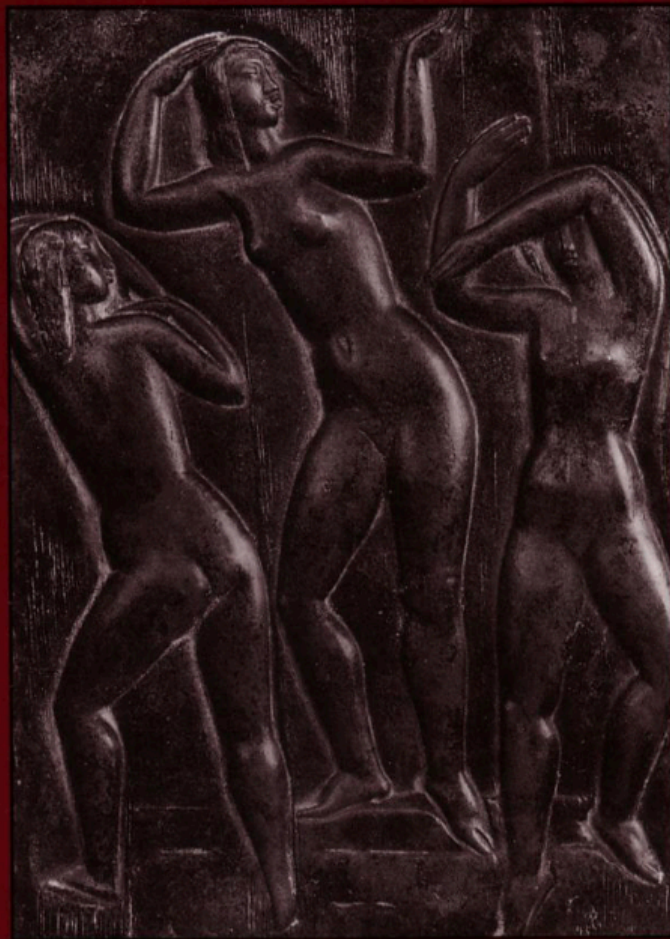


B U D D H I S T W O M E N O N T H E
P A R A D O X O F E M B O D I M E N T

being bodies

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Body of Radiant Knots

HEALING AS REMEMBERING

JOAN ITEN SUTHERLAND

THE TWO THINGS THAT HAVE shaped my adult life more than anything else are meditation and being sick. I know this is true because I cry as I write it. They are so tightly braided that I can no longer imagine what either would be without the other. Meditation helped me to make it through years of illness; illness forced my meditation to be deep and strong and real. Because of their unyielding collaboration, the dark colors of the open wound and the experience of bearing the unbearable are known to me.

Also known is the experience of healing. Healing not as the elimination of disease, but as a falling in love with the poignancy of being alive: taking the great injured heart of the world for my own and coming to respect the essential mystery of life, so that my answer to many questions is “I don’t know,” and this not knowing is a form of generosity.

A Zen koan says, “The buddha made of wood won’t pass through the fire. If she does, she will surely burn.” What does it mean to burn in this way? What does it mean to become smoke and ash, and where does that buddha go?

Since 1979 I’ve experienced neurological and immunological problems arising from accidental exposure to a toxic chemical. Several times I was pretty sure I might die; mostly, long stretches of being bedridden have alternated with periods when I’ve struggled to live as normal a life

as possible. For most of this time, to the extent I could, I practiced Soto Zen meditation, which meant counting my breaths or sitting in *shikantaza*, a state of still attention.

Through illness, I was conscripted into an experience of the Dharma. At times my haywire nervous system caused moment-by-moment fluctuations in my perceptions, physical sensations, and mood that made it difficult to hold on to a sense of a continuing self, even when I desperately wanted to. As my immune system broke down in some areas—making me vulnerable to infections—and became overactive in others—so that I developed allergies and autoimmune reactions—my condition was constantly affected by subtle changes in my environment, making it difficult to pinpoint where self ended and other began.

Sometimes, when things were really difficult, focusing on my breath was a way of finding anchor in a sea of fear and distress, or of calling back the pieces of a rapidly fragmenting self. When I was feeling better the movement reversed, and breathing mindfully helped release the constrictions of illness, expanding and softening my edges as I opened back into the world.

With *shikantaza*, when I was relatively healthy and my body could be porous, I sank into the great hum of the world, my breath mixing with all the life around me. But when I was heavy with illness and couldn't feel my body's permeability, I stayed with heaviness. If I was stuck in pain or lightheadedness or hypersensitivity to sensory stimuli, I rested my attention there, and over time I developed an exquisite familiarity with my symptoms and emotional states.

