

## *Body as Path*

*November 26, 2005*

This body of mine, this body of yours: When you take them apart, there's really not much there. Think of all the different parts spread on the floor in front of you. When you look at them that way, you can ask yourself: Which of them would you most like to take home and claim as yours? None of them, really. Each part is all bloody and decaying. The parts of the body we see from the outside, aside from the eyes, are all dead. The hair is dead, the skin is dead—and the parts inside are not much at look at, either.

And this is the body that we use as our vehicle for the practice. If it were simply used as an object of attachment, it would cause a lot of problems. As we want to it be this way, we want it to be that way, it keeps going against our wishes. If it went totally against our wishes, we wouldn't be able to latch on to it at all. There are some things we can make it do.

So what we're doing as we practice is learning how to use the body in a way that's actually helpful for the mind, rather than being simply a burden or responsibility or attachment. You can think about all the work we do just to keep this body housed, fed, clothed, and treated with medicine, and yet what does it do for us? It does some things that we want, but then all of a sudden this doesn't work and that doesn't work and this works again and that starts working again. Then they stop working altogether. When it's going to get sick, it doesn't consult you and ask when's a convenient time. It just goes ahead and gets sick. The same as it ages: It doesn't ask you whether you're ready to grow old yet, doesn't ask you whether you're ready to die. These things just happen. You'd think that after all you've done for the body, it would at least show a little gratitude. But it just does things its own way.

So if you lead a life simply as a slave to the body like this, where do you end up? Old and sick and miserable. That's the problem. Is there a way to live with this body and not end up miserable? That's the issue. Because it's going to grow old, and it's going to get sick, and it's going to die at some point. But the misery is not necessary. That's optional. Yet that's the option most of us opt for, without our realizing it. What's special about the Buddha's path is that it takes the body and uses it in a way that trains the mind so that it doesn't have to be miserable, doesn't have to suffer from the body.

We were talking this morning about how the path actually takes these *khandhas*—which are the things we feed on, the things we cling to—and turns

them into the path. And the way the Buddha treats the body in his teachings is a really vivid example. On the one hand, you can contemplate the parts the body to develop a sense of dispassion or *samvega*, which is the sense of urgency, a sense of dismay, with the way you've been leading your life so far, the way you've been attached to the body so far, and yet what have you gotten from it? Even the physical pleasures you've got from the body in the past: Where are they now? All you have is a memory of them, and the memory is a very pale imitation. It's not much. Sometimes it's even worse, if you did unskillful things to get those pleasures. You're stuck with the karma, but the pleasure is gone, and the memory of the pleasure can be painful.

That would be depressing if you stopped right there, but the Buddha doesn't stop right there. He says you can use this body for skillful purposes. You can use the body to be generous. You can use it to be virtuous. You can use it to meditate. And it's in the using it in meditation: That's where he gives the most detail. He talks about settling the mind with the body.

You can use the breath as an example, just paying close attention the breath. Find out which way of breathing can give rise to a sense of ease, a sense of pleasure. Then let that pleasure and ease spread out throughout the whole body. Let it saturate the whole body, suffuse, permeate the whole body. That sense of ease comes when you finally have identified what ways of breathing feel good, feel nourishing for the body, and then you can think of the breath spreading throughout the whole nervous system, all along the blood vessels, all along everything in the body out to the pores.

That's one way of getting good use out of the body. It gives you a type of pleasure that doesn't have to depend on sights, sounds, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations. It depends simply on how you focus on the body, how you focus on the breath.

In other words, it's a skill. And as in every skill, there are several things you have to master, such as the ability to stay focused, the ability to identify which kinds of breathing are comfortable, which ones are not, and the ability to spread that sense of ease at the same time expanding your sense of awareness, so that you're focused and yet have a broad range to your awareness. You learn how to saturate the full range of your awareness with comfortable breath sensations that are related to this comfortable breath that you're working on.

So as you're working on this skill, you find yourself sometimes focusing on the focus and other times focusing on the pleasure and other times focusing on the spreading. And it's normal that you'll be focusing on one or the other, but over time you want to be able to do all three at once. That's when the pleasure and the

rapture, the sense of fullness, get more and more intense, more and more consistent, and not waver so much.

In this way, you get good use of the body, because it helps create a state of mind that's totally blameless, that can act as a foundation for skillful qualities, skillful actions, skillful words. After all, when you're coming from this position of strength, why would you want to stoop to saying nasty things or backhanded things or petty things? Why would you want to do things that are harmful or hurtful?

The reason we harm or hurt other people is because we're hurting ourselves. Most of the evil in the world is done because people feel threatened or afraid. But if you have a good and secure basis for the mind here in the body like this, and have trained your awareness so that you can fill the body with a sense of rapture, fill your awareness with a sense of ease, fill the body with your awareness, then the normal petty ways of the world just get less and less attractive.

This is good for the body. But that's incidental. The really important part is that it's good for the mind.

So this is how you take the body, this aggregate of form, and turn it into part of the path. When you get the mind in a good state of concentration like this, all the aggregates are here. There's the form of the body, there's a feeling of pleasure, there's the perception of breath. Directed thought and evaluation are the fabrications. And of course there's consciousness. They're all here together. You're taking all the aggregates and you're using to make them a path.

Once you've done it, then you try to maintain it. Keep the path going inside. Think of your body as a path. How the mind relates to the body is a path. So ask yourself: The state of mind you have right now, where is it taking you? The activities you do throughout the day, where are they taking you? You look at the ways most people live their lives, and they're pretty pointless. They just hang around, they work, and then when they have time to rest, they do casual things that really don't go anywhere. They try to hang on to the body, and it just keeps slipping away, slipping away. And what do they have left? The normal way people relate to their bodies, their feelings, and all their aggregates is like clinging to a fistful of water. It slips through your fingers and there's nothing left. What you have left is the tension and stress that come from trying to hold on.

But if you develop the body as a path, then you can let go with ease. The skills you've learned are always there, as long as you need them, if you tend them and look after them, with the body as a basis. The body can come and go, but the skills are always there.

This is why it's good to look at the way you lead your life, and ask yourself: What, at the end, you are going to have left? After all, you don't know how much time you've got. But you *do* know you have the present moment right now. This is your chance. And you can take this chance and you can simply cling to it, or you can take this chance and turn it into a path. The choice is yours.