created by people who seem to have no clue about what a body actually looks like. What they do especially to models: they have no elbow, or no hip, or all kinds of bits stuck on or left out in their photoshopping. It even goes to the extent that, especially with celebrities, they'll put the celebrity's face on someone else's body in the photo because the celebrity's body wasn't good enough to be put out as this ideal image of what we should look like.

So it's no wonder that we get kind of screwed up about this, because we're always seeing these images and they don't look like real bodies. They don't look like my body—because they're not real. Even the models get photoshopped and made thinner to the point of looking almost alien, they're so thin. But this is the message we get over and over again about what a body should look like, whether it's thinner or stronger or more muscular or smoother or whatever. We take this in. And so we all have some sense of our body, of this body, and a view of it that doesn't often match reality.

I want to read an excerpt from a book by Larry Rosenberg, who's this great teacher—many of you probably know him. He teaches at Cambridge Insight Meditation Center and has written a couple of my favorite dharma books. This one is from *Living in the Light of Death*, where he looks at the death contemplations and these traditional practices, but he brings a great sense of humor to it.

So this is from Larry's book:

"I am a person who takes very good care of himself. I do yoga most mornings, I take long vigorous walks, I meditate a great deal, and I'm careful about food supplements and the food that I eat."

Sound familiar? Anyone else relate to that as a description of yourself?

"About three years ago when I was sixty-three, I was on the subway in Boston coming back from a trip to the dentist. I comfort myself with the thought that I may have looked a little peaked from my dental work. I was standing there holding on to the metal rail when a young woman seated in front of me smiled and stood up and gave me her seat. I didn't realize at first quite what was happening. I thought she was getting off at the next stop. But that stop went by, and the next, and I started to realize—wait a minute, a young woman just gave me her seat on the subway.

"My mind started racing. I wanted to say to her, 'You've got it all wrong. I get up and give my seat to you. I've been giving up subway seats all my life.' But apparently, from her standpoint, this looked appropriate. She was a young, vigorous, healthy woman. And I, it seemed, looked like a man who needed to sit down. All my years of doing yoga, of eating good food, and taking long walks were wasted. I looked my age anyway.

"Next time it would be, 'Hey grandpa, how'd you like a seat?' Or, 'Slow down old-timer, let me help you with those packages.' My self-image as a youthful, bouncy, older man—an image I didn't even know I had—had been smashed to pieces. This was not a bad experience. It was actually good. A young woman made a courteous gesture, and I got to take a load off my feet. It was what I did with it before my awareness returned and I had a good laugh at myself that mattered. It was a modern-day rite of passage, an initiatory moment that let me know that I was in a new category. It shattered my self-image."

So we've all had those moments, whether it's getting carded when you're going to a bar and wishing you weren't, or stopping getting carded and wishing they would, or getting your AARP card in the mail, or showing up at the movie counter and having them automatically give you a senior discount without asking for it. These things happen. We get reflected back an image that we don't hold as true for ourselves, because most of the time we have a somewhat distorted image of the body and what it's like.

I read an article some time ago on body image—there's a great deal written about it because it's so fascinating. The article, written by a doctor, defined body image as "our mind's eye image of our physical appearance in contrast with the outer image as rated by an unbiased observer." Most would assume these two would correlate substantially, but studies have shown the overlap to be astonishingly low—at just five percent. Only five percent correlation between what we think we look like and what an unbiased observer would say.

It's this body image that is closely related to psychological factors and clinical conditions like eating disorders, depression, and low self-esteem. We don't have an accurate idea, really, of the body. And so there's a great deal of suffering around this in our culture. This distortion can lead to conditions like anorexia—never feeling thin enough, even when one is very thin. Or now there's what's called bigorexia, where especially young men don't feel muscular enough and are always wanting to be bigger, more muscular. So much distortion, so much pain, because of this not understanding the body.

There's a disconnect that happens. The body can come to be seen as almost an enemy—something we have an aversive attitude toward for one reason or another. Definitely this sense of separation, a lot of conflict around the body and our relationship to it. Because it's seen as this separate thing. Even though we're identified with it, we're in a conflicted relationship to it. You probably know that line from James Joyce: "Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body." It leads to these distorted ways of relating—where we're in conflict with the body, or obsessed with it, or in denial, not connected.

And we can bring those kinds of ideas, often unconsciously, into our meditation practice. We're frequently not aware, as Larry said, of the image that we have or the relationship that we have to the body. But it's really important to begin to explore what that is—how we actually relate to the body, our attitudes toward it—because it definitely impacts how we do our meditation practice, how we practice mindfulness of the body.

