RELIGION AND THE BODY

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CHAPTER 11

The body in Theravāda Buddhist monasticism[1]

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I

I begin with a remarkable passage from the *Vinaya*, the canonical texts concerning monastic discipline. A monk has had sexual intercourse with his former wife, and thus caused the Buddha to promulgate the monastic rule forbidding sex: the Buddha says

> It would be better, foolish man, to put your male organ into the mouth of a terrible and poisonous snake than into a woman . . . It would be better, foolish man, to put it into a blazing, burning, red-hot charcoal pit than into a woman. Why? On account of *that*, foolish man, you might die, or suffer deathly agony, but that would not cause you to pass, at the breaking up of the body after death, to a lower rebirth, a bad destiny, to ruin, to hell. But on account of *this*, foolish man, [you may]. (*Vin* III 19[2])

Buddhist monastic training, like many other forms of Indian spiritual practice, notably those of *yoga*, seeks to control and finally eliminate many bodily drives and affects.[3] Sexual desire is perhaps the most common target, but there are others: according to another passage of the *Vinaya*, when the Buddha had taken his son Rāhula into the monkhood without the family's permission (Rāhula's opinion is not recorded) the Buddha's own father Suddhodhana complained, declaring that 'love for a son cuts into the skin, [goes right through the body and] lodges in the

[1] [Note added March 1994] This chapter was written in its original form in 1987, and slightly revised in 1990. I have not been able to take into account anything published since that time. If I were writing the piece now, it would be different in style but not in substance. In the interim I have written another article (Collins 1994), which might usefully be read in association with this one.

[2] References to Pali texts are to Pali Text Society editions; abbreviations are those used in the *Critical Pali Dictionary*.

[3] It is important to stress at the outset that this chapter concerns only certain aspects of the meditative life of monasticism, and of its social location. The Theravāda tradition, and still more Buddhism as a whole, contains many other and different attitudes to the body: temple paintings and sculptures, and much Buddhist poetry, for example, show a very fine aesthetic appreciation of physical beauty.

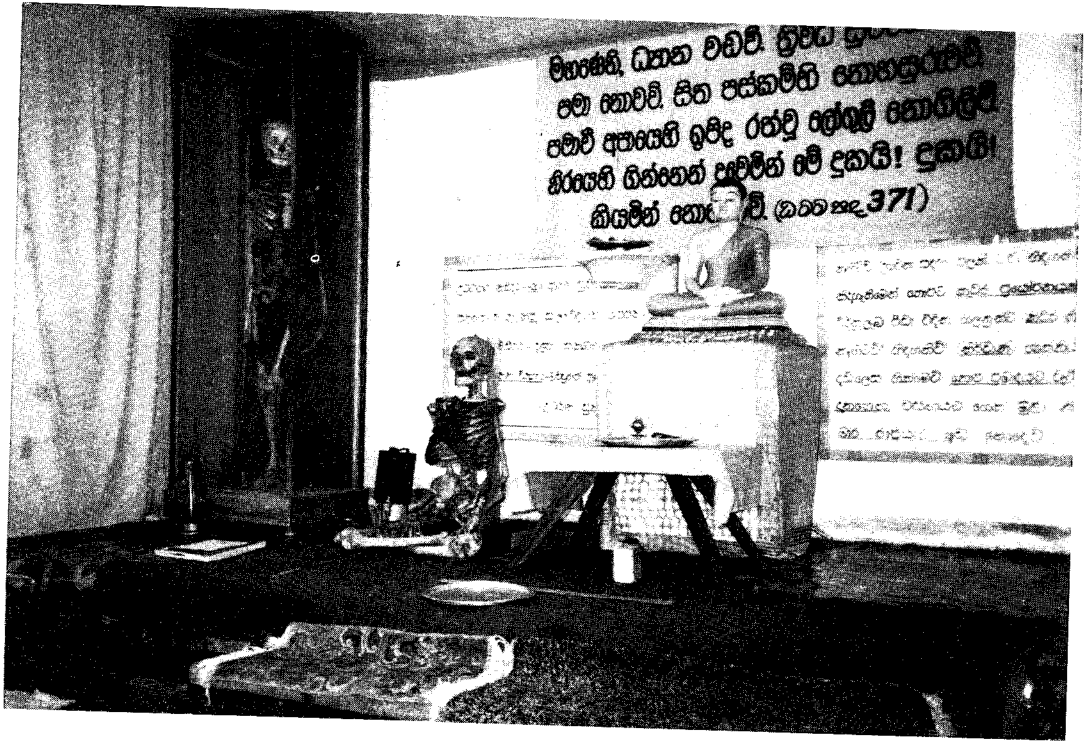

Plate 7 In the meditation room of a forest monastery in Mitirigala, Sri Lanka. Written on the saffron wall-hanging is a Sinhalese translation of *Dhammapada* 371, which urges monks to meditate.

marrow of one's bones' (*Vin* I 82–3). But even this love (or affection, *pema*), we read elsewhere (*S* III 7; cf. *A* II 213ff.), is to be rooted out from the body, as are the impulses of lust, desire, or 'thirst' (*taṇhā*, Sanskrit *tṛṣṇā*).

