Framing the Body

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There’s a famous photographer who takes drone shots of areas of industrial waste. Places that have been destroyed by mining or manufacturing. And he manages to make them look beautiful by the way he frames them. Similarly, several years back, there was a photographer who went into an old folks home, got some of the old folks to pose naked. But all the photographer took was pictures of expanses of wrinkled skin. And again, the wrinkles were interesting. They made nice patterns. You could see them as beautiful. The lesson being that beauty depends on how you frame things. You can take those same industrial sites and photograph them in a way that makes them look really ugly. It brings out the poisonous aspect of mining. The same with old people. You can photograph them in ways that make them look really ugly. You begin to realize that your sense of beauty is pretty arbitrary. This is one of the reasons why we contemplate the body. To see that our ideas of how beautiful the body are, how desirable a body is, are very, very arbitrary. The perceptions of beauty are not beauty, are not the real problem. The real problem is the desire to have beauty in areas that will cause a lot of trouble. As you notice, when the foresters talk about contemplating the body, part of it, of course, is thinking about the different parts of the body. If you’re lusting for a body or if you’re proud of your body, which part are you proud of? Which part are you lusting for? You realize the problem is not the body, it’s the pride, it’s the lust, the desire for lust, the desire for pride. That’s an important lesson. But then they also put it into context. Think about all the issues surrounding having a body. Because when you die, as long as you have an had a good training in getting past your desire to have a beautiful body, you’re going to look for a beautiful body to inhabit. One that looks good enough to go into. And think of all the issues that come along with that as soon as you’re born. Where are you born? Are you born in a safe place where people love you and take care of you? Or a place where people are being bombed, vaporized? Are you going to be living in a place where your needs are easily met or a place where it’s going to be hard to meet your needs? And how about the people you’re going to be living with? There’s so many issues involved in having a body. The need to feed, the need for pleasure, having to depend on other people, who find exasperating. Having to depend on people who are actually cruel. You can be born in a tribe where they have no other way of finding their livelihood but by killing. All these things can happen simply by having a body. So the issue is not just whether the body is attractive or not. It’s why do you desire a body to begin with? Because once there’s the desire, you have the ability to frame things in any way to make them attractive, to justify them, to satisfy your desires. But do you really want to sign with those desires? This is what this contemplation is all about. And John Mahabodh talks about how he contemplated the unattractiveness of the body for many years. And it got so that as soon as he saw any body he could, in his mind, take it apart. He began to wonder, was lust gone? And he realized there hadn’t been a moment where there’d been an insight that had decisively put lust aside. So he decided he didn’t trust what he’d attained. So he tried the opposite act. He thought of a very beautiful body clinging to his as he walked around, as he sat, and tried to see what reaction there would be. And for the first three days there was no reaction at all. And finally on the fourth day there was a slight movement in his mind that he would like it. He realized lust was not gone. So what was he going to do now? He decided to test that perception. Why is it that you can look at one body one way and it’s attractive and you look at it another way and it’s not attractive? What causes the mind to go for the attraction? Of course, it’s the desire. You’re using these perceptions to lure yourself, to lure the committee of your mind to go along with that desire for the body. No, for whatever it is you think you could gain by having a body. Because of course we’re attracted to human bodies, not only for the body itself but for their ability to provide us with an entry point into the human world. What is it in the human world that you lust for, that you desire? Is it really worth it? We keep coming back, coming back, coming back. And how much satisfaction is there? I had a student one time who, one evening in his meditation, started remembering back ten lifetimes. And at the end of each lifetime there was this strong feeling of what’s suffering, what’s suffering? Yeah, we keep coming back. Think of King Gauravya. He’s in conversation with Ratabala, the monk. Ratabala’s pointing out to him the truths of aging, illness and death. When he was young he was strong, but now he’s old. He means to put his foot one place and it goes someplace else. Aging. Illness. When he has pain, even though he’s a king, he can’t order his courtiers or his subjects to share out the pain so he feels less pain. He’s without protection there. Death. He may amass fortunes, but then has to leave them when he goes. So he’s been thinking about this. And then Ratabala asks him, suppose there were a kingdom off to the east, and a reliable person says that with your army you could conquer that kingdom and have all of its wealth. Would you go for it? Here he is, 80 years old, contemplating aging, illness and death. And he would still go for it. Sure. Why not? How about a kingdom to the south, to the north, to the west? How about on the other side of the ocean? Of course, in every case. Shows how blind we are. We keep coming back to things that cause suffering. It’s because we haven’t found anything better. This is one of the reasons why we meditate, is to find that something better. Which is why you’re not really through with lust. You’re not really through with the desires to have a human body or to enter into the human world. And do you reach non-return? You have to have some experience of the deathless to cut through these things, totally. But you prepare yourself beforehand by looking at your desires and seeing how foolish they are. Psychologists talk about poisoning your fantasies. So whether your fantasies about the human body have to do with the body itself, or the pleasures you can find by having a body, or holding on to somebody else’s body. So then see if you can poison that image. One way is to think about having somebody else and they despise you. Or they’re untrue to you. Or you gain something that actually destroys you. Or just the body itself. You sign on to this contract and the body hasn’t signed on to any contract. It’s going to do what it’s going to do. It prevents you from getting sick. It doesn’t ask permission. And suddenly this body that you thought you could use to gain all sorts of things becomes a huge burden. Just keeping it functioning is all you can manage. It doesn’t give you room for anything else. So think about the body. Learn to frame your issues properly. The body contemplation, as I said, is not just a matter of taking the body apart. It’s also thinking about all the issues that go with having a body, having to look after a body. And then it turns on you. And becomes a huge weight. Poison the fantasies. At the same time you have to provide yourself with something better inside the mind. This is why the Buddha recommends that when you’re doing body contemplation you also have breath meditation in reserve. So when things get depressing, you feel frustrated, you have a good place to go inside. And you use the body in that way. The Buddha doesn’t say the body is all bad. Because the problem is not with the body. It’s these desires that we have that are willing to pull us in all sorts of directions. If you learn how to use the body properly as an object of meditation, as a place to find some rest, you just stay with the breath. And you can take advantage of what you’ve got. But to use it for a higher purpose.

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