

## *Body & Food*

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One of the basic principles of the practice is that if you want to see your mind in action, you've got to look at things that are very close to you. The more you deal with abstractions, the less you see. Your eyesight gets focused further and further away. As a result, you miss the motions of the mind. So you want to focus on things that are very close at hand so that you can catch the mind in action around them. If you want to see attachment, you look at things that are very close. The two closest things are, of course, one, the body and, two, the food that the body feeds on.

Sometimes you hear people saying you don't have to focus on that, focus on the sense of I, or your ego whatever. Let go of attachment to that, and that'll care of everything else. But again, that's focusing on abstraction, and the work at hand never really gets done. It gets swept under the carpet. It's easy then to say once you abandon your sense of I or sense of attachment, that then you can go ahead and be attached to the body, be attached to the food just as you were before, but you can claim that you have a higher understanding of these things. But exactly who this blinds is hard to tell. Sometimes you blind yourself; sometimes you're trying to blind others. But the issue of suffering never gets resolved. Clinging never gets resolved.

So you look at things closer at hand. It's why we have the contemplation of the body, why we have the contemplation of the requisites every day. After all, the attachments we have around these things are why we were born to begin with. We took birth on a sensual level because of the pleasures that can come by having a body. This is what keeps us taking birth again and again and again.

If you want to undercut the process, you've got to look at the drawbacks of having the body as well. One way is to focus directly on the body, taking it apart piece by piece to see what you've got here. You can look at it in terms of elements. You can look at it in terms of diseases. There's a great passage in the Canon that goes down the list of diseases that can happen to the body. Every part of the body has its potential diseases. Once you've got a body, once you've laid hold of the body, laid claim to a body, you get the possibility for disease to come in every part of the body. If you didn't lay claim to it, you wouldn't be open to the suffering that comes from those diseases.

Or you can look at the parts of the body on their own, just one by one by one. Line them up in front of you and see what you've got. This is something you have

to do it again and again and again. You can do it quickly, but it doesn't have that much of an impact on the mind. Ajaan Fuang once gave one of his students the task of pulling the hairs out of her head and then replanting them, the same way you'd plant rice. He told her, "You can pull it out in big bunches, but you've got to plant it one by one by one by one." Just think all those little head hairs in your head.

In other words, this is an examination, this is a contemplation that you have to do in detail to really get down to the fine points. Just rub your nose into the fact that this is the kind of body you've got. You want sensual pleasures, but this is what you've got to commandeer: these elements, these organs, these systems. You have to commandeer these things in order to get the pleasures you want, but then look at the pleasures. They come, go, go, go, go, go, very fast. Ajaan Suwat would ask the question: "All the sensual pleasures you had last week, where are they now?" They're gone. You may have a memory of them, but it's not certain that you will. There are a lot of things that we struggle for and get them, and lose them, and forget about them as we hunt for more, more, more. But with even the things you can remember, it's not necessarily the case that the pleasures you had in the past will bring pleasure now when you remember them. Sometimes the memories come back with pain, either the simple pain of separation, that those pleasures are gone, or your remorse over the things you had to do in order to get those pleasures to begin with.

This brings us to the requisites. A lot of pleasure in life comes simply from food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. But exactly to what extent are these things really pleasant? One of our major attachments is to food. The question: "What is one?" What do we all have in common? "All beings subsist on food." You've probably heard the story of the concentration camp prisoners who, during the first week of confinement, would talk a lot about sex. And then after a week or two of starvation, they'd stop thinking about sex and all they could think about was food. They would talk for hours and hours on different types of food, different recipes.

That's our basic obsession. Food obsesses us even more than sex. But again, look at food. What is it? Where does it come from? Think of all the pain and suffering that goes into putting food into your bowls or onto your plate. The fact that we have to feed like this means that we have all the problems that come with indigestion, stomach ailments, intestinal ailments, food poisoning. People in the kitchen don't keep the food clean. They might keep food until it gets old, gets moldy, and then they can feed it to you. That can happen. Then you get sick. A

day or two of your practice gets wiped away as all you can think about is how miserable you are when your stomach isn't working.

