

# **The Wisdom of the Body & the Search for the Self**

**By Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche**

From the impermanent to the heroic to the sacred—The Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche on how the view of body changes and evolves in the three vehicles of Buddhism.

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From the Buddhist perspective, our spiritual journey begins here—with this very body and mind. Who we are now consists of these two, body and mind, and who we might become will also be expressed through body and mind. Yet what is the true nature of these two?

Our present experience of life can be viewed as a long dream, arising from our lack of understanding about who we truly are and the actual nature of our world. What we usually refer to as a “dream” is only a short-term fantasy that we wake up from every morning. The real dream we are having is our “waking life,” a delusion that continues on and on. When we are in this dream and do not recognize that we are dreaming, then everything we see appears as solid and real, and we do not see any possibilities for transforming our painful experiences. However, when we recognize that we are dreaming, then everything becomes spacious, transparent and free, and all of our confusion and suffering can be easily transformed.

All the teachings of the Buddha are taught for the purpose of developing the penetrating knowledge that sees through this illusion and wakes us up. It is important to realize that these teachings do not constitute a religion in the conventional sense. Rather, they represent a genuine science of mind, a science of insight that uncovers the pure nature of the mind and world that we experience. They also portray a philosophy of life—an approach to life that deals with its meaning and helps us understand how we can overcome the suffering of the world.

When we say that Buddhism is a “science,” we are talking about going into the depths of our inner world using the methods of the path to explore the two basic states of confusion and wisdom. Our resulting understanding of mind brings us greater clarity about how to lead our lives effectively and meaningfully. The spiritual journey is nothing more and nothing less than this.

We may not accept the view that we are “dreaming.” However, most of us recognize a personal sense of self, a familiar face, so to speak, that looks out on the world and reacts habitually to each experience. This sense of self, of “I,” pervades each moment, each interaction, perpetuating itself infinitely. Yet how often or how closely do we look at it?

The two aspects of this self are always together: body is the ground for mind, the stabilizing element that brings mind to the present. The embodied mind can settle, be tamed and be trained, whereas mind without body can go anywhere in an instant. It is when we work with our mind that we overcome whatever we experience physically or mentally as negative or disturbing. So when we discover the actual nature of the body, we are on a genuine path to experiencing the pure nature of mind and its world.

### The Body in the Three Yanas

The Buddhist path is divided into three yanas, or vehicles, which represent levels or progressive stages of Buddhist teachings. The Hinayana focuses on individual liberation and the teachings of the Four Noble Truths and dependent origination. The Mahayana focuses on the teachings of emptiness, compassion and buddhanature, and introduces the ideal of the bodhisattva, who is dedicated to the liberation of all sentient beings. The Vajrayana (also called Tantrayana or Mantrayana) is known as the “diamond vehicle,” and also the “path of skillful means.” By taking the state of fruition as the path, this “rapid vehicle” can result in liberation in one lifetime.

Each of the yanas presents a specific view of the body and corresponding methods for investigating and discovering its essence.

The Hinayana view of body focuses on the relative existence of one’s own body as a product of karma and as an impure and impermanent collection of aggregates. The body is taken as an object of meditation to induce the state of renunciation and spur the renunciate to the full state of cessation.

The Mahayana view of body, from the absolute point of view, focuses on the nonexistence of both the body itself and the mind that fixates on the body as a self. From the perspective of relative truth, the Mahayana views the body as inseparable appearance and emptiness. This illusion-like body becomes the basis for understanding the suffering of samsara more deeply and the ground for cultivating a genuine heart of love and compassion for all sentient beings. Moreover, the Mahayana meditation practices take not only one’s own body as an object of consideration, but also the bodies of all sentient beings.

The Vajrayana view of body is that the state of enlightenment is present within one’s physical form at this very moment. Body, speech and mind are regarded as sacred and are seen as the three kayas, or bodies, of buddha—primordially pure expressions of wisdom and compassion.

By looking at the view of the body from the perspective of the three yanas, beginning with the Hinayana, we can see how, through the application of methods of investigation such as the practice of the four foundations of mindfulness and analytical meditation, we can expose this “self” further and further—the self that is pure fabrication, the no-self

that is appearance-emptiness, and the state of primordial purity manifesting as the three buddha kayas.

