

Sleeping Next to My Coffin: Representations of the body in Theravāda Buddhism¹

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ABSTRACT

*Theravāda Buddhism can be stereotyped as having a negative view of the body. This paper argues that this stereotype is a distortion. Recognizing that representations of the body in Theravāda text and tradition are plural, the paper draws on the Sutta Piṭaka of the Pāli texts and the Visuddhimagga, together with interviews with lay Buddhists in Sri Lanka, to argue that an internally consistent and meaningful picture can be reached, suitable particularly to those teaching Buddhism, if these representations are categorised under three headings and differentiated according to function: the body as problem (to be recognized); the body as teacher (to be observed and learnt from); the body being transformed on the path to liberation (to be developed). It also examines two fruitful developments that accompany the body on the path to liberation: **experiencing a transformed body in meditation**; realizing compassion. It concludes that compassion for oneself and all embodied beings is the most truly Theravāda Buddhist response to embodiment, not pride or fear, disgust or repression.*

Keywords

Theravāda Buddhism, the body, impermanence, death.

A western *Bhikkhūṇī*, leading a solitary life in Sri Lanka, bought her coffin several years ago for twenty dollars. She placed it behind her bed in the small *kuṭī*, or cabin she had built for herself in a village near the ancient Buddhist city of Anurādhapura in the north of the country. The practical reason for her action was

1. This is a revised version of a paper given in 2006 at 'The Body and its Languages', the fourth 'Assises Pastorales Européennes' convened by Voies de L'Orient, Brussels, entitled, 'Sleeping Next to My Coffin: Theravāda Attitudes to the body and death'.

that she knew the villagers on whom she depended for food could not afford to buy her a coffin when she died. She, therefore, wanted to save them that expense. However, there was another reason, a religious one. The coffin would help her to meditate on death and the impermanence of the body. 'Death can come at any time, between one in and out breath', she told me in 2006. She had to be ready and the coffin could help her to be so.

The conversation took place in her *kuṭī*. As an additional reminder of impermanence and death, she had attached a skeleton to the wall, near one of the windows. I had seen others like it in Sri Lankan meditation centres. A much larger one, for instance, had hung from the wall of the meditation hall at Parappaduwa Nuns' Island, when I visited it in the early 1990s.² Next to the small skeleton in the *kuṭī*, however, was a picture of clear water tumbling over rocks framed by lush green foliage. The *kuṭī* was neither stark nor bare; it also contained pictures of abundance, colour and beauty. After all, she had described the day when she had bought her coffin as the happiest day that she could remember, adding that she, 'felt so free and light' (Sudharma 2003).

One stereotype of Theravāda Buddhism is that it has a negative view of the body. That a western Buddhist nun in a Theravāda Buddhist country could prefigure illness and death by buying a coffin for her living space might seem to confirm this. Nineteenth century Christian observers of Theravāda Buddhism contributed to the stereotype. Bishop Reginald Stephen Copleston (1845–1925), Anglican Bishop of Colombo between 1875 and 1902 and also a scholar of Buddhism, declared that the historical Buddha, Gotama, encouraged his disciples to feel 'dissatisfaction, or disgust' and added, 'The object most calculated, in Buddhist view, to produce disgust, is the human body itself, whether living or dead' (Copleston 1892, 83). After describing Buddhist meditation on the impurities of the body, he added, 'I cannot but remark on the degrading effect which follows on the encouragement of such a view of the body' (p. 84).³ That the body could be an aesthetic object for Buddhists, he would have denied completely, in spite of the beautiful images and murals he had no doubt seen at Buddhist temples. For him, the Buddhist path of necessity involved developing disgust towards the material and turning away from it. In similar vein, Reiko Ohnuma, in his study of giving away the body in Indian Buddhist literature, quotes J.H. Bateson (1908) as saying that the body in Buddhism, 'whether of men or of higher beings, can never be the abode of anything but evil' (Ohnuma 2007, 199). In the latter part of the twentieth century Melford Spiro judged the Burmese attitude to the body as coming 'close to being phobic' (Spiro 1982, 296, as quoted in Williams 1997, 213). Even one of my own early articles, on the female in Buddhism, suggested that the 'violent denial' of the physical body that is present in some of the verses within the *Therīgāthā* simply went too far. 'What is needed', I declared, in an off-the-cuff,

2. Parappaduwa Nuns' Island was near Dodandūva on the south coast of Sri Lanka. It was founded by the western teacher, Ven. Ayya Khema, on the same lake as the Island Hermitage (Polgasduwa), founded by Ven. Nyanatiloka in 1911. When she left Sri Lanka in 1989, Nuns' Island was managed for several years by a committee of Sri Lankan lay women. Eventually, the Island was handed over to the Island Hermitage. It no longer accepts women meditators. For a further illustration of the use of a skeleton in a meditation room within a Sri Lankan forest monastery see Collins 1997, 186.

3. For a fuller treatment of Copleston's representation of Buddhism, see Harris 2006, 125–138.

rather non-academic remark, was, 'a transformation of our attitudes' to the material (Harris 1999, 63). This paper, I realize, responds to this remark, continuing an internal dialogue within myself that I hope will be of use to others who seek to understand and to teach Buddhism's attitude to the body.