Then there are the other requisites—shelter, medicine, clothing—and again, a lot of pain goes into getting these things. Think of the farmers, the factory workers. Clothing nowadays travels all over the world. Cotton comes from Uzbekistan, gets woven into cloth in Iran, and gets sewed into pieces of clothing, say, in Korea, ends up in a warehouse near Louisville, and then gets sent all over the country. There's a lot of work that goes into that, a lot of effort, a lot of suffering.

So contemplate the fact that when once you're born, you're born with all these needs. Think about the things that people do in order to fill these needs, and what happens when they're not fulfilled easily. When needs are met and society is working well, everything is functioning properly, it all seems neat and orderly. But once things start breaking down, people who are nice and generous when their needs are well met can start turning vicious.

There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha says he doesn't trust the monks who behave nicely when they're well fed and well clothed. He wants to see how they behave when they're not well fed, when the requisites don't come easily. If they're still determined on the practice, then you can know they've gone beyond the attachment. You begin to trust them more. They can begin to trust themselves more.

To what extent do you trust yourself? Suppose that civilization were to break down. We're stuck here on the mountain. There would be problems with water, problems with food—no problems with toilet paper—but water, food: What would we do? How would we behave? Can you trust yourself? This line of thinking is all to help you see through this attachment you've built up around taking birth as a human being, taking birth with a human body.

So instead of seeing these attachments and the desires that go around with them as your friends, you start seeing them as something you want to dis-identify with. You don't want to go after them anymore. You see their drawbacks.

This is the essence of insight. You see the allure of things, but you also then see the drawbacks. You're making a comparison. You weigh them in the balance until you see that the drawbacks far outweigh the allure, the advantages. And you look to see how your attachments arise and pass away. Ajaan Maha Boowa had one way of testing this. He says, you take the body and you take it apart to all its pieces, again and again and again until it becomes second nature. Every time you see a body, you think about what's inside that body, so that lust doesn't have a chance to arise. Then you put things back together again and test where exactly, at what

point, does the perception of attractive come back to something you've been looking at as unattractive? Where does the mind make that switch? You may have to go back and forth, back and forth, back and forth this way many times. But you're trying to catch the mind to see how it puts certain things out of mind so that it can fashion that perception of "attractive." The perception of attractiveness has to have a big blind spot, and it's willed. If you can catch sight of that, see how the mind can lie to itself, that's when it gets a lot easier to let go of your attachments.

So look at things that are close at hand—this body, the food it feeds on—and you see that they have implications that stretch far into the distance as you see exactly how much your existence as a human being creates this network of suffering around it. You see the suffering that goes into having to feed all the time, having to take care of the body, having to take care of all these gaping needs we're born with.

As the Buddha said, we've been feeding so long, and the opposite of feeding, or the cure for feeding, is to develop a sense of *nibbidā*, sometimes translated as disenchantment, sometimes as disgust. What do we normally feel disgust for? Usually things that we've been eating, feeding on. Then we realize we don't want to feed anymore. When you stop feeding, you stop clinging.

That's when there's an opportunity for the mind to look for a different kind of happiness, a happiness that doesn't need to feed, doesn't require a body. The more you open up to that possibility, the more likely you'll be able to find it as a reality. You see that aspect of the mind, the aspect that's had enough of sensual pleasures: See that as your friend. So much of society has taught us to mistrust it. We're told that only weird, twisted, convoluted, perverted people don't go for the common pleasures like sex. The part of the mind that really wants something better get stunted, ignored, pushed away. So you have to train yourself to look back and see that it actually does offer health. That's not the unhealthy part of the mind. That's actually the healthy part of the mind, the part that wants freedom from all these attachments.

So treasure that part of the mind. Give it the food it needs, the food that comes from the meditation, that comes from the contemplation, that shows the way to something better.