



Knowing the Body: Seeing it through “Their” Eyes

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Abstract

This paper is based on my understanding and analysis of a number of ideas related with the body with the sole intention of over viewing the diverse understanding of the body and its functioning. Buddhaghosa’s (who is a Buddhist scholar) understanding of the body seems to be negative to many. I have viewed the body from the perspective of Buddhaghosa within his work *The Path of Purification*. Buddhaghosa points out the reality of the body and its underlying foulness and the human tendency to camouflage its foulness under the veil of superficial make up, which are altogether temporary by nature. I will also be dealing with the concept of donation of the body, from the perspective of the Buddhist school of thought. Within the other part of this work I will be dealing with the understanding of the body viewed from the perspective of the feminists. Within this part of the paper, I will make an effort to re-reflect upon Buddhaghosa’s understanding of the body, which seems to have an essence of the “gendered” notion within itself.

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Introduction

It seems quite interesting to think of the “various” ways in which

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we can study the notion of the body: “various” ways of viewing the same material, being constructed by the viewer in different ways. As for example, the female body is often perceived and conceptualized as an apparatus which is just meant to be used for fulfilling the purpose of reproduction (I will be dealing with the female body in one of the sections of this work). Within the society giving birth to children seems to be the pivotal and sole role for a woman. Although it is not the case, it seems that there is no other choice of life available for a woman. (If one reads the *therīgāṭha*, which had been written around 600 B.C.E, we find stories related to women, who had chosen to be nuns, and had chosen a life for themselves different from the stereotypical life as per defined by the society).

There exists a “gendered” notion of the body which can be very well realized by studying Buddhaghosa’s (who is a Buddhist scholar) *Visuddhimagga*. I will analyze the meaning of the term “gendered” used in this context in this work. The gendered body lies at the very core of Buddhaghosa’s meditations in *Visuddhimagga* where in Buddhaghosa highlights over the fact that the mendicant (who is male) ought not to meditate on a female body. This particular point of emphasis will be critically dealt within this work.

Questions can be raised against this kind of a discriminatory attitude: Why should people (even the literate class) lay stress on the difference in male-female embodiment as such? Dealing with the above issue does not directly fall within the scope of this paper. I intend to find out the most easily accountable difference between male-female bodies, both apparently and functionally. Over and above all this, I intend to find out whether it is possible to understand the male and female bodies as two sides of one and the same coin. The Feminists (I will be focusing on the ideas circulated by Judith Butler and Simon De Beavour) have worked at length to understand the female body and the surrounding circumstances.

Buddhaghosa had been very critical about the human body, and to many of his critics his approach seems to be negative (which I have already mentioned at the beginning of this paper). He repeatedly talks about the body as being foul. Buddhaghosa’s way of analyzing the human body might seem to be negative in approach,

when it is viewed superficially. I will be dealing with Buddhaghosa’s understanding of the “body” within the first part of this work. I will be analyzing his understanding of the body in great detail and my intention will be to find out the sole reason behind his pointing out the foulness of the body.

I will attempt to find an answer to the following question within this journey: What does transcending one’s body mean to an individual? A universally applicable understanding of the body and its transcendence is not the focus of my work, rather to go beyond the common sensical understanding of going beyond the limits of the body forms the core of the paper.

Buddhist Understanding of the Body

To begin with the attempt to understand the human “body”, one of the good ways to start with will be to ponder over the definition of the term itself. Buddhaghosa defines the term “body” as a collection of bones, joints, flesh, blood, cuticle, skin etc.¹ According to Buddhaghosa’s view point the body is a substratum for “foulness”.² The way of calling the body as the seat of foulness might seem strange to a few readers; although a closer reflection over the work, might reveal his real intention acting behind his usage of the term “foulness” with reference to the body. According to Buddhaghosa, the essence or the real nature of the human body is its “foulness”. He further makes a detailed analysis of the matter and enumerates different kinds of foulness. This enumeration of the different varieties of foulness is based on the different kinds of greed commonly observed within human nature.³ They are as follows: foulness of the bloated body, foulness of the livid body, foulness of the festering body, foulness of the cut-up body, foulness of the gnawed body, foulness of the scattered body, foulness of the hacked and scattered body, foulness of the bleeding body, foulness of the worm-infected body and foulness of the skeleton body.⁴

¹ B. Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāóamoli, Colombo: Ananda Semage, 1956, 201.