In this paper I will argue that to stereotype Theravāda Buddhism as having a negative attitude to the body is to distort it. Representations of the body in Theravāda text and tradition are plural. What may appear negative is present but so is the positive. Both Steven Collins and Ohnuma, in an attempt to reconcile the negative and the positive, convincingly appeal to the concept of complementarity (Collins 1997, 197; Ohnuma 2007, 199–241).⁴ Building on their work, I appeal to the function of different representations of the body in Theravāda Buddhist literature by categorizing them under three interrelated headings: the body as problem; the body as teacher; the body being transformed on the path to liberation. The three categories are complementary to each other but their complementarity is expressed through each having a different function for the person following the Buddhist path. Taking inspiration from the structure of a portion of the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, the first should be recognised, the second should be observed and learnt from and the last should be developed.⁵ I would like to suggest that, when the three are taken together, an internally consistent picture is created that is meaningful not only to the monastic Sangha but to all the groups within the fourfold community of Theravāda Buddhism: *Bhikkhus*, *Bhikkhūṇīs*, lay men (*Upāsakas*) and lay women (*Upāsikās*).

I will examine each of my categories in turn, drawing data both from the textual tradition, particularly the *Sutta Piṭaka* and the *Visuddhimagga*, and conversations with Theravāda Buddhists during field work in Sri Lanka in January 2006. Texts and contemporary voices, precept and lived understanding, are therefore juxtaposed. The rationale behind this juxtaposition is to render the fruit of this exploration meaningful not only to the world of textual exegesis but also to the lived tradition. My interviewees, therefore, function as a focus group capable of throwing light on whether the categories I am working with are applicable both to textual study and contemporary Buddhist practice. The names of my interviewees have been changed, except for Ven. Miao Kwang Sudharma, who has published her experiences.

THE BODY AS PROBLEM

Taking inspiration from Diana Paul, the *Aggañña Sutta* (D III 80–98) is a key text for examining 'the body as problem'. In her pioneering study of images of the feminine in the Mahāyāna tradition, she begins with this Theravāda text as a paradigm for organizing her primary sources (Paul 1979, xx–xxi). As Paul, I see

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4. Collins argues for a complementarity between 'the negative attitudes of the body-meditations' and, 'the positive nurturing of the body' within Theravāda Buddhist monasticism, and Ohnuma for a complementarity between representations of the 'worth' of the body and the 'worthlessness' of the body in Buddhist literature.
 5. In the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, it is said that the first 'Noble Truth' – the grasped-at aggregates of body and mind that are painful (*dukkha*) – must be fully understood; the second – craving as the origin of what is *dukkha* – must be abandoned; the third – the cessation of what is *dukkha* – must be realized; and the fourth – the path to this cessation – must be developed (S V 422).

this *Sutta* as paradigmatic within any study of Buddhist attitudes to gender, sexuality and embodiment.

In the narrative of beginnings contained in the *Sutta*, one world system passes away. Beings from that world are reborn into another, heavenly, world, where they are made of mind, self-luminous, able to move through the air as gods and without a solid, material body made of the four elements. When the world system that had passed away begins to re-form, some of these beings are reborn within it. At first they retain their luminous, mind-made, wraith-like subtle form. Then, craving is triggered for an edible milk-like crust that has formed on the earth. They eat. As a consequence, their self-luminosity disappears and their forms begin to coarsen and gain flesh. Some become physically beautiful; others become ugly. The beautiful then become proud of their beauty; the ugly become jealous. Other forms of food then evolve, including rice. The beings continue to eat, and their bodies become yet coarser. In the process, gender differences emerge and, with these, sexual energy, which nurtures different forms of immorality. Competition for the rice soon follows, and with it stealing, lying and punishment. The community becomes so crime-filled that, eventually, the beings choose a ruler to keep them in order. With this cameo of a developed human society, the narrative ends.

Within the *Aggañña Sutta*, embodiment or solid materiality is the fruit of greed or craving (*taṇhā*). Greed for the earth's food within the self-luminous beings establishes the conditions for the forming of flesh and blood as we know it. The beings, in effect, develop what they need to have in order to savour the sensual pleasure of eating, namely gross *rūpa*, imbued with fully developed physical sense organs. Gross visible form, therefore, emerges as a defining component of a proto-human being in response to craving present in consciousness. Embodiment, within this *Sutta*, signifies that *taṇhā* has not been overcome. The more developed and diverse craving becomes, the more gross and coarse the embodiment.⁶ Craving and embodiment, therefore, are partners. In effect, the *Sutta* vividly illustrates the doctrine of *Paṭiccasamuppāda*, with particular emphasis on the body.

The main problem with embodiment in this *Sutta* and more widely in the Theravāda tradition relates to the physical senses and their use in the life of the *puthujjana* (the unenlightened ordinary person). It is as though the senses are pre-programmed to operate in response to *taṇhā*. They are, therefore, on fire, as the *Āditta Sutta* explains (S IV 19–21). They are possessed with fever (*Māgandiya Sutta*, M I 501–513, e.g. 506). They are under the rule of Māra, the personification in Theravāda Buddhism of the forces that lead beings away from the spiritual path and bind them to the round of birth, death and rebirth (*saṃsāra*). These well-theorized concepts need to be reiterated in the context of embodiment. The arising of greed, hatred and delusion may be mind-driven but the Buddha's teaching is reduced if it is not also seen as fed by the interdependence between mind and body, *nāma* and *rūpa*. The metaphors used in the Theravāda texts to describe the dangers inherent in sense-desires (*kāma*) are vivid and embrace the totality of the human being, body and mind:

6. This is also seen in the discourse that precedes the *Aggañña Sutta* in the *Dīgha Nikāya*, the *Cakkavattisihanāda Sutta* (D III 58–79), which contains another myth, this time about the degeneration of a society because the monarch does not give wealth to the poor. As greed becomes more rife in society, both the comeliness of the citizens and their span of life decreases.