There's a lengthy excerpt I read some time ago by Reginald Ray, a Tibetan teacher. It appeared in the

Shambhala Sun, and he talks about how we bring that relationship into meditation, often in a way that's not so helpful. He writes:

"Buddhist meditation as practiced in the West frequently suffers from a profound disembodiment. Often we meditate from the neck up, as floating heads completely cut off from the life of our bodies and our physical existence in the world. We meditate in this way because we believe, often without realizing it, that the ideal meditative state should somehow be devoid of the pain, complexity, ambiguity, and physicality—in other words, the full embodiment of our natural human condition.

"You may object that the Buddha taught a Dharma whose goal was to show the way out of suffering. Quite true. But often in our Western practice of Buddhism, we mistake the goal for the path, seeing the Buddha's attainment of the goal as a description of how we should go about meditating. Many of us, when we sit down to practice, do so with a longing for quiet and peace. No problem. But then our meditation becomes an exercise in trying to attain such a state. It's here our problems begin.

"If we are experienced and skillful enough, perhaps we have figured out how to meditate so as to remove ourselves from the pain, uncertainty, and groundlessness of our lives and enter into a much more satisfying, unambiguous state of mind that we identify as 'the meditative state.' What could possibly be wrong with this?

"The problem is that in this approach, we are expressing and strengthening the profound dualism that has afflicted Western culture since at least the early Christian world of St. Paul. The view of meditation as disembodiment involves not only our idea that we meditate to remove ourselves from the dirt and detritus of our habitual mental states. More subtly, it is our mental image of an ideal disembodied state that we, perhaps unconsciously, hold up before ourselves every time we sit down to practice. This may be based on a memory of a state experienced in our own practice or with a respected teacher, or something we have read or heard. No matter what specific practice we may be using, this mental image, whether conscious or unconscious, is guiding and directing our meditation. It will limit how we are able to engage and how much we are able to experience, and it will restrict what we are able to see."

I found that so interesting—this tendency, especially when it's unconscious, to want to float above a little bit, to want to be in this more easeful realm that of course feels appealing but doesn't actually land in the truth of the moment, the truth of this body. Our practice is to connect with what's true about the moment, with what's true about here and now, as it actually is.

Joseph gave this beautiful teaching this morning about recognizing, or coming back again and again to, the simple fact: there is a body. This is so important. And so there is this invitation to open to the reality that there is a body, and in that opening, to connect to the body as it is—however it is in this moment. Not a memory of how it was yesterday, not a projection of what we'd like it to be, not some ideal of the body or some escape from the body, but actually as it is.

And so as we're trying to see clearly, a big part of what we see, what forms the ground of our meditation, is this mindfulness of the body. We need to really see that the body is our vehicle for awakening. As much as it's the work of the mind, so much happens through our awareness of the body, because a lot of what we actually know is body-based. We're knowing it through the mind, yes, but emotions, moods, and of course pain and different sensations all register and manifest in the body. Our ability to connect directly with that—with as little filtering, as little projection, as immediate as possible—is enormously powerful to see the actual nature of the body, its felt sense. And this can be the beginning of challenging the assumptions or ideas we have about the body.

To meditate, all we need is a body and a mind, of course, but as the sutta points to, mindfulness enough that there is a body, and awareness and mindfulness of that. Of course it can deepen, but it doesn't matter what kind of body. It just matters that there is a body and that we can be aware of it. And so it starts to challenge the assumptions that we have about a body—that this body isn't good enough, isn't okay, isn't the right body, isn't healthy enough, or tall enough, or strong enough, or whatever it is. And also, as we get deeper, even these assumptions about separation, or the body as me, as mine—we start to look at the very relationship to the body and see it can be a source for huge suffering and identification. Or a place of awakening, a place where we can actually find freedom through our relationship and understanding of the very nature of the body.

So the body and our relationship to it, our attitude toward it, is incredibly important in our practice. We need to begin to understand what's a skillful relationship, a wise relationship, a wise attitude toward this body right now, right here.

Throughout history there have been great histories of obsessing about the body or idealizing, glorifying the body. So much art is about the beauty of the body. And bodies, of course, have beauty, can be incredibly beautiful—the statue of David or Venus de Milo, all of the beautiful art. There's also a long history of denying the body throughout Christianity—flagellation, asceticism, all those kinds of practices of denying the life of the body. And Buddhism has a thread of that too.

