

'Body and Spirit: a Buddhist Perspective'

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Spirit is something of an ambiguous term and not one that easily translates into a common Buddhist term. The Collins English Dictionary offers as its first definition: the force or principle of life that animates the body of living things (from the Latin *spiritus*, breath). In some questions to the Buddha, a spiritual aspirant, Vacchagotta asked the Buddha, 'Are the life force (or spirit) and the body the same, or is the spirit one thing and the body another?' (Majjhima Nikaya, 72) The Buddha responded that he did not hold either of these views. Vacchagotta pursued this by asking what danger the Buddha saw in holding to these views. The Buddha replied that taking these positions is:

'...a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views. It is accompanied by suffering, distress, despair, and fever, and it does not lead to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation' to calm, direct knowledge, full Awakening, Unbinding.'

In other words it's an unhelpful way of thinking about things. The Buddha went on to say that it was because we don't understand the nature of existence that these views arise. Vacchagotta became more confused, which does not seem to surprise the Buddha who comments:

'Of course you are confused. Deep, Vaccha is this phenomenon, hard to see, hard to realise, tranquil, refined, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise. For those with other views, other practices, other satisfactions, other aims, other teachers, it is difficult to know.'

The questions that Vacchagotta puts to the Buddha are said, in the tradition, to go beyond the reach of reason. To understand, you need to be fully Enlightened, and mere speculation will only lead to confusion and suffering, especially if one is already holding onto other views - which inevitably we are.

So I could end my talk here and that would probably be wisest! However to try and shed some light on this subject I will explore the role of the body - and the breath (recalling the etymology of spirit) - in Buddhist spiritual life. The ninth century sage Santideva wrote:

'Of course it is right to protect this body, but as food for vultures and jackals, or as the implement of action for the benefit of humankind'.
(Bodhicaryavatara, 5, 66)

In his typical uncompromising way, Santideva suggests that the body should be used through spiritual practice to benefit beings. The main way the body is used in Buddhist practice is to develop awareness or mindfulness.

In early Buddhism there are two important suttas (scriptures attributed to the Buddha) dealing with mindfulness: the Anapanasati Sutta (mindfulness of breathing, Majjhima Nikaya, 118) and Satipatthana Sutta (attending with mindfulness, Digha Nikaya, 22). Both suttas emphasise four dimensions of mindfulness, which are the body, feelings (vedana), emotions or mental states, and wisdom. Thus significantly both suttas begin with the body. Shakespeare, in sonnet forty-four, bemoans that he can't jump easily to his lover owing to the nature of the body:

If the dull substance of my flesh were thought,
Injurious distance should not stop my way,
For then despite of space I would be brought,
From limits far remote, where thou dost stay.
No matter then although my foot did stand
Upon the farthest earth removed from thee,
For nimble thought can jump both sea and land
As soon as think the place where he would be.

Turning this on its head, it is rather that thought is problematic:

'The mind is fickle and flighty, if flies after fancies wherever it likes: it is difficult indeed to restrain. But it is a great good to control the mind; a mind self-controlled is a source of great joy'
(Dhammapada, verse 35).

Or, as Santideva puts it:

'Rutting elephants roaming wild do not cause as much devastation in this world as the roaming elephant, the mind, let free, creates in Avici and the other hells, but if the roaming elephant, the mind, is tethered on every side by the cord of mindfulness, every danger subsides, complete prosperity ensues'. (Bodhicaryavatara, 5, 2-3).

The mind is flighty and so by comparison the relative stability of the body is a real boon to develop mindfulness.

Both suttas begin by using the breath to help develop mindfulness. The initial instructions are:

Here a monk, having gone to the wilderness, to the shade of a tree, or to an empty building, sits down folding his legs crosswise, holding his body erect, and setting mindfulness to the fore. Always mindful, he breathes in; mindful he breathes out.

Having found a suitable place for meditation, the breath is the primary tool for discovery and transformation. The instructions go on to describe getting to know the breath, becoming intimate with the breath:

Breathing in long, one knows, "I breathe in long"; or breathing out long, one knows, "I breathe out long."
Or breathing in short, one knows, "I breathe in short"; or breathing out short, one knows, "I breathe out short."
One trains oneself, "sensitive to the whole body I breathe in; sensitive to the whole body I breathe out."

