Oozing Bodies, Oozing Minds

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In one of the explanations for the causes of suffering, they get traced back to something called āsava. This is one of those Pali terms that’s hard to translate. But there are two translations that get to an idea of what an āsava is. One is effluent, something that comes flowing out of the mind. Usually in English we think of the term effluent as something dirty, and that gives a pretty good idea of the implication in Pali as well. It’s something that defiles the mind, something unclean. Another translation is fermentation, something that comes bubbling up out of the mind. And either one is effective in getting across the idea that the defilements of the mind don’t come from outside. They come bubbling up from within first and go flowing out. There are four of these āsavas altogether. The first one is sensuality, the second one is becoming, the third is views, and the fourth is ignorance. Sensuality is defilement, and defilement is the big one we have to deal with first. The others are more subtle. Even though it’s a Western trait that we say, “Well, let’s go to the subtle ones first, then the common ones.” Once you take care of the subtle ones, the common ones will be taken care of. But no, you’ve got to deal with the common ones first. Why is it that we’re so attracted to sensory things, sensual pleasures? You have to come to realize that it’s not the attributes of the things outside that we’re attracted to so much. It’s this bubbling up inside. That’s the problem. Even with things that aren’t attractive, we will bubble up and want to make them attractive. But because the bubbling up comes and it goes flowing out and aims so much at the object, first you’ve got to take the object apart to remind yourself that it’s not all that attractive. This is why we have the contemplation of the body. This chant for the thirty-two parts of the body shows up in lots of places in the Canon. When people are ordained as monks and novices, they’re taught the first five of the thirty-two, the ones that are visible outside, as their weapon against sensual desire. So you focus first on the object to remind yourself that it’s not really all that attractive if you were to look at it in all of its aspects. What we tend to do is look at it only in a certain way, and we tend to block out all kinds of stuff. You look at the skin and you tend to block out the fact that there’s sweat pouring out of the skin and there’s all kinds of stuff coming out of the skin. If you take a microscope to look at the skin, basically what you see is all the dead cells. In fact, most of those body parts, what you see is dead. The hair that’s coming up out of the head, that’s already dead. The hair on the body is dead. The skin is covered with dead cells. When we think about somebody being attractive, these are the things we focus on—the skin, the hair, the nails, the teeth. Yet if we were to take them apart one by one by one, you’d realize there’s nothing all that attractive in any one of them. It’s the combination. Of course, that means the combination as put together in the mind that wants to make them attractive. So when you’re doing this practice, say, of going through the bones in the body or going through the five external parts that you can see, remind yourself that the purpose of all this is not to say that the body is bad, but it’s just to remind yourself that you have been deluding yourself. This effluent or fermentation of sensuality is combined with the effluent or fermentation of ignorance. You’re deliberately blocking out certain things. You don’t like to think, say, of what’s inside the body or what’s under the skin or the fact that the skin has blood right under it. The hair that you’re looking at has blood right in its roots, and there’s all this crud that comes out of the body that we have to keep washing off, washing off. There’s lots that you can contemplate here. When you’re looking at bodies outside, always refer to the inside of this body as the inside that you’ve got right here as well. It’s full of this stuff. Go down to the contents of your stomach, the contents of your intestines, all the different organs you have. If you opened up your body, just the smell would drive you. Of course, if you opened up your body like that, you’d be dead. The smell would drive everybody else out of the room. You’ve got it in here, and some of the smell leaks out through the skin. So when you’re face to face with some of these details, just turn around and ask your mind, “What is it that you want out of this body? Why do you want it to be attractive?” That’s where the important questions get asked. The purpose of this is to deflect your attention away from the object, back to the fact that you’ve got this desire for the body to be attractive. You have to keep asking yourself, “Why? Why do you want it to be attractive? What is this fermentation that comes bubbling up? What does it want? What are its assumptions?” That’s where the real issues are. You begin to realize that, after all, the body is not a culprit. It’s not that anybody’s body is trying to deceive you or to attract you. The other person may be trying to attract you. The body in and of itself, though, is not trying to attract you. It’s just a body. It doesn’t know anything. And this body that you’ve latched onto as yours, it’s not at fault. The fault lies inside. You want something out of it. Why? What do you think you’re going to get out of it? When you find yourself resisting this analysis, you get a lot of people resisting it. I don’t know how many people have said, “Can we please not have this chant on the thirty-two parts of the body?” And they come up with all kinds of reasons. It’s oppressive to women. It gives a bit negative body image. That’s another one. What this shows, though, is that it really is getting at something very important, something very deep-seated in the mind, a very deep-seated dipharma, a very deep-seated asava. And unless we’re willing to look at that, we’re in this huge blind spot inside ourselves. It’s not that the Buddha is bad-mouthing the body. He’s just stating the facts as they are. John Seward always made this point. Is any of this untrue, the list of the thirty-two parts of the body? Is there any part in the body that really is? If you put it out on the floor, is it really attractive? Is it really lovely? Does it smell nice? It’s all true. So why don’t we want to hear this truth? Well, we’ve got other agendas, other designs on the body. And those are the problem. So make sure that as you’re doing the analysis of the body, contemplating its various parts and the various ways in which you’re going to look at it, it’s unattractive. Not only the thirty-two parts, but the corpse contemplations. There’s another contemplation called the perception of drawbacks, in which you just think of all the diseases that can happen in the body. We want so much out of the body that we don’t want to get out of the body. And yet it can’t provide all the things that we want. And in trying to get what we want out of it, we have to ignore, try to deny a lot of what the body just simply is. And, of course, you can deny these things only for so long. Then it’s got to show its true nature. You’re in love with it, you like it, but then it’s going to get sick and it’s going to grow old and it’s going to die. So what is this hunger you have for other people’s bodies, for your body? And what misunderstandings is it based on? In order to conduct this analysis properly, you also have to have a good solid base and concentration. Some people can actually get the mind in a good concentration through this analysis. You think about the body for a while and it just gets very dispassionate. You just kind of drop it and the mind is very still. That’s important. You want to keep reminding yourself that there are alternative ways of looking for happiness, for gaining pleasure. The alternatives, especially in terms of getting the mind into concentration, are a lot more better. So when you find yourself going back to your old ways of liking to contemplate bodies and think about bodies and create these narratives of how you get somebody else’s body, always try to remember the downside and that there is a way to get it. There’s an alternative. There’s a better alternative. You’ve got it right here, right at the breath, right at this sense of stillness that you can create in the mind. So try to compare the two, the sense of well-being that comes from the stillness and then the charge you get out of creating those narratives, fabricating those thoughts about the body. Think about how you might get somebody else to lie down next to your body and whatever. Just keep comparing those two. Try to see in an objective way which is the greater happiness, the more reliable happiness, is less blameworthy than the happiness that is clear-sighted. The happiness that is less likely to let you down. That’s why John Lee says in his analysis of the frames of reference that you always have to refer both to the object and to the mind as it’s aware of the object. It’s that double focus. It really allows you to gain insight. It keeps you alert. It keeps you properly mindful. So you can see what the real problem is and also see what the real solution is. That way, this analysis yields its true benefits.

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