² B. Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 201.

³ B. Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 200-201.

⁴ B. Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 197-198.

To quote a few words from Buddhaghosa: “This Foulness, while it is of ten kinds, has only one characteristic. For though it is of ten kinds, nevertheless its characteristic is only its impure, stinking, disgusting and repulsive state(essence)”⁵ This point of enumerating the different varieties of foulness present within the human body is a step ahead in understanding the true nature of the same. I feel that Buddhaghosa’s understanding of the body is not meant for all. Quite a few of his readers will interpret his approach as a cause of pessimism within man. Any lay man perceiving the body will not think about its underlying foulness; he will consider Buddhaghosa’s stand to be rather a pessimistic one.

I felt after pondering upon Buddhaghosa’s stand on the body, that his sole intention acting behind pointing out the foulness of the body had been to highlight upon a basic ingredient of human nature, namely “greed”. Greed is one of the three (hatred and delusion being the other two) main reasons behind human misery. Humans tend to get attached towards all sorts of material possessions, being blinded by their external manifestations. Human beings tend to ignore the fact that the material objects they want to possess are all temporary by nature and are time bound. The human body with all its beauty and glory: shape, size, color etc. are not going to remain intact with the passage of time.

In the *Digha Nikāya* (The Long Discourses of the *Buddha*) the description of the body can also be found. To quote some words from the *Digha Nikāya*: “In this body there are head-hairs, body-hairs, nail, teeth [...] kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, mesentery, bowels, stomach, excrement, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, tallow, saliva, snot, synovial fluid, urine.”⁶ The above description of the “body” does not make the reader feel good about it. The point which draws my attention can be formulated in the form of a question: Why does the Buddhist school of thought portray the ugliness of the body in the form of its description?

Does it mean that the Buddhist school of thought has an aim of demeaning the body?

⁵ B. Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 201.

⁶ *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. Walshe Maurice, Massachusetts: Wisdom Publications, 1987, 337.

According to my understanding (which is definitely not the ultimate) the Buddhist school of thought does not want the people living in this world to live a life of delusion, attaching themselves to temporary things. The body is nothing more than the *pancakhandhas*: air, water, fire, earth and the mental faculties linked with consciousness (*naṃa-rūpa saṅghatā*).⁷

The question which arises next within one’s mind is: How can an ignorant being stop from moving into the path of suffering? The goal of transcending the body, going beyond the *rūpa* part of the individual is not an easy task. Buddhaghosa tries to show the correct direction to the human beings by revealing the essence of the body, namely its foulness. He clearly states that foulness is a part and parcel of a body, whether it is dead or living. The only difference between a living and a dead body is that: in the case of a living body there are certain external manifestations superimposed on the body which hides its foulness, while in the case of a dead body the foulness present within it is explicitly observable due to absence of any superimposed manifestation.⁸

Human beings need to meditate upon the different kinds of foulness of the body and stop oneself from being caught up within the cycle of rebirth (Now, even if an individual desires to go beyond his attachment towards the body by meditating upon its foulness, it requires a lot of patience and perseverance to fulfill this goal). Buddhaghosa gives a number of examples, in order to elaborate his point. I will cite one example (given by Buddhaghosa) in order to illustrate the point made: he says that a human being who has lust for the shape of the body should meditate upon the bloated dead body. As a result of meditating upon the bloated body, he will be able to realize the fact that the shape of the body is transitory by nature and is definitely not a part of its essence.⁹

According to Buddhism the attainment of liberation from the fetters of suffering is the prime aim of human life. As a result of being attached to the body, one will not be able to liberate oneself

⁷ *The Middle Length Discourses*, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṃamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, Massachusetts: Wisdom Publications, 1995, 56-57.

