

Kāya (2 of 5) The Joy Body

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This week, I am continuing the theme that explores the different ways that we can experience our body. These can be so dramatically different depending on the circumstances and the state of the mind, we can almost refer to them as different bodies. Yesterday, I referred to them as the karmic body.

I think this is where most people live much of the time if they are paying attention to their bodies. They are experiencing the body that is very much under the influence – under the impact – of thinking, wanting, not wanting, and fear. All of these volitional forces are operating. If used chronically and regularly, these forces build up a very strong feeling and sense of what the body is about.

Meditation begins to quiet down two things. It quiets down the ongoing karmic formations and karmic forces that shape the experience of both life and the body. We then begin to recover from the legacy of the karmic shaping that is happening.

Very simply, if you spend your days with your shoulders up to your ears because you are tense or afraid, then the karmic force is continuous fear. As we stop the fear, the shoulders can relax. The tension might be so chronic that they do not relax all the way. Slowly, slowly, the shoulders might find a way to relax more and more as you sit and meditate. The legacy of that karmic anxiety or fear begins to abate.

This gets replaced over time (not automatically) with a sense of pleasure, well-being, ease, lightness, openness, and softness in those very same shoulders. It is easy then to go on to the next concern and not linger attention on the shoulders. It is possible to feel a release of energy. There is a way in which the tightness and definition of the shoulders soften. They become more porous, softer, and more in flow with the rest of the body.

That release might not be noticed because it is pretty small. The opposite, staying chronically tense, is exhausting. It can create a lot of tiredness, exhaustion,

and weariness throughout the day. Without that tension, our energy is more available in a cleaner, easier way. Our body does not get so tired.

As we sit in meditation, relaxing the body, relaxing the karmic body, a nicer flow, a glow, and a vitality of energy start to become available to us. We become more settled and pleasures can start to appear. Pleasant experiences begin to show themselves. They might be very subtle. But start to pay attention and notice them. This allows them to grow.

It allows them to have a different influence on us than if we continually rest in the karmic body, karmic pain, karmic thoughts, and ideas of what is wrong with the world, with ourselves, or with our situation. These thoughts have a huge impact on us. If these negative thoughts are chronic, the karmic repercussions on ourselves is huge. It is not cost-free to spend a lot of time with angry, depressing, or undermining thoughts.

Meditation can begin to quiet down all that thinking and those thoughts. If we pay attention to the subtle pleasures and to subtle well-being, it begins to show us a different orientation. It shows us that there is more going on. There is more to the story of our lives than our challenges. Part of the story of life is our capacity for well-being, for feeling a healthy body, a flow of a body.

Even if there is an illness, injury, or pain in the body, it is possible that the container, the overall atmosphere of the body which holds that pain is one that is soft and pleasant – with pleasure and joy. The sense of pleasure and joy that can be there makes it much more interesting for the mind to want to be present here and now. It supports the mind wanting to be here in the present moment, with the body, with breathing.

There starts to be a unification process, a gathering-together process – maybe around breathing and our mindfulness practice. The mind is less scattered and less interested in other things. Our interest becomes more and more centered. It creates a kind of breathing room, a space for something to begin to emerge.

The karmic mind is a reactive mind. The karmic or reactive mind does not make room for the wellsprings within to flow freely or for the emergent qualities of healthy emotions. One of the emergent qualities that begins to arise in meditation is a feeling of joy, a feeling of delight. It is a feeling that I liken to a child letting go, sliding down a slide, squealing and so happy. Not that we are squealing in meditation, but we are letting go into breathing, letting go into our experience here.

At some point, it feels there is a bit of momentum for letting go into a sense of well-being, into joy, and pleasure. In some mysterious way – maybe not so mysterious to people who understand the neurochemistry of the brain – as we begin to get concentrated, settled, and focused, there starts to emerge as a wellspring from within, more and more joy, more and more happiness.

Over time, and it might be years for some of us, this happiness and joy in meditation begins to spread and suffuse the body. At some point, it is predominant and lifts us out of the karmic body. When the concentration is no longer there, we come back into the karmic body.

As it lifts us out, there is a pervasive feeling of well-being – a glow, warmth, joy, and lightness that can have all kinds of different intensities. They can range from a mild, pleasant intensity to something quite strong. We start experiencing a whole different feeling of what the body is. This sometimes is called the joy or the bliss body. It is the emergent experience of the body that is a paradigm shift for the mind. It is like: “Wow. Is this possible? Is this my body?” It involves a shift of identity in which the boundaries of the body are not so strong. There is a sense of safety, confidence, openness, and joy.

We start experiencing ourselves in a very different way from what the karmic body will ever let us know. If we only have the karmic body as a reference for how the body is to be experienced, we think that the karmic body is the real body. Remember, these are the bodies that we experience. The body that is being experienced is mediated through the activities or the states of the mind. It is not the corporeal body or the physical body.

As those states of mind shift, the experience of the body shifts. One of the ways it shifts is into the karmic body. This is just one more way in which the mind manufactures or predisposes us to experience the body. It is not any more real than the joy body or the bliss body. They both have their place. They both have their value.

So begin settling and relaxing into a sense of pleasure, joy, and happiness that may at first be only in hints. We may only have little traces of these going on, but these are things to relax into, to open, and allow for. Use these hints as supports, as a toehold in the present moment. That toehold can grow and grow.

Inevitably, people who experience something like this joy, delight, and pleasure in the body will become attached to it, prioritize it, and try too hard to make it happen again. Of course, there is no crime in doing this.

Perhaps this is a developmental stage. Maybe most people have to go through this. I went through it until I realized it was not working.

We have developmental stages to go through – the attachment and clinging, the wanting, trying to make it happen with too much force and expectation. Then we start seeing this stage, and we begin working with and letting go of this. If we stay with the attachment, the expectations, and the demands that it should be a certain way, we are just contributing to more of the karmic stream. The karmic body gets reinforced even more.

Chances are, if you start opening up and experiencing this joy body in meditation, you will get attached. You have been warned. Now you can be mindful of that and not be so caught in it. Hold it lightly, and find your way through it.

I certainly understand that this teaching on the joy body might seem very distant to some of you. You have no idea what I am talking about. It may even feel like a betrayal or an offense to the challenges and difficulties that you have with your body. However, there might still be something here for you.

Perhaps, give yourself extra time throughout the day. Give yourself pauses throughout the day. Put your smartphone on a timer, and every thirty minutes or hour, allow yourself an extended pause. The purpose is to feel embodied physical pleasure and joy.

Go for a walk. Sit and have some tea. Look out the window, relax, and see if you can touch into a sense of joy, delight, or pleasure in your body. Be a touchstone for a few moments and see what happens with the check-ins throughout the day to your body's capacity for pleasure, joy, and happiness.

May you have greater well-being today than you would have otherwise had. Thank you.