It is, I think, both uncontroversial and unoriginal to suggest that behind much – though by no means all – of the religions of mankind lie the aspirations to avoid death and to impose control and order on life. The human body, subject to the wayward imperatives of sexuality and doomed to decay and death, is implicated in both. Obviously different attitudes on these matters are possible: think, for example, of the common suggestion that some form of immortality, perhaps the only form available to individuals, comes precisely from the perpetuation of our biological inheritance in children and future generations. Moreover, physical self-reproduction is obviously a necessary collective task for any human society; as also is the organization of sexual life and relations to this end. But, although sexual activity is necessary to social existence, at the same time it presents problems: it seems reasonable to assume that the drives of sexuality contain in themselves no limitation of range, and so to infer that *any* ordered social and cultural life must demand in this respect, as in others, a minimum degree of asceticism and self-restraint. This is an issue which concerned two of the founding fathers of the sociological study of religion. Durkheim, as is well known, held that a general function of religious ascetics is to demonstrate, symbolically and in exemplary fashion, the self-control and self-denial necessarily incumbent on all members of society.[4] The need to control sexuality is part of a wider need to avoid chaos and give order to human life: and this comes into conflict with what Max Weber described, in a marvellous phrase, as 'the peculiar irrationality of the sexual act, which is ultimately and uniquely unsusceptible to rational organisation'.[5] I find it helpful to see Buddhist doctrine and monastic practice in terms of two of the senses in which Weber used the concept of rationality: it refers both to 'the kind of rationalization the systematic thinker performs on the image of the world: an increasing theoretical mastery of reality by means of increasingly precise and abstract concepts'; and also to 'the methodical attainment of a definitely given and practical end by means of an increasingly precise calculation of adequate means'. On the individual level, the ideal-typical Buddhist monk or nun lives a religious life in which the body, sex, and death are perceived to be immediately and inextricably related: they constitute the realm of desire, suffering, and rebirth from which release, *nirvāṇa*, is sought. But both in theory and in practice this self-perception can occur, as can the wider monastic life in which it is possible, only within the wider context provided by the continuing generations of lay society.

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[4] Durkheim 1915, 299–325; cf. Lukes 1973, 454–5.

[5] Weber 1963, 238. The following two citations are from Weber 1948, 293.

In what follows I shall outline certain forms of self-perception or 'body-image' as prescribed in texts of Buddhist meditation theory, which are intended to apply to any monastic practitioner, male or female. I shall then contrast them with forms of social behaviour and perception as prescribed in texts and revealed in modern ethnography: there is some complexity in detail here, since the Theravāda order of nuns died out in medieval times, and has not been revived. But there are women in modern Theravāda countries who do follow what from the outside we can call a monastic life, and whom I shall call, for brevity, 'nuns': describing and defining their social status is a more complex issue than I have space to address here, but it is not one which affects my argument.[6]

II

Conceptually, Buddhism is dualistic: the body comes to an end at death, whereas consciousness continues. This consciousness, constantly changing after death as during life, can be reborn (or 'stationed') in immaterial heavens: and in final *nirvāṇa* there is no physical existence at all.[7] (I leave aside the vexed question of whether or not this state involves consciousness in some form.) On the one hand, the dualism of Buddhist thought can and does lead to the kind of extreme attitude to the body for which we have the familiar label 'Manichaean': the body and its desires are rejected, and escape from it is the final religious goal. On the other hand, such an attitude clearly cannot provide a direct vehicle of religious motivation and aspiration for the members of a continuing, self-reproducing human society. In fact, the austerely transcendentalist and immaterialist conception of *nirvāṇa* is carried into ordinary material life in various ways: by texts, relics and statues, and – as I shall try to show – by the bodies of monks and nuns. In a much more than merely symbolic sense, these things embody in time and matter the eternal and immaterial Truth – they actualize, we might say, the ideology. Consider, for example, the idea of the Buddha's two bodies. (In Mahayāna traditions, we find three and sometimes more.) He has a *dhammakāya*, a 'Body of Truth', which is the truth of his (and all other Buddhas') Teachings, and the texts which contain them; and a *rūpakāya*, a 'Body of Form', which is both the physical human organism known as Siddhattha Gotama, and which came to an end at some time in the fifth or fourth centuries BC, and also the relics of that body (and of those of former Buddhas) preserved and enshrined in stupas, temples, and sometimes in statues of the Buddha. These latter, sometimes called *Buddharūpā*, 'Buddha-forms' or 'Buddha-bodies', like the relics of his historical body, immediately and vividly convey the presence of the Buddha and his saving Truth, and are – like the scriptural texts which embody 'the Body of Truth' – the objects of extensive ritual and other activity. These ideas of the various 'bodies' of the Buddha concern the first and second of what are called the 'Three Jewels': that is, the Buddha and his Teaching (*Dhamma*). It will be my aim here to show how it has also been embodied in the experience and action of actual Buddhists, those who constitute the third Jewel, the Monastic Community (*Saṃgha*).

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[6] In Buddhist monastic law, and in the civil law of their societies, they are counted as laywomen; where ordinary laymen and women take 5 Precepts, the third of which is to refrain from adultery, they – like certain older men – take eight or ten Precepts permanently, which turns the third into a vow of celibacy.

[7] See Collins 1982, chs 7 and 8.

