The Form of the Body

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Our brains are hardwired to report all the latest news on the body, every little pain, every little disorder. And the mind seems to pick up that habit very quickly. The least little thing goes wrong with the body and the mind gets upset. Just try sitting for two, three, four hours. If you think you’re not attached to the body, you suddenly discover a lot of very intimate and demanding attachment. Even just one hour, it’s easy for the mind to complain about the pain here, the pain there. How much longer is this going to go on? What’s going to happen to the body as a result? It goes on and on and on. We like to think that the mind is in charge, but the body seems to be calling a lot of the shots. Actually, the body itself doesn’t call the shots. It’s simply that we’re very attuned to anything, the least little thing that goes wrong with the mind. This is why we have that chant on the body, to help pry loose some of those concerns, to realize that not every little thing that goes wrong with the body is a life-or-death matter. Even the life and death of the body is not as important as the life and death of the mind. That’s what we’re trying to focus attention on, and it requires looking at the body in such a way that its importance can begin to fade. It looms less and less large in our concern. But that requires a lot of work. We have to chant that chant every day. We have to contemplate this issue every day, every day, this body of mine that’s so insistent, that seems so important. We’ve got to learn to take it apart. In Thailand, they have the habit of allowing monks to visit autopsies. There’s a medical museum and a state-of-the-art hospital you can visit. You can see dead bodies on display. What’s amazing about it is you look at these things and it develops a sense of lightness. You realize that all these issues that you’re so worked up about with the body, its health, its proper functioning, its purpose—no matter what you do, everything in the body ends in death. That can be liberating, just that thought, that realization that the little worries and concerns of the day, or even some of the big worries and concerns of the day, really don’t have to be taken all that seriously. There are other issues that are more serious, like the ability to free the mind from suffering. That’s important. And you want the issues of the mind to take on more and more importance in your life. So that’s why we chant that chant, this body of mine. Achieve full mastery of concentration until you’ve also overcome your attachment to sensual desire. It’s good to think about why that is. One very important reason is what is the object of meditation? It’s form, the form of the body, the way you experience the body from within. And to be subtly there, you want to make sure the mind doesn’t easily slip off into the other way of experiencing the body as a whole. That’s an object of major concern. Worrying about its health, worrying about what it’s going to do to you if things don’t go well in the body. All the concerns that having a body exposes us to. The body as a source for getting in touch with sights and sounds and smells and tastes and tactile sensations and all the sensual pleasures we enjoy. When your awareness of the body switches into that mode, it destroys your concentration. Here it is, the same body. It’s just two different modes of looking at it, from within as form and from without as the body. Not so much without, but just seeing the body in the context of the world, in the context of your thoughts of who you are, what the body’s going to do to you, the pains and the pleasures you can receive from the body. So you need practice in training the mind so it doesn’t switch into that mode so easily. If you can stay in the mode of just form, your concentration gets a lot more solid. The mind has a lot more room. So it’s a double practice here, on the one hand, exploring this sense of form from within, these qualities of breath or wind, fire or warmth, earth or solidity, water or liquidity. You want to get in touch with those. Explore them. Get as absorbed in them as you can. So you’re used to looking at the body from this perspective, how you feel it from within. The other part of the practice is to look at all the other ways that you can relate to the body and see that you don’t want to get so quickly and easily entangled in them. Train the mind so that its immediate reaction to a body is not so much how much you enjoy the tastes that the body makes available to you, or the sights that it makes available to you, or just enjoying having this body, or all the other things it can do for you. But your immediate reaction more is, “This is something that’s going to grow old. It’s going to get sick. It’s going to die.” It’s not worth all that much concern. You can’t give it primary importance in life. You’ve got to learn how to train your knee-jerk reaction to the signals that would otherwise switch you over into the mode of worrying about the body. So you approach the problem from both sides, making the sense of form more inviting, more interesting. At the same time, you make the sense of the body either as a sensory object or as a conduit for other sensory objects. That’s less and less important. So, explore the breath. That’s the most important of the elements. As Ajaan Lee says, there are basically two kinds of breath in the body. There’s the breath that comes in and goes out. That’s the visiting breath. And then there’s the indwelling breath, which is just the general quality of energy in the body. Notice that the indwelling breath is actually the more important of the two. So when you think about the breath in the body, don’t be so much concerned about the air coming in and out of the lungs, but just what is this quality of energy? When you breathe out, do you squeeze different parts of the body? That’s not good for the indwelling quality of energy. When you breathe in, do you force it to breathe in an awful lot so it feels too stretched? That’s not good for the indwelling quality of breath either. So, gain a sense of that indwelling quality of breath or energy and learn how to treat it well. It tends to be the part of the breath that we mistreat the most. This is why we get tense, say, in our shoulders. Think of the breath as coming not through your nose, but as an energy that’s centered, say, at the tip of the breastbone, the whole front line of the body there, from all the different chakras. Think of them as being all connected. The breath comes out of that line, connecting them. Give it space. Allow it room to stay healthy, all through the in-breath, all through the out-breath. Then adjust the in-and-out-breath accordingly. Sometimes you don’t have to consciously adjust it. Just think of this part of the body as feeling sound and whole, and the in-and-out-breath as itself. See how long you can keep it that way. In other words, give yourself challenges within the context of the form of the body. That’s one way of making it more compelling, easier to stay here. Not switch over into that other mode when you’re concerned about this pain, that pain, and the whole narrative cycle that you build up around that kind of thing. Giving the sense of the body as form more space. You give the mind more space as well, more space to know itself. Instead of seeing itself simply as it’s running around, trying to patch up this leaky house, the rain comes. You’ve got to place a pail here, a pail there, a basin there to catch all the leaky rain. Worry about every little thing that could go wrong in this house. Instead, you make concentration your dwelling, the sense of form as your dwelling. It doesn’t have any narratives. It’s simply here, right here, right now. Learn how to give all of your attention. If you want to think about things, think about the breath. If you want to analyze things, analyze the breath. If you want to enjoy something, learn how to enjoy the breath. In other words, get the mind really engaged in this aspect of having a body. That way, the mind can get to know itself a lot better. Its exploration of cause and effect in the way the mind relates to this sense of form gets more and more continuous. When it’s more continuous, you see more, especially in terms of the connections, cause and effect. That’s what the Buddha’s awakening was all about, was seeing cause and effect within this framework of name and form. Name being the mental events, form being the sense of how you feel in the body, the body as you sense it from within. So try to get yourself in this context as much as you can. That’s what will enable you to know all the lessons you want to know about suffering in the mind. How the mind causes suffering, how it can put an end to suffering. You need to give it some space so you can see these things. It’s right here in this sense of the form of the body. That’s where the space lies.

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