Body & Food

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One of the basic principles of the practice is that if you want to see your mind in action, you’ve got to look at things that are very close to you. The more you deal in abstractions, the less you see. Your eyesight gets focused further and further away. As a result, you miss the most important functions of the mind. So you want to focus on things that are very close at hand so you can catch the mind in action. If you want to see attachment, you look at things that are very close. The two closest things, of course, are one, the body, and two, the food that the body feeds on. Sometimes you hear people say, “You don’t have to focus on that. Focus on the sense of ‘I’ or your ego.” Let go of attachment to that, and that takes care of everything else. Again, that’s focusing on an abstraction, and the work at hand never really gets done. It gets swept under the carpet. It’s easy then to say, “Once you’ve abandoned your sense of ‘I,’ your sense of attachment, then you can go ahead and be attached to the body, be attached to the food, just as you were before. But you can claim that you have a higher understanding of these things. Exactly who this blinds is hard to tell. Sometimes you blind yourself, sometimes you’re trying to blind others. But the issue of suffering never gets resolved. Clinging never gets resolved. So you look at things that are close at hand. That’s why we have the contemplation of the body, why we have the contemplation of the requisites every day. The question, this attachment that we have, after all, is why we were born to begin with. We took birth on this sensual level, because we wanted the pleasures that can come from having a body. This is what keeps us taking birth. Again and again and again. So if you want to undercut the process, you’ve got to look at the drawbacks of having the body as well. One way you can focus directly on the body, taking it apart piece by piece by piece, and see what you’ve got here. You can look at it in terms of elements. You can look at it in terms of diseases. There’s a great passage in the Canon where it goes down the list of diseases in every part of the body. It’s diseases that can happen once you’ve got a body, once you’ve laid hold of a body, laid claim to a body. You’ve got the possibility for disease to come in every part of the body. If you didn’t lay claim to it, you wouldn’t be open to the suffering that comes from those diseases. Or you can look at the parts of the body on their own, just one by one by one, line them up in front of you. See what you’ve got. This is something you have to do again and again and again. You can do it quickly. It doesn’t really have that much of an impact on the mind. We gave her the task of thinking about pulling the hair out of her head and then replanting it, the same way that you plant rice. And he told her,”You can pull it out in big chunks, but you’ve got to plant it one by one by one by one. Just think of all those little head hairs in your head.” In other words, this isn’t an examination, this is a contemplation. You have to do it in detail. Really get down to the fine points. Just kind of rub your nose into the fact that this is the kind of body you’ve got. You wanted sensual pleasures, but this is what you’ve got to commandeer, these elements, these organs, these systems. You have to commandeer these things in order to get the pleasures you want. But then look at the pleasures. They come and go, go, go, go, go very fast. All the sensual pleasures you had last week, where are they now? They’re gone. You may have a memory of them. It’s not certain that you will. There’s a lot of stuff that we struggle for and get and then lose and forget about it as we hunt for more, more, more. But even the things you can remember, it’s not necessarily the case that the pleasures you had in the past will bring pleasure now, when you remember them. It comes back with pain, either the simple pain of separation, that those pleasures are gone, or your remorse over the things you had to do in order to get those pleasures. This brings us to the requisites. A lot of the pleasure in life comes simply from food, clothing, shelter, medicine. But exactly to what extent is really something pleasant? One of our major attachments is to food. The question, “What is one? What do we all have in common? Is it all being subsist on food?” You’ve probably heard the story of the concentration camp prisoners who, during the first week in confinement, would talk a lot about sex. And then, after a week or two of starvation, they’d stop thinking about sex and all they could think about was food. They would talk for hours and hours on different types of food, different recipes. That’s our basic obsession. Food obsesses us even more than sex. But again, look at food. What is it? Where does it come from? Think of all the pain and suffering that goes into putting food into our bowls, food onto our plates. And the fact that we have to feed like this means that we have all the problems that come with indigestion, stomach ailments, intestinal ailments, food poisoning. People need to clean the kitchen. Don’t keep the food clean. They keep food until it gets moldy and they can feed it to you. That can