

Harmony of Zen and Vipassana (2 of 5) The Dharma's Body

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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One of the surprises and treasures of Buddhist practice for me has been a growing – and still growing – delighting in or valuing the body, the experience of the body. There is a difference between the body and the experience of the body. The experience of the body, more than the body itself, is at the heart of what is most significant for Dharma practitioners.

The body and the experience of it are hard to separate. But this idea is central to the tremendous appreciation that the Buddha and much of Buddhism have with being centered in or connected to one's body. It is not the body as a physical object, but rather the experience the body has of itself.

In the ancient teachings, the Buddha used different words at times to refer to the physical body and the body that we can experience. One word for the "physical body" in Pali is *sarīra*. In Sanskrit, it is *śharīra*. *Sarīra* is often translated into English as "a relic" – a relic of someone who has died, a bone or something leftover from the cremation. It has long been a custom in different schools of Buddhism to save relics and put them on an altar. Sometimes *sarīra* is used to refer to a corpse. For a living person, *sarīra* refers to the purely physical body itself.

The Pali word for "body," especially in meditation practice, is *kāya*. People who do Zen practice know this word because *Nirmāṇakāya*, *Sam̐bhogakāya*, and *Dharmakāya* are often chanted. When the earliest teachings talk about a meditator, the word *kāya* refers to the body as it is experienced.

How we experience the body is partly dependent on our state of mind. The fascinating part of being a meditator is feeling how the mind state changes and the experience of the body changes. Sometimes the posture will even change, depending on how concentrated – how focused, still, and quiet – the mind becomes.

If the mind stops becoming claustrophobic, caught up in thinking – and becomes more spacious, open, quiet, and soft – this can hugely transform how we experience the body. The experienced body can often become soft and transparent. It can be experienced with very soft boundaries or no boundaries at all. The feeling of the body can sometimes even disappear entirely in meditation. I have actually opened my eyes in meditation to see if my physical body was still there. With my eyes closed, there was no evidence of it because the mind was so still and quiet.

The interplay between the mind and the body is so intimate that there is a tendency in Buddhism to not make a strong duality between the mind and the body – but rather to see them as a unified whole. One place this unified whole plays out is with the emphasis on being present for the body's experience of itself. It is not exactly right to say it that way, but rather our experience is conditioned by the quality and state of the mind.

Of course, it goes in the other direction as well. The state of the body affects the mind. If we are in a lot of pain, this can have a big impact on the mind. We can get contracted. We can get caught up in certain thoughts, judgments, fears, and projections.

But it is not necessarily so. I learned a great lesson sitting zazen at the Zen Center, where I was not supposed to move. I would have a lot of knee pain. I noticed after a while the pain actually got worse if I had self-pity. I think little micro-muscles in my knee would tighten up when I had self-pity. The only way I could manage the pain was if I let go of my self-pity. Then the micro-muscles would relax, and the pain became manageable.

I found that the less I got caught up in my thoughts – the reactivity in my mind, my projections into the future for what this all meant – then the pain would get simpler and simpler. To have the simplicity of physical pain, without the added reactivity, showed me how much the experience of pain was a product of the quality, state, and activity of my mind – but not all of it, of course.

The Buddha himself said when there is extreme pain, it is the pain of the *sarīra*. It is the pain of the corpse, the purely physical body. Many times the mind and the body have a big interplay in what we experience as pain, discomfort, and all kinds of things in the body.

In Vipassana practice, we learn to center ourselves in the body. We allow ourselves to experience the body's experience of itself. This has a huge impact on the mind because the body and the mind are so closely related. In fact, the shifting, changing experience of the body reconditions the neurotic, fearful, or traumatized mind.

To begin to soften and relax – the Buddha was very explicit about this. He talked about cultivating mindfulness of the whole body – opening up and becoming aware of the whole body. This is not just the body that is breathing but the whole body – kind of like a global experience of the body itself. A global experience is one where the mind is not contracting or fixating on any particular thing. The mind is not creating a boundary to the body, but rather the mind is open to experiencing it all.

As the mind gets settled and concentrated, if any feelings of well-being, joy, or happiness well up, the Buddha talked about allowing them to spread throughout the body. Allow those feelings to spread – and the experience begins to shift dramatically.

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, this is partly what is referred to as the three bodies of the Buddha. There are three different ways of experiencing the body, depending on our mind state. It becomes such a delight to rest in and experience these kinds of bodies. The body becomes freer and freer – a liberated body.

An ancient Mahāyāna sutra emphasizes that liberation does not happen in the mind. It happens in the body. Awakening is an embodied experience more than a mental experience. But, in fact, we now know you cannot really separate the mind and the body.

In Vipassana practice, there are many ways in which mindfulness of the body is practiced. One way is to bring the kind of attention – as I suggested in the exercise with the hand – to whatever is the compelling physical experience of the moment. If there is some predominant experience in the body, either pleasant or unpleasant, which is more compelling than the breath, then it is fine to let go of the breathing and not keep that focus. Bring the same careful attention – sensing and feeling – into the part of the body that has the strong sensations.

Over time, different parts of the body will speak up and show themselves. It is like doing bodywork over months and years. We are bringing careful attention – opening the attention, allowing the sensations to be there. We are not reacting to the sensations or forcing them. We are not spending too much time relaxing around them either. We are just feeling and sensing. Slowly the body begins to wake up and become more aware and sensate. It becomes a more sentient body as opposed to a conceived body or a body that we are thinking about.

So much of our physical self-consciousness has to do with our ideas and images of what the body should be or can be like. We compare our bodies with other people's bodies. So much pain goes on in our society around the body, skin color, and all kinds of things having to do with the body.

Meditation is one way to free ourselves, at least personally, from all these ideas, comparative thinking, and concepts. By allowing awareness of the body to arise from the inside out, we find the body is much happier than we often are. The body is much more content when it flows and we have the experience from the inside out.

Mindfulness of the body is the body's awareness. In meditation practice, we learn to abide or rest in the experience of the body. When the breathing is the most compelling part or the center of our experience, we stay with the breathing. To breathe is an embodied experience. Breathe with all things. Breathe with the body – all of the body.

I hope this made some sense. I hope it pointed to one place where Zen and Vipassana overlap: the emphasis on the body, the importance of it in the practice, in the *kāya*, and maybe in what we can call our own *Dharmakāya*.

Thank you all very much.