

## *Pleasure from the Body*

*July 26, 2008*

There's an old Japanese folktale about a young woman who's so busy with her chores during the day that she doesn't have time to go down to the well. So she has to go down at night. It so happens it's a bright moonlit night, and as she looks down into the well she sees a face, the face of a young man, much handsomer than any she has ever seen. She's so taken with it that she goes back home and all she can think about is how she'll never get a chance to marry a man that handsome. It makes her so sad that she refuses to eat food and she ends up pining away to death. Many years later a cat fell in the well and so they had to dredge it out. As they dredged out the well, do you know what they found on the bottom? A mirror.

This is a good symbol for the desire we have for sensual pleasures, the way we try to get sensual pleasure out of the body. It's all in our heads. The idea that the body is beautiful or that the sensual pleasures we can get through the body through eating, sleeping, and sex are really worth all the effort that goes into them: It's all in our heads. When you look at the actual facts of the matter, the pleasure is very evanescent. It comes and goes so quickly that you can't really catch hold of it. The things we have to do in order to get that pleasure are often demeaning and they develop really bad habits in the mind and the body itself.

As the chant just now said, we like to think of the body as beautiful but what's actually there if we really look at it carefully? There is nothing that corresponds with our ideas of beauty. People hate that chant. I don't know how many times I've been asked not to recite that chant here at the monastery. People claim that they already have a bad image of their bodies and they don't want to have that re-enforced, or else they say they are beyond attachment to the body, so it's unnecessary. Of course, if it were unnecessary, why would they complain?

The problem is really not with the body. The body does its functions. It needs a stomach and it needs intestines. It need all these things in order to function. The problem is we try to get the wrong kind of pleasure out of it. We look at it as a source of sensual pleasure either through the things we can touch outside or the things we can experience through the body: the pleasures that comes from eating, sleeping having sex, or getting intoxicated. Some people find the mixing-up of the brain signals when they get intoxicated or high really fun and enjoyable, but it's not the path to liberation in any way. Which is why we need the medicine of this reflection to remind ourselves that the pleasure we get from it is all in our minds, it doesn't last very long, and sometimes it's followed by pain, regret. And it's also

followed by really bad habits of the mind. In order to enjoy the body in this way we have to be mindless and have to not be very alert, and it encourages our impatience. We want pleasure right now, regardless of the consequences. This teaches us to be heedless.

The Buddha's not saying that the pursuit of pleasure is bad, or that the body can't provide pleasure, but the kind of pleasure that's actually helpful in the path is of a different sort.

Here it's useful to understand the distinction between sensuality and form. Sensuality, the Buddha defines as the passion for our intentions or the passion for our resolves for our sensual desires. We're much more attached to our desires than we actually are to their objects. In approaching the body from that perspective, we look at it for the sensual pleasures it has to offer in terms of sights, sounds, smells, taste, tactile sensations.

But we also experience the body in another way, what we in the West call the kinesthetic sense, or proprioception, the sense of form of the body, how you feel it from inside. When you're sitting here, the fact that you know where your legs are, where your arms are, where your head is, the general shape of the body: That's form. It has the potential to provide a different kind of pleasure. Developing that pleasure, instead of developing unskillful habits, actually requires skillful habits of the mind. It requires mindfulness. It requires alertness. It requires ardency—lots of skillful qualities.

This is why this pleasure is part of the path, the pleasure of jhana, with strong absorption in the form of the body. This is why we work with the breath until we learn how to take advantage of the potentials that this, the body experienced as form, has to offer. These pleasures start simply with learning how to breathe in and breathe out in a way that feels good, asking yourself what rhythm or texture of the breath feels most gratifying right now and where in the body it feels most pleasurable. Then you learn how to maintain that pleasure, developing it into a sense of fullness and refreshment.

One way of doing this is to notice which parts of energy channels in your body you tend to squeeze when you breathe in and breathe out. Can you breathe in and out without squeezing them? Just choose one channel and be intent on allowing it to stay open all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out. You keep this up for a while and there will be a sense of fullness. In fact, you'll find there are certain spots in the body where, if you keep this up, there's almost a sense that you're drowning, but you're not. It's just that you're allowing part of this form of the body to experience an uninterrupted sense of ease. The drowning sensation comes from the fact that someplace in the mind there's a signal that's

been imprinted that when you breathe in, this part of the body has to get squeezed or when you breathe out it has to get squeezed. You're fighting against that signal so it's going to take a while to get used to it but once you do you'll find a sense of fullness there. Then you can think of it spreading around to different parts of the body.