Blinded are beings by their sense desires,
 Spread over them like a net; covered are they
 By a cloak of craving; by their heedless ways
 Caught as a fish in mouth of a net. (Verse ascribed to Rāhula, Th.297).

As one of the early *Bhikkhūṇīs* or nuns is said to have described it: ‘Like spears and javelins are the joys of sense (*kāmā*), that pierce and rend our mortal frames’ (verse attributed to Selā, Thī.58).

The message of the *Aggañña Sutta* cannot be escaped in any exploration of embodiment in Theravāda Buddhism. Embodiment in Theravāda Buddhism is intimately linked with the three characteristics of existence that also characterize mental states: *anicca* (impermanence); *dukkha* (anguish or unsatisfactoriness); *anattā* (non-self). This is not only because its constituents of earth, liquid, heat and motion are impermanent, and, when combined within the body, *asubha* (unlovely), although these qualities can also be seen as a ‘problem’ within Theravāda Buddhist understandings of the body.⁷ It is because of the interpenetration of mind and body. As long as the mind is stained by the corruptions (*āsava*), including that of sense-desire (*kāmāsava*), so will the body be stained. The *āsavas* and the three roots (*mūla*) of suffering — greed (*lobha*), hate (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*) — are not disembodied. For humans, they could not exist if not for the interconnectedness of mind and body. This, within Theravāda Buddhism, has to be recognized, if liberation is to be gained.

If we can trust the Pāli texts and I believe we can, the Buddha’s teaching about the bodily senses and the sensual caused problems in his own time. In one discourse, Māgandiya, a wanderer, is recorded as accusing the Buddha of destroying human potential for growth through his teaching about the bodily senses. Māgandiya’s philosophy was that human wholeness was helped by the full development of the pleasures of the senses. The Buddha’s reply to him includes autobiography, and a striking bodily image, which compares belief that sensual pleasures are advantageous to a blind man being duped into thinking he is wearing a pure white robe when, in reality, he has been given a greasy, dirty and coarse robe to wear (*Māgandiya Sutta*, M I 501–513).

In fact, the Buddha held that the key problem lies not with the senses or their objects, for as S IV 162–5 explains, ‘the eye is not the fetter of forms nor are forms the fetter of the eye, but rather the desire and lust that arises there in dependence on both: that is the fetter here’, with parallel statements on the other four physical senses and their objects, and the mind and mental objects. Moreover, while sexuality can play no part in the path to liberation, even craving can play some part in this. In the *Bhikkhūṇī Sutta*, Ānanda says to a nun enamoured with him:

Sister, this body has come into being through food; yet based on food [by ungreedy, mindful eating], food can be abandoned. This body has come into being through craving; yet based on craving [for liberation], craving can be abandoned. This body has come into being through conceit; yet based on conceit [by thinking that ‘I too’ can attain liberation], conceit can be abandoned. This body has come into being through the sexual act; but in regard to the sexual act the Blessed One has advised the destruction of the bridge. (A II 145; Nyanaponika and Bodhi 1999, 111).

7. See Collins 1997, 194, where he suggests that Buddhist attitudes to the body are indebted to larger Indian attitudes towards purity and pollution.

THE BODY AS TEACHER

When examining the body as teacher, a paradox emerges. On one side, Theravāda Buddhism insists that our embodiment places humans in the potential grip of *Māra*, through our orientation to sense-pleasures. On the other, it stresses that the body is centrally important to liberation. To an inquirer who asks whether it is possible to travel to the world's end, a place where he believes there will be no more birth, death and rebirth, the Buddha is recorded as saying, 'it is in this fathom-long body with its perceptions and thoughts that there is the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path leading to the cessation of the world' (A II 48; Nynaponika and Bodhi 1999, 90). Williams' point that the body is precious in Buddhism, 'more valuable than a wish-fulfilling gem', although made in the context of Mahāyāna Buddhism, is just as true of Theravāda (Williams 1997, 214).

The sentient body contains 'the origin of the world', namely craving fuelled by ignorance, and also the 'path leading to the cessation of the world', namely *Nibbāna*, because, as teacher, it can help humans see the delusion that fuels the misuse of the bodily senses and the ignorance that is unaware of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*. Just as embodiment compounds the problem of human existence, so it offers a key ingredient of the cure. All schools of Buddhism, for this reason, stress that a human birth is both precious and hard to obtain. Many are those born in other planes of being, where the conditions are not favourable for spiritual growth (e.g. A I 34). In the human realm, however, our bodies can become teachers of wisdom, aids to seeing *Nibbāna*, and therefore are to be observed and cared for.

One of the questions I asked Buddhists in Sri Lanka in January 2006 was, 'What do you believe our bodies can teach us?' I interviewed each person separately. Almost all stressed that the most important thing the body can teach are the truths of *anicca* and *anattā*.