III

The external life of the Buddhist Monastic Community is regulated by the Monastic Rule, the *Vinaya*. The prohibitions on sexual behaviour in the Rules are an intriguing subject of study in themselves (and not only because the things prohibited are described in very great detail!). The third of the five basic Buddhist moral precepts is to refrain from *kāmesu micchācāra*, literally 'wrong behaviour in regard to (sense-) desires'. For laypeople, 'wrong behaviour' means adultery: for monks and nuns, it means a graded hierarchy of prohibitions, prescribing various punishments for various offences, the worst being permanent expulsion from the monastic community for any form of sexual intercourse. These publications relate, of course, to the external behaviour of the individual: many of the rules regarding actual or potential sexual misconduct, as so frequently throughout the *Vinaya*, are said to have been promulgated because of the effect caused by the offending behaviour on society, and on the reputation of the monkhood within it. But Buddhist jurisprudence (in this respect unlike much of Hinduism and Jainism) also recognizes that responsibility cannot be ascribed for unintentional infringements of its laws. In a more general sense, the standard Buddhist analysis of *karma*, action and its results, always explains it as involving, and sometimes

simply as consisting in, intention. Moreover, this emphasis on intentic
reminds one that at the highest level of Buddhist spiritual training, whe
adherence to external prohibitions can be taken for granted, it is t
inner existence of desire in any mental form which is the focus
attention. Thus although sexual activity in dreams, for example, bei
unintentional, does not breach any article of monastic discipline (*Vin*
39, 112, 116), it is seen as evidence of residual desire, and thus as involvi
a karmic result (*Sp* 521, *Mp* III 317–18, *Vbh-a* 408). The enlightened sai
the *Arhat*, is specifically said to be so completely beyond passion an
desire as no longer to be subject to wet dreams (*Vin* I 295, *Kv* 163ff., 617–1
with *Kv-a ad loc.*).

In moving thus from the prohibitions on external behaviour to th
eradication of all inner manifestations of desire, we move from the real
of the monastic rules to that of spiritual training and meditation. Mo
forms of meditation take place in the simple sitting posture familiar to a
of us in the West nowadays; certain forms of 'mindfulness' training ca
also take place while walking methodically to and fro, often on a speciall
constructed meditation walkway (*caṅkama*). Advanced practitioners a
said to remain mindful and aware, and in that sense to meditate, in a
the 'four postures', standing, sitting, lying, and moving, both awake an
asleep. Attitudes to the body can be traced both in general evaluatio
and comparisons applied to it, and in specific forms of meditation.

First, on the general level, the following two stories from the canonic
collection of poems by nuns may suffice to give the idea. When th
parents of the future nun Sumedhā tried to persuade her to accep
marriage to 'handsome (*abhirūpo*) King Anīkaratta', part of her reply wa

> Why should I cling to this foul body, impure, smelling of urine, a fright
> water-bag of corpses, always flowing, full of impure things? . . . A body
> repulsive, smeared with flesh and blood, food for worms, vultures and [othe
> birds . . . The body is soon carried out to the cemetery, devoid of consciousnes
> it is thrown away like a log by disgusted relatives. Having thrown it away in th
> cemetery as food for others, one's own mother and father wash themselve
> disgusted; how much more do common people? (*Thī* 466–9[8])

The second and even more drastic episode concerns the nun Subhā (th
name means 'beautiful' or 'pure', and its opposite, *asubha*, is used as
technical term in meditation for the meditations on the 'foul' o
'repulsive' parts of the body and corpses to which I will turn presently)
She is pursued in a wood by a young man, who attempts to seduce her

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[8] The translation is from Norman 1971, 46.

he is particularly struck by the beauty of her eyes, which he compares to blue lotuses and to those of a celestial goddess. She explains to him that 'An eye is like a little ball set in a hollow, with a bubble in the middle and full of tears; eye-secretions occur in it; an eye consists in various [different] parts rolled together in a ball'; she then wrenches one of her eyes out and gives it to him. Not surprisingly, the text tells us that 'straightaway his passion ceased, and he begged her pardon'. She goes to the Buddha and he restores her sight (*Thī* 366–99).[9]

In one famous text (*S* II 94–5), the Buddha says that if one is looking for something permanent and lasting, one would do better to try the body, which lasts up to a hundred years, than the mind, which changes every moment. None the less, perception of the body's impermanence is one side of the overwhelmingly negative evaluation of it in meditative reflexion, the other being its impurity. The body is compared, amongst many other things, to an abscess (*S* IV 83), an anthill (*M* I 144), a ball of foam (which is quickly rubbed away) (*S* III 142), a pot (which as standardly in all Indian thought represents that which is created and necessarily destroyed sooner or later) (*Dhp* 40), a hospital (in which consciousness lies like an invalid) (*Vism* 478), and a prison (*Vism* 479). In the great compendium of doctrine and meditation compiled by Buddhaghosa in the fifth century AD, the *Path of Purification* (*Visuddhimagga* 500) it is quite straightforwardly proposed as an argument for the undesirability of rebirth, that to be born again will involve spending nine months in a womb, itself disgusting and 'malodorous' as all parts of the body, situated next to the intestines, bowel, bladder, etc.; and then, even worse, birth itself involves passing through the vaginal passage, covered in blood and other horrific substances. How could anyone possibly want *that*?!