⁸ *The Middle Length Discourses*, 201.

⁹ *The Middle Length Discourses*, 200.

from the cycle of birth, misery, death. There is nothing as such incredible about the body due to which one can afford to sacrifice one's own liberation.

The question which can be raised at this point is that: Does an ordinary human being want to get oneself liberated? An ordinary man might just be satisfied with temporary spans of happiness within his life time, although, Buddhaghosa's perspective related to the body is of no less value due to a lack of understanding audience.

Notion of *Daṇa* in Buddhism

The notion of gifting one's body in part or whole forms an important part of the Buddhist approach. There are many stories beautifully portrayed in the *Jātākas*, *avadaṇās*, where the Boddhisattva gives away his body out of compassion for his fellow creatures and loses his life at the end. The *Boddhisattva* does not feel any sort of hesitation while giving up his body in exchange of terminating the misery of ignorant creatures.¹⁰

While there are stories, in which we find the instances of tests, confronted by the Bodhisattva, these tests have been designed by the *Sakka*¹¹ (who is considered to be the head of the thirty three gods in Buddhism.) in order to find out whether any hint of unwillingness is present within the Boddhisattva's attitude while donating his body.¹² Reiko Ohnuma, a Buddhist scholar, describes a number of stories centered upon the concept of gifting of the body. One such story described by Ohnuma is from the *Divyavadana*: The two main characters within the story are the king and a bhrahmin. The king had an all round good reputation, while the Brahmin is a greedy one who attempts to test the king's selflessness.¹³ To quote some of Ohnuma's words: "*rājakrīd ayā krīd itum ārabdhāh*"¹⁴ The work done by the king, is indeed sound

¹⁰ Reiko Ohnuma, *Head, Eyes, Flesh and Blood*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, 28.

¹¹ *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, 41.

¹² Reiko Ohnuma, *Head, Eyes, Flesh and Blood*, 28.

¹³ Reiko Ohnuma, *Head, Eyes, Flesh and Blood*, 26-27.

¹⁴ Reiko Ohnuma, *Head, Eyes, Flesh and Blood*, 317.

apart.¹⁵ In other words, the attitude of the king is way apart from others. The king happily shared whatever he had within his possession with others. In fact, Ohnuma comments that the Brahmins’ expectation of getting a negative response from the king when asked for his head seems funny to him.¹⁶

So, it is not the case that detachment towards the body is a rare phenomenon even amongst humans. The king always behaved selflessly, and never had any kind of clinging towards all the material wealth he had within his control. There was peace and harmony both in his kingdom and within the hearts of his countrymen.¹⁷ The notion of donating one’s body as observed in the different Buddhist literary sources can be questioned upon. On one hand, Buddhism talks about foulness residing within the body, while, on the other hand, Buddhism talks about the notion of donating that foul substance (body). I intend to work on this topic and explore more on this in my future research.

Gendered Notion of the Body

Before entering into the core of this section, I need to reflect upon the meaning of the term “gender” as commonly understood by many. The term “gender”, as interpreted by Judith Butler, a feminist thinker, is the presumed meaning already present within the meaning of a sexually identified body.¹⁸ The concept of gender is rather a modern concept, under the influence of which one can understand the female body, beyond the confinement of the sexual body which she has to herself. In such kind of an approach, Butler says, that a split is observed between the culturally created gendered body and the biological understanding of the sexual body.¹⁹ Butler has penned down her thoughts on the gendered notion of the body. According to Butler the term “gendered body” is a byproduct of the cultural framework to which both the male

¹⁵ Vasudeo Govind Apte, *The Concise Sanskrit to English Dictionary*, Motilal Banarasidas Publishers, Delhi, 2010.

¹⁶ Reiko Ohnuma, *Head, Eyes, Body and Flesh*, 26.