I began to be able to call up this attention-without-comment throughout the day, and I tried to cultivate an attitude of curiosity to counterbalance the fear I often felt. I remember walking in my garden when my leg suddenly went out from under me, and I fell in a heap. A few hours later depression came on without warning, but I could see, with the awareness cultivated in meditation, that these two seemingly separate events were part of the same neurological storm system, and I was able to weather the depression without taking it personally. I remember coming out of a seizure once, filled not with terror for my loss of consciousness, but with awe at the vision I'd had of a woman in a beautifully decorated veil, who pulled it aside to sing to me.

Meditation enabled me to watch what was happening unflinch-

ingly, and over time to deeply accept it as the fact of my life. It helped me to build a psychic container strong enough to hold experiences that otherwise might have overwhelmed me. It takes strength of soul to absorb the losses of chronic illness—losses of relationship, work, the simple pleasures of a body that simply works—and meditation does strengthen the soul. There's also an unanticipated sweetness that comes with including the hard stuff, an acceptance of all of myself that became easier to extend to others as well. Though illness limited my ability to practice in the traditional sense—I eventually stopped trying to be part of a sangha, and five minutes of lying-down *zazen* was as good as it got some days—it also brought me quickly, surely, and repeatedly to a confrontation with the Great Matter. We're all standing at the cliff edge of life and death all the time; it's just that, with chronic illness, you can never forget you're there.

In this mindful attention to my illness, though, I was also a little too ready to be okay with things as they were. Every practice has its shadow side, and I've come to see that this kind of Zen, at least the way I held it, had an aura of resignation about it. There is something noble about doing a hard thing gracefully, but there's something equally noble about seeking transformation with a white-hot desire and a willingness to risk everything.

A few years ago, through a network of friendships, I fell unexpectedly into the Lakota (Sioux) way of healing. The medicine man with whom I worked asked me two questions: Do you want to heal? Are you willing to ask for it with your whole heart and accept whatever comes? A Lakota prayer song goes, "Great Mystery, have pity on me; I want to live, this is why I do this." Shamanic tradition's straightforward expression of desire—the powerful act of naming what you want—brought me to a new relationship with both my illness and my practice. Could I, without reservation, put my faith in the possibility of transformative intervention? This felt really risky because it threatened my hard-won equanimity. Was I engaging in the very grasping and attachment that meditation practice is supposed to still? What if I rekindled my longing for health and it didn't work? In the end, it took a dream to make the way clear:

I'm walking through a field with a Lakota friend of mine. A group of spirit-people are coming down a mountain in front of us. But

blocking our path is a lion attacking a wildebeest. I have to decide whether to intervene in this life and death struggle so that we can reach the spirit-people, or to let nature take its course. I decide to stop the lion, and I kick at it so hard I wake myself up.

And so for nine months I was doctored in the traditional Lakota way. I learned that people in grief are *wakan*, or sacred. It is this place of the broken heart, the broken spirit, the broken body, where we are, if we can see it, cracked open to the mystery. In this *wakan* moment, we are naked before the Great Matter. In the pitch-black of the sweat-lodge, sweat and snot and tears pouring from me, my face in the dirt as it got really hot, I sang and begged for mercy.

In ceremonies, dreams, and visions the spirits gave me many things to do. My life became a round of prayer, purification, and sacrifice. A Lakota prayer begins by acknowledging one's humility and asking for help; it ends with a dedication of the prayer to all one's relations. I came to see that my illness was a tear in the fabric of not just my life, but in life-as-a-whole, and that my relations—human, spirit, plant, animal—were more than willing to help stitch it back up. In return, I undertook to continue circulating the gift through the sangha of all beings in whatever ways I am able.

When the ceremonial cycle was complete, a radical change in my condition had occurred. This is not to say that I am without physical problems, though they are vastly fewer and farther between. It's more that I've experienced how life-as-a-whole is dealing with them, and I feel lighter. In Buddhism we talk about raising one's *bodhicitta*, one's intention toward enlightenment for the benefit of all beings. It was shamanic practice that showed me how this worked in all directions: how all beings desired my healing, which enabled me to desire it for myself.

Shamanic practice brings in the wild. It cracks things open, turns them on their head, throws the broken bricks of ruined structures up into the air to fall back to earth in a rain of flowers. In that vivid space I could see that the truest acceptance of my circumstances was not the same as resignation to my fate. Acceptance can be dynamic; it can include the possible as well as the actual. This new openness, and my increasing health, led me to begin practicing in a different Zen tradition, which in some important ways integrated my meditative and sha-

manic experiences. I started sitting with the Diamond Sangha, who practice a combination of Rinzai and Soto that includes koan study. This involves meditation on a series of questions that can lead to direct insight into the nature of reality, and then deepens and broadens that understanding.

