

The Body As Spiritual Path

If you are drawn to yoga by a desire to deepen your spiritual connection to life, how should you view the body?



FOR MORE THAN 2000 years, one of the fundamental questions in both Eastern and Western religious traditions has been how to view the body: Is it a sacred vessel to be honored as a manifestation of the divine, or is it a stagnant pond that corrupts and entraps the pure spirit? This is not just an abstract question for theologians to ponder, but a practical question you must ask yourself in your own spiritual development. Is your yoga practice an effort to hold on to youth, or are you using the body to deepen your understanding of how to live? Is your meditation practice just a way to gain control over your life, or are you involved in a true search for your own liberation?

There are certainly many spiritual teachers who only speak critically of the body. They rightfully say that the Buddha stressed the importance of nonat-

tachment to the body and taught specific contemplative practices intended to lead to disenchantment with it, including meditations on the 32 parts of the body, the charnel ground, and the truth of one's own death. As proof that the body is something to be disregarded or subjugated, they point to the sadhus in India who practice denial and distortion of the body to attain enlightenment. They ridicule Western yoga with its emphasis on asana and its ignorance of the other seven limbs and denounce the sometimes ill-informed, exploitive Kundalini and Tantric teachings offered in the West. Some of these same voices criticize Western Buddhist meditation practices for placing too much emphasis on physical comfort and having a "feel-good" psychological orientation.

Such criticisms start with genuine seeds of truth. It is easy to overidentify with the body and avoid the hard work and sacrifice required for spiritual development. However, it has been my experience that using the body as path can be the superior choice at various stages in practice and that adopting a negative view of the body without a deeper understanding of the ancient teachings can lead you to beliefs that are misguided and antilife. By denying that the body is sacred, people often unknowingly embrace a dualistic spiritual approach filled with judgment, aversion, and behavior that undermines the very spiritual values being sought. One obvious example of this hypocrisy is the frequent spinal and knee injuries that occur among meditation and hatha yoga practitioners when the body is treated simply as a means to an end. Similarly, when the body's sexual impulses are not consciously worked with in meditation practice, they are often acted out unconsciously in unskillful behavior.

Yogis often discover that they have great concentration on the meditation cushion or the yoga mat but lack the skills to embody their practice in thoughts, words, and actions in daily life. It is one thing to feel centered while meditating, but to act mindfully while coping with a screaming baby or a difficult boss or during a disagreement with your spouse requires that you stay present in your body.

Although the Buddha taught the importance of nonattachment to the body, he was quite clear on how he viewed the body in meditation practice: “There is one thing, monks, that cultivated and regularly practiced leads to a deep sense of urgency . . . to the Supreme Peace . . . to mindfulness and clear comprehension . . . to the attainment of right vision and knowledge . . . to happiness here and now . . . to realizing deliverance by wisdom and fruition of Holiness: It is mindfulness of the body.”

Coming into the Body

THE BUDDHA WASN'T commenting on whether the body is good or bad but rather was emphasizing the importance of using mindfulness of the body to discover the dharma, the truth of how things are. He was suggesting that we use the body as an object of concentration, mindfulness, and reflection in order to see through it to the very reality of this existence—in other words, to use the body as path. Following the Buddha's instructions, you can work with the body and body awareness as part of your own spiritual path, most fundamentally as a means for learning to stay present. This is called mindfulness of the body, which the Buddha taught as the First Foundation of Mindfulness practice. When you first begin to meditate, it becomes immediately obvious why the Buddha started with the body—you continually get lost in your thoughts.

Similarly, you find that difficult emotions so cloud the mind that you even have trouble knowing what you are feeling. The great benefit of mindfulness of the body is that it is a direct physical experience, one you can focus on no matter what is going on in the mind. This means that when your mind is restless or agitated, or you keep getting lost in memories, reactions, and fantasies, you can center yourself by simply shifting your attention to the body. By concentrating on your breath or body sensations, you come into the present moment. Likewise, when you are consumed by strong emotions, you are able to come back to the present through mindfulness of the

body. Being able to return your attention to the present moment is vital, for only by being fully in the arising moment can you actually have understanding and take wise action. Awareness in the body is the best way to bring this about.

