Body as Path

November 26, 2005

This body of mine, this body of yours, when you take them apart, there’s really not much there. Think of all the different parts spread out on the floor in front of you. When you look at them that way, you can ask yourself, “Which of them would you most like to take and claim as yours?” And there’s really nothing. Each part is all bloody and decaying. The parts of the body that we see, aside from the eyes, are all dead. The hair is dead. The skin is dead. And the parts inside aren’t much to look at either. And this is the body that we use as our vehicle for the practice. If we simply use it as an object of attachment, it causes a lot of problems. As we hold onto it, we want it to be this way, we want it to be that way, and it keeps going against our wishes. If it went totally against our wishes, we wouldn’t be able to latch on to it at all. There are some things we can make it do. And so what we’re doing as we’re practicing is to learn how to use the body in a way that’s actually helpful for the mind, rather than simply a burden or a responsibility. You think of all the work we do just to keep this body housed and fed and clothed and treated with medicine. But what does it do for us? It does some things, and all of a sudden this doesn’t work, and then that doesn’t work, and then this works again, and that starts working again, and then they stop working altogether. And when it’s going to get sick, it doesn’t consult you and ask when it’s convenient time. It just goes ahead and gets sick. And the same with as it ages. It doesn’t ask you whether you’re ready to grow old yet. It doesn’t ask you whether you’re ready to die. These things just happen. You’d think that after all you’ve done for the body, it would at least show a little gratitude, but it just does things its own way. So if you lead a life simply as a slave to the body like this, where do you end up? Old and sick and miserable. That’s the problem. Is there a way to live with this body and not end up miserable? That’s the issue. Because it’s going to grow old and it’s going to go sick and it’s going to go die. It’s going to die at some point. But the misery is not necessary. That’s optional. And that’s the option that most of us opt for. What’s special about the Buddha’s path is that it takes the body and uses it in a way that trains the mind so it doesn’t have to be miserable, so it doesn’t have to suffer from the body. We were talking this morning about how the path actually takes these khandhas, which are the things that we feed on or the things that we cling to, and it turns them into the path. And the way the Buddha treats the body in his teachings, that’s a really vivid example. On the one hand, you can contemplate the parts of the body to develop a sense of dispassion, or saṃvega, which is a sense of urgency, a sense of dismay, over the way you’ve been leading your life so far, the way you’ve been attached to the body so far. And yet, what have you gotten from it? Even the physical pleasures you’ve got from the body, where are they now? All you have is a memory of them, and the memory is just a very pale imitation. It’s not much. That would be depressing if you stopped right there. But the Buddha doesn’t stop right there. He says, “You can use this body. You can use the body to be generous. You can use it to be virtuous. And you can use it to meditate.” That’s where he gives the most detail. He talks about settling the mind with the body. You can use the breath as an example. Just paying close attention to the breath, find out what way of breathing can give rise to a sense of ease, can give rise to a sense of pleasure. Then let that spread out throughout the whole body. As he says, saturate the whole body, suffuse, permeate the whole body. That sense of ease comes when you finally have identified what way of breathing feels good, feels nourishing for the body. Then you can think of it spreading throughout the whole nervous system, throughout all along the blood vessels, all along everything in the body, out to the pores. That’s getting good use out of the body. It gives you a type of pleasure that doesn’t have to depend on sights or sounds or smells or tastes or tactile sensations. It depends simply on how you focus on the body, how you focus on the breath. In other words, it’s a skill. And as in every skill, there are several things that you have to master. The ability to stay focused, the ability to identify what kinds of breathing are comfortable, which ones are not, and the ability to spread that sense of ease, at the same time expanding your sense of awareness. So that you’re focused and yet have a broad range to your awareness. And you learn how to saturate that with comfortable breath sensations that are related to this comfortable breath that you’re working on. So as you’re working on the skill, you find yourself at sometimes focusing on the focus, and other times focusing on the pleasure, and other times focusing on the spreading. It’s normal that you’ll be focusing on one or the other, but over time, you want to be able to do all three at once. That’s when the pleasure and the rapture, the sense of fullness, get more and more intense, more and more consistent. They don’t waver so much. And this way, you get good use out of the body, because it helps create a state of mind that’s totally blameless. That can act as a foundation for skillful qualities, skillful actions, skillful words. Because when you’re coming from this position of strength, why would you want to stoop to saying nasty things or backhanded things or petty things or doing things that are harmful or hurtful? The reason we harm other people or hurt other people is because we’re hurting ourselves. Most of the evil in the world is done because people feel threatened or afraid. But if you have a good, secure basis for the mind here in the body like this and you’ve trained your awareness so that you can fill it up, fill the body with a sense of rapture, fill your awareness with a sense of ease, fill the body with your awareness, the normal petty way of the world just gets less and less attractive. This is good for the body, but that’s incidental. The really important part is that it’s good for the mind. So this is how you take the body, that aggregate of form, and turn it into part of the path. When you get the mind in a good state of concentration like this, all the aggregates are here. There’s the form of the body, there’s the feeling of pleasure, there’s the perception of breath, there’s the direct thought and evaluation, those are the fabrications, and, of course, there’s consciousness. It’s all here together. You’re taking all of the aggregates and you’re using them to make them a path. Once you’ve done that, then you try to maintain it. Keep the path going inside. Think of your body as a path. How the mind relates to the body as a path. Ask yourself, “The state of mind you have right now, where is it taking you? The activities you do through the day, where are they taking you?” If you look at the way that most people live their lives, it’s pretty pointless. They just hang around, they work, and then when they have time to rest, they do casual things. They really don’t go anywhere. They try to hang on to the body and it just keeps slipping away, slipping away. Where do you have left? It’s normally how people relate to their bodies, their feelings, all their aggregates. It’s like clinging to a fistful of water. It slips through your fingers and there’s nothing left. But what you have is the tension and the stress that comes from trying to hold on. But if you develop the body as a path, then you can let it go with ease. The skills you’ve learned are always there, as long as you need them. If you tend to them, look after them, but the body as a basis. That can come and it can go, but the skills are still there. So this is why it’s good to look at the way you lead your life. Ask yourself, “What, at the end, are you going to have left?” Because we don’t know how much time there is. But we do know that we have the present moment right now. This is our chance. You can take this chance and you can simply cling to it, or you can take this chance and turn it into a path. The choice is yours.

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