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### The Source and the Solution; How Buddhism Leverages the Body to Escape Suffering

When looking back at 60's pictures, Grandma exclaims: "Wow, time has just flown by!" A newlywed couple romanticizes about how their life will "never be the same." During a graduation ceremony, a friend reflects on the "good ol' times" on campus. One realization that is evident quite frequently throughout life is that things are always changing; no moment will be quite like the next, and there is no way to stop the flow of time, no matter how much you look at that picture or reflect on old memories. Within the Buddhist doctrine, this idea is far more than a common aphorism, however; it is a foundation of the belief system. The texts argue that the physical reality of the world is constantly in flux and holding onto it too tightly is actually the origin of all suffering. This principle does not solely apply to external environments but deeply concerns each person's own material body; becoming attached to its appearance and sensations is setting oneself up for a multiplication of misery. However, while the physical body, a temporal home for our consciousness and the reason for our struggle with material craving, is not meant to be highly regarded in Buddhism, it is still seen as a valuable tool for leading oneself and others down the path of Dharma.

Along with other spiritual philosophies that emerged around the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Buddhism integrated the concept of transmigration into its creed. Transmigration, the idea that this is not your first life or last life but rather one point in time of your existence through rebirths in different physical bodies, contributes heavily to the Buddhist perspective that the physical body is

purely a temporary house. Instead of being born once and dying once, every being is born again and again after each death in a cyclical pattern and according to one's past karma. This pattern of rebirth has existed for so long that "it is not easy to find a being who has not formerly been your mother . . . your father . . . your brother . . . your sister. . . your son . . . your daughter" (*Path of Purification*, in N 941). Your family members are all beings who are living in a material body during a finite lifetime, after which they will each transmigrate to a different form of material existence.

Because your spiritual self will continue to live on while your physical body grows old and dies, Buddhist texts urge followers to steer themselves away from pursuits, concerns, or pleasures which are not rooted in the eternal nature of their consciousness. The idea of a "noble pursuit" is important in Buddhist texts; it describes actions which reflect an understanding of the combination of an ever-changing physical reality and one's permanent consciousness. Kunala, the handsome son of Emperor Ashoka who ruled present-day India over two millennia ago, lives on in Buddhist lore as someone who lived according to a deep understanding of transmigration and the impermanence of his physical self. After a series of misfortunate events leads Kunala to face his eye being torn out by a torturer, he reflects: "When I consider the fragility of all things and reflect on the counsel of my masters, I no longer tremble, friend, at the idea of this torture; for I know that my eyes are something perishable" (*Legend of Ashoka*, in N 925). The understanding that his body is temporal seems to give him a supernatural equanimity in the face of obstacles. Even after his eyes are gruesomely removed, instead of being dismayed at the pain and his loss, he is joyful for acting on his principles: "The eye of flesh, although difficult to seize, has just been taken from me; but I have acquired the perfect and irreproachable eyes of wisdom" (925). Kunala serves as an

inspirational story to followers of the Buddha by prioritizing his spiritual, everlasting vision of the impermanence of the physical world over his material vision which was bound to pass away.

Buddhist texts urge their followers to work towards this unshakeable wisdom of impermanence because physical bodies and their interaction with the outside world are actually the source of all suffering. The 12-link chain of causation, a core tenet across Buddhist sects, explains that the six senses of human bodies (including the mind) are always coming in contact with stimuli of the outer environment. This contact leads to feeling and sensation which in turn gives rise to craving and aversion, the source of suffering according to the second noble truth. Every time one hears a sound, tastes some food, or detects a smell, there is a causal reaction from that sensory-perception to a mental processing of “dislike” or “like.” Through repeated exposure, these individual *sankharas* of craving and aversion lead to a mental habit pattern of suffering. However, Buddhism prides itself on offering the true way out of this suffering. When working back up the 12-link chain, one finds *ignorance* as being the source of all misery—further up the chain than even the six senses themselves. Here, ignorance means ignorance of *Dharma*, the universal truth of impermanence of the physical reality. The physical body is the bridge between each being and the world of stimuli which keeps us locked in a perception-suffering cycle.

Those on the path of *Dharma* can actually leverage their body by viewing it in a more objective way in order to release themselves from *samsara*, the endless cycle of transmigration and suffering. Strivers along the path of the Buddha are told that one of the highest goals is abiding “independent, not clinging to anything in the world” (*Establishment of Mindfulness*, in N 878). Here, *independent* can be likened to *objective*, even *detached*; one embarks on a process of exiting their body and viewing it from a third-person perspective to realize that their own attachment and association to their physical body is the source of their suffering. Detailed instructions are given

on how to do so; while meditating, and “when feeling a pleasant feeling, he understands: 'I feel a pleasant feeling'; when feeling a painful feeling, he understands: 'I feel a painful feeling'; when feeling a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he understands: 'I feel a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling’” (N 880). Objectively viewing sensations of the body is seen as a method of building up understanding of the 12-link chain through personal experience. Although the physical body is the source of the suffering of beings, it also a tool and the means by which humans can realize the pattern and come out of it.

Just as fundamental to Buddhist doctrine as releasing oneself from *samsara* is the goal of helping other humans down the same path. Among the *paramitas*, or the qualities of the Buddha, generosity and loving-kindness stand out as being focused on benefitting others. In Metta meditation, bhikkhus are instructed to think in a way to build compassion and empathy: “I am happy. Just as I want to be happy and dread pain, as I want to live and not to die, so do other beings, too” (*Path of Purification*, in N 934). Such selfless thinking and development of a truly loving heart are essential for one to attain true Buddhahood. While Buddhist texts often teach that one should first aim to purify their own self, they just as well emphasize leading others towards liberation in a compassionate way.

In serving other beings according to the *Dharma* in one’s temporary earthly existence, the physical body is valued as an indispensable tool. The body allows Buddhists to interact with other beings, either to ameliorate their temporary misery or lead them down a path to permanent emancipation. In *The Shibi Jataka*, a king saves a dove from being eaten, only to realize that the hawk will soon go hungry because of his well-intentioned action. The king displays his desire to lay down his body for a compassionate end, declaring: “I will cut a piece of my own flesh / And give it to the hawk. / Even if it becomes my duty to sacrifice myself, / It is incumbent on me to

protect the life of this frightened being” (N 785). Immediately after feeding the hawk his own sliced flesh, he follows: “All those who suffer from these miseries,— / Them will I save, and for them will I procure Deliverance” (N 787). Even though the being here is an animal, the king, having a deep understanding of Buddha’s teachings, does not differentiate based on the form of physical rebirth but recognizes the hawk as a being in need of guidance, just like humans. Similarly, if the historical Buddha did not have a healthy body to travel from city to city or the energy to teach students all day long, the *Dharma* would not have spread as far as it did. Although the teachings he gave stress how the body is only temporal and serves as the root cause of our craving and aversion, the importance of the physical body as a vehicle through which to save both oneself and others from suffering cannot be understated.

Although its ephemerality and role as the source of all suffering give the physical body a negative light in Buddhist scriptures, the ability to use that body to disassociate the mind from suffering and spread *Dharma* even further make it an integral tool within Buddhism. The extent to which the body should be appreciated is not entirely defined, however, and leaves some discrepancy up to the particular individual and situation. Developing and maintaining a healthy body are important tasks in today’s abundance of leisure time and sugary snacks, but a desire to become fit can slowly morph into an obsession with one’s appearance which only leads to further suffering, creating quite the dilemma. Once again, the de-facto answer of *the middle path* leaves followers of the Buddha discussing and discerning for themselves what the proper direction really is.

## Works Cited

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