Such reflections on the impermanence and impurity of the body are said to apply equally to monks and nuns. If there is any real difference between the genders in this matter, it is that monks are frequently said to regard the female body as dangerously desirable; this sentiment is part of the outright misogyny which, unfortunately, is to be found in a certain range of Buddhist literature. Nuns, on the contrary, are not said to have reflected, at least overtly, on the corresponding attractiveness of men;[10] but in one place, at least, the Buddha says that for women as for men nothing can take hold of one's mind (or 'obsess the heart') as the bodily appearance, voice, scent, taste, and touch of the opposite sex (*A* I 1–2). In the detailed prescriptions for meditation on loving-kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy, monks and nuns are both recommended not to begin by taking a member of the opposite sex as their object, for obvious reasons (*Vism* 296, 314, 316; cp. 184).

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[9] For a complete translation see Norman 1971, 38–46.

[10] See Lang 1986, who makes this point in a comparison of the *Thera-* and *Therīgāthā*. In my opinion, the argument in Lang's paper is very much overstated, since only this difference between the genders is to be found; and unfortunate though it may be, the difference is hardly one confined to Buddhist texts.

To turn to the second and more specific area of meditation: those kinds concerned with the body, particularly the more extravagantly described impurities, are not thought to be topics suitable for everyone, but are best for those of greedy and/or intelligent temperaments. Only mindfulness of death and the development of loving-kindness are thought to be 'generally useful'. But it is indicative of the ambiguous status of the more directly ascetic attitudes in Buddhism (an ambiguity to which I shall return) that Buddhaghosa does record a varying opinion: 'some say perception of foulness [in corpses], too [is suitable for everyone]' (*Vism* 97). Indeed, one canonical passage extolling the virtues of 'mindfulness of the body' goes so far as to say that 'those who do not practise [it] do not enjoy the deathless' (*A* I 45). There are a number of different ways in which the meditations on the body are collected; the following list is synthesized from a number of canonical and commentarial texts.[11]

Meditations on the body

1. Mindfulness of in- and out-breathing.
2. Mindfulness of the four modes of deportment (standing, sitting, lying, moving).
3. Mindfulness consisting in full awareness (of where attention is directed, of physical position and movement, eating, washing, dressing, etc.).
4. Reflection on the four material elements: earth/solidity, water/fluidity, fire/heat, air/movement.
5. Reflection on the repulsiveness of food.
6. Reflection on the repulsiveness of the body, in its 31 parts: head-hairs, body-hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow, kidney, heart, liver, midriff, spleen, lights, bowels, entrails, gorge, dung, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, spittle, snot,

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[11] These are: the *Kāyagatāsati Sutta* (M III 88ff.), *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (M I 55ff.), *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (D II 290ff.) (with their commentaries), *Khuddakapāṭha* III with *Paramatthajotikā* I 37–75, *Visuddhimagga* chs. 6, 8, 11.

oil-of-the-joints, and brain-in-the-head.
7. Perception of foulness/Cemetery Meditations:

Series 1 – gradual decomposition of a corpse, in nine stages:
swollen and festering, a few days old
pecked at by crows, vultures, dogs and worms
a skeleton, with pieces of flesh and blood, held in by tendons
a blood-smeared skeleton without flesh, held in by tendons
a skeleton without flesh or blood, held in by tendons
bones scattered in all directions
bones coloured white like a conch
bones more than a year old, heaped together
bones gone rotten and reduced to dust

Series 2 – ten varieties of dead body:
corpses bloated, livid, festering, cut-up, gnawed, scattered, hacked and scattered, bleeding, worm-infested, and a skeleton.

In nos. 1–3, the mindfulness of breathing, of the modes of deportment and full awareness, attention is constantly given to how the body 'is of a nature to arise and pass away'; in no. 4, the reflection on the four material elements, the mediator is to compare himself to a butcher, cutting up the carcase of a cow and dividing it into portions; in no. 5, the perception of the repulsiveness of food (there are four types of 'food', only one of which is physical, to which I refer here), elaborate attention is paid to the precise details of the transformations of food in the processes of eating, digestion, and excretion, and the food thus eaten and transformed is to be regarded merely as a necessary evil for the maintenance of the body during the monk's 'crossing over suffering': it is to be viewed with as much distaste, one reads, as that with which parents, lost in a wilderness, would regard eating the flesh of their only child, as a necessary evil which allows them to survive and escape (*S* II 98–9, cited *Vism* 347).

In no. 6, the perception of the repulsiveness of the body, extended accounts are given for each of the thirty-two parts, full of lingering attention to detail, stressing in each case the 'malodorousness' of the phenomena, and using some striking similies. I will allow myself to mention only a few. Uneven teeth are like a row of old chairs in a waiting room; the heart, in someone of speculative temperament, is the colour of lentil soup; snot is an 'impurity that trickles out from the brain'; the stomach is home for thirty-two families of worms, for whom it provides at once 'maternity home, toilet, hospital and burial ground', and it is like a bowl in which food lies like dog's vomit; and the brain is like a lump of dough in an old gourd rind, the colour of milk turned sour but not yet become curds. In all of these cases, apart from reflecting on the inherent repulsiveness of it all, the meditator is to use the comparisons to reflect that just as, for example, dough in a gourd rind is not conscious of itself as being there, but simply exists in physical juxtaposition, so too the brain is not conscious of being in the skull. In the cemetery meditations, no. 7, the meditator is to reflect in the case of each corpse or skeleton 'this [my own] body is of the same nature as that, will become like that, cannot avoid [becoming like] that'.