In the experience of insight, body and mind fall away. The distinctions we make between the two, and the distinctions between self and other, disappear. The question of living or dying falls away, too. I've experienced this, with great wonder, as "nothing to stand on, nowhere to fall." And yet at the same time there is a profound sense of location: I am right here, sitting in the *dokusan* line before dawn, one candle burning, incense smoke hanging in the air. When the landscape is lit from within, the body is no longer something alive, but life itself, pure and clear.

There's an essential mystery here. From the perspective of emptiness, living or dying doesn't matter, sick or well doesn't matter. This is not indifference, but an affirmation that life shines everywhere equally, without distinction or preference. It's all holy. In the same moment, without separation, it does matter whether my head hurts or my energy is good today. This is also holiness. Both are buddha-nature: empty buddha, sick buddha. Body of radiance, body of knots. Body of radiant knots. Just perfect, this crankiness; completely frustrating, this perfection. At night it all tumbles into sleep together.

This is an act of remembering. This is Zen's direct transmission outside the scriptures. In koan practice you return the gift by presenting your insight, embodying it. You can't explain a koan; you can't keep it at a distance. You have to become intimate with it, let it enter you as you enter the moment of eternity it opens before you. It's physical and visceral as well as intuitive. Sometimes the answer to a koan comes in a flash of insight, where I suddenly know that I know. At other times, when I don't understand a koan, I act it out, and the answer becomes apparent through a kind of kinetic intelligence. When I truly *am* the old Chinese monk or the oak tree in the garden or the young woman sitting in meditation, when the koan is embodied in me, then I've answered it.

Through years of illness my body was the dark engine of my practice. Now this same body is itself a locus of wisdom. As I learn to trust this, the uninhibited presentation of koan practice can be a challenge.

At some point, though, I stopped worrying about making a fool of myself and *became* the fool. This is the process of remembering my buddha-nature in my bones and sinews. There's nothing more delightful than hearing gusts of laughter or big thumps on the floor coming from the dokusan interview room and knowing that someone else is being exquisitely foolish too. I love that this practice allows for, asks for, playfulness: the ground note for me these days is a kind of idiot joy. I appreciate our great Chinese ancestor Pang Lingzhao, who, when she saw her father trip and fall, threw herself down beside him. He asked her what she was doing, and she replied, "I saw you fall to the ground, so I'm helping."

A few years ago I moved to this cottage out in the country, not sure if I'd come here to live or to die. My intuition was true, if not literal: here in the woods, at the edge of the ocean, I've let illness kill me, let meditation kill me, so that I might live. These are lovers who ask everything and promise nothing. Like the wooden buddha in the fire, I've had to burn for it. Because of the intensity of my experience, the heroic qualities of the traditional Zen path are in some ways attractive to me. But in the end my healing has been a different kind of story: the dragon once slain doesn't stay dead, the grail once gotten winks in and out of view. In the hero's tale, illness would be a test—you triumph over it to win the prize, but in real life the initiation goes on and on, simultaneous with the grace of small healings. All of it arising all the time, always getting better, always falling ill.

Having no choice in the matter, I've decided to be grateful for the insoluble problem of chronic illness, which keeps things close to the bone. At the same time, I can't really see it as a gift; considering how most people live, with malnutrition and disease and too much hard work, it seems more like the common condition of being human. Having known pain, it's pretty hard to be indifferent to the sufferings of others. What the experience of emptiness provides is a kind of buoyancy that makes me less likely to drown in the sea of life; I'm able to respond to suffering without being overwhelmed or paralyzed by it. A helpful compassion can be born here, I think.

So healing, for me, has been a kind of ripening. It's learning to suffer in an authentic way so that I can begin to stop suffering. It's seeing illness as an event within the body of the community that needs attending to. It's always having one ear open to the ground note of joy

that comes from the experience of emptiness, a sound that's underneath both happiness and sorrow. As I become simultaneously more transparent and more vivid, as more life comes through, I revel in the delights of being a body. As Hakuin Zenji wrote, "This very place is the Lotus Land, this very body, the Buddha."

We focus so much on the enlightened mind, but what is an enlightened body? Some clues might be found in the idea of the *trikaya*, the three bodies of the buddha. The *nirmanakaya* is the transformation body, the unique form each thing takes. It's what makes conifers different from broadleaf trees. For me, shikantaza built a strong platform for my practice and opened me, through an exploration of my own particularity, to intimacy with this world of form. In my shamanic journey into *sambhogakaya*, the body of interbeing in which each thing contains all things, I came to know the spirits and my relations in the natural world as sangha. The cultivation of insight through koan practice led me directly to experience the third body, the *dharmakaya*, the absolute reality of pure and complete emptiness.

Perhaps the enlightened body, then, is all three of these: the physical body, intimate with itself as substance, matter, flesh and blood; the spirit body, intimate with other spirit bodies; the empty body, intimate with its own buddha-nature. All sick, all well, all alive, and all dead. All held in the great shining body of the world, and already true, if we can just remember it.