### The Four Foundations of Mindfulness

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness are meditations that cultivate a correct knowledge of the natures of four specific objects: the body, feeling or sensation, the mind and phenomena. (Phenomena here refers to the six objects of our six sensory perceptions: forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touch and mental objects.) In this context, knowledge is primarily that which correctly recognizes relative truth, or the relative characteristics of these four things. However, on the basis of this, there is a gradual development of the higher knowledge that recognizes absolute truth. The Hinayana emphasizes these four mindfulness practices as meditations upon the nature of relative reality, while the Mahayana approach makes use of these practices as a way of realizing the absolute truth.

These four meditations work with the five collections of physical and mental components (known as the five skandhas, or aggregates) that comprise sentient beings: physical forms, sensations, perception, concept or mental formations, and consciousnesses. Among these five, the form skandha relates to the body and the next four are all related to mind. In short, we can say that there are two observed objects of self-clinging: body and mind.

Essentially, the practice of mindfulness consists of investigating these individual objects of meditation in order to discriminate between or distinguish the actual characteristics of the things themselves from the abstractions we create in dependence upon them. For example, the abstraction or concept of “my body” can be distinguished from the aggregate of body itself. The actual body is a physical thing composed of various elements, and it has nothing whatsoever to do with my name for it, my image of it, and so on.

### The Hinayana Approach: Reversing Attachment to Self

From the Hinayana point of view, the body is the basis for the self-clinging that is said to be the cause of suffering. At the same time, the body is viewed as the main basis for the path that leads to the transcendence, or cessation, of suffering. Thus, the body is both a fundamental cause of suffering as well as that which suffers; in addition, it is a fundamental cause of liberation because it is that which engages in the path of transcendence.

In a basic way, the mindfulness of body relates to our fundamental sense of existence. Due to our samsaric tendencies, our existence is normally not very stable or grounded; it is very wild, like a mad elephant. For that reason, at the first stage of mindfulness practice, we work with the existence of form. In particular, we work with three different levels of form: the outer form of our physical existence, the inner form of our perceptions, and the innermost form, which is related to the Mahayana understanding of the selflessness of body.

We work with the outer form of our physical existence by bringing our complete attention to the physical body, which is the primary basis for our clinging. When we work with mindfulness of body, we work with the basic root of emotions, which is attachment. The method of practice is to feel the body within the state of calmness, or shamatha. We simply experience the skandha of form without adding anything to it—without adding any labels, judgments or thoughts, such as, “This is my body,” “This is a good body,” “This is a beautiful body,” “It is so healthy,” “It is so unhealthy,” and so forth. The instruction here is just to drop it all. At this point, we are simply being open. By bringing body into the present, we come into contact with what body actually is, rather than continuing to think about what it actually is.

What we are working toward is seeing the actual nature of the outer form of our body, without concern for speculations, such as, “Is the body mind or matter? Is the body a projection of mind or not?” At this level, we should forget about such philosophical or theoretical divisions. The Buddha teaches this basic approach in the sutras when he says such things as, “When you see, just see. When you smell, just smell. When you touch, just touch. When you feel, just feel.”

Once we are able to simply sit and be with our body, then it is possible for us to have a sense of the profound nature of our physical existence. That experience takes us to the inner state of physical existence, allowing us to see the true nature of our body, the reality of the relative existence of self. At this stage, we experience the impermanent nature of our body, which is the subtle experience of the mindfulness of body. It is said that as a result of this technique, we begin to feel our body in a way that is completely different from our ordinary experience. We actually begin to feel the empty nature of the body. The body naturally leads us to the experience of shunyata, or emptiness. Usually, we experience only the labels we impose on our body. When we look at ourselves in a mirror, we see nothing more than our conceptual mask. What is the problem with putting on this mask? We forget that we are wearing a mask and we scare ourselves. Practicing mindfulness of body is a way to experience the true self—the true body—without any barrier.