When we look at our body we see that we cannot control it. We cannot control the way it ages or becomes sick. This teaches us the truth of *anattā*, that we do not have a permanent self. (Shamali)

Our body changes every day. And we don't know how it will change. Nothing in our body remains the same. So we can learn about impermanence from our body. (Nelun)

The main thing that the body teaches us is that the body is something that is not permanent. (Hector)

One thing the body teaches us is that it is not really personal. In the Buddhist tradition we believe that one very good way to learn about impermanence is looking at your own body and how it behaves. When a child becomes a youth, one can say that aging is desirable. But when you pass your twenties, then your thirties, then your forties, it's no longer desirable. Buddhism believes the body is the best way to teach you impermanence and also a wholesome attitude towards life. (Roshan)

All my interviewees were lay. All were meditators. Shamali, Nelun and Hector were all over seventy when I spoke to them. Roshan was an academic in the prime of his career. I was surprised how similar the answers I received from all of them were. Significantly, not one of them was perplexed by the question.

I should not have been surprised. Their answers echo the Pāli texts and confirm that the idea of the 'body as teacher' is recognized by the lived, lay tradition. They also demonstrate how influential the texts continue to be and, significantly, suggest that texts directed at celibate monastics are now being owned by lay meditators. For, in the texts, the Buddha is shown illustrating the meaning of impermanence and the dangers of the sensual through pointing to the changes in the body from youth to age, most often using a woman's body as example when addressing male monastics. For instance, he encourages his monastic listeners to imagine the body of a young girl at 15 or 16, 'at the height of her beauty and loveliness'. He then jumps to the same 'girl', now woman, at 80, 90 or a 100 years old, when her teeth are broken, her hair thinned, her skin wrinkled. He does not stop there. His listeners are to imagine the woman when she is diseased, lying in her own excrement, and then dead, being devoured by crows or ravens (*Mahādukkhakkhandha Sutta*, M I 88–89). In this ruthless deconstruction of youthful beauty, nothing remains static. There is no unchanging essence to feel attraction towards.

The *Therīgāthā* show women applying this teaching to themselves, also adding the consequent unloveliness (*asubha*) of the body. *Bhikkhūṇī* Sumedhā, daughter of a king, refuses to be married because she knows the body is impermanent and foul. The *Therīgāthā* records her as saying that the body is 'foul, unclean, emitting odours, source of fears, a bag of skin with carrion filled, oozing impure the while' (Thī.466). She continues: 'Were one to dissect the body and turn the inside out, the smell would prove too much for even one's mother to endure' (Thī.471).⁸

The texts and the witness of Buddhists today, therefore, agree that, if the changes in human bodies are observed and learnt from, they can teach the three characteristics of existence, since an awareness of *dukkha* flows from the realization of impermanence and non-self. In Theravāda Buddhism, there can be no enlightenment, no release from the imprisoning effect of senses fevered with greed, unless these characteristics are recognized. If there is to be not only an initial recognition of the problems connected to the body, but a full understanding and learning from its characteristics of existence, then the truth of the body's impermanence, its propensity to decay and coarsen, and its non-selfhood has to be observed, listened to. As one *Sutta* declares:

One thing, O monks, if developed and cultivated, leads to a strong sense of urgency; ... to the attainment of vision and knowledge; to a pleasant dwelling in this very life; to realizing the fruit of knowledge and liberation; ...the body is calmed, the mind is calmed ... all wholesome states that partake of supreme knowledge reach fullness of development ... and the fetters are discarded. What is that one thing? It is mindfulness directed to the body. (A I 43–44; Nyanaponika and Bodhi 1999, 39)

THE BODY BEING TRANSFORMED ON THE PATH TO LIBERATION

In this section, I am concerned with practice, with development, with the true meaning of *bhāvanā* (lit. calling into existence). What practices, connected with the body, are recommended, within the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, to maxi-

8. For other similes and illustrations connected with the body's impermanence see Collins 1997, 191.

mize the lessons that the body can teach so that the problem connected with it is transcended, and liberation touched. And what is the fruit of such practices?

First, it must be stressed that Theravāda Buddhism does not encourage repression of the sensual – as witnessed by beautiful temple art, and the fact that beauty of physical form is seen as one of the results of past good karma. Moreover, the *Theragāthā* contains a number of verses (e.g. 1, 13, 22, 23, 307–310, 992, 1062–1070, 1135–1136) in which enlightened monks express a non-attached joy and a non-sensual appreciation of the beauty of nature, such as Mahā-Kassapa, who says: ‘With clear water and wide crags, haunted by monkeys and deer, covered with oozing moss, those rocks delight me’ (Th.1070). Moreover, the tradition does not advocate repression of awareness of the body. It does not encourage denial of the fact that we are embodied through concentration on the mind alone. *Rūpa* cannot be omitted from the interdependent *khandhas* in any worlds but the rarefied formless realms; while the Buddha experienced the latter prior to his enlightenment, his enlightenment built on his discerning awareness of the body. At the time of the Buddha, sects existed that believed spiritual progress came through tormenting the body. The Buddha himself seemed to have also followed such a path before his enlightenment, becoming, in the words of one *Sutta*, the ‘foremost loathly one’, accumulating the dust and dirt of years on his body, crawling on all fours as an animal, eating so little that eventually he could touch his backbone when he touched his belly (*Mahāsihanāda Sutta*, M I 77–81). The Theravāda tradition, however, is adamant that he turned away from this. His message to those who practised extreme asceticism was that it did not lead towards progress along the religious path. In contrast, what the Pāli texts recommend is calming and ‘earthing’ the mind through mindful concentration on such things as breathing or one of the four physical elements, an unflinching willingness to face the reality of embodiment through observation of self and others, and the use of visualization and imagination. And the message is for lay and ordained people. Although many of the discourses within the Theravāda texts are directed at those who were ordained monastics, and although it is recognised that lay people will enjoy the pleasures of the senses from time to time,⁹ as John Kelly has pointed out, the range of topics covered in sermons to lay people within the Theravāda texts is considerable, and certainly includes the impermanence of the body, its decay and death (Kelly 2011, 32–43).