IV

No doubt much of this could be paralleled from *memento mori* writings from many other traditions, particularly from the Christian Middle Ages. Such sentiments in Buddhism are to be seen against the background of the pan-Indian concern with purity and pollution, where both the permanent social status and the temporary condition of the individual are threatened by what anthropologists often describe as *irruptions biologiques*. These biological assaults on the refuge of civilized life include birth, menstruation, excretion, sexual fluids, death, and a variety of aspects of the cooking and eating of food. The whole Indian social system of caste, as is well known, revolves around rules of marriage and commensality based on purity and impurity of this nature.[12] While the Buddha denied that caste had any bearing on religious matters (he did not, as is sometimes claimed, reject caste completely), it seems obvious that this cultural pattern is preserved in the Buddhist attitudes to the body so far described. In other forms of Indian religion, both Hindu and Jain, the connection between the body, desire, and death can lead to extreme forms of physical asceticism: in Buddhist texts such practices always appear as extreme and fruitless forms of self-mortification, of the kind which the Buddha tried out to its limits before discovering his 'Middle Way'.

The story will be familiar to most people: the Buddha's early life was spent in an extravagant luxury unusual even for the royal family into which he was born. At the age of 29, after seeing a sick man, an old man, a corpse, and an holy man (who, unlike the young prince, seemed to have understood the meaning of the other three 'sights'), he embarked on a life of asceticism. His self-mortification was so fierce that he became extremely thin, with his ribs showing through his skin (an image frequently represented in iconography). Finding, however, that this brought no answer to the riddles of life, suffering, and death, he began to eat again in moderation, and subsequently became enlightened. His First Sermon presents the Truth he awakened to, and begins by setting out the two extremes between which his Path was the 'Middle Way': there is 'devotion to indulgence of pleasure in the objects of sense' (i.e. the ordinary life of family and household) which is 'inferior, low, vulgar, ignoble and leads to no good'; and there is 'devotion to self-torment' (i.e. the life of self-mortificatory asceticism) which is 'painful, ignoble, and leads to no good' (*Vin* I 10). There are many places in the canonical texts where this 'self-torment' is criticized; one evocative example of the ideal Buddhist attitude is provided by the monastic rule against murder and suicide. The story goes that some monks had practised the Cemetery Meditations and had become disgusted with their own bodies; they were ashamed of them, we are told, in the same way that young persons proud of their appearance might be ashamed of a dead dog hanging round their neck. They then either committed suicide or got others to kill them. The Buddha condemned their actions, promulgated the rule, and went on to include under it any form of inciting or assisting another person to commit suicide (as an offence punishable by permanent expulsion from the monastic Order) (*Vin* III 68–71).[13]

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[12] The classic account is Dumont 1980.

This emphasis on moderation leads away from what might seem the excesses of the meditations on the body. From this point of view, food is to be taken in moderate amounts, to maintain the body in a condition appropriate for comfortable practice of meditation. Standard comparisons used here compare a monk's eating to a chariot-driver maintaining his vehicle (e.g. *M* I 10), or to a bird taking its two wings with it as it flies (the monk's wings being his robes and food-in-moderation; e.g. *D* I 71). Indeed, in many contexts the comfort and ease of the monastic life are stressed. A good example is the Discourse on the Advantages of the Monastic Life (*Sāmaññaphala-sutta*). Progress through the stages of meditation brings states of increasingly refined 'joy and ease born of detachment, concentration, and purification'; the meditator then 'pervades, drenches, permeates and suffuses his body with [three states], and there is nowhere at all throughout his entire body which is not suffused with them'. This bodily joy, ease, and purification is compared to a ball of lather saturated with perfumed soap powder, a deep pool suffused with the cooling waters of an underground spring, lotus flowers growing in water permeated by its moisture, and a person dressed in clean white clothes (*D* I 73–6).

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[13] Suicide is not forbidden, however, to enlightened saints under certain specific circumstances; see Wiltshire 1983.

In a similar vein, and in contrast with the emphasis on the 'malodorousness' of the body described earlier, in the *Path of Purification* Buddhaghosa writes that 'the bodily perfume of virtuous monks' brings pleasure to the gods. If this is so, he asks 'what of the perfume of his virtue? [This] is more perfect by far than all the other perfumes in the world, because the perfume virtue gives is borne unchecked in all directions' (*Vism* 58). As we shall see, this metaphor has a social dimension; here I adduce it to parallel the physical pleasure very frequently celebrated as a product of Buddhist meditation (at least for those who have advanced some way with it). This pleasure is referred to as *diṭṭhadhamma-sukhavihāra*, 'dwelling happily in this life', and *phāsuvihāra*, 'comfortable living'. Those with the profoundest experience of meditation may be called 'body-witnesses' (e.g. *D* III 105), who have 'touched with the body' not only various immaterial realms of the cosmos, but also 'the deathless' – that is, *nirvāṇa* (e.g. *M* I 477, *A* II 87, III 356, *It* 46, 62, *Pp* 11, 14).[14] Those who are not so far advanced, but who can look forward to rebirth in one of the heavens will find there just this kind of bliss; indeed, different meditative levels are explicitly correlated with various heavens, and dying in such a state allows the physical happiness of meditative attainment to continue celestially.[15] The meditations called 'Divine Abidings' (loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity) are meant literally to produce such heavenly happiness. Among the results of successful practice of them are that the practitioner 'sleeps happily, wakes happily, and dreams no evil dreams . . . is not affected by fire and poison and weapons . . . the expression on his face is serene, he dies unconfused and . . . is reborn in the Brahma-world [one of the heavens]' (e.g. *A* V 352). Certainly anyone who has seen Buddhist monks, particularly in a Buddhist country, can confirm the striking appearance of good health and contentment which they very frequently display. (Whether they are reborn in heaven is not open to such empirical confirmation.)

