

Mindfulness of the Body (3 of 4) Body as Nature

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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We continue with the exercises or practices related to mindfulness of the body as discussed in the discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness or the Four Establishments of Mindfulness. This exercise has a simile that is evocative of what we are practicing. It is an orientation for a practice of mindfulness of the body.

I am going to read the simile:

One practices just as though there was a bag with an opening at both ends,

I do not know what that means. It certainly makes me think of the human body, which has two openings.

Things come in and go out of those openings. I do not know whether the text evokes that or describes a kind of bag used in the ancient world.

Just as though there was a bag with an opening at both ends, full of many sorts of grain – such as hill rice, red rice, beans, peas, millet, and white rice. If a person with good eyesight were to open it and review it thus – they would look upon it this way: “This is hill rice; this is red rice; these are beans; these are peas; this is millet; this is white rice.”

I have seen bags and bowls of mixed dried beans – red beans, pinto beans, white beans, all kinds of beautiful beans. There is a kind of beauty or simplicity to this – a delight. Sometimes I have put my hands into a bag of beans, appreciating them as they rolled off my hands. Each kind of bean stands out in highlight. You can distinctly see each kind. You can also see the collection, the different medley of colors and shapes.

There is clarity in this image of a bag full of different kinds and colors of rice, beans, and millet. You can see each one. There is also a collection of different things that we are seeing. Seeing it all has a kind of specialness. Amazingly, the natural world produces a wide range of seeds that become food. They dry nicely and store. They are available to cook at a later time and to feed us.

Farmers, who work and are close to the land, see these as seeds for next year’s crop. Seeds have an amazing

capacity to sprout and grow into plants, flowers, and more seeds. The cycle continues naturally and easily.

If we look at this bag of different beans and rice, most of us may have a preference for which to eat. But seeing it does not lend itself to greed, attachment, or aversion to any particular seed – unless maybe we are allergic to it. We can marvel at the naturalness and ease – a beauty of sorts – but it is not something that we would be easily attached to.

It is not that we start looking at the different seeds and say: “Well, that is a superior seed. That is a more beautiful seed. Oh, that is a terrible seed. How could nature make a seed with that shape and color?” Everything is seen in a natural way – that is how it is. There is appreciation or marveling at it – but not a pull to be attached or aversive – just the naturalness of it. So that is how I see the simile, “One practices just as ...”

Then the exercise is to review, visualize, bring to mind for oneself – sitting in meditation – thirty-one parts of the body. The thirty-one parts of the body – thirty-two, if we add the brain – is a classic, regular meditation practice taught in Southeast Asian Buddhism and Theravadan Buddhism. It is the first meditation practice that people I have known were taught when they got ordained as a monastic. The practice takes memorizing thirty-one or

thirty-two parts of the body. To review and visualize them requires concentration and focus.

Maybe it is an exercise of memorization and focus, which is not as easy as breathing. Breathing does not require a higher order of attention or functioning for the mind to stay focused as memorization does.

It trains the mind to be present for our body, which is very important and central to who we are as human beings. To be aware of the naturalness of the parts of our body with an absence of attachment or aversion – and marveling at them. Watching the naturalness of beans and seeds is the same as being with the body in that way.

For some, it is a radically different way to relate to our bodies. Perhaps because of social conditioning or it is built into our DNA, we are very concerned about our attractiveness and non-attractiveness. Some people spend a lot of time and money to address concerns about how they look. They spend inordinate amounts of time feeling critical, embarrassed, or ashamed of some parts of their bodies.

We learn a lot of this higher-order self-consciousness and valuation from society. Social trends tell us which body types are considered attractive – appropriate or

inappropriate. We buy into these social constructs and ideas.

There is a tremendous amount of pain and distress around something completely natural. We do not see the beans upset about being a particular seed or shape. They are allowed to be what they are. A species of tree can have different shapes. Generally, we don't look and say: "That is not an appropriate shape. That branch should not be coming out at that angle." It is just all part of the natural world.

How do we shift our attention from this complicated, socially conditioned concern with our bodies? How do we move away from projecting images of ourselves toward a very different way of being with the body? When we do not look at ourselves or others in physical terms as being better or worse – there is no hierarchy, no judgments of people. There is naturalness and ease with all the ways we can be.

This exercise begins with four or five external body parts that we tend to be most concerned with. When we become teenagers, self-consciousness around our looks becomes more and more marked. Sometimes it can occur earlier or later, depending on our social situations and what is valued.

The text goes like this:

A practitioner reviews, visualizes, or considers this body up from the soles of the feet and down from the top of the hair. One considers this whole body in both directions – reviews it and visualizes it in this way: “In this body, there are head hairs, body hairs, nails, teeth, and skin.”

How many of you are preoccupied with these parts of the body? Maybe you spend a lot of money adjusting or fixing them to be this way or that. You may be upset, embarrassed, ashamed, or shy about them. Our society creates and imposes a tremendous amount of suffering. We project concerns on skin color, for example. It is heartbreaking what we do.

But these body parts are being reviewed, visualized, and considered just as we would look at a bag of beans – not negative or positive – just a bag of dried seeds. Because the seeds are dried, they are unappetizing, not ready for us. The seeds are just there, but they have value and importance.

Then the exercise goes from the external body parts to deep inside the body. The first places are kind of neutral. I imagine people in the ancient world did not have a clear sense of the organs. The text goes:

“Flesh, sinews, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery.”

If you have ever looked inside a human body – which I’ve done at a cadaver lab – there can be amazing beauty to it all. It is not a beauty that is attractive or aversive. It is just, “Wow!” – like looking into the Grand Canyon. It is a natural marvel.

The exercise continues with parts of the body that some of us would consider a bit unclean, unattractive, maybe a little repulsive. It goes from body parts we may find attractive to those we may find repulsive:

“The contents of the stomach, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, spittle, snot, oil of the joints, and urine.”

How can we look at all the parts of the body equally? What approach can help us visualize and review the parts of the body step by step – get focused and concentrated – have the mind become still and free from reactivity for or against them?

To the degree that our body and other people’s bodies are a preoccupation – is there some appropriate, freeing, and beneficial way to see all the different parts of the body? To find equality with them, whether we are attracted or repulsed. Maybe neutrality is the right word, but it seems too passive. Perhaps it is a kind of appreciation with no attachment and no aversion.

Just, “Oh, the naturalness of it.” That approach to the body frees us from our social conditioning, self-consciousness, and preoccupation. It allows us to become settled and intimately connected to the natural wonder and marvel of our physical bodies, free of attachment and aversion.

If we feel our body from the inside out, that is what the body really appreciates. I think our body appreciates being allowed to be a body without the projections, values, and ideas that the mind lays on top of it.

To allow naturalness and the natural beauty of who we are to radiate from the inside out. Freeing ourselves from the constructs of our society and times. In that way, our bodies and hearts from the inside out will sing. We will sing, play the song of our naturalness, and be free.

So thank you, and we will continue this series tomorrow.