

## *Don't Hang Around Your Corpse*

*May 19, 2022*

Back when Ajaan Suwat was asked to teach in Massachusetts, the person organizing the retreat was talking about how this would be a good chance for people to get to know the forest tradition, but he asked Ajaan Suwat a couple of days before the retreat not to teach contemplation of the body. I was there at the discussion. In fact, I was the translator. The look that Ajaan Suwat gave to the organizer when he said that made me realize that we were going to get some talks on contemplation of the body. And sure enough, we did—on the third night.

Ajaan Suwat introduced the topic by talking about a woman who had studied with Ajaan Funn and was meditating, repeating the word “Buddho” to herself and focusing on her breath. All of a sudden, she had a vision of a corpse lying right in front of her. She didn't want to be near the corpse so she moved back. The corpse moved closer to her. She moved back again. The corpse moved in, closer to her again. And finally, it became her body in the vision. Ajaan Suwat talked about how Ajaan Funn had told her to think about her body—in the sense that someday it's going to be a corpse. And did she want to hang around in this corpse? No. But as Ajaan Fuang noted one time, when he was teaching in Bangkok, a lot of people hang around their bodies because they don't know where to go. They identify that strongly with their bodies. So even if you don't have issues of strong lust or pride around your body, still there's a very strong attachment. You can't imagine being without the body.

It's good to be prepared, because the body is going to do a lot of things you won't expect, unless you think it through. If you don't want to think about the fact that you're going to die—this body you're sitting in right now is going to turn into a corpse—it's going to be hard when it actually happens. So it's good to think about that ahead of time.

In the forest tradition, the ajaans focus on the two contemplations in the Satipatthana Sutta having to do with the unattractiveness of the body. On the one hand, you can go through the body's 32 parts. It's 31 parts in the Canon; the Commentary adds the brain. On other hand, there's the contemplation of the different stages of decomposition that the body goes through after it dies. The ajaans usually put those two contemplations together.

When Ajaan Fuang was teaching meditation, sometimes he would have people get spontaneous visions of themselves sitting in front of themselves. So he'd tell them to imagine the body in the vision one year from now, two years from now—three, four, five, ten, twenty. And then, depending on how old they were, how many multiples of five before you got to when you died. Then he'd have you think about what's going to happen to it after you die—first day, second day, third day.

We don't see much of that here in the States. When somebody dies, they get whisked off right away. In Thailand, it's not so quick. People actually see more of the stages of

decomposition. You look at a decomposing body and you say, “Hmm, I wouldn’t want to hang around that.”

Then Ajaan Fuang would have you cremate the body in the vision until it was nothing but dust. Then he’d have you reassemble the body from the dust back to the corpse, from the corpse back to the old person, from the old person back to where you are right now.

This was to remind you that this is all connected. It’s meant to make you want to look someplace else for your happiness—and to develop a sense of *samvega* around any desire for a body. Because, if you at the moment of death, if you latch on to another body, it’s going to be the same sort of thing all over again. But if you develop a sense of peace in the meditation and get so that you can focus on something formless like space or awareness itself, you realize that you have an alternative spot to go.

Some people might say, well, your imagination of space and your imagination of consciousness depend on the body. But the actual experience of space, the experience of consciousness, doesn’t necessarily have to depend on a body. There are formless beings. This, the Buddha said, is one of those things that he couldn’t prove to you ahead of time but he said that it’s a good thing to take as a working hypothesis. It helps you realize that you have more choices than just having to come back to another body and go through these processes all over again.

Even if you don’t like your body, at the very least, realize that you’re not disliking it because you don’t want to have anything to do with it. It’s disappointed you, one way or another, but you’re still very attached.

So, think of it in terms of its different parts.

Ajaan Mun would recommend that you go down the list that we chanted just now—hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin—until you get one that really hits you. Sometimes a spontaneous vision will rise, sometimes not, but you get a strong sense of *samvega* over the fact that “Oh my gosh, there’s that in my body as well.” Focus on that one. You don’t have to do the whole body, just that one part. Think about the fact that you’re living with this weird thing that’s inside you or around you, like the skin. And think of all the issues that are created around that particular part. There are illnesses in that part. If it’s one of the exterior parts of the body, people get really attached to it—how it looks. But then if you were to take it off and just have it as a separate piece, you wouldn’t want to look at it or get near it at all.