This unflinching focus on the reality of embodiment is practised through what the Pāli texts call *sati*. Today, *sati* is usually translated as ‘mindfulness’, as in the quote from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* given at the end of the last section, following the example of orientalist such as T.W. Rhys Davids (Bodhi 2011, 23). The Sanskrit equivalent of the term ‘normally means memory’ (Bodhi 2011, 22) but the Buddha re-configured it so that it described a way of observing one’s present experience or contemplating a particular phenomenon. Bhikkhu Bodhi’s reflection on its meaning is most helpful. He prefers to describe it as a, ‘lucid awareness’ that involves energetic and close observation, leading to clear comprehension. He adds, with reference to one form of *sati*, ‘One might even call the stance of *sati* a

9. For instance, the Buddha is recorded as saying to one lay person: ‘There are, householder, these four kinds of happiness which may be achieved by a layperson who enjoys sensual pleasures, depending on time and occasion. What four? The happiness of possession, the happiness of enjoyment, the happiness of debtlessness and the happiness of blamelessness’ (A II 68; Nyanaponika and Bodhi 1999, 99).

“bending back” of the light of consciousness upon the experiencing subject in its physical, sensory and psychological dimensions’ (Bodhi 2011, 25).

Important for this study is that *sati* goes beyond observation of what is happening in the present moment within one’s own body and mind. The four classic foundations of mindfulness – contemplation of one’s body (*kāyānupassanā*), one’s feelings (*vedanāpassanā*), one’s mind (*cittapassanā*) and the basic patterns of reality that arise when our physical senses interact with their objects (*dhammānupassanā*) – include clear comprehension of death, *marāṇānussati*, through observing dead bodies and skeletons. The visualization and imagination that I have already referred to can also be directed towards this.

In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (M I 55–63), and other texts,¹⁰ the following practices are listed, all of which are aspects of the first of the four *Satipaṭṭhanas*:

1. Sitting cross-legged with the back erect and watching the breath to concentrate and calm the mind, knowing whether one is taking a long or short breath, and saying to oneself, ‘I will breathe in and out experiencing the whole body’, ‘I will breathe in and out tranquillising the bodily activities’.
2. Developing mindfulness of what one is doing with the body at every moment. Knowing, for instance, when one is standing, sitting, walking, eating, drinking or tasting.
3. Reflecting on the components of the body, particularly on their impurity – the hair, nails, teeth, sinews, bones, marrow, kidneys, heart, liver [etc.], from the soles of the feet up or from the crown of the hair down.
4. Meditating on a dead body: for example, seeing a decomposing body thrown aside in a cemetery and reflecting that this body is of a similar constitution to one’s own; seeing a skeleton in a cemetery, the bones of which are ‘white and something like sea shells’ with a similar reflection (*Kāyagatāsati Sutta*, M III 92).

Other texts extend this image of bones to evoke the *dukkha* inherent in repeated rebirth. In one *Samyutta Nikāya* passage, the Buddha is recorded as saying that the heap of bones one person leaves behind through countless births, with the passing of an aeon, would be, ‘heaped a mountain high’ (S II 185).

Lay Buddhists in a Theravāda country such as Sri Lanka glimpse mindfulness of body and death whenever they place flowers in front of a Buddha image, whether at home, in their local *vihāra* or monastery, or at pilgrimage sites, when it is usual to chant this verse, which, through analogy, encourages a visualization of their own death:

*Vañṇagandhaguṇopetami etam kusumasantatiṃ pūjayāmi munindassa
sirīpādasaroruhe.*

*Pūjemi Buddham kusumena ‘nena puññena metena ca hotu mokkham. Pupphaṃ
milāyāti yathā idam me kāyo tathā yāti vināsabhāvaṃ.*

This mass of flowers endowed with colour, fragrance, and quality, I offer at the

10. In addition to the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (M I 55–63), see also the *Kāyagatāsati Sutta* (Discourse on Mindfulness of the Body – M III 88–99).

lotus-feet of the King of Sages. I worship the Buddha with these flowers; by the merit of this may I attain freedom. Even as these flowers do fade, so does my body come to destruction. (Kariyawasam 1995, 8–9)

Post-canonical commentators also have a contemplation on the inevitability of one's future death, in *maraṇānussati*. Buddhaghosa introduces the subject in the *Visuddhimagga* in this way:

One who wants to develop this should go into solitary retreat and exercise attention wisely in this way: 'Death will take place; the life faculty will be interrupted', or 'Death, death'. (Vism.VIII.4)

He gives eight ways of doing this, which include: seeing death as a murderer – just as a murderer acts quickly, so does death; realising that just as death comes to all, however powerful, wise or developed they may be, so it will come to me; acknowledging the frailty of life – only when the conditions are right can life survive and when they break down, life ends; knowing that death cannot be negotiated with – it can come before one has chewed four or five mouthfuls. Buddhaghosa ends:

A bhikkhu devoted to mindfulness of death is constantly diligent ... He conquers attachment to life. He condemns evil. He avoids storing ... Perception of impermanence grows in him, following upon which there appear the perceptions of pain and not-self. (Vism.VIII.41)

Maraṇānussati, according to Buddhaghosa, therefore, is at one level, a preparation for death. At another, it is a preparation for a liberated life, through helping the eradication of any form of attachment to the body and its five senses.