A famous Buddhist text from around the beginning of the modern era, the *Questions of King Milinda*, which purports to record a debate between a Bactrian-Greek king and an Indian Buddhist monk, here as so often crystallizes the issue: the king asks 'is the body dear to those who have gone forth [to the monastic Order]?' The monk Nāgasena replies that it is not. 'Then why,' replies the king 'do you treasure it and foster it?' The monk answers by likening the body to a wound received in battle, which is anointed and bandaged, so that it might heal. Similarly, although the body is 'not dear' to monks, he says, they protect it as a means of promoting the holy life. He then cites some verses comparing the body to an abscess with nine holes, in the style sketched earlier (*Mil* 73–4). Later I shall try to produce an account, from the point of view of an outside interpreter, which will parallel exactly the structure of this Buddhist explanation. That is, I shall try to show that the positive nurturing of the body is complementary rather than opposed to the negative attitudes of the body-meditations. None the less, it is fairly obvious that the two approaches stand in potential conflict. One place where this conflict can be seen to emerge within Buddhism is in connection with a set of ascetic practices called the *dhutaṅgas*.[16] One of these, no. 13, is clearly a form of physical self-mortification familiar from other Indian traditions; another, no. 11, is presumably a prerequisite of the 'Perception of Foulness' meditations sketched earlier. But, although they receive a whole chapter in the *Path of Purification* (as does the Perception of Foulness), and although the first, wearing rag robes seems to have become the name of a monastic faction in ancient and medieval Ceylon, it also seems clear that they have had an ambiguous history in Buddhism, one which continues today. The list of thirteen is not found in the canonical texts, and the more extravagant practices are certainly marginal and unemphasized. There are passages where the list seems to be condemned.[17] In modern Sri Lanka and Thailand, as Michael Carrithers and Jane Bunnag have recorded, although the idea (and practice) of such heroic supererogatory asceticism is often accorded great popular acclaim, in the longer term the cleanliness and decorum expected of monks becomes the greater demand. As Bunnag says,[18] such '*dhutaṅga* monks [who in Thailand are most noted for their wandering life style] are frequently regarded as being on a par with tramps, beggars and other kinds of social derelicts'. A similar picture can be seen in regard to the movements of women in modern Buddhist countries who lead, to varying degrees, an ascetic or meditative life style. There seem for a long time to have been poor women living near temples and holy places, dressed in white and living on charity: but they have not been accorded high status, and so the new movements of 'nuns' have taken specific care to differentiate themselves from such 'beggars'. Correct physical decorum is a recognized requirement of their public life.[19]

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[14] It is perhaps worth remarking that the commentaries to these and other such passages usually gloss *kāya* not in its normal sense of '(physical) body', but as *nāma-kāya*, 'mental body'.

[15] See, for example, the table given in Collins 1982, 217.

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[16] These are: 1. wearing rag robes; 2. using only three robes; 3. begging alms; 4. not omitting any house when begging; 5. eating once a day; 6. eating only from the bowl; 7. not taking second helpings; 8. living in the forest; 9. living at the foot of a tree; 10. living in the open air; 11. living in a cemetery; 12. being satisfied with whatever dwelling one receives; 13. sleeping in a sitting position and never lying down.

[17] See Carrithers 1983, 62–2, etc.

[18] 1973, 54.

Thus, although the inner meditative reflection of a monk or nun emphasizes the body's impurity and impermanence, their social position also requires what one might call 'a spotless performance'. The metaphor of 'the perfume of virtue' referred to earlier is a term used both in canonical and later texts (*A* I 225–6, *Dhp* 54, *Dhp-a* I 422), and in modern Sinhalese usage[20] for the social reputation of the well-behaved monk or nun, a reputation gained and maintained through carefully composed deportment, and through social interaction where they are treated as revered superiors. The good monk is depicted thus: 'having entered a house, or gone into the street, he goes with downcast eyes, looking forward the length of a plough yoke, restrained, not looking [at anything around him]' (*Nidd* I 474, *Vism* 19).[21]

This emphasis on decorum and social presentation carries over into the texts dealing with monastic virtue. Of the 227 Vinaya rules for monks, and 311 for nuns, 75 are 'Training Rules', solely concerned with matters of dress, deportment, and etiquette; and in the rest of the list 'rules on [clothing] are much more numerous than rules about lodgings or food'.[22] In Buddhaghosa's theoretical treatment of morality (*sīla*) these concerns are equally prominent.[23] A pervasive image in his discussion has it that a monk should keep his *sīla* unstained and untorn; as Gombrich puts it, '*sīla* is envisaged as a kind of protective cloak in which the monk is to remain wrapped, a cloak of decorum'. Gombrich shows how the theoretical emphasis on intention in the Buddhist understanding of *karma* is, in practice, subject to 'an overwhelming demand for empirical evidence of a monk's internal state'.[24] I mentioned earlier the Buddhist emphasis on intention, and the fact that Buddhist jurisprudence requires that an act be committed consciously for it to be judged as an offence; but it would be absurd, on the other hand, to hold that an intention to commit murder, for example, is as bad as an actual murder. Accordingly, Buddhist jurisprudence (as opposed to psychological analysis) requires the external act (*As* 97; *cf. Sp* 439, *Kkh* 30).