If you know the story of the life of the Buddha, before he was enlightened he did many years of rigorous self-asceticism, really extreme practices of not eating or bathing, sleeping outdoors. He was so thin it's said that if he pressed his belly button he could feel his spine. And then he realized that wasn't the way. The idea he had was that if he tortured the body enough, somehow the spirit, the soul would transcend and go free. But he saw it wasn't getting anywhere. So he took some food and discovered what he came to call the middle way—that the extremes of indulgence are not praiseworthy, not onward leading, but also asceticism is not helpful. He discovered this middle way and realized that practitioners need the four requisites of food and shelter and medicine and clothes, that we need to take care of this body so that it can do this kind of practice.

Now, of course, what he considered the middle way we would these days think of as really extreme

asceticism, but the valuing that he put upon the body being healthy is a lesson that we can really take. He said you need to take medicine if the body is ill. We need to take care of ourselves. It's not about soldiering on through difficulty.

So knowing the body intimately is a central part of this kind of meditation practice. There are many other kinds of meditation that go into mantra or visualizations, but our practice is really grounded in mindfulness of the body. It is the first foundation of mindfulness that Joseph was talking about tonight. It's where the Satipatthana Sutta—which really is the description of the practice that we do here—begins, with mindfulness of the body and six different practices that you can do with the body, each one having a number of subsets underneath it. So there's a very evolved and even complex set of practices that the Buddha talked about for working with the body and mindfulness of the body.

This is where we begin. And it's great that this is the place we start. It's where we're most intimate—not going off into some esoteric realm, but here, relating to this body right here. And so it begins with the breath and knowing intimately the nature of the breath, using the breath to calm the body and bring well-being to the body. Then opening up to the body in all these different ways through the four elements and the body in action, body in movement. There's a whole section in the sutta on the thirty-two parts of the body. It's not a practice that we teach in a retreat like this because it's very complex, but if you know that sutta, there's this list of body parts that begins with head hair, body hair, nail, skin, teeth, and goes on to all of the fluids of the body—the pus, phlegm, blood, urine—and the muscle and the bone, the heart and the liver.

The practice is really to develop this intimate relationship, not just with the superficial skin and sensations of the body, but actually with all of these parts of the body. Traditionally this practice is called asubha practice. In some translations—even in Bhikkhu Bodhi's usually wonderful translations—it's often translated with headings like "the loathsomeness of the body," or framing the body as somehow disgusting. In the commentaries especially, this was taken to be the attitude that this practice would develop.

I was really curious about this practice because it's right there in the sutta, but I was never taught it. I didn't know anyone who was even teaching it. So one time when I was on self-retreat at the Forest Refuge, I took it upon myself to teach myself how to do it. I found what little I could that was written about it and began to try to practice it in the way the commentary described—that's the most that was written that I could find at the time—along with what was in the text itself.

Luckily, there's a library over at the Forest Refuge, and I happened to find the catalog from the exhibition called Body Worlds. You know that exhibition? A doctor was able to get these corpses, dead bodies, and put them through a process he called plastination—some kind of preserving of the bodies that enabled them to be maintained in lifelike positions, but dissected. So this catalog was just photos of bodies that were opened up in all kinds of ways: the organs, the musculature, the bones, the nervous system, the

circulatory system.

That became my bible for the practice, because I didn't really have any idea what the spleen looked like, or the gallbladder, or all these different parts. Some you have a sense of, but knowing where they were exactly, their color, and so on—that was new. The practice itself has a whole regimented way you do it, where you work through groups of five or six body parts, going forward and backward, then adding the next group. It's very concentrating and quite an amazing practice. I only did it for two or three weeks, so I'm certainly not an expert, but I found it to be really profound.

And instead of loathsomeness of the body—as the text kept pointing to, "this will incite disgust, one should view the body this way"—I actually, I wouldn't say fell in love with the body, but I really became in awe of the body. It was just shown to me what a miracle this body is. How much goes on in the body that we have no clue about, and certainly no control over—all the hormones that get secreted, the regulation of blood sugar, all of the processes happening automatically. It's a miracle, this body.

So that sense of wonder was developed, but also a great deal of equanimity, because it's hard to get identified with the liver. You know, *my* liver or *my* kidney—when I saw all these photos, they all looked pretty much the same, maybe a little different in size, but there was this basic universality to body. So it certainly wasn't a practice of disgust for the body, but actually amazement at the body.

But these kinds of practices, and the way especially some of the commentaries wrote about them, have given Buddhism a flavor sometimes of a negative view of the body. And again, it's somewhat understandable. These practices were carried out and passed on through monastic traditions mainly, and monastics were celibate. These practices were often done to combat and work with passion and lust as it arose for one's own body—but you could also do these practices contemplating other bodies—so it was a real skillful means.

