

Kāya (4 of 5) The Insight Body

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So far, we have talked about the karmic body, the joy body, and the tranquil body. Today, I want to talk about the insight body. It is the way that the body is experienced under the gaze of mindfulness when we start having deep insight and a real ability to be very quiet with almost no mental projection or discussion going on in the mind.

We can settle back and just observe the body in a deep way, unencumbered by any ideas, preoccupations, fears, or judgments around the body. We can clear the inner sight, the mind's eye, to perceive and sense the body in and of itself. It is a careful sensitivity to the changing, fluid quality of the body's experience of itself.

Our senses, the nerve endings that pick up all the different sensations we feel in our body, are operating all the time. But certain things come into prominence. They are there for a while and then fade, and something else comes into prominence and then fades. There is a constant shifting of what comes into experience in our body.

On top of that, the body shifts and changes. In the course of a single meditation practice, maybe the body has become relaxed. Maybe it has become tenser. It shifted and changed. Over a year or two, your body has gotten older. Certain things have shifted and changed in how you are, and you can feel the changes going on.

Part of the insight body is to have a relatively quiet and focused mind, settled here in the present moment, which observes the changing nature of the body. As we sit in meditation and relax, we realize at some point that all of the so-called experiences of the body, all the ways in which we can know and feel the body directly, are constantly shifting and changing. It is a kaleidoscope. It is a constant flow. It is a stream of sensations, a stream of experience that is shifting, changing, and moving.

When this first happens in meditation, it usually comes when the mind is somewhat concentrated. It often happens in the wake of something like the joy body. Firstly, there can be a lot of joy and settledness, maybe even some peace. This allows the mind – the thinking mind – to become increasingly quiet. The advantage of that is now the thinking mind is not projecting its ideas onto the body.

The mind has a lot of ideas, some of them not so accurate. Ideas of permanence like: "This is always going to be this way. I'll always be this way and the body won't be changing." Then the body changes – sometimes suddenly in an accident or an injury, sometimes slowly and gradually.

I have been blessed with being able to sit cross-legged into my old age. But I have tremendous colleagues – deep meditators, wonderful meditation teachers – who started sitting cross-legged when they were young and now sit in chairs. It is fine to sit in a chair. This is an example of how the body changes.

We are present to feel, sense, and adapt to the changes. But the changing stream of experience, when it is an insight body, is not the change we see over an extended period of time. Rather, it is like looking at a river and seeing that the surface of the river – the current – is constantly shifting, changing, and flowing.

At some point, this body of ours, without our overlaid thoughts and ideas, begins to reveal itself in its native capacity and expression as a changing, fluid, moving field of sensations, which our nerve endings take in and process. Each nerve ending takes in a particular data point. You may feel the individual data points coming and going as a sound. There is an itch. There is a certain feeling of warmth. There is a tightness. We feel into these more and more deeply. Then we find that within each one there is something that is constantly in flux and moving.

A fascinating way for vipassana practitioners to do this is with pain. I have practiced with a variety of pain. Knee pain is the most classic for me. To bring my attention – non-reactive attention (attention that is not afraid, angry, or reactive) very carefully to the pain. There is no projecting of ideas such as, "Oh, I'm going to hurt forever," "I

can't do this," or "This is terrible. I'm probably going to have to have my leg amputated." Self-pity was one reaction I used to have when I was younger, "Oh, poor me who's in pain."

But, somehow, to have a mind that can put aside the projection or veil between us and the pain and just experience the pain in and of itself – finding exactly where it is in the knee – is fascinating. As we get closer to it, maybe it is a little square centimeter. It may not always be in the same place. It is moving around. It is pulsing, sparking, shifting, and dancing. As we get closer and closer, we see that it is not the solid pain we might have assumed from a distance, when we were concerned with and reactive to it. It is not a solid, unchanging pain.

In fact, maybe we should not even call it pain because pain is an abstraction – an abstract umbrella term. Underneath that label is pulling, stabbing, burning, pressure, tightness – all of these more particular, intense sensations. Because of the intensity of it, we call it pain. The different kinds of pain we have are made up of different sensations that are intense.

We bring our attention to just that particular sensation – to see the dance, the spark, the movement of it – and we see it is not so solid. It is difficult to be present for something when we are apart from it in some way. We see, "Oh, the pain." It is much easier to feel it on a deeper level – underneath the idea of pain. There are intense pulsing, searing, burning, sparking, stabbing feelings. These words sound terrible, but sometimes this is a lot easier than just relating to it as "the pain."

Even more difficult is when we relate to the pain as "my pain" or "I'm having pain." When we add the baggage – the association of me, myself, and mine – to the pain, we are adding another layer of abstraction that is accurate enough but not really needed. It involves a different order of the mind – mental activity – which keeps us removed, reactive, and sometimes may increase the level of pain.

You might experiment with feeling the shifting, changing, pulsing nature of pain, and see the difference between viewing it as "my pain" or viewing it as "the pain." It is not just with pain that we see this shifting nature but also with pleasure. You can feel meditative pleasure. If you really tune in to what it is like, it is a stream, a flow, a glow. It is a shifting and changing phenomenon.

The insight body is an experience of the body where everything is flowing. Some people would describe the body as being like sand, rain, or snow flowing down – a flow of particulate sensations flowing and moving.

When the insight body gets really deep, the boundaries of the body, the shape of the body, have no meaning anymore. Oftentimes, the body feels somehow boundaryless. The sense of the body's boundaries and shape becomes irrelevant. The ideas of the body fall away and settle into the raw data of the senses that are constantly shifting and moving.

In that raw data, in the insight body, there is a particularly unique flavor to the insight of not-self. You see that the whole body experience is just a flow of these sensations. It is clear that any one sensation is not yourself. (If that were the case, you would disappear in a sense when that sensation disappeared.) But you realize that is not the self. This freeing up of the tendency of the mind for "this is me, this is myself, this is mine" is very relaxing and peaceful for the mind. To begin recognizing not-self in the whole field of the body sensations as they flow is part of the insight body.

Another part of that insight body is to realize that any clinging to it is pointless or painful – and not really necessary. It is like if you put your hand in a waterfall to grab some water. You might get a little bit in your hand, but when you are done, it all gets squeezed out. You cannot really grab a handful of water. So you realize this movement of grabbing does not work.

The insight body, when we see the radical nature of change, is a powerful way of learning not to identify with our experience and to begin to experience life without the filter or the burden of identification. It is a powerful lesson in the possibility of non-clinging. We see that the things we cling to are unreliable and unsatisfactory, and that clinging brings more suffering. To see that for ourselves, when we are sitting in the insight body, then it is obvious. It is not logical. It is not rational. It is not because you have reasoned it out, not because you read it in a book. It is clearly obvious that this is how it is.

That is the direction insight meditation is going. Someday, really beginning to taste or feel the insight body, which is, again, a very different way of experiencing the body than the karmic body. The karmic body tends to be the one that solidifies and carries the burden of all the projections, reactions, and identifications we have.

I hope you come to appreciate, value, and care respectfully for these bodies that you have. By not identifying with it as being mine, it is also part of your universe to care for. Care for your body. Care for yourself. Thank you.