Working with the body as path also frees you from being overcome by suffering and aversion in your life. Both physical and emotional pain can cause you to be so filled with aversion that you pour your energy into hopelessly longing for life to be other than it is, as if you could magically change what has already occurred. This aversion may arise through the body as pain from a chronic injury or through the mind as grief from a lost relationship. Either way, seeking to get away from the moment, you contract. Unfortunately, this only draws you more fully into that which you are pushing away. Your attention becomes focused on the painful sensation; therefore, the aversion only increases your suffering. Trying to outlast the pain or deny the aversion only enhances its negative affect on your nervous system. But by becoming mindful of the body, you can stay in the moment with the pain whether it's physical or emotional, which in turn frees you of the aversion. When aversion is reduced or eliminated through mindfulness of the body, your suffering decreases almost immediately, and your difficulty becomes much more bearable.

Even physical pain is better handled through mindfulness of the body. Pain is never just pain; it can be twisting, throbbing, stabbing, contracting, or expanding; sometimes it comes in waves, sometimes in pulses. As you stay present with pain, you start to see it more clearly, which in turn calms the nervous system, and the pain becomes much more tolerable.

Even with the arising of pleasure, it is skillful to stay present in the moment by using body sensations as the object of focus. When you do so, you will discover that what is pleasurable often arouses the mental attachment of wanting it never to end. Seeking to grasp hold of and retain the pleasantness, your mind immediately jumps into the future with planning or fantasizing. Imagine being in the moun-

tains and seeing a beautiful sunset but rather than staying with the sunset, you start planning your next trip. Now you are no longer present to fully enjoy the sunset, and you miss much of the experience. If you start to observe your mind, you will discover this happens repeatedly. You so fixate on holding on to or extending wonderful moments that you don't actually experience them.

Concentrating on the Body

THE BODY CAN ALSO be used as the ground or object for your concentration. This means staying so focused on the body that you achieve a degree of concentration that allows you to open to various deep meditative states. These states are referred to as *jnana* in the Pali Buddhist sutras and *samadhi* in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*. When one is able to achieve deep concentration, a whole universe opens up that is underneath the surface experiences of daily life.

The body is an ideal object of concentration, whether accessed as breath, touch, or sensation. In many instances, when you enter into deep meditative states by staying concentrated on the body, an added dimension of intensity occurs. Some teachers would say this is because you are directly accessing the energetic body. In some of these deep meditative states you may experience that there is no body, only patterns of energy or a sense of emptiness. Even this is awareness of the body. Or if all you feel is numbness in the body, this too is body sensation and can be an object of mindfulness.

In asana practice you can begin to learn mindfulness of the body by changing the focus of your attention from the outer movement of the limbs and torso to the inner felt-sense of the body and mind. Working with the breath while doing your postures is a step in this direction. Tantric and Kundalini teachings also use the body as path to evoke certain energetic states or create certain image-driven mind states.

Many people have also found that using the body as the meditative object helps bridge the gap between their medi-

tation practice and daily life. They find they can bring mindfulness into work and personal situations by dropping their attention to the breath or to the body sensations that are arising. Finding the arising sensations in your feet when dealing with a difficult colleague, staying with the breath when caught in traffic, and keeping your awareness in the hands while disagreeing with your partner are all examples of using the body to stay centered in daily life.

Realizing the Truth

THE BODY CAN BE a path to the realization of the truth of the dharma. This is called the arising of insight. For example, through mindfulness of changing body sensations, you directly realize *anicca*, or impermanence. By being aware of what happens in the body, you are able to directly experience *dukkha*, or suffering, that comes when you cling to things as if change were not inevitable. You may witness yourself trying to hold on to a relationship, to the attractiveness of your body, or even to a favorite possession. In the clinging your body feels tension, fear, and discomfort, and you realize that such an attitude toward life only brings suffering. In turn you may begin to develop a more spacious approach to life.

