

Contemplating Beginner's Body

Tarchin Hearn – Aug. 2020

Abstract:

We often regard our body as a skin encapsulated organism of flesh and blood and sensation. Ironically, we seem to be mostly interested in it when it is malfunctioning, when it is demanding attention. We want pain or discomfort to go away. We want the cut to heal or the embarrassing leakage to stop. Yet when it is functioning well, we tend to ignore it, engaging instead with a world of mental constructs – a panoramic world of linked memories and future plans. In many cultures, philosophically, this mental world of mind is valued while the body, 'brother donkey' as St. Francis called it, plods along as an obligatory but rarely appreciated partner in living. This short but dense contemplative essay calls these attitudes into question.

To more fully engage with this contemplation, it will help to arrange yourself in a comfortable posture. Please do this now. Invite a softening throughout your body. Make friends with your breathing and release into an ever widening vibrancy of spacious, open, responsive, presence – (smiling, breathing, present, appreciating, offering). Then, savour the following words, allowing the ideas and images to resonate in your directly lived experience.

'Beginner's mind' is a well known Zen expression pointing to the immediacy of experience. Recently, I found myself wondering if it might have become trivialized through over familiarity. As a corrective, perhaps we should consider the phrase, 'beginner's body'? The Sanskrit word *kāya* is often translated as 'body'. However it is not restrictively referring to physiology or what you might see in the mirror. It has the more encompassing meaning of 'collective'. In this sense, 'body' or *kāya* is a word used, by an observer, to indicate a cohesion of reciprocally responsive, inter-dependent activities. *This*, is the body. A living body is an animate organism, a transient whole, a fluid organisation of dynamic systems that are evolving over time.

In Buddhism and particularly Tibetan *dzogchen* teaching, fundamental reality is often considered in terms of a triad of essence, nature and expression. We could apply this delineation to a living body. The **essence** of a *kāya* – a body, which only appears or exists inter-dependently with myriad other bodies – is fundamentally ungraspable. This 'no-thing-ness' (not a thing but a process/movement) is named in some

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buddhist scriptures, the 'body of truth' or *dharmakāya*. The **nature** of any *kāya* is a morphing field or expanse of multi-dimensional inter-knowings or inter-respondings, for example: atomic knowings, molecular knowings, cellular knowings, organ system knowings, organism knowings, social knowings, ecological knowings and so forth. This body or collection of knowing/experiencing is called *saṃbhogakāya*. The **expression** of *kāya* is autopoietic responsiveness. A particular manifesting of responsiveness, such as this person or that tree, is called the 'undying body of illusion', *nirmāṇakāya*. Collectively, these three, *dharmakāya*, *saṃbhogakāya* and *nirmāṇakāya*, are referred to as the *trikāya*.¹ They are co-arising now as this ever fresh body of experience, this creative union of the knowing that I am – and the contributing timeless presence that you are. A cell is a body of molecular activity. A multi-celled creature is a body of cellular activities dancing with social activities. Inner and outer mingle in extravagant immediacy. Bodies inter-penetrate and inter-support: symbiosings of virus, bacteria, protists, fungi, plants and animals. Our collaborative dancing is the ungraspable suchness of now. And so we find ourselves resting in and as, this ever present, ever fresh, 'beginner's body'.

I am an animal (and so too are you). I exist in movement. Movements, invoking further movements. Movements responding to other movements. Recognising this, we should perhaps question the wisdom of regarding meditation, and in particular *Kaṣyāpānupassana*,² as an activity to be done primarily while seated on a cushion. As a balance to the increasingly sedentary nature of modern life, I think it would be more skilful

to begin our journey of mindfulness practice with experimental movement – moving bodies interacting with moving environments. This is what animals do. Sitting meditation, for the purpose of awakening, requires exquisite tactile sensitivity; the sensitivity that is necessary to see/feel creative relational movement in moments of seeming quiescence or stillness. With this in mind, beginner meditators might be better served by starting their explorations with contemplative dance, or tai-chi. This would parallel what we all did as infants when we devoted our waking hours to what Maxine Sheets-Johnstone has perceptively termed "learning our bodies and learning to move ourselves."³

Through thoughtful, experimental, playful, and increasingly skilled practice, we can develop competent confidence in the fact that movement (intimated through tactile-kinaesthetic first person experience) and change (third person observer's experience) are absolutely fundamental to existence. Stillness, in the sense of non-change, can only be found as a summation or abstraction of the dynamic activity that underpins it. After all even when we are sitting quietly, our hearts are beating, our lungs are breathing and our neurons are synapsing. In fact, our physiology is collaboratively thrumming all over, responding in innumerable ways to the dancing worlds in which we live. As long as there is anything, there is movement – movements within movements – and so in living, we are moved to move.

*Stillness and movement have merged
In the womb of the uncreated.*

*I praise you mahamudra.
All existence has your form.*⁴

Can you recognise the stillness (*samādhi*) in the movement and the movement in the stillness? Can you feel it? How might you begin to explore it? *Samādhi* could be translated as a state of being completely firm or absorbed; *samma* (complete) and *dhi* (associated with qualities of being fixed, firm or decisive). In Buddhism, the word is associated with *dhyāna* or *jhānā* which, suffused with qualities of presence/understanding, in ancient China morphed into the term *Ch'an* and then morphed again in Japan to *Zen*.

What might it mean to be completely firm in the midst of dynamic activity? How is this experience different from being unstable? Can you encourage being completely grounded, stable, firm or present, however and wherever you find yourself?