¹⁷ Reiko Ohnuma, *Head, Eyes, Body and Flesh*, 26-27.

¹⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, New York: Routledge, 1990, 9.

¹⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 9

and female sections of the world belong.²⁰ Butler continues, when one calls a particular body as “female” and the other as “male”, the referendum of such a connotation does not simply remain confined within the boundaries of describing the physique of the male or female respectively.²¹ Theoretically if and only if one can separate out the concept of gender from the concept of sex, then only the glass wall created between the terms: “male body” and “female body” can be brought down altogether.²² For my current endeavor, the gendered notion of the body can be simply understood as a creation of the culture (modern).

In this section I intend to highlight upon another dimension of Buddhaghosa’s understanding of the body. While talking about the path leading towards liberation of oneself, Buddhaghosa mentions the importance of meditation (on the foulness of the body) for the mendicant. On this very note, Buddhaghosa brings in the gendered notion of the body within the scenario. The gendered notion of the body, simply refers to the strict demarcation between the male and the female body. He says that a male mendicant ought not to meditate upon a female dead body and vice versa.²³ In other words, the female body cannot be the subject for meditation for the male mendicant and likewise for the female (I will elaborate this particular point in the Section 3 with respect to the feminist understanding of the female body). The sole aim of the mendicant is to face the real nature of this gendered body (corpse), and this would not be possible if the mind of the mendicant beavers (moves here and there) due to its contact with the body belonging to the opposite sex.²⁴

To quote some of Buddhaghosa’s words: “However, a female body is not appropriate for a man or a male one for a woman; for the object,[namely, the repulsive aspect], does not make its appearance in the body of the opposite sex, which merely becomes the condition for the wrong kind of excitement.”²⁵ This particular point

²⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 8.

²¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 9.

²² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 9.

²³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 191.

²⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 191.

²⁵ B. Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 191.

raised by Buddhaghosa does not seem justified in my view point. I do not feel that the question of the gendered notion of body has any relevance over here. My feeling is not arbitrary by nature; it is based on Simon De Beavour’s understanding of the female body (I will elaborate on this point, further, in the following section.).

Female Body: Seen through the “Eyes” of the Society

The female body is treated like an “object” which the male desires to bring within his possession. To quote some of Simon De Beavour’s words: “[...] he remains at the center of this activity, being, on the whole, as the subject as opposed to the objects that he perceives and the instruments that he manipulates, [...] the feminine flesh is for him a prey.”²⁶ From the lines quoted above the act of objectification of the female body within the society can be clearly seen. The woman is nothing more than a chunk of flesh in the eyes of the hungry carnivore (male) (The men have been equated with the carnivores over here).

According to De Beavour, the female body acts as a tool within the society. Even, in the act of love making where both the female and the male bodies are involved, the female body is assigned, rather mentally prepared to play the passive role. Therefore, the female needs, demands, appetites etc. are suppressed and over taken by the male bodily demands.²⁷

Simon De Beavour raises a very interesting point over here. She says that a man can even conjugate with a dead female body.²⁸ This might be a possible reason why Buddhaghosa has prohibited the male mendicant to meditate upon a female corpse (thus reflecting on Buddhaghos’s perspective of the body). Since, the male mendicant might have the desire to conjugate with the dead (female) body. On the other hand, it is just not possible to establish a conjugal relationship with the male dead body (since, a male corpse cannot have any erectile motion automatically, while been already dead.). Therefore, the presence of the gendered notion of

²⁶ Simon De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley, London: Ann Bryuone Printers, 1953, 366.

²⁷ Simon De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 367.