One trains oneself, “calming the whole body I breathe in; calming the whole body I breathe out.”

The Satipatthana Sutta goes on to exhort cultivating mindfulness in the four main postures, that is, moving, standing, sitting and lying, and then to every activity including eating, sleeping, defecating, speaking and keeping silence. The importance is that mindfulness should not be developed just through sitting meditation, but through the body at all times.

The Anapanasati Sutta stays with the breath. In the first tetrad (above) we start to see a relationship between the body and the breath. By attending to the body (“sensitive to the whole body, I breathe in...”), the breath helps to calm the body. We start to see a vital connection between the breath and the body, with the breath affecting or conditioning the body. The second tetrad is on feelings or vedana, which is the hedonic tone of experience, that is, whether sensations are pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. The breath is used in turn to become sensitive to rapture, then bliss, then mental processes and finally to calm mental processes. Rapture is contrasted with bliss, with the former being primarily a pleasurable bodily experience and the latter predominantly mental. Thus here we see the body (aided by the breath) conditions the mind. Mental processes are the stories we tell about our experience, which are often habitual and unhelpful. By keeping attention on the breathing we can calm these processes.

The third tetrad is on the mind and mental states. The four parts are sensitive to the mind, gladdening the mind, steadying the mind and liberating the mind. This section begins by simply bringing awareness to this aspect of our experience – our emotional life. Then we have what can be a pleasant respite! We gladden the mind, encouraging ourselves and congratulating ourselves on sticking in there with the practice. The mind is steadied through becoming more concentrated, which is more likely to occur with a happy mind (having gladdened it). Liberating the mind refers to noticing non-attachment, that is, noticing when the mind is clinging to our experience and when it isn't. This is developed further through the final tetrad, which is on wisdom.

The four sections of the final tetrad are focusing on impermanence, on fading away, on cessation and on relinquishment. Impermanence is a key teaching in Buddhism. Indeed the whole of Buddhism could be boiled down to seeing impermanence deeply with all its ramifications. Needless to say not easy since although we can have an intellectual understanding that all things are subject to change, our emotions and behaviour belie this. The tradition suggests that the more deeply we understand impermanence, the more our attachments to anything will fade. Cessation refers to letting everything arise and pass away without trying to tamper with it; letting our experience be just as it is. Finally relinquishment means letting go of any sense of oneself doing anything, since we see there is nothing to hold on to (all is impermanent). In the Satipatthana Sutta there is a refrain at the end of each section, “...and he abides independent, clinging to nothing in the world.” When completely achieved this is full Awakening.

This account of the path through mindfulness may however create an overly cognitive impression of Enlightenment, with its emphasis on wisdom. In full Awakening wisdom and compassion are inseparable. In some practices compassion is directly cultivated. One such practice is tonglen, also called ‘giving and taking’. The essential part of this practice is that you breathe in the

sufferings of beings, which you visualize as black smoke, and you breathe out blessings or bliss, which you visualize as moonlight. As you breathe in and out, the heart acts like a transformer, transmuting suffering into bliss.

Sometimes you experience an ache in the chest, but it is a good sort of pain. It could be overwhelming – the idea of taking on all the suffering of all beings – but in a sense ‘you’ don’t do it. In some versions you visualize Buddhas or bodhisattvas, so it is as if they are doing it; or you can think of the universe doing it. Again, in tonglen, like the mindfulness practices, there is an intimate relationship between the body, the breath and spirit or mind.

In conclusion, the Buddha was essentially silent on the relationship between body and spirit. He encouraged his followers to find out from direct experience, rather than talk about it. In practice there is a close relationship between body and spirit, with each affecting the other. A traditional analogy is like two wheat sheaves propping each other up: they co-occur.

Meditation, and especially mindfulness meditation, is a way to find out for oneself, with the breath as a helpful tool. Given the importance of the breath, I will end with another breath. The Udana, literally means an outbreath, and refers to inspired utterances made by the Buddha or other realized beings, often on gaining Enlightenment. This is Kottitha:

Dead to the world and its troubles
he recites mantras
mind unruffled
shaking distractions away
like the wind god
scatters a few
forest leaves

(from Songs of the Sons and Daughters of Buddha)

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