This Body, Too

October 22, 2023

When you see a dead body, or what’s left of a dead body after they’ve cremated it, it really hits you. The Buddha has you reflect on this body too, such is its nature, such is its future, such is its unavoidable fate. The purpose of that, of course, is not to get you depressed, but to make you heedful, to wake you up. If you live your days complacently, they get wasted. Your opportunity to do good, which is what makes human life valuable, slips away, slips away. So you have to think about what you’re responsible for. Right now, as you meditate, you’re responsible for what you do with your breath, what you do with your body, what you do with your mind. To make up your mind, you’re going to stay right here. You think about the Buddha in the night of his passing away. The very last thing he did was to go through the different states of jhana and then again release from there. So he’s teaching by example. You really want to train your mind. So you do it as a practice. You make sure your body’s going, that it can be strong enough to stay concentrated, strong enough to stay focused, hardened, alert, and mindful. That’s what we’re doing right now. In jhana, sometimes I like to make this point again and again that as you’re meditating, you’re getting good practice in how to die. Because on the one hand, you want to make sure your mind is focused where it should be focused. It doesn’t get waylaid. Thoughts may come up. Here is where that principle of knowing what you’re responsible for and knowing what you’re not responsible for comes in. The fact that thoughts occur to the mind comes from the past karma, your past actions. And those things you’re not responsible for right now. You’re responsible for what you do with them. So if anything comes up that would divert you away from your concentration, you’ve got to drop it. And the more quickly you can drop it, the better. Both because your concentration will be less disturbed and also because you begin to understand, when a thought comes, how does it come? What are the steps? And at what point do you actually become responsible for what the thought is? Sometimes it’s just a little stirring there in the mind and the body. It’s hard to say whether it’s a physical stirring or a mental stirring. And the thought seems to come full-blown. Other times you make the decision. This little stirring here, what’s it about? What can I make out of this? We’re so used to making a lot out of our thoughts. Then we’ve got to learn how to unlearn that habit. So as soon as something comes up, whether it’s a narrative in the mind or a picture or just a perception, you’ve got to let it go. Leave the ends dangling. You don’t have to complete a thought. All too often we regard our thoughts as little presents that come into the mind, a potential for entertainment, a potential for whatever. We look into the box and then we fall into the box. And it gets delivered someplace, who knows where. So you want to stay outside the box and regard it as something you really don’t want to get involved in. It’s like a telemarketer or a package that you didn’t order. You don’t have to get curious about the thoughts. Just let them go. There are stages in the meditation where you do want to be curious about what’s going on, what kind of thoughts keep coming back. But as a basic skill, as you meditate, you want to say, “No, no, no. I’ve got to stay focused.” The image that the Buddha has, when you pass away, it’s like a fire going from a house. It can go a great distance. It’s blown on by the wind. The wind stands for craving. It’s through craving that another becoming gets started. So you want to make sure that the craving that motivates you is craving for the Dhamma. That is possible. We’ve heard so much about how craving can be bad. But if it’s craving to have the possibility of continuing to practice, to continue in your quest to perfect the perfections, then it is something you want to hold on to. Then you don’t want anything to waylay you. And when the body being weak at that point or pushing you out, you’ve got to learn how to develop the strength of the mind. You’ve got to be independent of the body, independent of the strength of the body. So it’s going to take practice. One of the people who was helping us today clean up the sala was commenting that she’d had a bad case of COVID. And during that time she just could not focus her mind, because her concentration was still dependent on the strength of the body. That’s why you have to learn how to develop a strength that is independent of the body. We use the breath, we use the body. But there has to be a part of the mind that’s not dependent on them. You have to find that, nurture it, strengthen it. And that’s when you’re doing your duty. You’re taking on new identities, dwelling in new worlds, coming back to old worlds sometime, but taking on new identity again, again, and again. You’re not the only one who’s burdened by this. We have that reflection on the requisites every night to remind you. When you’re born here, you’re born with a big gaping hole. Food has to be stuffed in. You have to be clothed, sheltered. The body misfunctions and you have to get medicine again and again and again. Think of all the people who are burdened by the fact that you need food, you need shelter, you need clothing, you need medicine. Some people you know, a lot of people you don’t. And so you’re going to come back, come back with a purpose. Which is, of course, the purpose of ultimately you don’t have to come back. So realize that what you’re doing right now is your responsibility. This is the duty that falls to you. It’s craving, and the duty here is to abandon it. Otherwise it turns into suffering. So you want to comprehend the suffering, realizing that it is clinging. Sometimes they say the First Noble Truth is that life is suffering. That’s not what the Buddha said. Sometimes they say simply, “There is suffering.” That’s not what the Buddha said either. Suffering is in the clinging to the five aggregates. The clinging is something you’re doing. The aggregates are things that you’re forming. When the Buddha analyzes the aggregates, he analyzes them as verbs, form, deforms. Feeling feels. Perceptions perceive. Fabrications fabricate. Consciousness cognizes. The things you’re doing, particularly the fabrication, as the Buddha points out, we fabricate the other aggregates for the sake of having them. It’s as if we have potentials coming in from the past. They don’t get actualized until we form an intention to actualize them. In fact, that fact right here is what the opening for awakening is, where you learn how not to fabricate these things. If you don’t fabricate them, that present moment experience just doesn’t happen. You get freed from time. When you’re freed from time, you’re freed from space. That’s where the potential is, which is why the Buddha focused so much attention on sankharas, on what we’re doing right now to create our present moment experience through the way we breathe, through the way we talk to ourselves, through the perceptions and feelings we focus on. These are all activities. And then we cling to them. It’s another level of activity. We keep doing them again and again and again. It’s not those squirrels that get startled in the course of the day. And then it’s cheap, cheap, cheap, cheap, cheap for hours sometimes. It’s all we know how to do. And the Buddha’s teaching us, “Look at this process of fabrication, what you’re doing right now. You’re responsible for this right now. Look at it carefully. Get a really good sense of what you’re doing as you fabricate.” You fabricate this state of concentration so you can understand it and eventually go beyond it. That’s your responsibility. That’s being heedful. Because this possibility does exist. What happens is that it’s totally unfabricated. That’s what gives meaning to all the Buddha’s teachings. Take the teaching on inconsistency, stress, and not-self, like we chatted just now. Focus on the drawbacks of sankharas. Focus on the drawbacks of any object of the mind. Because there is something better. If what we’re fabricating was as good as it got, there’d be no point in talking about the drawbacks of fabrication. But we talk about the drawbacks of fabrication. We talk about the drawbacks of these processes. Because there’s something better. When we can find that, then we place no burden on anybody at all. So this is what it means to be heedful. Realizing that otherwise, in your search for happiness, you’re placing a burden on yourself, you’re placing a burden on other people. But it is possible to practice so that you don’t place any burdens on anybody at all. You’ve got this opportunity. You’ve got this time. This is what a human life can do. There’s a lot more to us than just the ashes that are left over or the body that’s left over when we leave it. And that’s our responsibility, what we can do. And as the Buddha points out, we can do a lot. But our time is limited. We’re looking for an unlimited goal, but the amount of time and energy we have to devote to it is limited. Which is why we have to be very careful about taking on only our responsibilities and making sure they get taken care of. Because no one else can do them for us. And if we don’t do them now, there’s no telling how much longer we have the opportunity to do them. So be heedful.

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