²⁸ Simon De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 368.

the body can be clearly felt within Buddhaghosa's analysis, based on some kind of a discriminatory attitude towards the male and female sexual bodies. De Beavour further says that a male body (irrespective of the fact whether he had been in contact with a female body or not.) always wants an object, namely the female body, which he can possess upon. While, on the other hand De Beavour points out the condition of a woman, whose mind is socially bound to make her feel incomplete without a man's guidance to know herself.²⁹

Generally, the woman's body is conceived by the society like a precious diamond (an object), which requires an owner who can use it as per his desire. Due to societal norms and conditions, a woman's mind is trained to act as an object for the man. Judith Butler interprets De Beavour's understanding of the female mind and body: the woman's body is taught not to fulfill her individual needs which are nowhere less human than the male physical needs and appetites.³⁰

There is a sharp difference between the De Beavour's and Butler's understanding of the feminine body, in spite of the fact that both are feminist writers. As pointed out by Judith Butler, the Cartesian mind-body dualism forms the ground for De Beavour's thesis on the female body and its freedom, although De Beavour tries her level best to avoid any such split.³¹ While on the other hand, Butler strongly argues against any traditionally tailored superimpositions creating any sort of divide whatsoever including the gender based divide.

I would now take the opportunity, to view the conditions, if and when any woman makes an attempt to live the life of her choice, by the help of analyzing a story based on this. Such is the story of *Ammu*, a beautiful woman, described by Arundhati Roy, in her "*God of Small Things*". *Ammu* (a divorced, single parent, female) crosses the line defined by the society and gets inclined towards a *Paravan* man, being ruled by her heart. The body of this *Paravan* man is nowhere different from the body of a man belonging to any

²⁹ Simon De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 374.

³⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 16.

³¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 16.

higher status (defined by the society). I would also take the opportunity of reminding the people of discriminatory tastes what Buddhaghosa had said in regard to bodies of different individuals, belonging to various status respectively. He said that an unmaintained, unclean, undressed body of a king is nowhere different from the body of a man who belongs to a lower caste.³²

Still, Ammu had to pay a very high price for the choice she had made in her life: the society boycotted her and at last, she had to embrace death at a very early age. Within this short piece dedicated to understanding the human body, two kinds of discrimination towards the body can be accounted of. They are as follows: (i) male and female bodies are discriminated which in turn leads to the “gendered” notion of the body, and discriminatory attitude towards the individual bodies based on their membership to some respective socially defined caste.

Conclusion

If I go back to the title of this paper, “Knowing the Body: Seeing it through “Their” Eyes”, it seems relevant to me, to point out the bearers of the “eyes” through which I have visualized the body, and created this piece of work. “Their” refers to the following few (this list provided below is not exhaustive by nature; rather such kind of an enlisting will help the reader to map the piece of writing and divide it into relevant parts): (i) the Body: seen through the “eyes” of the Buddhist School of thought; (ii) the Body: seen through the “eyes” of some feminist thinkers and (iii) the Body: Seen through the “eyes” of the society.

If I have to briefly say, what I know about the body after seeing it through the eyes of the above mentioned few. I would say that both the Buddhist school of thought and the society have stressed upon the gendered notion of the body, over and above anything else, however much less important it might be. Although, the Buddhist school of thought consider the birth as a human being, and there by having a human body to be a matter of great fortune, based on the fact that the individual who is born as a human has the potential of

³² B. Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification*, 202.

attaining *nibbāna* within his lifetime. While, as soon as the Buddhists are giving importance to the gendered notion of the body, they are shifting their focus elsewhere, this point might be debatable but cannot be totally left out of consideration. While, on the other hand, if I have to comment on the way of visualizing the body seeing through the societal eyes, all I can say is that, there are many big issues which are left in the dormant state and requires serious attention (Like, the issue of decreasing the sharp gap between the rich and the poor, especially within a country like India where the population is beyond control): the society should unite their minds and focus them on more constructive and meaningful issues than engaging themselves within trivial matters (like differentiations based on gender, caste, color etc.) which are nothing but creation of a few polluted minds having its massive influential impact on many.

On this very note I would like to conclude this piece by reminding the readers about the relevance of being human over and above anything else: I would like to say, the fact of being human transcends all limitations including the limitations created by the structure given the name of “body”. So being human and acting as one should be their main motto in life disregarding all created differences.

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