### Reversing Attachment to Body

In the Hinayana tradition, mindfulness of body is also practiced using the method known as the “meditation on ugliness,” or the “meditation on that which is repulsive.” The object of one’s meditation, in this case, includes both one’s own body and the bodies of others. Traditionally, one reflects on how our bodies are impure or unclean, to counteract the perception of our bodies as pure, and the five skandhas are viewed as “aggregates of filth.” This meditation engenders a sense of disgust toward the body and strengthens our sense of renunciation, of wishing to be free of samsara.

This attitude of revulsion is generated in stages by means of the “ten perceptions of the body.” The first of these is the perception of the body as mortal, the recognition that death could occur at any time. The next meditation works with the perception of the body

as being ugly or gross by reflecting on all of the unpleasant things that are inside our body, such as blood, lymph, phlegm and other foul and revolting things. The remaining eight perceptions are based on considering what happens to a body after death.

Although we are very attached to our bodies right now, if we think about these a great deal, then our perception of our bodies will change. Essentially, we are attempting to divest ourselves of whatever it is that we are fixating on as “I” or as a self through contemplating the dissolution of the body, until finally we realize that there is no basis in the body for the concept “I.” This meditation should only be done under the guidance of a qualified Buddhist teacher.

Contemplating impermanence is another method for reversing our attachment to the body and inspiring us to take advantage of the precious opportunity of this life that allows us to cut attachment. When we reflect on death and impermanence, we reflect on the certainty of death as well as the uncertainty of the moment of death. We also contemplate the kinds of experiences we will have at the time of death, and what will truly help us through them. We consider what we are leaving behind—our physical body, our family and friends, all our possessions and power, and even our teachers.

When we reflect in this way, we see that this reality is not frozen—it is flowing like a river. Every moment is new, fresh and profoundly awakening. We can take full advantage of this moment or let it slip from our hands, just as each moment in the past has slipped away. That is seeing impermanence: seeing the transitory nature of our lives and the fragile nature of our existence.

### The Mahayana Approach: Selfless Body

The Mahayana approach to mindfulness of body is not based on perceiving the body as impure or as pure, or on perceiving its composite nature. At this stage, the practice of mindfulness of body is closely related to the notion of selflessness—the nonexistence of body—rather than to the existence of body.

As far as the Mahayana path is concerned, there is no solid physical body that actually exists outside of our mind. The way we experience the existence of our body is simply mind’s projection. At this stage, we discover a much deeper level of physical presence, and our mindfulness practice consists of seeing the true nature of that experience. As we approach the level of absolute reality, we see more clearly the relative state of mind, body and mindfulness.

At the same time, the Mahayana views the body in the same way as someone who wishes to cross a river views a boat. It is immediately useful and beneficial, if used properly. Shantideva, one of the greatest exponents of the bodhisattva path, who lived in India in the seventh and eighth centuries, says in his classic work the *Bodhicaryavatara*:

Upon finding the boat of human birth now, cross the great river of suffering.

O fool, there is no time for sleep, for this boat is hard to catch again.

## Dream and Emptiness

That the physical world is not necessarily solid and real can be understood through the example of a dream. When we are dreaming, there is a subject, an object and the action between them. As long as we remain in the dream state, we experience a real world, real phenomena and a real body. However, when we look back at last night's dream from the point of view of today, we see that the reality we experienced in our dream does not exist.

Furthermore, if we look back at both last night's dream and yesterday's waking experiences, then we can see that they are equally nonexistent—as far as today is concerned. There is no good reason to say that yesterday was more solid and real than last night's dream, except that we cling to our dreamlike experience of yesterday more than to our experience of last night's dream. Therefore, in the Mahayana path, our whole experience of the body, our entire experience of the physical world, is simply a projection or a production of our karmic mind, and that experience exists only as long as we remain in this dream of samsara.

It is the view not only of Buddhist metaphysics, but also of Western science in general and modern physics in particular, that our ordinary sense faculties, such as the eye consciousness, do not see the subtle nature of the objects we perceive. In a similar way, we mistakenly believe that this life's appearance of our own body is truly existent and real and that our confusion and suffering are real.