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[19] See Nissan 1984, 37–8, Bloss 1987, 22.

[20] M. B. Carrithers, personal communication. Compare the medieval *Saddhamma-sangaha* (72), which tells us that the breath of monks who preach, and of those who assent to sermons in the words 'sādhu, sādhu' is sweet-smelling.

[21] See Carrithers 1983, 56–8 for a fine description and discussion of this 'good conduct'.

[22] Wijayaratna 1990. [23] See Keown 1983. [24] 1984, citations from 93, 100.

In the texts, good and bad conduct, purity and impurity, etc., are regularly said to occur through body, speech, and mind; the rules of morality (*sīla*) and the Monastic Code (*vinaya*) are said to govern body and speech only: obviously, mental life cannot be directly disciplined by external rules (*Sp* 18–9). But, in fact, almost always when texts use this tripartite division, virtue and vice are said to operate in the three places together. Thus the usual assumption is that the internal mental condition of a monk or nun can be inferred from his or her physical and verbal behaviour, since it is the latter which express the former – to themselves as much as to anyone else. The empirical evidence for the state of virtue is well described in the following definition of 'proper conduct' (*ācāra*) in the *Path of Purification* (*Vism* 19): the monk is

> respectful, deferential, possessed of conscience and shame, wears his inner robe properly, wears his upper robe properly, his manner inspires confidence whether in moving forwards or backwards, looking ahead or aside, bending or stretching, his eyes are downcast, he has a [good] deportment, he guards the doors of his sense-faculties, knows the right measure in eating, is devoted to wakefulness, possesses mindfulness and full-wareness, wants little, is contented, is strenuous, is a careful observer of good behaviour, and treats the teachers with respect.

Much of this phraseology is the same as that used in elucidating the second and third sections of the meditations on the body discussed earlier: from the present perspective, I suggest that such meditation is a form of private self-control and self-supervision required by the expected public body-image.

V

In the preceding two sections of this chapter I have tried to juxtapose the *deconstruction* and rejection of the body in meditative analysis with the *construction* of it in social behaviour as a unified and valued public object. In concluding, I shall now try to show that these two emphases are not mutually contradictory, but complementary. This can be described on both the individual (psychological) and communal (economic) levels. My argument here will be comparative: I shall quote from three scholars writing on the early and medieval periods of Christian monasticism, and try to show that what they say can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to the Buddhist case.[25]

First, then, on the individual level: earlier, in discussing sexual prohibitions, I moved from the external rules prohibiting forms of behaviour to the internal conquest of desire, manifested in the absence of wet dreams. In a study of some texts by the fourth century Latin writer John Cassian, Michel Foucault remarks similarly how the discussion of the 'deadly sin' of fornication is hardly at all concerned with external actions, either with others or alone. Rather, the focus of interest is the internal 'battle for chastity' in the mind, in both waking and sleeping states. This battle is waged gradually, requiring a constant vigilance over thought, imagination, and impulse, until the final stage is reached, where (as a blessing of grace and not an attainment of effort) even 'involuntary nocturnal pollutions' cease. This process, Foucault asserts, is best described *not* as 'the internalization of a whole list of forbidden things, merely substituting the prohibition of the intention for that of the act itself'; rather, it is 'the opening up of an area', 'a process of "subjectivization"' which is quite different from, and much more than, a simple 'sexual ethic based on physical self-control'.[26] In a Buddhist canonical text, the elderly monk Bakkula, who has been in the robes for 80 years, is asked by a non-Buddhist ascetic how many times during that time he has had sexual intercourse. Bakkula tells him that this is an inappropriate question; better to ask how many times have ideas or images of desire (*kāma-saññā*) arisen in his mind; when the ascetic asks this question, he replies that he is not aware of this ever having happened (*M* III 125). An enlightened monk called Dabba Mallaputta was wrongly accused of having had sexual intercourse on a number of occasions; on being asked by the Buddha whether it was true, he replied each time that he was not aware of having had intercourse in a dream, leave alone while awake (*Vin* II 78, etc.). The Buddha elsewhere characterizes the 'highest brahmin' of old as having nothing to do with sex 'even in dreams' (*Sn* 293).

I suggest that the *Vinaya* rules, the meditations on the body, and the effort to eradicate desire for material and sexual existence, serve to create in the body of the Buddhist monastic practitioner the space for an individualized or 'subjectivized' analysis. In so far as salvation is conceived as a spiritual state manifested in both mind and body, the attempt wholly to inhibit (or perhaps, exorcise) all sexual drives and thoughts, and not merely to prevent overt sexual activity, necessarily induces psychic conflict, a conflict which opens up the interior terrain for which texts and doctrines provide the map. In this private zone of operations the de-sexualized, and thus in one sense de-socialized individual can embody in imagination the immateriality posited in the doctrines of Buddhism, and in this way 'touch the deathless with the body'.