happen. And then you get sick. A day or two of your practice gets wiped away as all you can think about is how miserable you are when your stomach’s not working. Then there are the other requisites. Shelter, medicine, clothing. Again, a lot of pain goes into getting these things. The farmers, the factory workers. Clothing nowadays travels all over the world. Your cotton comes from Uzbekistan and it gets woven into cloth, and your rand gets sewed into pieces of clothing, say, in Korea. It ends up in a warehouse near Louisville, and then it gets sent all over the country. There’s a lot of work that goes into that, a lot of effort. So contemplate the fact that once you are born, you’re born a little with all these needs. Think about the things that people do in order to fulfill these needs. What happens when they’re not fulfilled easily? When society is working well, everything is functioning properly, it all seems neat and orderly. But when things start breaking down, when people who were nice and generous, when their needs were well met, can start turning vicious. There’s a passage in the Canon where the Buddha says he doesn’t trust the monks who behave nicely when they’re well fed and well clothed. He wants to see how they behave when they’re not well fed, when the requisites don’t come easily, and if they’re still determined on the practice, then you know that they’ve gone beyond the attachment. You begin to trust them more, and they can begin to trust themselves more. To what extent can you trust yourself? Suppose civilization were to break down. We’re stuck here on the mountain. There’d be problems with water, problems with food. There’d be no problems with toilet paper. But water? Food? What would we do? How would we behave? Can you trust yourself? This line of thinking is all to help you see through the attachments we’ve built up around taking birth as human beings, taking birth in this human body. So instead of seeing these attachments and the desires that go around them as your friends, you start seeing them as something you want to disidentify with. You don’t want to go after them anymore. You see their drawbacks. This is the essence of insight. You see the allure of things, but you also then see the drawbacks, and you make a comparison. You weigh them in the balance. You see that the drawbacks far outweigh the allure, the advantages. Then you look to see how your attachments arise and pass away. And Jahn Mahaprabhu had one way of testing for this. He said, “You take the body, and you take it apart into all of its pieces, again and again and again, until it becomes secondary.” It’s like in nature. Every time you see a body, you think about what’s inside that body. That lust doesn’t have a chance to arise. And then you put things back together again and test. See where exactly, at what point, does the perception of attractive come back to something that you’ve been looking at as unattractive? Where does the mind make that switch? You may have to go back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. But you try to catch the mind to see how it puts certain things out of mind so it can make that perception of attractive. The perception of attractive has to have a big blind spot, and it’s willed. When you can catch sight of that, you can see how the mind can lie to itself. That’s when it gets a lot easier to let go of your attachments. So look at things that are close at hand. This body, the food it feeds on. You’ll see that they have implications that go far into the distance, as you see exactly how much your existence as a human being creates this network of suffering around you. Also, you see the suffering that goes into having to feed all the time, having to care for the body, having to take care of all these big, gaping needs that we’re born with. As the Buddha said, you’ve been feeding so long that the opposite of feeding, or the cure for feeding, is to develop a sense of need to feed. Sometimes it’s translated as disenchantment, sometimes it’s disgust. What do we feel disgust for? Usually things that we have been eating, feeding on. Then we realize we don’t want to feed anymore. Then when you stop feeding, you stop clinging. That’s when there’s an opportunity for the mind to look for a different kind of happiness. A happiness that doesn’t need to feed, doesn’t require a body. The more you open up to that possibility, the more likely you are to find it. To see that aspect of the mind, the aspect that’s had enough of the physical pleasures, the sexual pleasures, see that as your friend. So much in society has taught us to mistrust that. It’s only weird, twisted, convoluted, perverted people who don’t go for the common pleasures, it says. As a result, the part of the mind that really wants something better gets stunned, gets ignored, gets pushed away. So we have to train ourselves to look back at it and see that it actually does offer health. That’s not the unhealthy part of the mind. That’s the actual healthy part of the mind that wants freedom from all these attachments. So treasure that part of the mind and give it the food that it needs, the food that comes from the meditation. It comes from the contemplation that shows the way to something better.

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