The *Visuddhimagga* in its section on 'unloveliness' (*asubha*), draws on a section of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (4 above) that is not intended for all. Buddhist tradition insists that extreme forms of meditation on the foulness of the body are only for those who have excessive pride in their appearance. Those who already have an awareness of the impermanence of their bodies and those of others do not need them. There is also an understanding that the meditator will be a *Bhikkhu* or *Bhikkhuni* and that he or she will be practising under a meditation master. All involve meditating on a certain kind of corpse. Ten kinds are listed: the bloated, the livid, the festering, the cut up, the gnawed, the scattered, the hacked and scattered, the bleeding, the worm-infested, the skeleton. After laying down numerous conditions, Buddhaghosa writes:

So the meditator must stand firm. Establishing his mindfulness well, he should remove his fears in this way: 'No dead body gets up and pursues one. If that stone or that creeper close to it were to come, the body might come too; but since that stone or that creeper will not come, the body will not come either. Its appearance to you in this way is born of your perception, created by your perception. Today your meditation subject has appeared to you. Do not be afraid, bhikkhu'. (Vism.VI.57)

Buddhaghosa goes on, with reference to the corpse in a particular phase of decay that he contemplates:

Just as a pauper who acquired a treasure of gems would guard and love it with great affection, feeling reverence for it as one who appreciates the value of it, 'I have got

what is hard indeed to get!', so too [this bhikkhu] should guard the sign [mental image of the object] loving it and feeling reverence for it as one who appreciates the value of it. (Vism.VI.65).

Buddhaghosa eventually speaks of 'a counterpart sign' arising, which is less frightening, and which arises when there is a suspension of aversion and other hindrances, and leads on to the arising of the meditative absorptions, the *jhānas*. The purpose is, 'liberation from ageing and death' and the realization that the living body is just as unlovely or foul as a dead one:

This is the body's nature: it is a collection of over three hundred bones, jointed by one hundred and eighty joints, bound together by nine hundred sinews, plastered over with nine hundred pieces of flesh, enveloped in the moist inner skin, constantly dribbling and trickling like a grease pot, inhabited by a community of worms, the home of disease, the basis of painful states, perpetually oozing from the nine orifices like a chronic open carbuncle ... (Vism.VI.89)

Buddhaghosa ends, 'But in the ultimate sense there is no place here [i.e. within the body] even the size of an atom fit to lust after' (Vism.VI.90).

In the light of these meditations on foulness, it would be easy to conclude, as did Bishop Copleston, that Theravāda Buddhism encourages absolute disgust for the body. Copleston was right in judging that something approaching 'disgust' plays a part in Buddhism. The Pāli word is *nibbidā*, which means weariness with and turning away from worldly life, or disenchantment with the conditioned world of impermanent physical or mental processes. *Nibbidā* arises when the futility of putting energy into pleasures of the senses rather than into spiritual practice is seen; the futility of laying down the conditions for more rebirths rather than seeking liberation from them. Buddhism is distorted, however, if *nibbidā* is seen as the guiding principle behind the everyday life of the Buddhist.

My fieldwork suggests that Buddhaghosa's meditations on foulness were not being used by lay people but meditation on death most certainly was, in an extension of the verse they might recite when offering flowers. Moreover, my lay interviewees stressed that it was realism rather than pessimism or a sense of disgust that would lead them to meditate on death or the body. I asked Hector, for example, 'Is preoccupation with the death of the body morbid?' He replied:

I don't think it's morbid at all. I can't think of any reason to think of it as morbid. It's reality. Death is a thing that you have to face some day. So why not be prepared for it and, you know, be ready.

Roshan said:

Traditional meditations on death remind us to look at each day as one step closer to death. You are marching towards death. This doesn't mean you should be disgruntled. It should be taken as fact. It's like the sun rising in the morning and going down in the afternoon. You start life and you are gradually marching to death. You get ready for death. Now one most important thing is to see whether your conscience complains against you ... If it doesn't complain against you, then that is supposed to be the optimum position to be able to die.

He continued:

I think this whole practice of *Maraṇānussati*, reflection on death, is meant to make life now better. It is not about thinking about where you will be going after death. The emphasis is more on the life you live now ... The more you reflect on death, that you are not going to be around forever, the better your attitude towards others becomes. You have a kinder attitude towards others. And you're less avaricious.

Earlier in his interview he had also stressed the need to do good with your body, 'You know your body is decaying, that nothing you can do will prevent this. So why not use the physical body for a good purpose — to help others, not harm'? For Roshan, awareness of impermanence and death pushed him towards altruism, not depression, disgust or pessimism.