This is where the contemplation turns into a focus on the mind. Why does the mind play these tricks on itself? Something that looks really attractive in one context becomes unattractive in another context, and then back to attractive again in still another. What’s going on? The mind *wants* this to be attractive. For what purpose? Keep digging into those questions and you’ll learn a lot of interesting lessons about the mind. Because the issue, of course, is not the body, the issue is the mind. The body can just do its thing and it’s not upset. The body isn’t upset when it dies. It’s the mind that’s upset. It’s going to go looking for another

body. Of if you're not careful, if you're not trained, it's going to hang around this body as it decomposes, which is also an unpleasant place to be.

Ajaan Fuang had a student once who was meditating with him at Wat Makut in Bangkok. The place where they were meditating was a two-story building. He was up in the second story, overlooking a field of what they called "envelopes." These are brick and concrete structures just big enough to put a coffin in. And there were lines and lines and lines of them. Because in Thailand when a person dies, you don't always have the funeral right away. Sometimes you have to wait until the family can afford it or until a son or daughter who's studying abroad comes back home. Then the family can get together and can do a proper job. So, in the meantime, you need a place to put the coffins. So they had these envelopes lined up behind Wat Makut.

As the woman was meditating, she had a vision of people performing a ceremony where they were putting a coffin into one of these envelopes. And there was a man, wearing a suit, standing right at the entrance to the envelope. When the ceremony was over and people were going their separate ways, he stayed right there, looked left, looked right, and went *zoop* into the envelope.

That startled her. So she got up from meditation and glanced out the window. Sure enough, people were going their separate ways from having performed that ceremony. So without saying anything to Ajaan Fuang, she went down and asked them, "The person who died, did he look like this?" She described the man in the suit, and they said, "Yup, that's him."

So she went back up and asked Ajaan Fuang what she should do now. He told her to get back in meditation and see if she could get that vision again, which she did. Then he said, "Okay now, look in the envelope." There she saw the man squatting down right next to his body, looking lost, not knowing where to go. That's when Ajaan Fuang said, "Okay now, dedicate the merit of your meditation to him." The woman said it was like a light going out of her chest, out of her heart. The man was like a deer in the headlights. He looked over in her direction, had a brief flash of recognition on his face, and then disappeared.

As Ajaan Fuang told me in another time, he would walk around Wat Makut sometimes in the evening to exercise his legs. He came back one night and said, "You know, the number of people who die and hang around their bodies is really large." You get the feeling he was probably walking around, sending them off.

So you don't want to hang around. And the best way not to hang around is to think beforehand about what's going to happen to the body so that you're not surprised by what it does. And remind yourself, there's something better than this. You don't have to keep coming back for more bodies. As the Buddha said, if you were to take all the bones of one person for an eon, assuming that the bones didn't decompose and there were someone to look after them, the pile would be huger than a mountain. We've been through that many bodies. Yet one of the reasons we're afraid to die is fear we're going to leave this body. And, of course, that fear primes us to latch on to whatever body comes into our range of awareness at the point of

death. So learn to get some detachment from the body. See your attachment to the body as something strange, and that can save you a lot of grief.

Speaking of those envelopes, they don't have them anymore. They put up a warehouse for storing the coffins. The reason is related to a story that I always like to tell. One of the monks I knew at Wat Makut needed a place to do walking meditation. He realized that the aisles between the envelopes were perfect as walking meditation paths. So he'd go out at night and walk between the envelopes. At first, he was kind of freaked out, thinking about all the dead bodies around, and the possibility that there might be spirits of the dead people still hanging around as well. But, after a time, doing this night after night after night, he got more and more used to it until it became very ordinary.

Then there was one night, as he was doing walking meditation, he said to himself, "I'm getting pretty good here, I'm not afraid of being around the dead bodies." All of a sudden a hand reached out from one of the envelopes and grabbed him by the ankle. It turned out that it was a druggie who was smoking pot or something in an empty envelope, and who was going to ask him for a match. Of course, the monk practically had a heart attack. But then it got so that there were so many druggies hanging around in the empty envelopes that they finally had to destroy them all and then put up a warehouse for storing the coffins with a lock on the door.

So learn how to think about the parts in your body—I mean you're living with them day in and day out—think about them without getting worked up about them. Just realize, okay, this is all there is to a body—just these things and we're so attached to it, so attached to its needs. People will do all kinds of things to protect their bodies, protect their survival of the body, but what is it made of? And then it's going to die on them anyhow at some point, and if they're still attached to it, they'll be attached to a corpse. When you can see this as all very strange and undesirable, that's when you can open up the mind to the idea: Maybe there's something better.