

Oozing Bodies, Oozing Minds

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One of the explanations for the causes of suffering traces them back to something called *asava*. This is one of those Pali terms that's hard to translate, but there are two translations that get to an idea of what *asava* is. One is *effluent*, something that comes flowing out of the mind. Usually in English we think of an effluent as something dirty, and that gives a pretty good idea of the implication in Pali as well. It's something that defiles the mind, something unclean.

Another translation is *fermentation*, something that comes bubbling up out of the mind. Either translation is effective in getting across the idea that the defilements of the mind don't come from outside. They come bubbling up from within and then they go flowing out. There are four of these *asavas* altogether. The first one is sensuality, the second one is becoming, the third is views, and the fourth is ignorance. Sensuality is the big one we have to deal with first. The others are more subtle.

It's a common Western trait that we like to go to subtle things first, the assumption being that once you take care of the subtle ones, and common ones will be taken care of. But no, you've got to deal with this common one first: Why is it that we're so attracted to sensory things, sensual pleasures? You have to realize that it's not the attributes of the things outside that we're attracted to, so much as this bubbling up inside. That's the problem. Even with things that aren't attractive, we'll bubble up and want to make them attractive. But because the bubbling up comes and goes flowing out, because it aims so much at the object, you've first got to take the object apart to remind yourself that it's not all that attractive. This is why we have the contemplation the body.

This chant for 32 parts of the body shows up in lots of places in the Canon. When people ordain as monks and novices, they're taught the first five of the 32—the ones that are visible from the outside—as their weapon against sensual desire. So you focus first on the object. Remind yourself that it's not really all that attractive if you look at it in all of its aspects. What we tend to do is look at it only in a certain way, and we tend to block out all kinds of stuff. You look at the skin, and you tend to block out the fact that there's sweat pouring out of the skin, and there's all kinds of stuff coming out of the skin. If you take a microscope to look at the skin, basically what you see is dead cells. In fact, most of those body parts that you see are dead. The hair that's coming up out of the head is already dead. The

hair of the body is dead. The skin is covered with dead cells. Yet when we think about somebody being attractive, these are the things we focus on—the skin, the hair, nails, the teeth—yet if we were to take them apart, one by one by one, you'd realize that there's nothing all that attractive in any one of them. It's the combination—and of course, that means the combination as put together in the mind that *wants* to make them attractive.

So when you're doing this practice, say, going through the bones in the body, going through the five external parts that you can see, remind yourself that the purpose of all this is not to say that the body is bad. It's to remind yourself that you've been deluding yourself through this effluent or fermentation of sensuality combined with the effluent or fermentation of ignorance. You're consciously, deliberately, blocking out certain things. We don't like to see what's inside the body, what's under the skin, the fact that the skin has blood right under it. The hair that you're looking at has blood right under its roots. There's all this crud that comes out of the body that you have to keep washing off, washing off. There's a lot that you can contemplate here.

And when you're looking at bodies outside, always refer to inside: this body you've got right here as well that's full of this stuff. Go down through the contents of your stomach, the contents of your intestines, all the different organs you have inside. If you opened up your body, just the smell would drive you away. Of course, if you opened up your body like that, you'd be dead, and the smell would drive everybody else out of the room. With what you've got in here right now, some of the smell leaks out through the skin.

When you're face-to-face with some of these details, just turn around and ask your mind: What is it that you want out of this body? Why do you *want* it to be attractive? That's when the important questions get asked. In other words, the purpose of this is to deflect your attention away from the object back to the fact that you've got this desire for the body to be attractive. You have to keep asking yourself: why? Why do you want it to be attractive? What is this fermentation that comes bubbling up? What does it want? What are its assumptions?

That's what the real issues are, because you begin to realize that, after all, the body's not the culprit. It's not that anybody's body is trying to deceive you or to be attractive you. The other person may be trying to attract you, but the body in and of itself is not trying to attract you. It's just a body. It doesn't know anything.

And this body that you've latched onto as yours, it's not at fault, either. The fault lies inside the mind. You want something out of it. Why? What do you think you can get out of it? When you find yourself resisting this analysis—and you can get a lot of people resisting it, I don't know how many people have said,

“Can we please not have this chant on this 32 parts the body?” They come up with all kinds of reasons. It’s oppressive to women is one. It gives negative body image, that’s another one.

What this shows though, is that it really is getting at something very important, something very deep-seated in the mind, a very deep-seated defilement, a very deep-seated asava. Unless we’re willing to look at that, there’s a huge blind spot inside us.

So it’s not that the Buddha’s badmouthing the body, he’s just stating the facts as they are. Ajaan Suwat always made this point. He’d say, is any of this untrue? The list of the 32 parts of the body: Is there any part in the body that, if you were to put it out on the floor, would be really attractive? Is it really lovely? Does it smell nice? This is all true. So why don’t we want to hear this truth? We’ve got other agendas, other designs on the body. Those are the problem. So make sure that—as you’re doing the analysis of the body, contemplating its various parts, and in various ways you can look at it as unattractive, not only the 32 parts, but other corpse contemplations—you understand why you’re doing this.

There’s another contemplation called the perception of drawbacks, in which you think of all the diseases that can happen in the body. We want so much out of the body, yet it can’t provide all the things that we want. In trying to get what we want out of it, we have to ignore, we try to deny, a lot of what the body simply is. And of course, you can deny these things only for so long. It’s got to show its true nature. You’re in love with it, you like it, but it’s going to get sick, it’s going to grow old, and it’s going to die. So what is this hunger you have for other people’s bodies, or for your body? And what misunderstanding is it based on?

Now, to conduct this analysis properly, you also have to have a good solid base in concentration, although sometimes people can actually get the mind in a good state of concentration *through* this analysis. You think about the body for a while, you get very dispassionate, and you just drop it. The mind gets very still.

What’s important is that you keep reminding yourself that there are alternative ways of looking for happiness, for gaining pleasure. And the alternatives, especially in terms of getting the mind into concentration, are a lot better. So when you find yourself going back to your old ways of liking to contemplate bodies and think about bodies, creating these narratives of how you might get someone else’s body, always try to remember the downside, and that there is an alternative, a better alternative. You’ve got it right here, right at the breath, right at this sense of stillness that you can create in the mind.

So try to compare the two, the sense of well-being that comes from the stillness, and then the charge you get out of creating those narratives, fabricating

those thoughts about the body and about how you might get somebody else to lie down next your body, or whatever. Just keep comparing those two, and try to see them in an objective way: Which is the greater happiness and more reliable happiness, the happiness that's less blameworthy, the happiness that's clear-sighted, that happiness that's less likely to let you down?

This is why Ajaan Lee says in his analysis of the establishings of mindfulness that you always have to refer both to the object and to the mind as it's aware of the object. That double focus is what really allows you to gain insight, keeps you alert, keeps you properly mindful, so that you can see what the real problem is, and also see what the real solution is. That's how this analysis yields its true benefits.