

This Fathom-Long Body

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There's a passage where the Buddha says, "The world, the origination of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path leading to the cessation of the world, all lie within this fathom-long body." Which means that all you have to do is look at the body and you see everything you need to know for the sake of liberation.

We often forget about that. We think that we focus on the breath, we focus on the body, for the time being as we get the mind calmed down, and then we want to move on to more abstract and deeper topics for the sake of insight. But if the abstraction gets away from the body, it loses its grounding. And it gets away from where our real world is right now, which we experience right here in the body. All the things we need to know about the mind we can find by looking at how the mind relates to the body.

So if you want to understand the Buddha's teachings, you have to stay grounded right here. And you really look into how you relate to the body. One of the things you'll begin to see is that your sense of who-you-are is awfully arbitrary.

Start taking the body apart in terms of its 32 parts, as we chant. In other words, take it apart in your mind. Take your liver for instance. It's sitting here in your body functioning away, doing all the things livers are supposed to be doing. It's your liver. But if you were to take it out and put it on the floor in front of you, it would be alien. And why is that? What does that show? It shows several things. One is that our sense of who we are is very selective. It moves around a lot. You don't even have to do anything as drastic as actually taking your liver out of your body. Just shave the hair off your head, or cut some hair off your head, clip your nails, and then take all the nail clippings and the hair and put them in a pile in front of you—and they're not *you* anymore. You don't even want them around. A few minutes earlier they were part of you, but now they're very much not. You want to throw them away.

This teaches a very important lesson on not-self. What is this "self" that we want to see as not-self? Well, it's an activity. It's something we do, something we put together. The Buddha talks frequently about I-making, my-making, and what he calls the obsession or conceit that's the construction, "I am." There's an "I" that exists someplace in here. But it's pretty arbitrary. It moves around in whatever way you find strategic. That gives you a clue about its nature. It's a strategy. It's something you do for the purpose of happiness. In other words, when you're trying to decide what to do, you create a sense of "Well, what am I? Who's going to do the actions? Who's going to be experiencing the results of these actions? Which things should be sacrificed for the sake of that 'I'?" If you weren't able to make these distinctions, you'd find it very hard to make decisions about what to do, what to say, what to sacrifice. It serves a function, this I-making and my-making.

But the problem is that we tend to turn these activities into a thing, something that we *are*. And as soon as it becomes something you are, you've got all kinds of problems. One, trying to pin it down. And two, if you've got this self that's unenlightened, how are you going to enlighten it? How can an unenlightened self enlighten itself? This is where the Pure Land people take off.

But the Buddha doesn't have you look at it in those terms. He says, "Look back at just your body. Where does the sense of self reside in the body?" You go through the 32 parts, and there's no particular part that you would want to lay claim to and say, "This is me." While it's functioning okay, it's your brain, it's your liver, your lungs. They're helping you, so there is a sense of "you" hovering around them, and you're going to be protective about them. But if you were to try to pin down exactly which part of your body is the central part, you'd be hard put to say.

So you begin to see this sense of self as a construct. And because it's a construct, you can learn how to construct it in skillful or unskillful ways. This is what you're doing as you're meditating: trying to construct it skillfully. When you focus on the breath, you actually do get a sense of being one with the breath. You begin to have a sense that your sense of "I" is located at some part of the body—most often, up in the head. But then as you work with the breath in the body, you begin to realize that staying exclusively in the head is problematic.

So you play around with different locations in the body. Try to be in your hands for instance. Try to be in your feet. One purpose of this is to help get the mind concentrated, but the other purpose is to give you a sense of how arbitrary your sense of who-you-are and where-you-are can be. Once you gain an insight into how arbitrary that is, it's a lot easier to let go of unskillful ways of fashioning a self, unskillful types of identification.

Again, it's good to first work with the body to keep the whole thing grounded. Then you can also begin to work with different perceptions, different ideas, different emotions, but don't let them pull you away from the body. Keep everything related to the body and you'll find that you have a real handle on these things.

As when an emotion seems to take over: A lot of its power comes from the hormones that are racing through your blood, say, when fear comes up or anger comes up. But if you can learn to be discerning and say, "Okay, this is the mental side and that's the physical side. And just because those hormones are there, keeping your heart rate up, doesn't mean that the emotion is always there. It comes and goes, comes and goes. But because those hormones are still in your blood, it's going to take a while for the physical side to calm down."

This is where a lot of people have trouble. They say, "I'm trying to get rid of my anger but I really seem to be continually angry." Well, maybe you have the physical manifestations continually, but not necessarily the mental manifestations. Those come and go. And then you've got the breath. You can use the breath to counteract the physical manifestations by breathing through them.

So instead of glomming all these things together, you begin to take them apart. And as long as you stay right here with the body in the present, you're grounded. This is an important principle. All aspects of the four noble truths, starting with understanding suffering, stress, and pain, are things you do right here in the body. Understanding the causes of suffering and stress and pain: You can learn them if you keep careful watch over how the mind relates to the body. The path to the end of suffering is this body together with this mind. Use the body as your focus. You get right concentration, you use the body as your frame of reference. And you begin to understand how the mind creates suffering right here at the body. Right view, right resolve: All these things relate to how you relate to the body. And as the Buddha said, when you touch liberation, you touch it right here at the body. If you want to understand these things, you've got to look at the mind's relationship to the body right here right now.

So don't wander away from the body. And don't object to the chants and the teachings on the topic of body contemplation. A lot of people do. They say, "This is creating a negative self-image, all this chanting about 'full of all sorts of unclean things.'" But, okay, is that a lie? Which part of your body is clean by its very nature? The stomach? The liver? The skin? The fact that we have to keep bathing the body day in, day out, day in, day out, should tell you something. The Buddha's not lying. He's just saying things we don't like to hear.

When a monk ordains, the first thing the preceptor has to teach to the monk after the Triple Gem is the five parts of the body to use for contemplation. This contemplation is that important.

The Buddha keeps everything grounded, because this is the big relationship in our lives: how the mind relates to the body. All the unskillful things the mind does around its experience, it's going to do first to the body. And most consistently with the body.

So if you want to understand the movements of the mind, if you want to understand how the mind creates a sense of self, how it can begin to let go of that sense of self, or to stop creating it, first by creating more skillful feelings of self until you can get them more and more refined, until finally you can let it go: You find that it all relates right here.

It's all in this fathom long body. You don't have to go anywhere else.