

The Dharmic Life (1 of 5) The Body as Your Monastery

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The theme I have in mind is practicing in our lives. We could say that all of Buddhism is about practicing in daily life. Many of the teachings are completely relevant to how we go about living our lives. The orientation I have for the talks this week is how to live a more Dharmic life. Sometimes people think it would be nice to live in a retreat center or monastery for a while – or find some way to live more fully in the Dharma. It's not so easy to do in daily life, where there's work and family.

So what can we do to receive some of the benefits of a contemplative, renunciant, or monastic life? How can we have some of those benefits in ordinary lay life?

I want to talk about five ways we can bring more practice into our lives or live more in the Dharma. I would like to believe that these ways are available to all of us. You would find tremendous benefit by practicing them. Not only would you find the Dharma, but the Dharma would also find you. You would allow yourself to be a receptive vessel for the Dharma. The Dharma might fill you in a wonderful way.

The first way of living a more Dharmic life is to be more connected to your body – to practice mindfulness of the body, to center yourself in your body. While practicing different Buddhist traditions, I – delightfully, surprisingly – discovered that they all emphasized being grounded and connected to the body. Sometimes it was not explicit, but it was clear you had to bring the body along and practice with your body.

When I was practicing Zen, there was not an active discussion of mindfulness of the body, but much of the practice was embodied. We sat in a particular posture that required embodiment. We ate formally in an embodied way. We walked in ways that encouraged more embodiment and connection to our body. When we were working, they instructed us to put ourselves fully into the work – to be connected, involved, and absorbed in the work such that our body was fully there for it. There was a strong emphasis on being in the body.

I learned a lot about being embodied by working in the monastic kitchen. I was present with my whole body as best I could. It wasn't always easy. I tried to be fully connected to whatever physical work I was doing in the kitchen. We worked with both hands – the full body – connected to and absorbed in the physicality of our work. I did that for a year. Learning how to be in the world in an embodied, engaged way was wonderful.

When I was practicing Zen in America and Japan, they taught me to do things with my body enthusiastically. I tended to use one hand. Part of my body was involved in other things or thoughts, and I would do things half-heartedly. That did not go over well in Zen. You had to be there wholeheartedly. In Japan, they emphasized always doing things with both hands. So if you picked up a pot of food or a tool, you would always use both hands. You were fully there for it. Giving someone a gift with both hands feels different. Instead of giving with only part of who you are – like, "Here you go!" – you do it fully.

I love the *añjali* (putting the hands together and bowing). It brings together the two sides of who we are – left and right – so that all of us is involved. That is different from shaking hands, which involves only part of our body. I think shaking hands is wonderful and has value. I don't want to diminish it. But there's also something valuable about both sides coming together with respect and offering all of ourselves in that greeting.

Then we become more attuned to the sensations of the body. The sensations of our bodies are not senseless. In fact, the attitude – that being involved with the body's senses has no meaning or value – can make the body senseless, and we become disconnected from the sensations. Instead, we value the sensations because they

carry so much information. They are expressions of our attitudes, emotions, and feelings. They are expressions of our reactivity and response to what is happening in the world around us.

There are layers and layers of subtlety we can be aware of when we are connected to our bodies. Even a little connection to the body will provide early warning signals of feelings, sensations, attitudes, and information about what is happening in the world around us. That information is often there before our thinking mind is aware of it. The first sensations of anxiety, anger, love, kindness, or warmth toward someone come through the body. If we are busily wanting, reacting, or thinking about what's wrong, we do not pick up on them.

I studied with a Zen teacher who talked about the body being an antenna. The more you tune yourself to that antenna, the more information you pick up. I would also emphasize that our body is not just an antenna for information outside of it but also what is inside.

We are not beings divided between the mind and the body. The body is a rich repository of intelligence, responsivity, feelings, and emotions. That information is helpful for our lives. So we spend more time being sensitive to sensations, sensing what is happening in the body.

That begins to shift the emphasis from thinking that the mind will solve everything to allowing the body to participate, receive, experience, and help process what is going on. Some of our difficult emotions can be well processed in the body if we allow the body to feel them. This can be hard to do. Sometimes we feel all these things acutely, which can be painful.

There is an art to learning how to keep opening into the body in a wise, compassionate way – that allows the body to free up and release things. Holding in the mind – the attachment or clinging we have – often gets expressed as tension in the body. Muscles are held tightly, and that tightness tends to numb the body. As we become more sensitive to the body, we may become aware of the tension we hold in the body. That can act as a stepping-stone for the body to begin to release itself and open up.

So we practice being in our body while we do things – really being present. And we become more aware of and sensitive to the sensations and feelings of our body – to what's going on in the body. That practice of presence in and awareness of the body is a way to learn to live a more Dharmic life.

We let the Dharma – all the benefits of mindfulness and wisdom – begin to show itself and accompany us through our body and life. The less we are connected to our body, the less the Dharma accompanies us through life – unless we are good at the cognitive aspects of keeping the body in mind, thinking about it. That can be useful – and the primary vehicle for some people. But I think, for most people, being rooted in the body and connected to what is happening in the body has tremendous benefits.

If you would like to live a contemplative Dharmic life without becoming a monastic, then your monastery is your body. Your temple is your body. Keep coming back to being in your body.

I'll continue this theme tomorrow with another area of daily life. In the meantime, you can experiment with giving more emphasis to your body – what is happening there, how you use it, its feelings and sensations. What happens if you allow your body to be in a more receptive mode and feel all the sensations that you have?

I hope that mindfulness of the body will bring you great enjoyment and delight in having a physical body. Thank you.