One with the Body

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Listening to the chant on the thirty-two parts of the body, it would be easy to conclude that the Buddha had a negative attitude toward the body, or solely a negative attitude. But if you look at that chant in the larger context of how he treats the body, how he treats the topic of contemplation of the body, you find that he has a positive use for it as well, as an object of concentration, as an object of rapture, an object of ease, or for developing rapture, for developing ease. After all, what are we focusing on as we meditate here? The breath. We’re trying to make the breath comfortable. It shows that the body does have some potential for providing well-being, not necessarily in the way we normally would think. But this is a type of well-being that the Buddha said is not to be blamed, is not to be feared. You can imagine, after you’ve had that practice, in denying pleasures to the body. There was actually one practice where he stopped the body’s breathing, and he found that even though he intentionally stopped the breath through the nose and through the mouth, it started going through his ears. He was the type of person who tended to be afraid of sensual pleasure, because he had seen the drawbacks. During that point in his practice, he was running off in the other direction, starving the body, doing all sorts of things to destroy any sense of pleasure in the body. He found that, however, didn’t work. Then, as he reflected on the pleasure that comes from a concentration that’s based in the body, that’s absorbed in the body, that’s immersed in the body, it creates a much better sense of well-being, a much more stable sense of well-being in the mind. And as he reflected on that, he realized that there was nothing to fear from that pleasure. And thus it became part of the path. So even though we have to be wary about attachment to the body, we do use the body as a means for well-being, as a means for developing good qualities in the mind, like so many things in the practice. It’s a matter of learning how to take something that you used unskillfully before and learn how to use it skillfully. Eventually, do let go of the body, but learn how to use it skillfully first. It’s a passage where Ananda is teaching a nun who tried to seduce him about things that we have to be aware of. We let go of things that we use in the course of the practice before we let them go. In other words, you make use of food. After all, the body couldn’t survive without food, even though eventually, someday, you have to let go of your attachment to food. In the meantime, you do have to use food. There’s desire. There’s the desire to gain the goal. And of course, eventually, you have to let go of desire. But you do need desire along the path. There’s conceit. In other words, the thought that other people are able to do this, why shouldn’t I? That’s a useful thought along the path. Then Ananda said, “Then there’s sex.” He said, “That doesn’t count. The principle doesn’t apply there.” That’s an unskillful use of the body, an unskillful use of the mind. But in other areas, it tends to be a common practice that there are many things that we’re eventually going to have to let go of. But before we let go of them, we have to immerse ourselves in them. We have to learn to really master them. One is the way we relate to the body. We relate to the breath. When you focus on the breath, how do you focus? Where do you focus? Do you put too much pressure on the breath? Do you put too little pressure on the breath? Try to be quick to notice that when you focus on the breath, does the breath change? You immediately ask, “Well, how can you know that? How do you know what the breath is like when you’re not focused on it, and how do you know what it’s like when you are focused?” Well, you can notice this. There’ll be a change. You can feel it, if you pay careful attention. Then there’s the question of how you conceive of the breath. What mental picture do you have of the breathing process? To what extent does that mental picture determine the way you’re going to experience the breath? One way of finding this out is to experiment. Change the mental picture. Think of the breath coming in and out of the body in different ways, in different spots. Then there’s the mechanics of breathing. Exactly how much effort do you have to exert to bring the breath in and push it out? What happens if you only work at bringing it in, and then when it comes in enough, you stop, and then let it go out whatever way it wants until you’re ready to come in again? What does that change in your experience of the breathing? What’s it like to just let the body breathe on its own? In other words, if it’s not going to breathe in or breathe out on its own, you’re not going to force it. What does that do? There are lots of questions you can ask about how you relate to the breath. The purpose is not simply to ask questions, but it’s to find a way of relating to the body that really does feel good, so you can focus on the breath without causing undue stress on the body. There’s no undue sense of constriction or tightness, so you can be with the body on good terms. When you do this, you find that the body seems to open up to you as well. The sensations that seem tight and standoffish begin to melt, and it’s almost like you’re more absorbed in the body. In almost a physical sense, everything melds together. We know that the purpose of discernment is to make distinctions, so the question is, “Well, why are we allowing things to meld together like this?” You have to let them come together so that your awareness does feel one with the body, feels one with the breath. They feel each other. The sense of ease and rapture that come from learning how to relate properly to the breath, you allow to spread throughout the body. You allow your awareness to spread throughout the body. In the beginning, it’s not going to fill every little cell, but you’ll find that there are patches here and there, and you can connect them, allow them to flow together, even though the whole thing may not feel one in that good sensation of the breath. You’ll find that you can connect lots of different passages that are ready, lots of different sections or patches of the body that are ready to connect. Once you