

Contemplating the Unpleasantness of the Body: Why and How

Bhante Bodhidhamma · YouTube Talks · 21:14

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa

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

So I thought this evening we'd have a look at the contemplation of the body. Now the Buddha actually offers us quite a few ways of doing it, but I'm going to go for the *asubha* contemplations, which translates as the repulsive or the unpleasant parts of the body. It's going to be really wonderful.

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

Now it's good to begin such an exercise by reminding ourselves how precious this life is. So here we experience this 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. And 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, so people who are, for instance, deeply depressed or in one of the more severe mental illnesses. There's the animal realm where people get drunk. There's the insatiable hungry ghost realm, people chasing money all the time. There's the human, of course. And then there's these angry gods. Unfortunately, we've got lots of experience of that at the moment with Ukraine and Gaza and Sudan. And finally there are the happy gods, all those wonderful multi-billionaires who are sitting on their yachts. So those areas, there's not much hope of finding liberation because nothing's pushing them. It's this lovely place of being happy and unhappy and it's an inability to maintain that happiness that leads us to seek the end of it all.

So, obviously, we can't be here without a body. That's number one. It's through the senses that we experience the world. Everything we come to know has come through the senses. Well, not everything, but virtually everything has come through the senses. It's through the body we relate, we communicate, we express ourselves. Through the body we work, we do things, we help others. In other words, creating

good *kamma*. 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 apologise to the body for any harm we've done it. And I've got this little verse which you can repeat after me and that gives you a starting point for this contemplation. So 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."

Now 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 realised its mirage-like nature, having cut off Māra's flower-tipped arrows, one should make himself invisible to the king of death." So these flower-tipped arrows are these little pushes we get for just that extra bit of cake and do this and 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 Māra'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.

So I'm taking this exercise from a discourse, the Giramananda Sutta. He's sick and Ānanda's gone to the Buddha and says, "What can we do for him?" So he says, "Well, give him these 10 contemplations." So I won't go through the 10 contemplations, but two of them are the unpleasantness of the body and then its drawbacks.

So now the idea is, as I read through these different parts of the body and you're sitting in meditation, as you contact them through your imagination and through your memory, through your nose, through your eyes, just catch your relationship. Most of them I think you'll find fairly neutral, but some you'll have some relationship of disgust at some level or other. So it's really getting in touch with that and recognising that it's not necessary. We don't have to feel disgusted with the body because the body is just what it is.

And then after that, we'll just run through all these wonderful things, these horrible things that can happen to the body as a reminder that we must continue our meditation with vigour.

So if you just find yourself in a quiet place for a moment, I shall give you the instructions from the Buddha. So examining our body from the soles of the feet and down from the tips of the hair. We'll just go down. We won't come up again. So just starting at the top there, just the hair that's on the body.

And then there's nails, teeth, the skin, the muscles, the sinews, the bones, the bone marrow, the kidneys, the heart, the liver, the spleen, the lungs, the intestines, the bowels, the undigested food, the bile, the pus, the fat, the tears, the blood, saliva, snot, faeces, stools, and urine.

So now if you go back to the one where there was some sense of disgust, just bring it back to mind and just

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? Function? Product? Biologically, scientifically.

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 to give us that *samv*
ega, 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's the cough and asthma, catarrh, inflammation, fever, stomachache, fainting, dysentery, gastric pain, cholera, leprosy, boils, eczema, tuberculosis, epilepsy, herpes, itch, scabs, smallpox, scabies, haemorrhages, diabetes, piles, pimples, ulcers and cancer. Afflictions stemming from disorders of the bile, phlegm, wind or their conjunction. Afflictions caused by changing weather, by not taking care of ourselves, by over-exertion 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. So again, it's just recognising that the body is subject to disease. It's not gone beyond disease. It is of a nature to fall ill. This is meant to help us to begin to see the body in a different way, to take care of it, but not to be enthralled by it.

Now, by the way, on that list I added cancer. I don't know whether they had cancer or not in those days. It's not listed.

Anyway, what happened was that the Buddha did give this teaching about the unattractiveness of the body in praise of perceiving the unattractiveness of the body and in praise of development of the perception of the unattractiveness of the body. And he went off then for seclusion for half a month. And when he came out, he said to Ānanda, "Why does the Sangha of monks seem so depleted?"

"Because Lord, the Blessed One, with many lines of reasoning, gave monks the talk of unattractiveness. Spoke in praise of the development of the perception of unattractiveness. The monks thinking, the Blessed One, with many lines of reasoning, has given a talk on unattractiveness. They remained committed to the development of the perception of unattractiveness 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 sangha of monks might be established in understanding."

Now, I can't imagine what the Buddha must have felt when he found out that this contemplation he'd given to his monks had driven them to suicide, and seemingly to monks helping people to commit suicide. In fact, it was on this occasion that he declared the first *pārājika*, which is a rule for the monks, which if

you break it, you lose your ordination. So anything to do with killing another person is not allowed. So he gave them the contemplation of *jhāna* to produce beautiful mental states. Well, of course, you need time to do that sort of practice.

So another way of doing it is by offering gratitude to the body. But before we do that, let me just remind you of the purpose of this exercise. It's to encourage detachment from the body and to especially undermine that relationship of identity. It can sometimes be used, especially in the monastic orders, to cool sexual impulses. So the idea is that when some erotic idea comes to mind, you then remind yourself that this body is also not particularly erotic. And this should allow the sexual energy to die away. If, of course, a person were simply to continue developing that disgust of the body, then they would lose their sexual impulse completely. And it's to undermine society's emphasis on physical beauty and attractiveness.

So what I'm going to do is ask you to then go through the body in the same way from the top of the head all the way down to the toes and as you go down and you visualise that part of the body, just say thank you. Thank you for, for instance, give it a purpose if you want. So the skin, thank you for the protection you give this body. So just take your time going down and then when you finish that, just go into the meditation.

So it's offering gratitude to the body. And I think you'll find that all the cells jump up and down with great joy. Finally their work is being appreciated. So if we sit in silence and then just begin going down saying thank you to all the different parts of the body.

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