The arising of such insights is a natural unfolding of mindfulness practice, and they will occur whether or not you use the body as a path; however, they are more accessible for some yogis through the body. It is very liberating to have these direct insights, but it can also be emotionally disorienting. Many yogis get lost or stop at this stage. When unusual or disturbing moments arise in practice, you can stay present with them by maintaining body awareness.

Pitfalls on the Path

YOU MOST LIKELY already know the problems of using the body as path. It is easy to be lazy or indulgent in your desires or to rationalize avoiding the difficult aspects of practice. Sense desire is very beguiling, which is why the Buddha sought to counterbalance the lures of the body by revealing how temporary and

illusory its pleasures are. There are a thousand ways to place your comfort ahead of your growth, to postpone practice, or to get lost in wanting mind. Additionally, misunderstanding the nature of body can create the illusion of self, invite contraction and grasping of the mind, and bind you to your suffering.

For all these reasons, it is easy to see why the body has so often been reviled as the enemy of spirit. Yet one must ask: Are these primarily problems of the body, or are they hindrances of the mind? This distinction is important because it is easy to fall into a state of disinterest in the body, which is really a disguised form of aversion. Likewise, it is easy to succumb to a cynical or nihilistic antilife attitude and mistake it for a spiritual one. There are those on the spiritual path who feel superior for having renounced the body but who are actually hiding from life's challenges.

In hatha yoga there is also the problem of turning what is a spiritual practice into a health worshiping practice. Yogis will talk with pride about their spiritual practice when actually their attention is focused on becoming more flexible, stronger, or stress free. This does not mean that you should ignore the health aspect of your body or abuse it in the name of spirituality, for there is no compassion or loving-kindness in such behavior. But you should be honest with yourself. Honesty is necessary for being in the moment, and only by being in the moment can the good arise within you. If your main motivation in doing yoga is the health of your body, then fully embrace it as your practice, not just on the yoga mat. Practice loving-kindness toward your body by not abusing it in the rest of your life, and practice mindfulness by staying just as interested in it when it becomes sick, starts to age, or is no longer dependable. As spiritual teacher Ram Dass, author of *Be Here Now*, says, "Start where you are." By deeply exploring the truth and integrity of the body, you will gradually form a basis for a spiritual practice.

The Dharma of Liberation

FOR YOU, AS WITH everyone, there will come a time when the body no longer

elicits attachment and emotional vicissitudes are no longer of great importance. For most people this realization comes at some point in the aging or dying process, without much preparation, and usually evokes fear and dread. But if you are actively practicing on the path, this knowledge arises as part of your spiritual unfolding; instead of fear, it brings with it an ability to live *now*, as though one's death were imminent. This is the understanding the Buddha received when he was still Prince Siddhartha from the Three Heavenly Messengers: a sick person, an old man, and a corpse. The material benefits of this world are fleeting and must not be clung to; one must look to a deeper source for happiness. This is the point of the Buddha's teaching on mindfulness of the body—to help us discover that "deep sense of urgency" that will lead us to "right vision and knowledge" and deliver us into the "wisdom and fruition of Holiness."

It must also be acknowledged that to talk of path is itself a contradiction, for there is really nowhere to go—you are already your true nature. But to not speak of path is to deny the possibility of discovering this truth for yourself. Only when you know it for yourself can you be fully alive in this moment. T. S. Eliot spoke to this paradoxical truth when he wrote in *Four Quartets*: "We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive at where we started / And know the place for the first time." Eliot's insight points to yet another advantage of using the body as path, which is that you already know of its future demise. Therefore, trying to get anywhere with the body other than to arrive fully in the present moment makes no sense. But through mindfulness of the time-bound body, you can indeed be fully alive in this moment, even while knowing there is nothing to cling to at any moment in this life. This is the dharma of liberation.

Using the body as path is not skillful means for everyone; you must determine for yourself if it is part of your path. The only way I know for you to determine this is through practice. If you choose to use body, you can do so

knowing it is a worthy endeavor, for the Buddha said the following: “If the body is not mastered, the mind cannot be mastered. If the body is mastered, mind is mastered.” ■

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