

Dhammapada 46: How to View the Body

Bhante Bodhidhamma · YouTube Talks · 18:59

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa

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

So this evening, to carry on our little Dhamma exploration, *Dhammapada* exploration, I thought I'd choose verse number 46. I shall chant it in the Pali first:

Phenūpamang kāyam imang veditvā

Marīcidhamang abhisambudhāno

Chetvāna Mārassa papupphakāni

Addassan gacche maccurājassa

And the translation. This is Gil Fronsdal:

"Knowing this body is like foam, fully awake to its mirage-like image, cutting off Mara's flowers, one goes unseen by the king of death."

And I prefer Thanissaro's translation actually on this one:

"Knowing this body is like foam, realizing its nature a mirage, cutting out the blossoms of Mara, you go where the king of death can't see."

That's a bit more dramatic, I think.

So let me read a little story that comes with it:

On one occasion, the Buddha was residing at Jetavana Monastery in Savatthi, and a certain *bhikkhu*, after obtaining a subject of meditation from the Buddha, went to the forest for the purpose of practicing meditation. Although he strove diligently, he made little progress and was not happy with himself, and so he thought, "I'll return to Jetavana Monastery and request the Enlightened One to give me another subject of meditation better suited to my temperament." And with this thought he set out to return to Savatthi.

Now on the way he saw a mirage. Reflecting mindfully within himself, he realized that a mirage after all is only an illusion caused by a sheet of water vapour. So also was his body an illusion and insubstantial by reason of birth and decay. And fixing his mind on the mirage, he continued with this meditation practice.

Later, he went for a bath near the bank of the river Aciravati. While resting under a tree close to the river and seeing the froth breaking up, he realized further the impermanent nature of the body. Now from Jetavana Monastery, the Buddha saw the *bhikkhu* and sent forth his radiance and exhorted him: "*Bhikkhu*, you are on the right track. Keep it up. It is good that you've realized the body is impermanent like froth and insubstantial like a mirage."

At the conclusion of the exhortation, the *bhikkhu* attained *Arahatship*.

Well, that's not bad, is it? See what we're missing out on, not being born at the time of the Buddha!

So: "Knowing this body is like foam, realizing its nature a mirage, cutting out the blossoms of Mara, you go to where the king of death can't see."

So a couple of vocabulary items there. *Marīci* just means to shimmer or glitter, and so it becomes a word for mirage. And that is a metaphor for illusion. If you see it as a mirage, that it is a mirage, it's an illusion. But if you think it's real, then it's a delusion.

Now here it says "having cut off Mara's flower-tipped arrows" — that's a more direct translation: "having cut off Mara's flower-tipped arrows."

Now it's interesting because the only time that I'm certain that the arrows of Mara approached the Buddha was just before he was fully liberated. And it attacked him with "What about the sensual life? It's great out there! What are you doing just sitting under this tree?" And then there was fear — fear of failure — and who was he anyway to try and become fully liberated, and so on.

And as these arrows came to the Buddha, because of his determination, commitment to his path and that sense of hope, they turned into flowers. So here, I think this "Mara's flower-tipped arrows" is extending the metaphor a bit, because flowers stands for sensual pleasure. So he cut off sensual pleasure.

So there are three things in this discourse: insubstantiality, impermanence, and of course the cause of suffering — attachment. And the last thing is the king of death. So if he's gone beyond the king of death, then of course he must be liberated. That's just another way of saying that the person's liberated.

So when we're contemplating the body as body, there are these three characteristics to look at. So this impermanence of the body — I mean that's pretty easy for us to see the older we get. Things change downwardly. But so that's not so difficult for us to see, but we don't really see the power of seeing impermanence unless somebody dies.

So even today I was talking to somebody, a student who is having problems with seeing impermanence everywhere. It's coming up as a lot of fear, and they've had two close deaths in the family, one after the other, very sudden. So when that happens, of course, the impermanence of the body becomes quite real — its insubstantiality, its fragility. We're all living on a knife edge.

And the image there is of froth on water. It just breaks up. You've seen it gathering on streams, and then it just breaks away, breaks up. So it's the whole deconstruction of the body. If you were to imagine it laid out before you, all the bits and pieces, then we would see that it's just something that's constructed, something that's put together.

But of course, it's real in the sense that we feel it. You bite your tongue and you can't deny that you have a body. It definitely feels real. But of course, that is the perception that we are trying to cut through. Pain is pain — that's fine. But when it's my pain, when I'm suffering from it, then it gives it a sense of reality which it doesn't have.

And it's interesting that the discourse uses the idea of vapour that's creating the mirage, the froth on the water, because the body, it seems, is 60% water. So if you were to separate all the elements of the body rather than the parts, you'd end up with a lot of bottles of water.

And then when it comes to the body itself in terms of the attachment to the body, the main thing is, of course, our attachment to the body as something which is — we can't say beautiful for most of us because we have this awful image of Hollywood, Bollywood, and CGI. Nobody lives up to that standard! But there is always that — we can say — slight concern that people see us as pleasant, as something to look at which is pleasant.