The vipashyana (insight) meditation on the emptiness of form taught by the Buddha in the Heart Sutra, says, "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Form is no other than emptiness, emptiness is no other than form. . ." Maintaining the discipline of seeing the dreamlike nature of our body and bringing our mind back to the awareness of that experience is the mindfulness of body in the Mahayana path.

## Method of Practice: Analytical Meditation

There is no way we can really practice mindfulness of body, in the Mahayana sense, without understanding and practicing analytical meditation. In the Mahayana, this meditation is performed by searching for the "self" within the body, searching for exactly what we think of as "I." For example, when you have a headache, you say, "Oh, I have a headache." You do not say, "Oh, body has a headache." And when you cut yourself in the kitchen you say, "I cut myself." This shows how we perceive our body as being the self.

One practices this analysis by going through the entire body, dividing it into fragments, and asking in an experiential way: "Is any part or all of my hair my self?" "Is either eye my self, or both eyes?" "Are my eyelashes my self?" "Is my ear my self?" "Is my nose my self?" And so on. The purpose of this is to reverse the misapprehension of the body as a self. If the self were a real part of the body, then you would find it through this type of search. In fact, you do not find any "self," and so you come to know that neither the

whole aggregate of form nor any part of it is the self. Through this examination, you resolve that the body is not a basis for the self.

### Interdependence and Existence

From the Buddhist point of view, whatever is dependent on something else for its existence has no true existence in and of itself. Because the appearance of something that we take to be a self depends on the coming together of all five skandhas, it exists only interdependently. This is similar to the formation of a “tent” made up of five matchsticks. The first matchstick can only stand upright when the other four are present and support it. When all five matchsticks are present and support each other, then they can form the appearance of a tent. In the same way, the illusion of self can only exist on the basis of all five aggregates, with their attendant causes and conditions, coming together.

The self that we experience coming from the past moment to the present moment to the future moment is like the reflection of a moon in clear water. The reflection is remarkably vivid, yet there is no moon in the water. In the same way, the “self” we experience seems to be real and existent, but when we look at it closely, it is just empty form. When all the causes and conditions of self come together, the five skandhas and so on, then you have the appearance of a self that continues from past to future. But that appearance, like the moon’s reflection, is without any true, independent self and is therefore emptiness.

### Appearance-Emptiness

If this is so, then how do these forms exist? How does this body exist? The body exists in the form of a collection of countless atoms or subtle particles. However, from the point of view of Mahayana analysis, when we examine form, deeply looking for these particles, no matter how precise or refined our analysis, we will not be able to find the subtle particles that theoretically compose the coarser elements. We will not be able to find a subtle particle that itself is partless—that cannot be broken down further.

So if these subtle particles do not inherently exist, how could something more coarse ever inherently exist? This is similar to the analysis of modern science, which likewise finds no solidly existing particles. However, scientists still refer to energy fields, quarks and strings, which is a more comfortable way of describing emptiness.

Similarly, when we analyze “mind,” no solid, truly existent mind can be found. Mind itself has many parts, and each part is momentary. Consequently, both bases of self-clinging—body and mind—are actually empty yet appearing form. This is what we call “illusion,” and all appearances are like this—empty-appearing forms, like mirages. In the same way, when we are experiencing mental suffering, it seems very solid and real, and when we are experiencing happiness, it also seems very solid and real. However, when we look at these states, nothing solid is actually there.

If we are viewing all phenomena as being like illusions and dreams, then in post-meditation we need to engender dream-like compassion toward illusory beings, who are

tormented by taking appearances to be real. We extend our compassion to all samsaric beings, exerting ourselves in pacifying their suffering and bringing to them the wisdom that will end their illusion.

We have to remember that the analysis we are doing here is from the point of view of ultimate reality, not from the point of view of relative truth or conventional reality. From the perspective of the absolute nature, we say that things are empty and do not have true existence. However, from the perspective of relative reality, from the conventional point of view, things do exist in the nature of interdependence.

### The Vajrayana Approach: Sacred Self

According to the view of Vajrayana, the physical existence of form is sacred. In the Vajrayana, the fundamental nature of our body, speech and mind is recognized as primordially pure and enlightened. When their pure nature is known and manifest, they are acknowledged as vajra (indestructible) body, vajra speech and vajra mind.

