

Kāya (1 of 5) The Karmic Body

May 30, 2022

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

mindfulness, physical activities, bowing, attitude, feelings, meditation, face, muscles, tension, holding patterns, yogic body, mental conditioning, desires

Gil Fronsdal

Today I will begin a five-part series on the body.

Mindfulness of the body is a core aspect of the Buddha's teachings. He repeats it often and with great enthusiasm. He talks about how all kinds of wonderful qualities – tranquility, concentration, peace, whatever is wholesome and skillful, the different stages towards liberation, and liberation itself – are all based on or experienced through mindfulness of the body.

In my years of Buddhist practice in this country with Zen and in Japan and Asia, what struck me was how much the body was used in the practice. Certainly, meditation is meant to be a physically embodied practice. But there were also a lot of activities in the monastery that involved using the body, such as physical work,

chanting, bowing, and ritual. What got awakened in the body through those activities was probably as important for me as meditation itself. I was not given instructions or told that this attention to the body – this engagement with the body – was important. It slowly seeped into me and changed me from the inside out.

For example, we did a lot of bowing in the monastery. Most often, it was a kind of standing bow, even for something as simple as passing someone on a path. As we walked around the monastery, we were supposed to stop for a moment and bow to them as we passed. Or the people who served the food – we always bowed before and after being served. When we came into the meditation hall, we would always bow.

Over and over again, there was lots of bowing throughout the day. If you do that for months and years, something changes. This gesture of putting the hands together in front of the chest and bending forward a little bit is not just a physical gesture. It evokes certain kinds of emotions and attitudes within. For me, it was an attitude of appreciation, an attitude of letting go of self-centeredness, and a feeling of reverence and respect.

My feelings were not dramatic. It would be these teeny feelings, sometimes unrecognized even, because I was busy doing my life. But slowly, drip by drip, those little

gestures began to establish feelings in me in a deeper way – in a valuable way for my life.

I became familiar with a transformation in the body of sentiment, attitude, feelings, and sensations. Then multiply that by all the different things we did in practice. Many things which came up would change in the body.

Meditation was especially transformative. Surprisingly, the way that I experienced my body changed dramatically in the course of my years of meditation practice. Sometimes they would change within a single meditation session. Sometimes it changed over years of practice – so much so that I came to appreciate that we have different bodies.

I mean that the body we experience shifts and changes depending on the states of mind we have – how the mind is used – the attitudes, thoughts, perceptions, and intentions. All kinds of things come together to shape how we experience our bodies. It is not that the material body changes in and of itself. That does not change particularly, except in the ordinary ways we all know – exercise or the lack of it, and aging.

The way that the body is experienced is very much conditioned by what is going on in the mind. The mind begins to shift and change in very significant ways in

meditation. As a result, the way we experience the body changes as well.

So this week, I would like to talk about five different bodies we can experience. Do not take this to be ontological. The material body does not change. We are talking about the experienced body, how it is experienced. Today, I want to talk about the karmic body, and tomorrow about the bliss body. Later in the week, I will talk about the peace body, the insight body, and the liberation body. Each represents a different way the body can be experienced.

The karmic body is the body we have shaped through the activities of our lifetime, especially those that are volitional, which come from the deliberateness of the mind. It is different from what happens if you have a profession where you use your body over and over in certain ways and that shapes your body. Maybe we can consider this a karmic body, but it does not necessarily come from the attitudes of the mind that exist there.

An example is that people's faces are a little bit different because of the languages they speak. Different languages engage over a lifetime different teeny micro-muscles in the face. So there are subtle differences in people's faces depending on the language that is spoken. Those are not necessarily karmic, they are just – I do not know what to call that.

The karmic has to do with our attitudes. It involves the tensions that we hold – the holding patterns in our bodies. When there is anxiety and fear, we hold our bodies a certain way. If that fear is chronic, the tension gets built in and becomes almost hardwired into us. If we spend a lot of time being angry so that the anger is chronic, that affects the micro-muscles of the face, around the eyes, and shoulders in different places.

If we are oriented more toward desire, the eyes, face, and movements of the body shift and change; they are expressive of those desires, searching and looking. If it is anger that we express, the body takes a different stance, a different posture. In a similar way, confidence, generosity, and love are all different attitudes that shift and change things in our body, not just the muscles, but also the chemicals of our body and how the neurons fire in our body.

For many people, when we sit down to meditate, we are encountering our karmic body. We initially experience a lot of the tensions we hold in our body – the shoulders, face, belly, hands, anywhere at all. I discovered in my early years of meditation that I carried tension in my thighs. The tension in my thighs traveled up and affected my lower back. The tension was a bracing of myself against something happening.

I have known people who have had a tremendous feeling of wanting to bolt out of meditation. That feeling of escaping, of running away, might be encased in our bodies. It shapes the experience we have of this body of ours.

Sometimes some of the pain we experience in the early stages of meditation practice is karmic pain. A very common place to experience that is the shoulders, shoulders that are held high, like mine were when I was younger. As they begin to release, they begin hurting.

There could be a certain kind of despair or something that we are experiencing, so we are collapsing and giving up. That certainly affects the musculature and the feelings in the chest. It also makes a big impact on the upper back. As we sit in meditation, we might feel the legacy of a long time of sitting in a certain way. The muscles are tired, and some have contracted. Working with that is working with a karmic body.

Knowing this is what it is can give us a lot of patience, compassion, and understanding that this is often what we are working with when we first start meditating. The karmic body, the karmic breathing, has been affected by the emotions, attitudes, experiences, traumas, or challenges we have had in our lives.

This process is what we are slowly working with as we relax and breathe. We can contribute to some of the relaxation. We do not want to make it into too big of a project – to relax all the time. Some of it just comes with sitting quietly and meditating, letting go of thoughts, and being present in a sincere way here and now. It gives the body a chance to unwind. It gives things the chance to release, to soften.

It is wonderful to watch meditators over a few years and to see the slow evolution into what is sometimes called the yogic body. The body of a meditator – you can see how they sit down. There is a comfort level. There is ease. There is an embodiment there that has evolved over time.

The karmic body begins to recede, at least temporarily. Sometimes as we get concentrated, the karmic body recedes, and other kinds of experiences of the body enter into the foreground. Then as the concentration leaves, the karmic body returns. We get back in touch with the tensions and holding patterns we have. That massage is part of the process of healing, of opening up and coming to some resolution of the karmic body.

As you go about your day today, you might see if you can notice what I am calling the karmic body. Notice the holding patterns in your muscles and posture. How is your posture affected by your attitude, desires,

aversions, confidence, or lack of confidence? Where are things tight? Where are things holding?

Maybe some of the physical pain we have really comes from physical conditions. Sometimes a small percentage might be from activities we have done. These activities may have expressed anger, impatience, hurry, desire, greed, resistance. Then because of that, maybe something got injured. Now we have to live with the aftereffect of this – this karmic body we have to work with.

We are not stuck in the karmic body. This is what practice is about to some degree, to find freedom from that karma. This is what we will talk about for the next few days.

Thank you.