As for the only monastic I interviewed, Ven. Miao Kwang Sudharma offered me some of the texts that I have quoted about the impurity of the body and refused to see them as pessimistic. They were the truth. Our bodies were impure. She added that our response should not be disgust but compassion — compassion for all, even to murderers and wrongdoers who were paying off karmic debt.

The fruits of mindfulness of the body, even the decaying body, are not disgust and repugnance, although these might arise initially. Indeed, if disgust remained, a Theravāda meditation teacher would guide her pupil away from it, since it would be too close to aversion and hatred (*dosa*). Rather, the fruits of mindfulness of the body in the present and imaginative recollection of what will happen as it decays and moves towards death include fearlessness, acceptance and equanimity. I would also argue that it can lead to compassion and a glimpse of a peace that is beyond the senses.

Two fruitful developments, I believe, flow from the Buddhist spiritual practice that I have described, both of which actually transform how the body and death are seen, and transcend the body as problem: experiencing a transformed body in meditation; realizing compassion. Taken together, these aptly describe the body's transformation on the path to liberation, my third category, or, to put it another way, the body's participation in the cultivation of the path. The discourse on mindfulness of the body, the *Kāyaḡatāsati Sutta* (M III 88–99), one of the texts that contains the mindfulness of the body practices listed earlier, changes mood completely after the cemetery meditations are described. From meditations on corpses, it suddenly turns to joy and rapture. The next paragraph begins in this way:

And again, monks, a monk, aloof from pleasures of the senses, aloof from unskilled states of mind, enters on and abides in the first meditation [*jhāna*], which is accompanied by initial thought and discursive thought, is born of aloofness, and is rapturous and joyful. He drenches, saturates, suffuses this very body with the rapture and joy that are born of aloofness; there is no part of his body that is not suffused with the rapture and joy that are born of aloofness. Monks, as a skilled bath-attendant or his apprentice, having sprinkled bath-powder into a bronze vessel, might knead it while repeatedly sprinkling it with water until the ball of lather had taken up moisture, was drenched with moisture, suffused with moisture inside and out, but without any oozing. Even so, monks, does a monk drench, saturate, permeate, suffuse this very body with the rapture and joy that are born of aloofness; there is no part of his whole body that is not suffused with the rapture and joy that are born of aloofness. (M III 92–93)

This is a description of the first *jhāna*, the marks of which are joy and rapture. Interesting to me is that, here, the joy and rapture described are not of the mind alone. They are of the body. Every part of the body is said to be flooded with them. They have nothing to do with the temporary joy of sensory pleasures such as a tasty meal or a morning on the beach, but they have everything to do with the body. According to this discourse, the physical can be transformed through the non-attachment to the sensual, the non-attachment to self-centred concerns, which is present in meditation. As the meditator rises through the second and third *jhāna* to the fourth, joy and rapture fall away, to be replaced by a sublime equanimity, culminating in the experience of a body that is suffused with an utterly pure and clean mind. ‘Monks’, the Buddha is recorded as saying, ‘it is as if a man might be sitting down who had clothed himself including his head with a white cloth; there would be no part of his whole body not covered by the white cloth’ (M III 94).

The purity of the images in the last part of this discourse is striking. They are a direct foil to the image of the greasy, dirty and coarse robe mentioned in the *Māgandīya Sutta*, standing for the merely superficially attractive nature of the body taken as an object of sensual desire.¹¹ Gone are references to impurities and foulness. The body is experienced in a purified way because, in the words of another discourse, it is being ‘washed with an inner washing’¹² through the growing purity of a mind. Collins uses texts such as this to argue that the monastic Sangha, by meditation practice and the following of the *Vinaya*, becomes a symbol of *Nibbāna* (Collins 1997, 195–98). Samuels suggests that relationships between lay and ordained in Sri Lankan Buddhism are fundamentally linked with the Sinhala expression, *hita ādaganīma*, which he translates as ‘attracting the heart’, a dynamic conditioned by the beautiful, physical appearance of a harmonious and ethically pure monastic Sangha (Samuels 2010, xxv and 38). This is seen at a high level in a passage in which Moggallāna first beholds his transfigured friend Sāriputta after the latter has attained stream-entry: Moggallāna says to him, ‘Friend, your faculties are quite pure, your complexion is very bright, very clear. Can it be that you, friend, have attained the Deathless?’ (Vin I 41).

The message of Theravāda Buddhism, therefore, is that when greed, hatred and delusion are on their way to being eradicated from the mind, the body becomes radiant. It becomes suffused with a joy, and eventually an equanimity, that goes beyond the dangers connected with the senses outlined at the beginning of this paper, and beyond ideas of ‘me’ and ‘mine’. The body does not lose its conditioned and impermanent nature but it is no longer a partner to craving.

The Buddha himself, according to the texts, possessed this radiance. The texts insist that he exhibited physical perfection — a finely proportioned body, beautiful to behold, with clear eyes and a full face, and skin the colour of gold (*Sela Sutta*, *Sutta-nipāta* v.548). The Buddha’s appearance is present in the texts as a continuous symbol of the transformed body, although it was subject to decay, ageing and death. The *Lakkhana Sutta*, a litany of praise to the thirty-two physical marks that the Buddha was believed to have gained through wholesome deeds in his previous births, is particularly significant. The marks include soft and tender hands

11. See footnote 7.

12. The phrase is taken from the *Vatthūpama Sutta*, in which the Buddha speaks of enlightenment as an inner washing M I 39.

and feet, a smooth skin, a straight posture and long eye-lashes as well as those symbolically linked to the *Dhamma* such as the marks of wheels on the soles of his feet (D III 142–178). As Sarah Shaw has pointed out, some of these attributes are godlike but at least one, the very first, having a level tread on his feet, differentiates him from Indian deities by allowing him to walk firmly on the ground as a human being (Shaw 2006, 114).