We could try paraphrasing the above verse in the following manner.

In the space of beginner's body
"the womb of the uncreated"
the ever fresh kāya of now,
stillness and movement are not two.
I value this great movement
this continuously cresting flow of nowness,
this primordial holomovement that we are.
All existence is this body.
All existence is this form (of movement).

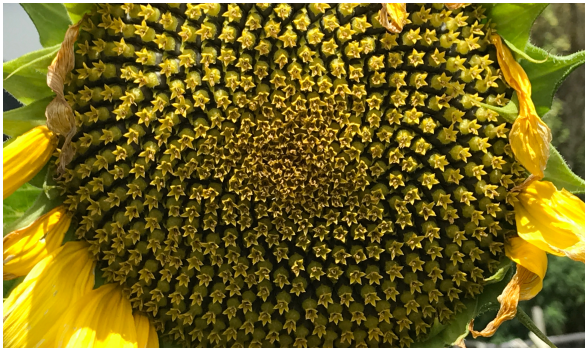
From a biological perspective, kāya is a perceived integration of co-ordinated multi-domained activity. Single celled organisms emerge, or instantiate, from this holomovement.⁵ Multicelled organisms instantiate from this holomovement. In animals with sufficiently complex nervous systems, these molecular and cellular activities become consensually co-ordinated activities.⁶ Seen by an observer, they could be described as consensual co-ordinations of 'behaviour', for example a bird building a nest or a cat protecting her kittens. Some animals have learned to co-ordinate these consensual co-ordinations and thus bring forth capacities for detailed communication or as Humberto Maturana has nicely termed it, "language – consensual co-ordinations of consensual co-ordinations of behaviour."⁷ And so we find our lives today; me writing this essay and now you reading it.

How amazing. We exist in movement – animation. Without it, we are a corpse. I am a body of animation. In this sense, evolving dynamic bodyhood is an eternal beginning, an ever fresh gestation from which the world of experience (current displays of bodyhood) continuously emerges.

In the process of explaining things, we often lose sight of and sometimes even ignore the dynamic reality of our beingness. Instead, we focus on relatively fixed objects and subjects in various states of limited interaction. Yet, even while we do this, the textures and rhythms and inter-flowings of our beingness are determining our knowing of space, time, force and value.

These are the qualitative dancings that underpin our conceptual worlds. Contemplating all of this, we might arrive at a place of speechlessness – this beginner's body. We might find ourselves anew – again and again and again – this ungraspable body of knowing that we are.

*In this covid flavoured world,
this elusive holomovement of today,
sometimes maddeningly ungraspable
and sometimes, blessedly present,
may these contemplations be deep and fulfilling,
and may they support abundant healthy living
for everyone, everywhere.*



Endnotes:

¹ In Buddhism, the *trikāya* is comprised of the dharmakāya, sambhogakāya and nirmanakāya. Dharmakāya, literally 'body of truth' is synonymous with suchness, unbroken wholeness and the full realization of Buddhahood. Sambhogakāya, is often translated as 'enjoyment body' which is meaningful when we realise that enjoyment is a quality of knowing. When the flowing of knowing/responsiveness that we are is obscured by tensions, preference, and compulsive engagement with objects, there is nearly always a degree of dissatisfaction. When we are in tune with the flowing of knowing, the suchness that we are, there is pleasure. Hence 'enjoyment body' – an enlightened 'subjective' perspective. Nirmanakāya is translated as the body of illusion or manifestation and sometimes even the undying body of illusion or manifestation. This is pointing towards an enlightened 'objective' perspective. This is the world of objects: people, cities, rocks, rivers, galaxies, snails, fir trees and so forth. An enlightened perspective reveals all of these perceived objects to be assemblages of dynamic processes without any absolute beginning point or end point hence 'undying'. Some texts describe this as 'unborn and undying'. Being a transient appearance dependent on situations and circumstances it is illusion-like, hence – the undying body of illusion.

² *Kāyānupassanā* is the first of four Foundations of Mindfulness, found in the Buddha's Satipaṭṭhāna Sutra. *Kāyānupassanā* is commonly translated as awareness of the body and most meditators see this as practice of observing their physiology. In this essay I'm trying to suggest that it might be much more than this. Rather than *kāyānupassanā* being the activity of 'me' being aware of 'the body', it could be seen as an invitation into a deepening appreciation of the dancing matrix of corporeal knowings that collectively comprise what we conventionally call the body. Where does this body of relationships begin? Where does it end?

For more on *kāyānupassanā*, see *Foundations of Mindfulness* in greendharmatreasury.org

³ A good summary of Sheets-Johnstone's work can be found in her most recent collection of essays; *Insides and Outsides: interdisciplinary perspectives on animate nature*, 2016, Imprint Academic.

⁴ This verse is from a sadhana of *Guru Rinpoché*.

⁵ *Instantiate* is an interesting word. I might have written here that single celled organisms 'emerge' from this holomovement but I have chosen to say 'instantiate' to hint at the instant, ever fresh here and nowness of this process. As the holomovement changes so too does the particular shape or form of the cell. The idea resonates with this concept of beginner's body / mind.

⁶ *Consensual* as opposed to coercive. An integrated multi-celled organism is not created or controlled by any one master organ, cell, or factor, but arises through consensual collaboration of innumerable domains and dimensions of activity.

⁷ See writings by Humberto Maturana, such as *"The Origin of Humanness in the Biology of Love"*, for a very interesting description/explanation of how consensual co-ordinations of activity have lead to the development of language.