As lay people, though, we need to have a different relationship to the body. But even in that practice itself and in the words of the sutta, to me it's not an invitation to loathsomeness, to thinking "Oh, isn't this icky, all this blood and phlegm and pus." The image that the Buddha used is that the practitioner looks at the body as though it was a sack with holes at both ends, filled with all kinds of grains—red beans and black beans and green beans and lentils. And you'd simply say, "This is red beans, this is black beans." So it's just looking and saying, "This is what the body is made of." You look at a pile of rice—it's not disgusting. There's just that real sense of equanimity. This is simply the nature of the body. So I don't think creating a sense of aversion was the Buddha's intention. Actually, the opposite. There has to be this balanced appreciation of the body.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu, who is one of our great scholars and writes and translates voluminous amounts, said this about this question: "Although early Buddhism is widely believed to take a negative attitude towards the body, the texts of the Pali Canon do not support this belief. They approach the body both in its positive role as an object of meditation—to develop mindfulness, concentration, and the mental powers based on

concentration—and in its negative role as an object for unskillful states of mind. Even in its negative role, the body is not the culprit. The problem is the mind's attachment to the body. Once the body can be used in its positive role to develop mindfulness and concentration, those mental qualities can be used to free the mind of its attachment to the body. Then, as many a modern meditation master has noted, the mind and body can live in peace."

So it's not about needing to be detached from the body, or averse to the body, or having some kind of disembodied meditation—but rather a wise and skillful relationship to the body.

The body in all of its aspects, inner and outer, and in all the postures. Again, in the sutta it talks about awareness of sitting, walking, standing, and lying down—that we meditate in all these four postures. And so our practice is really to start to know the body in this intimate way, this direct way without filters or projections or ideals or distortions.

When we start to be aware of the body in this way, when we close our eyes in meditation, what is it that we actually experience? There's this invitation that Joseph mentioned: just this awareness that there is a body. But when you close your eyes, what actually is there? It's not a body in the sense of a concept. What we actually experience are different degrees and areas of pressure and warmth and coolness, tingling and vibrating and pulsing. This is what our actual experience of the body is.

And in that, we start to see quite literally, quite immediately, the changing nature of the body. It's not one thing, it's not solid, and it's certainly not permanent. It's this fluctuating, flowing set of processes that even as you bring mindfulness to them can often change. The very awareness of them changes our relationship to it.

But from that inner experience, we make a whole world. All of these ideas and attitudes and good and bad and this and that and not enough of this. And we identify: my pain and my back and my body. The Buddha's instruction, again from this Satipatthana Sutta, a little earlier than where Joseph was speaking, says, "Here bhikkhus"—and a bhikkhu is anyone who's a serious practitioner—"here bhikkhus, a bhikkhu lives contemplating the body in the body." And this is another important part of that sutta. In the body—not in the idea of the body, the concept of the body, but in the body itself. Ardent—this is that word I was referring to the first night about courage, ardency—ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful of it, having overcome covetousness and grief for the world. That one abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.

And it goes through seeing all of the five aggregates, which starts with the form aggregate of the body, then feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. We'll talk more about these as the retreat goes on. When we look at the body in that way, we see it as not me, not mine, not who I am. It's just this set of processes, this changing, flowing, alternating set of experiences. This is actually what we can know as the body, as a meditator. This is the beginning of a wise relationship to the body—to see it in this way.

So part of our challenge is that we see this body in some ways as kind of impersonal. As I said, my liver, your liver—it's just a sensation. You don't have to even say "my sensation," certainly not "my pain" or "my knee." But how do we do that and at the same time care for the body? How do we find this balanced attitude to the body so that there is some ease in the meditation? Because it is hard to meditate when there's a constant struggle, either through ideas or literally in the experience of the body—or certainly if we're not connected to the body, if we can't land here in our experience of the body in this direct and immediate way.

So there's a balance that we're always exploring between seeing the body in this kind of impersonal way and actually caring for the body, bringing kindness to the body, even healing the body, and creating a healthy relationship with the body. Many of you probably know the power of meditation for healing. I'm not talking about miracles, but just bringing balance into the body. The great work that Jon Kabat-Zinn has done—who's a practitioner of this kind of meditation, friend of all of ours and a student here at IMS—from this meditation he developed MBSR, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, that has now gone on to serve countless people, probably hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, who are dealing with chronic pain or stress. And through mindfulness, they find balance, find ease that medication couldn't touch, that other forms of therapy couldn't touch. Just through the power of mindfulness and bringing a kind awareness to the body through this process of scanning, of using the mindfulness to scan through the body.

Now here on a retreat like this, our intention isn't just to get comfortable. It's not just to get rid of pain, to make the body feel better, but to awaken. We want to wake up. We want to find freedom, deeper happiness, more understanding. So finding this right balance in our relationship to the body is really so important.