In this tradition, a practitioner works directly with his or her body and mind using a variety of skillful methods to swiftly transform them into the nature of enlightened body and mind—right on the spot. Therefore, in order to find enlightenment, it is not necessary to renounce the world (the outer body) or one's own body and mind, and leave them behind, as practiced in the Hinayana vehicle, or to seal all appearances with the theoretical view of emptiness, as in the Mahayana. Enlightenment is already right here, within our subtle mind and body, and there is no need to search for liberation outside. We do not have to wait for eons in order to experience a pure buddha realm. In one moment, we can directly cut through all our clinging and enter the vajra world. Therefore, in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the view of Vajrayana is considered the highest, and its meditation is regarded as supreme.

### Three Stages of Body and Mind

Penetrating the nature of mind and body is emphasized equally in the Vajrayana. In the tantric scriptures, such as Hevajra and Kalachakra, the state of mind and body are generally taught to exist in three stages: coarse, subtle and utmost subtle.

The three stages of mind are: 1) the coarse mind—kleshas (defilements) and thoughts; 2) the subtle mind—mind that is resting in basic nondual emptiness; and 3) the utmost subtle mind—absolute bodhichitta (awakened mind or heart), freedom from all conceptualization.

The three stages of body are: 1) the coarse body—the skandhas, the ayatanas and dhatus; 2) the subtle body—the prana, nadis and bindu; and 3) the utmost subtle body—the vajra body.

The coarse body is our relative, physical body that is composed of and functions through the five skandhas, eighteen dhatus and twelve ayatanas (the ayatanas and dhatus comprise



all the elements of the perceptual processes: the six sense organs, including mind, their objects, and the corresponding consciousnesses). From the Vajrayana perspective, this body is seen as the basis or fundamental ground of transmutation.

The subtle body, which pervades the coarse body, consists of three elements: a network of channels, or nadis; the subtle wind energies, or prana, which move through these pathways; and the essence of the physical body, known as bindu. By means of practicing with these three, one accomplishes the three vajras—the indestructible nature of the three aspects of enlightened body, speech and mind.

Thus, in the tantric view, the ground of body is full of pathways or highways (nadis) upon which the horse of prana circulates, and the wealth of subtle and pure energies (bindus) is enjoyed by the accomplished rider. Conversely, it is taught that the dualistic mind is like a person without legs who rides on the blind horse of prana.

The utmost subtle body is the genuine body of the spontaneously present, indivisible three vajras. This is the resultant form in the Vajrayana, and it is the purest form of nadi, prana and bindu, which are the basis or support of the unchanging three kayas, or bodies, of buddhahood. The dharmakaya, or “body of truth,” relates to vajra mind; the sambhogakaya, or “body of enjoyment,” relates to vajra speech; and the nirmanakaya, or “emanation body,” relates to vajra body.

Through the methods of the Vajrayana, one takes the basic ground, which is our very state of physical existence, into the experience of sacred world. All the interdependent appearances of mind and phenomena are experienced with sacred vision, without abandoning or adopting anything. We work with the vastness of relative reality by seeing it in its true state, the state of sacred world. Thus, the relative world is seen as a sacred mandala, or buddhafield.

## Awakening

This progressive and very personal three-yana journey leads us beyond the basic duality of existence and nonexistence to the indestructible, awakened state that transcends all conceptuality. In the first stage of our spiritual journey, we look at the existence of our samsaric body and samsaric world as unclean, as something to abandon or renounce. In the second stage, through the methods of the Mahayana path, we discover our basic potential, our fundamental state of liberation. This is actually a rediscovery of our genuine self, of who we really are. Once we have rediscovered that self, we enter the path of the tantras, the path where body and mind arise as the spontaneous expression of the continuity of our own vajra heart.

Ordinarily we cling to our bodies like dreamers, clinging unawares to illusory appearances. But when we recognize that we are dreaming, all the solidity of the dream, including our own body and the bodies of others, is no longer there. When we reach that point, we awaken from the long dream of samsara. With the wisdom of knowing who we truly are, absolute and relative compassion will manifest naturally toward all sentient

beings and benefit them extensively. That is what we call achieving complete enlightenment.

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