

The Kindness of Body Contemplation

January 30, 2013

When we focus on the breath, we're with the body in and of itself. What does that mean, "in and of itself"? The rest of the formula tells us that we're "ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside any greed and distress with reference to the world." In other words, we aren't looking at the body in terms of how it functions in the world. We're simply looking at what it's like to have an experience of a body, both right now and over time.

Like the breath we're focusing on right now: How does the breath feel right now? Where do you feel the breath? Where does the breath flow smoothly? Where does it not flow smoothly? If it's not flowing smoothly, where are the patterns of tension in the body that get in the way? How can you dissolve them? These are things you can explore right here, right now.

But it's all too easy to slip away from the body in and of itself to the body in the world—in other words, what it looks like to other people, what your image of the body is that you're carrying into the world, whether it's strong enough to do the work you want. All these are issues you want to put aside right now. Whether you like your body or don't like your body is not an issue. The issue's just being with the body right here, right now.

So we need tools to cut away these tendencies to go back to our likes and dislikes about the body, our frustration with the body, our pride around the body, whatever the issues are. That's why there are other supplementary meditation themes to go along with the breath.

One of those themes is to contemplate the body in terms of its elements, to realize that it's made of the same elements that everything else out there is made of. It's nothing really special, better or worse than they are. Or you can contemplate the parts of the body, using the list we chanted just now, starting with hair of the head and ending with urine. That list in particular is an important meditation. The beginnings of that meditation are taught to every potential monk, every potential novice. The preceptor is supposed to teach each new candidate the first five items on the list: hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin. You're taught to reflect on these back and forth. Think about each part on its own. What would it be like if it were taken out of the body and just placed on the floor all by itself? How would you react to it? If you walked into the meditation hall here and saw your body parts on the floor, even if they were neatly lined up and labeled, you'd run away.

And when those parts are in the body, what are they with? They're with the blood, the lymph, and all the other things you have in the body that you really don't want to think about. But they're there. And you have to question: Why don't you want to think about these things? If you're looking at a person and have other issues with the person you're looking at, the idea of these things seems to get in the way. Particularly if you're physically attracted to the other person or if you're physically attracted to yourself—or if you're not attracted to yourself, the thought of these things disgusts you. It's interesting that whether you like the body or don't like the body, the cure is the same: look at the body in terms of its 32 parts. If you have pride around your body, you do this contemplation to remind yourself that there's nothing there to be proud of. If you're ashamed of your body, you do this contemplation to remind yourself that everyone else has the same body parts, so there's nothing to be ashamed of. This contemplation is a great equalizer.

How do you do it? You can go through the list, visualizing each of the parts and ask yourself, where are they right now? One common exercise is to start with the bones. Visualize each of the bones as you can remember them, starting with the bones at the tips of your fingers and going up through the hands, the arms, and the shoulders. Then shift to the tips of the toes and go up through the legs, the pelvis, all the bones in the spine up through the neck and the skull. When you do this, you realize that what you have here is the same as what everybody else has. This helps liberate you from the idea that your body is better than other people's bodies or

worse than other people's bodies because we all have the same parts, and none of them are worth putting on show.

You can think of the body in terms of the way they eat mangos in the Philippines. You take a knife and first you cut the sides of the mango away from the seed, and then you've got two little boats of mango, each in its skin. Then you cut the flesh crosswise in little squares without cutting the skin, and you can turn it inside out so that the squares of mango separate out and you can eat them without using a spoon. Imagine doing that with your body. Imagine Miss Universe or whoever doing that to her body as part of her walk down the runway. What she has is the same as what you've got. Then reflect on the cosmetic industry and you realize that everything they sell is just to paint this up, to pretend that things like livers and intestines are not there in the body or to disguise the fact that the body's getting older and older as we speak.

If you're willing to do this practice, you find it's really liberating. You're no longer a slave to the cosmetic industry or all the other facets of the advertising industry that want to make you feel bad about your body so that you'll buy their products to make you feel better about your body. They want you to keep feeding off the fear that your body is not up to snuff, but it's close enough to being beautiful that their products will make the difference. But if you hold no delusions about your body or anyone else's body, you're free.

I'm always amazed at the people who don't like this contemplation, who say it's imposed on them, that it's oppressive or unfair, whatever. It's actually very liberating because it equalizes and strips away the delusions that keep us enslaved. As for whatever negative image comes up in the course of the contemplation, there's a difference between a healthy negative image and an unhealthy negative image of your body. The unhealthy one is when you see your body as deficient in one way or another, and other people's as beautiful. A healthy negative body image is when you see that everybody's equal in having all these parts of the body that are really not all that appealing, really not all that worth holding onto.

This is not meant just to overcome lust. It's also meant to overcome any kind of attachment to the body, realizing that this attachment can cause all kinds of problems, all kinds of suffering. I read recently about a lay teacher who decided that this was a bad kind of contemplation, meant to make women feel inferior, and so she had decided to substitute it with another one, having goodwill for your body and goodwill for any sense of shame around the body. But she'd also noticed that the results of this contemplation were fragile. Every time a new wrinkle appeared, she'd have to go through it all over again. Whereas if you realize that there's really nothing here worth getting all excited about, the appearance of wrinkles is no big deal. Everybody has them. They're just a warning signal that you should accelerate your efforts to do good.

So learn to see this contemplation as really liberating. Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about it as one of his main contemplations for gaining insight not only into your ideas about your own body and about everybody else's bodies, but more importantly into the deceptions of perception—and particularly your perception of what's attractive and what's not. The perceptions are what you're after. Why are your perceptions so arbitrary? What's hiding behind the fact that you choose one perception over another—that this is attractive, that's not attractive? Your perceptions are driven by your greed, aversion, and delusion. And if you can't see that, you'll never be free from your greed, aversion, and delusion because they'll be parading these perceptions in front of you and fooling you all the time.

So this is not a contemplation that bad-mouths the body. It's just focusing on how the mind relates to the body and it puts the mind in a position where it really can be with the body just in and of itself. That way you begin to see other things in and of themselves as well: your feelings, your perceptions, thought fabrications, states of your mind, any qualities that would pull you away from staying with the body here in the present moment or any qualities that would help in that direction. You want to be able to see these things clearly for what they are and while they're happening. The more you're able to step back from either your pride around your body or your shame around your body, the more you realize that neither is a helpful attitude to bring to the practice. When you can step away from these things, you're that much closer to freedom, to finding a happiness that's independent from both the body and the events in your mind.

It's not like we're saying the body is bad and the mind is good. There's something deeper than even the mind

that we're after. As the Buddha says, this "something" can be touched by the mind and it's touched and seen at the body. The potential opening to it is always right here in the present moment where the mind and the body meet. Where you have an experience of the body right now: That's where the experience of the deathless will come. As long as the mind has these issues around liking or disliking the body, it's not going to be able to settle into the spot where it can touch and see that other dimension.

So use this contemplation for its intended purpose. It's not to hate the body, or to make you feel ashamed of yourself. It's to free you from the body and from all the attitudes in the mind that get attached to the body and then either like it or dislike it because of the attachment. When you understand this contemplation, you find that it really is very helpful. It's one of the kindest things the Buddha left behind.