

The Form of the Body

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Our brains are hardwired to report all the latest news on the body, every little pain, every little disorder. And the mind seems to pick up that habit very quickly. The least little thing goes wrong with the body, and the mind gets upset. Just try sitting for two, three, four hours. If you think you're not attached to the body, you suddenly discover a lot of very intimate and demanding attachments. Even in just one hour, it's easy for the mind to complain about the pain here, the pain there, how much longer it's going to go on, what's going to happen to the body as a result. It goes on and on and on.

We like to think the mind is in charge, but the body seems to be calling a lot of shots. Actually, the body itself doesn't call the shots, simply that we're very attuned to anything that happens to it. The least little thing that goes wrong with it becomes the mind's major concern. This is why we have that chant on the body, to help pry loose some of those concerns, to realize that not every little thing that goes wrong in the body is a life-or-death matter. Even the life and death the body is not as important as the life and death of the mind.

That's what we're trying to focus attention on, and that requires looking at the body in such way that its importance can begin to fade. It looms less and less large in our concern. But that requires a lot of work. We have to chant that chant every day. We have to contemplate this issue every day, every day. "This body of mine" that's so insistent, that seems so important: We've got to learn to take it apart.

In Thailand, they have the habit of allowing monks to visit autopsies. There's a medical museum in Sriraad Hospital that you can visit where you can see dead bodies on display. What's amazing about it is, as you look at these things, you develop a sense of lightness. You realize that all the issues that you're so worked up about around the body—its health, its proper functioning—no matter what you do, everything in the body ends in death. And that can be liberating: just that thought, that realization, that the little worries and concerns of the day, or even some of the big worries and concerns of the day, really don't have to be taken all that seriously. There are other issues that are more serious. The ability to free the mind from suffering: That's important. You want the issues in the mind to take on more and more importance in your life. That's why we chant that chant, "This body of mine."

The texts say that you don't achieve full mastery of concentration until you've also overcome your attachment to sensual desire. It's good to think about why.

One very important reason is: What is the object of meditation? It's form, the form of the body, the way you experience the body from within. To be solidly there, you want to make sure the mind doesn't easily slip off to other ways of experiencing the body as an object of major concern, worrying about its health, worrying about what it's going to do to you if things don't go well in the body—all the concerns that having a body exposes us to. Then there's the body as a source for getting in touch with sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations—all the sensual pleasures we enjoy: When your awareness of the body switches into that mode, it destroys your concentration.

It's the same body, just two different modes of looking at it: from within as form, and from without as the body—but not so much without but just seeing the body in the context of the world, in the context of your thoughts of who you are, what the body's going to do to you, the pains and the pleasures you can receive from the body. So you need practice in training the mind so that it doesn't go switching into that mode so easily. If you can stay in the mode of just form, your concentration gets a lot more solid. The mind has a lot more room.

So it's a double practice here: on the one hand, exploring the sense of form from within, these qualities of breath or wind, fire or warmth, earth or solidity, water or liquidity. You're getting touch with those. Explore them. Get as absorbed in them as you can, so that you're used to looking at the body from this perspective, how you feel it from within. Then, on the other hand, look at the other ways that you can relate to the body and see that you don't want to get so quickly and easily entangled. Train the mind so that its immediate reaction to the body is not so much how much you enjoy the tastes that the body makes available to you, or the sights that it makes available to you, or just enjoying having this body, all the other things it can do for you, but your immediate reaction is more, "This is something that's going to grow old, it's going to get sick, it's going to die. It's not worth all that much concern." You can't give it primary importance in life. You've got to learn how to train your knee-jerk reactions to the signals that would otherwise switch over to the mode of worrying about the body.

So you approach the problem from both sides, making the sense of form more inviting, more interesting, at the same time you make the sense of the body either as a sensory object or as a conduit for other sensory objects less and less important.

So, explore the breath. It's the most important of the elements. As Ajaan Lee said, there are basically two kinds of breath in the body. There's the breath that comes in, goes out. That's the visiting breath. Then there's the indwelling breath, the general quality of energy permeating the body. And you may notice that the indwelling breath is actually the more important of the two.

So when you think about the breath in the body, don't be so much concerned about the air coming in and out of the lungs, but just: What is this quality of energy? When you breathe out, do you squeeze different parts the body? That's not good for the indwelling quality of energy. When you breathe in, do you force it to breathe in to the point where it feels too stretched? That's not good for the indwelling quality of breath, either. Gain a sense of that indwelling quality of breath or energy. Learn to treat it well. It tends to be the part of the breath that we mistreat the most.

This is why we get tense, say, in our shoulders. Think of the breath not as air coming through your nose, but as an energy that's centered, say, in the tip of the breastbone, or the whole front line of the body. All the different chakras: Think of them as being connected, and the breath comes out of the line connecting them. Give it space. Allow it room to stay healthy, all through the in-breath, all through the out-. And then adjust the in-and-out breath accordingly.

Sometimes you don't have to consciously adjust it, just think of this part of the body as feeling sound and whole, and the in-and-out breath will adjust itself. See how long you can keep it that way. In other words, give yourself challenges within the context of the form of the body. That's one way of making it more compelling, easier to stay here without switching over into that other mode where you're concerned about this pain, that pain, and the whole narrative cycle that you build up around that kind of thing. In giving the sense of the body as form more space, you give the mind more space as well, more space to know itself.

So instead of seeing yourself simply as running around trying to patch up this leaky house—the rain comes, you've got to place a pail here, a basin there, to catch all the leaking rain, worried about every little thing that can go wrong with this house—make concentration your dwelling, in the sense of form as your dwelling. It doesn't have any narratives. It's simply here right here, right now.

And learn how to give all of your attention. If you want to think about things, think about the breath; if you want to analyze things, analyze the breath; if you want to you enjoy something, learn how to enjoy the breath. In other words, get the mind to really engage in this aspect of having a body. In that way, the mind can get to know itself a lot better. Its exploration of cause and effect in the way the mind relates to this sense of form gets more and more continuous. When it's continuous, you see more, especially in terms of connections, cause and effect. It's what the Buddha's awakening was all about, seeing cause and effect within this framework of name and form, *name* being the mental events, *form* being a sense of how you feel in the body, the body as you sense it from within.

So try to get yourself in this context as much as you can. That's what will enable you to know all the lessons you want to learn about the suffering in the mind, how the mind causes suffering, how it can put an end to suffering. You need to give it some space so that you can see these things. And right here in the sense of the form of body, that's where the space lies.