Ajaan Lee gives the image of waking-up the elements of the body—in other words, becoming sensitive to all the different areas where energy flows in the body, where it's been blocked, what you can do to unblock it, and trying to keep yourself as fully aware of as many of these spots as you can, all at once. When you do, it really transfixes you in the present moment. Because all too often the mind, even when it's with the breath, is sending out its feelers for someplace else to go. But if you've got all the feelers occupied with different parts of the body, there's no place where they can go. There's nothing free to send out. They're all occupied. They're all involved in this process of trying to be as fully aware of the form of the body as you can.

This is one very important way of gladdening the mind in the practice because to stick with the practice you do need a sense of pleasure. It has to be impressive. Otherwise, the mind is going to start sending out its feelers to think about other pleasures that it's missing right now: all the places you could be going, all the things you could be doing but you're not because you're stuck here without air-conditioning, totally subject to the vagaries of the weather. And if you spend all your time thinking about what you can't do right now, the meditation gets very dry. But if you can provide yourself with a sense of pleasure that comes from within like this, a sense of well-being that you can carry around with you, you can make that your obsession for the time being: how, once you get a sense of well-being and fullness in the body, can you carry it around. This kind of pleasure is actually part of the path and it's an essential part of the path to boot. Deriving this kind of pleasure from the body is perfectly necessary and fine.

This is why we have that reflection on the unattractive side of the body. Not to say the body is bad or that the search for pleasure is bad but simply that we're looking in the wrong place. We're trying to get a pleasure out of the body that the body can't really provide or can provide only in a fleeting way but with lots of drawbacks.

So work on developing this approach to the body—approaching it from within. Familiarize yourself with the different elements or properties: the warmth of the body, the energy flow, the coolness, the solidity. Learn how to play with them in ways that provide a sense of pleasure and variety. You'll find that playing in this way develops good qualities of the mind. You become more mindful, more

alert. You're developing the qualities that eventually will be conducive to insight. They'll allow you to see that even in this sense of fullness and ease of the body there's an element of stress. This practice might even lead you to start exploring the formless pleasures, because you begin to realize that your sense of the form of the body is a perception. There's a mental label that tells you that "This is where the body ends, this is the shape of the body, and it has these limits." As long as the breath is coming in and going out, the movement of breath through the body tends to re-enforce those perceptions. But as the breath gets more and more refined, you'll find that you can rely more and more simply on the buzz of the energy flow in the different channels of the body without having to breathe in and breathe out.

This is partly because they get more and more connected as your pores open up, and partly because the brain is using less oxygen. The in-and-out movement of the breath gets more and more refined, more and more subtle, until it finally stops and you're just sitting here very still. Your awareness is still, quiet in the body. The breath energy is still. It's all connected and you find that you can let that perception of the form of the body lapse. It may lapse on its own but you'll begin to notice you don't have to stir it up again because there's nothing in terms of the movement of breath that will stir it up. That's when you're ready for the perception of formlessness.

Think of all the sensations of the body just as little droplets, little points of sensation, and that there's space penetrating all those points, going between them, and that space is connected with the space outside. You're not conscious of any limitation on how far that space could go. That provides a pleasure that's even more subtle. But while you do this you don't want to analyze it too much. Just stay with that perception and the sensation of space.

But as you reflect on that, after doing this many times, you begin to see you've learned an important lesson about perception. As long as you're using the body as a foundation for sensual ideas it's going to require a lot of mental activity. You begin to see that sensual thoughts are like little blips that appear in the form of the body and you have the choice of going with them or not, stepping into their worlds or not. It's like a little cyst of a sensual world appearing in the form of the body, a little seed that you then water, and it'll turn into a world that you enter into. That's one way you could approach it—or you could see it simply as a disturbance in the various properties of form. It's like having a computer. You can type with the keys and get letters or numbers, or you can press a function key and then the keys do different things.

These little sensations in the body either can stay simply as form sensations or

they can become the basis for sensual worlds. You begin to realize that those sensual worlds take a lot of energy and don't provide much in terms of genuine satisfaction. So you see the power of perception, the labels you put on things, and if you start training yourself to use the proper labels and can maintain enough mindfulness and alertness and concentration to keep them in mind with the right amount of effort—not too much, not too little—then you can touch whole new levels of pleasure in the body that are actually part of the path.

So try to acquaint yourself with the pleasure that the body can provide when it's approached from this side: as form, rather than as a source of sensual pleasure. You'll find that your whole notion of what pleasure is will change radically. So, too, will your notion of what pleasure can do. It'll change radically. Instead of being a source of intoxication, this pleasure of form actually clears away the intoxication and gets the mind more solidly on the path.