Here we are on the first day or so of a long retreat. There's bound to be discomfort in the body for virtually everyone—I guarantee it. It's just like starting up at the gym or training for any kind of activity. There's just the getting used to the schedule and the long hours of sitting and the kind of walking meditation that we do, and adjusting to the conditions here. So I guarantee that you've all, to some extent or another, had an uncomfortable body at some stage in these early days, and that will continue to some degree or another as we go on.

So we need to know: how do we take care of the body in a way that's balanced? And this is, I think, a big art of meditation. When we listen to the body and give it rest or ease or a break, we move the posture if it's really uncomfortable. I really don't feel that we can meditate effectively if the mind is like a tight fist, if we're just gritting our teeth and making it to the end of the sitting. If we're doing that over and over again, it's just not that helpful.

And so it's just a place to explore. What's the edge there? And can I just get curious, even for a moment?

And if the mind's too tight, if the body simply isn't able to stay, sure, it's much better to go to something

more spacious—to move, to breathe in a way that's easier. But to be willing to work with the edge of that also.

Sometimes we need great determination to actually stay present. My first teacher, my first retreat, was with S. N. Goenka. He's a very fierce teacher, and his retreats are very demanding. I had no clue what I was getting into.

And it's not many days in that he has what he calls vow hours, where the meditation is for an hour and you are not to move. You're not to move your hands or your shoulders or your feet, your legs, or anything. And I would just be hanging on for grim whatever, by the skin of my teeth, waiting for that click. He would click the microphone before he rang the bell. You'd just be waiting till that happened.

But I found I could do it. It wasn't pleasant. I don't know how mindful I was. I was just hanging in there. But I really saw something—to sit through something you didn't think you could sit through. How often do we say to ourselves, "I can't bear this anymore"? But if you have enough mindfulness to see that thought in the mind and look at it, you often find you can. You can bear it a moment more, and perhaps even get curious about it.

So this is the shifting that can happen as we start to inhabit this body, really be very present for it. And of course, in the life of the body there are also pleasant experiences. And we love those, don't we? Of course we do. It's understandable that we do—if the body is feeling light and blissful or joyful or spacious or open, wonderful. We need to also know that, be intimate with that, be mindful of that.

But as we often say, the worst thing that can happen to a meditator is to have a good experience, because then that becomes the metric by which we judge every other sitting, and we can get lost. Many of you probably have stories of how long it took you to let go, to the final nth degree, of longing for that great experience you had five years ago on your first retreat or your second retreat. It can really be a great challenge to the practice.

So yes, we need to appreciate and open to when the body is in that state—it's beautiful, it's wonderful when that happens—but it's also impermanent. And if we cling to it, it is a source of suffering. In the wise relationship, we start to see that. How often have you had an experience where the body is like that and the thought comes in: "Ah, now I've got it. This is how meditation should be. Somehow I turned the corner. Whatever the instruction was, whatever practice I was doing, this is what it's going to be like now for the rest." Even as we're saying it, we know it's not true, but there's this vain hope that somehow we're going to hold on to this beautiful experience of the body. And what happens? It changes. What happens next? We suffer.

So it is being willing to be with this immediacy of the body. How it is right now. How can we be with that, open to that? And so we see that the body isn't a source of lasting happiness. This is not what the Buddha was pointing to when he talked about freedom. It doesn't happen just in the body. The mind has to be

transformed.

So we develop over time, through practice, through our own experience—and again, this is the power of this practice, your own exploration—what is a skillful relationship for you to this body? Not what was skillful yesterday, not what you think should be skillful, but right now, as it is. And to recognize: this body is the vehicle for our awakening. It's the body that we will walk on the path with. But we have to have a wise relationship. We care for it, we feed it, we clean it, we stretch it, we do whatever we need to do to keep it in balance—but we recognize that it is just a vehicle, in some ways impersonal. We don't own the body.

So the Buddha said over and over again: not me, not mine, not myself. It is just the body. We see it in its elemental nature—just heat and cold, earth element, air element, fire element, water element. This is the actual nature of the body. And developing that kind of relationship, of seeing clearly, is the way to the path of freedom that the Buddha talked about again and again.

So I want to close with another verse from the Dhammapada, pointing to this wise relationship to the body.

Whoever, although she's heard next to nothing, sees Dhamma through her body is not heedless of Dhamma. She's one who maintains the Dhamma.

At the end of talks, we like to have some silence to let the words settle. You don't need to change your posture. It's simply about letting the words fade into the background and coming into a direct connection with your experience—your body, your breath, your mind—as it is right now.

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