And so there is this concern about how we look. And if a person is using their looks in order to gain advantage, of course, then you very quickly catch somebody who is attracted to you, and with that there comes power. But there's also a real bite back — it's not a feedback, it's a bite back — because now your sense of power is dependent on their admiration.

And of course when their admiration fades away, you discover it's not love. And of course if their admiration turns to somebody else, then we're fired up with rage and jealousy. So there's a whole mixture of suffering that comes with being too concerned about how we look.

There's a distinction between cleanliness, tidiness, and beauty. So how do we overcome this connection to the body, the body as something that has to be beautiful in other people's eyes?

So in the discourse on Girimananda, who is a monk and he's very ill, and the Buddha knows about this and he tells Ananda to go and see him and gives him ten perceptions: perception of impermanence, of not-self. Now here it's translated as ugliness, sometimes it's translated as repulsiveness. The drawbacks, giving up, fading away, cessation, dissatisfaction with the whole world, impermanence of all conditions, and mindfulness of breathing.

And we'll just concentrate on the business of the body and its foulness or ugliness or unpleasantness, maybe we should say.

So interestingly enough, there are 31 parts enumerated by the Buddha. In this body: there's head hair,

body hair, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, intestines, bowels, undigested food, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, saliva, snot, synovial fluid, and urine.

That's quite a wonderful list! Interestingly, and I've always wondered why, but the brain isn't included. But it is when you do the Mahayana list — they've added it and the list changes a little bit. So you've got feces and then brain, presumably saying that you might be a fathead or something! But it seems as though the ancients didn't know what this lump of fat or whatever in the head was. They thought it was part of the skull, part of cartilage or something. It seems they had no idea that's where your thinking and imagining is manufactured.

Now although I say that, although we might be surprised by that because we take this for granted, when you're thinking and imagining, it's out there somewhere, isn't it? It's not — although it's inside you, it's — you wouldn't imagine it to come out of this lump of fat that's inside your head. And I think in those days, prior to our severe split between the body and mind, people thought more from the heart often, more about what I feel, what I understand, rather than what I think and understand.

Anyway, what we're supposed to do, of course, is to bring the image of these in mind and just relate and just feel what our relationship is. Normally speaking, it's some form or some level of disgust. And to recognize that that's not necessary. That's, again, something to do with not really accepting our body as animal. We're here as animals as well, and not accepting that part of it is unpleasant. It doesn't smell nice for a start. And it's just recognizing it's a smell, and the disgust is not actually necessary at all, which is a measure of our delusion about how the body should be or how we imagine the body to be.

So now, of course, the Buddha says what we do is to contemplate the drawbacks. "This body has much suffering and many drawbacks, for this body is beset with many kinds of affliction, such as the following: diseases of the eye, inner ear, nose, tongue, body, head, outer ear, mouth, teeth and lips; cough, asthma, catarrh, inflammation, fever, stomachache, fainting, dysentery, gastric pain, cholera, leprosy, boils, eczema, tuberculosis, epilepsy, herpes, itch, scabs, smallpox, scabies, hemorrhage, diabetes, piles, pimples and ulcers. Afflictions stemming from disorders of bile, phlegm, wind or their conjunction. Afflictions caused by change in the 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 they meditate, observing the drawbacks of the body. Great old list, isn't it? He's not shy of listing these things at all, is he? Hits it on the nose, you might say.

So these exercises are given us in order to undermine this relationship of attachment to the body. Now, we have to ask ourselves, why do we form this relationship of attachment to the body? And for that, you have to go back a couple of steps to this idea of identity, which we're trying to constantly undermine.

So this identity, this "me," is seeking happiness, remember. It's just seeking it in the wrong place. And what

it does by seeking happiness, it forms a relationship with what makes it happy. How do we define our happiness? I would say for the most part it's how we feel. I feel happy, I feel comforted, I feel warm, I feel beautiful, I'm in love, and so on. So this happiness has an anchor in the way we feel, and that's what we're always chasing. We're always chasing something that's going to make me feel good.

And that's where the problem lies, because then everything that makes us feel good becomes something we depend upon. And when it's not there, that's when you get your grief. And behind it sits your fear of loss and so on and so forth. All the miseries come out of trying to seek some sort of permanent happiness through the body.

And the mistake that we can make of course is then to try and get away from all sensual pleasures. Well that just takes you into a very miserable place, like a dry prune. I mean that's no good at all! So it's not a case of getting rid of sensual pleasures as such, but getting rid of that relationship and being aware of it, being aware of it.

And of course, that was the old reason for fasting, and why Muslims also fast for one month every year, is to try and cut through this dependency we have on the sensual world for pleasure. That's what we used to do it for as Christians, or I as a Catholic. During Lent you had to give something up — your sweets. Well, there's a pain really, but the idea was to realize that you don't need sweets in order to be happy.

So this verse, I've built up a lot around it, but the basic message, of course, is the impermanence, the insubstantiality, and how not to be attracted by Mara's flowers.

So I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not caused confusion, and that by your devotion to practice you will be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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