One of Shaw's conclusions is that we see in the Buddha, 'a creative integration of many diverse elements, including a number of very different ways of perceiving teachers and the possibilities of what it is to be fully human' (Shaw 2006, 115). One of these ways of being human is to have a body transformed by progress on or attaining the culmination of the path. Visualizing the physical and mental qualities of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as if they were one's own is usually considered to be the terrain of Mahāyāna Buddhism. However, Theravāda Buddhism contains two parallels. First, there is *Buddhānussati*, which involves recollecting or being mindful of the qualities of the Buddha. Second, there is something close to visualization. As Shaw has pointed out, an *Apadāna* shows the Buddha recollecting the qualities and physical appearance of previous Buddhas, and imagining a chamber within which each could be seated close to him (Shaw 2006, 115–116). If the Buddha could do this, so can the contemporary meditator, some Theravāda Buddhists are arguing. Permission has therefore been given to some Theravāda Buddhist meditators to imagine each of the thirty-two marks of Gotama Buddha in the relevant parts of their own bodies, so as to perhaps experience at least a faint echo of some of them.¹³ In these meditations on the Buddha, a further way of transforming one's own body towards being no longer governed by Māra is offered.

Most Theravāda Buddhists would say that they themselves are many lives away from the state of purity described at the culmination of the *Kāyaḡatāsati Sutta* or embodied in the Buddha. However, they would nevertheless see it as a goal. Such a goal is no longer restricted to the monastic Sangha. The extremes of cemetery meditations may not be practised by all but the *jhānas* are certainly aspired to and *Buddhānussati* practised.

As for realizing compassion as fruit of the practices linked with liberating mindfulness of the body, my fieldwork suggests that some Theravāda Buddhists aim to replace worry about the body and its ageing with lovingkindness and compassion, for their own body and for all embodied beings. An outsider to Buddhism might argue that the demands of compassion must pull in the opposite direction to those of non-attachment and meditation on unloveliness. Even insiders have argued this. One of the accusations levelled by Mahāyāna Buddhists against the Buddhists of the older schools was that they were concerned only with their own salvation and had no compassion. As I have argued elsewhere, however, non-attachment and compassion are not incompatible in Theravāda Buddhism but are interdependent (Harris 1997). Although some early Buddhist monastic communities may have emphasized the former over the latter, warranting Mahāyāna accusations, the Theravāda tradition does not separate the two. Compassion is central to it. The most wholesome response to the impermanence of our bodies, according to the Theravāda tradition, is compassion for one's own embodiment and compassion for all sentient beings passing between birth and death, and a dedicating of one's

13. I thank Peter Harvey for alerting me to this practice within the Samatha Trust (www.samatha.org).

body for the welfare of others. And compassion has an activist side in Theravāda Buddhism. If compassion is truly compassion it must join the fight to end suffering in others (Harris 1997, 20–23). When compassion is placed at the centre of Theravāda Buddhism’s attitude to the body, a message about the body that lies beyond the realization of impermanence and non-self is reached. The body, within Theravāda Buddhism, becomes a vehicle of compassion.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that the diverse and seemingly contradictory representations of the body in Theravāda Buddhism can be categorized under three headings and differentiated according to function: the body as problem (to be recognized); the body as teacher (to be watched and learnt from); the body being transformed on the path to liberation (to be developed), and that an internally consistent picture can be reached as a result. The body in Theravāda Buddhism is a vehicle that can both help or hinder progress along the Buddhist path. It can be a sword that can be turned against an embodied being or a means of awakening. I have also suggested that there are two fruitful developments that flow from a body’s participation in the cultivation of the path: **experiencing a transformed body in meditation**; realizing compassion. Compassion for all embodied beings is the most truly Theravāda Buddhist response to embodiment, not pride or fear, disgust or repression. Moreover, my fieldwork demonstrates that the practices and realizations I have explored are meaningful today not only to those who have renounced lay life but to lay meditators also. ‘Sleeping next to one’s coffin’ need not generate fear. It can generate acceptance and compassion.

ABBREVIATIONS

- A *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, partial transl. Nyanaponika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha* (1999, Oxford: AltaMira).
- D *Dīgha Nikāya*, transl. T.W. Rhys Davids, *Dialogues of the Buddha*.
- M *Majjhima Nikāya*, transl. I.B.Horner, *Middle Length Sayings*.
- Th *Theraḡāthā*, transl. C.A.F. Rhys Davids, *Psalms of the Early Buddhists*.
- Thī *Therīḡāthā*, transl. C.A.F. Rhys Davids, *Psalms of the Early Buddhists*.
- S *Samyutta Nikāya*, transl. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (2000, Boston: Wisdom).
- Vin *Vinaya-piṭaka*, transl. I.B.Horner.
- Vism *Visuddhimagga*, transl. Ñāṇamoli, *The Path of Purification*, 5th Edition (1991, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society).

Cited translations are those listed above. Texts and translations (except A., S. and Vism.) published by the Pali Text Society.

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