allow the breath to feel comfortable in the spot where you’re focusing, you’ll begin to notice that there are other spots like that in the body. It’s almost like you’re tuning into their frequency. Once you’re tuned in, then you can connect them. Once they’re connected, they can begin to grow. That sense of well-being does fill the whole body, and the mind seems to be one with the body. It’s like John Lee says, “Don’t be in too great a hurry to crack it up into pieces.” Allow your awareness and the breath and your inner sense of the body all to become one, and get good at it so that no matter what the type of breathing, no matter what the situation, you can create this sense of oneness. The time will come when you start asking questions about, “Is this truly one?” But in the meantime, don’t be in too great a hurry. If you crack things before they’re ready, it’s like breaking open an egg before the chick is fully matured. You’re not going to get the chick out of the egg. All you do is get a yolk, or a half-formed chick is going to die. It takes time, and there’s a sense of allowing it to mature before you start taking this apart. John Lee has noted in many of his talks and writings that there’s a stage in which you try to take all four frames of reference and you make them one. You’re here with the breath—that’s the body. You’re here with the feelings of ease—that’s the second frame of reference. There’s the awareness of the mind. There’s the quality of the mind. They’re all one together right here. For the time being, that’s where you want them. You want them all together. Because when they separate out after being together like this, they separate out along their natural thought lines. Our natural way, or normal way of relating to them, creates unnatural lines of separation. Which is why the type of analysis we do on the four frames of reference before you’ve really gotten the mind concentrated doesn’t necessarily open things up in the way you might hope it would, because you’re dividing things along the wrong lines. But when you bring things together like this and allow them to stay together for a while, things begin to separate. You begin to see their natural separation. It’s like a chemical mixture that you allow to sit. There are four different chemicals in there, and if they’re allowed to be still long enough, they begin to separate out, and each goes to its own place. And then, once they’ve begun to divide themselves like this or separate themselves out like this, that’s when you can get to work refining your understanding of exactly where those separations are. Normally, we shake the chemical around, and so there are lots of swirling lines. It’s really hard to make any kind of division that really makes any sense. It’s clear in any way. It’s like that pattern on the chanting book we have. It’s taken from that old process where they would mix colors, and then take a few wires and stir them around in the colors on top of a solution, and then go these very swirling, interesting patterns. They’re beautiful to look at, interesting to look at, but if you try to analyze them, where does the red begin, where does the blue begin, where does the green begin? It’s all very complex. Whereas if you allow things to sit for a while, they all begin to go back to their own nature, their own specific gravity, and they divide out on their own. Once they’re divided like that, then you can start seeing through them. Then you can start letting go. But until you get to that point, you want to get things as still as possible, as one as possible. I’ve been reading in Mahayana philosophy recently, and they like to make the point that mainstream Buddhist philosophy, what they like to call Hinayana, is more concerned about gaining release from conditioned experience. Whereas for them, the whole purpose of the practice is to enter into conditioned experience. Rather than getting release from conditioned experience, they wanted to enter into it. That’s if we weren’t doing that, too. We’re entering into it right here. You immerse yourself in the breath, you immerse yourself in the feeling of the body. The feelings of rapture, you let them spread to fill the whole body. The immersion is a function of concentration. The release is what comes when you’ve mastered concentration and realize that there’s something better. So don’t be afraid of getting stuck in concentration. Don’t be afraid of the fact that there is a sense of oneness and it doesn’t seem to be so easy to analyze yet. These things take time. We’re not practicing the instant Eightfold Path. We’re practicing the Noble Eightfold Path, and it takes a while. Yet it can go through some unexpected stages. So you have to be willing to go through those stages. If you decide you have things figured out beforehand, well, that prevents the mind from going through the training, from going through the process. We think we’re clever because we’ve had it all analyzed. We’ve read all these books. We can explain these things. But it’s very different from having the mind go through the process, go through the stages itself, and see what it learns. This is why the Buddha said there’s a difference between the knowledge that comes from hearing and the knowledge that comes from thinking, on one hand, and the knowledge that comes actually from developing these qualities in the mind. We know beforehand that there’s going to be a separation. We try to figure it out beforehand. You know, John Lee’s image of the person who wants to get just the gold out of the rock. So he goes with a little pick to get out just the gold. Of course, it doesn’t work. He has to go through the process. In his case, you bring the rock in and you put it into a smelter. When it gets the right temperature, then things start separating out on their own. They separate in ways that you didn’t expect, which is why you have to go through the process of putting them all together and then applying the heat, which is the heat of the persistence of our practice. So keep the heat up. Not too hot, not too cold. Keep it just right. But keep it consistent. Try to achieve this sense of oneness. We may not like the word “achieve,” but try to get there. Then maintain it as much as you can and see what happens as it develops, as it matures.

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