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[25] In what follows I shall be speaking at a level of considerable abstractive generality, which would certainly need extensive ethnographic correction and elaboration if it were taken to be a descriptive as well as an analytic account. For example, only a small minority of monks or nuns ever meditate to any significant level, so my remarks can only be taken as referring to ideal types: but then, much of the social and psychological perception I shall be sketching *itself* makes use of ideal types.

[26] Foucault 1985, 24–5.

This kind of socio-religious theatre (a term, I stress, which I do *not* mean to be either pejorative or reductivist) is necessarily more than a soliloquy, even if the leading players are in one sense radically individualized. For the existence of monks and nuns 'outside society', as that wholly misleading phrase has it, is made possible only by the support, material and behavioural, of the laity (the chorus, perhaps). This leads me to the second comparative quotation, and to begin to move from the individual to communal levels. Peter Brown, writing recently about the same texts of John Cassian as was Foucault, but in relation to the Desert Fathers whose wisdom Cassian is retelling, discusses the 'perfect "purity of heart"' granted by God to a few saints:

> They had been freed from sexual fantasies in dreams associated with nocturnal emissions . . . The sexuality of the emission created a disjunction between [the monk's] public, daylight self and a last oasis of incommunicable, privatized experience. When such dreams ceased, the last fissure between the private person and his fellows could be assumed to have closed . . . The total expropriation associated with the life of the desert had begun, as in the case of Antony, with the surrender of private wealth. It ended with the surrender of the last traces of sexual fantasy. This was a sure symptom, in Cassian's mind, and in that of his Egyptian informants, that the dispersal of the last, most hidden treasures of the private will had taken place . . . In the desert tradition, the body had been allowed to become the discreet mentor of the proud soul . . . The rhythms of the body itself, and, with the body, his concrete social relations determined the life of the monk: his continued economic dependence on the settled world for food, the hard school of day-to-day collaboration with his fellow ascetics in shared rhythms of labor and mutual exhortations in the monasteries slowly changed his personality. The material conditions of the monk's life were held capable of altering the consciousness itself.[27]

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[27] Brown 1988, 231–2, 237.

In the Buddhist case, the concrete social relations of importance to 'the rhythms of the body' are those I have outlined which make the monk or nun a visibly clean, pure, and decorous object. It is only in an ideological sense that they can be said to 'leave society'. From the interpretative point of view, a monastic life exchanges one social position for another: that is, belonging not to a natural family but to 'the lineage of the Buddha'. From this social position monastics can be construed, by themselves and others, in both attitude and behaviour, as independent and autonomous agents; the orientation towards a purely personal and immaterial goal both differentiates them from the laity, bound up in networks of material concern, and creates the actual behavioural space in which the 'subjectivized' interiority inculcated by meditative practices can take place.

But the communal dimension of the monastic's 'de-socialized' body is not restricted to the provision of a stage on which the individual drama of salvation is played out. Here we come to my third and last comparative quotation, and to a topic almost always underrated in the study of religions: money, or, in a pre-monetary economy, the ownership of property. Jack Goody, writing of the medieval Christian Church, has claimed that

> the maintenance of the church as an organisation, the church as a corporation with its specialised priesthood, the church of literate societies rather than the less substantial church of Durkheimian sociology, such an organisation requires its own property. To maintain a complex hierarchy of priests requires a large endowment . . . [T]he major means by which church property in Europe became as substantial as it did was probably by gift and by inheritance.[28]

In Buddhist history, property has not usually been inherited from lay owners, but resources and land have regularly been donated by laity: kings, for example, frequently gave whole villages to monasteries and to eminent monks (though not equally often, perhaps, to nuns). Equally, I would not wish to follow Goody in attempting to derive the rules of marriage and family organization in Buddhist countries from the needs and directives of the church, as he has done for the history of Europe.[29] But the general point is simple and clear: any social institution such as the Buddhist monkhood, which cannot reproduce itself from within, must have not only a regular influx of new members from the circumambient society, but also a real and continuing existence 'outside society' – guaranteed by economic independence – if it is not to become simply an aspect or phase of the productive and reproductive cycles of ordinary life. (In practice throughout South and Southeast Asia there have always been factors tending towards just this.) Monks and nuns as 'sons and daughters of the Buddha' may be, as the texts say, the heirs to his spiritual wealth, but they also need a material inheritance if there is to be independent continuity in such a non-reproductive 'family'. In this perspective, the ascetic celibacy of monasticism, inculcated and underlined by meditations on the body, is one attempt to guarantee that it will not be drawn back into just those kinship-based social and property relations against whose interrelated and repetitive patterns the goal of liberation is defined. Correspondingly, the composed, pure, and autonomous body of the monk or nun presented in social life instantiates for lay supporters the immediate existence of that sacred, immaterial, and undying Truth which their own bodily concerns make impossibly distant from them, and with which they can thus be connected by their material support of its human embodiments.

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[28] Goody 1976, 46. [29] See Goody 1983.

Thus the body in Theravāda Buddhism may be seen, both individually and socially, as one central part of the basis in lived experience from which the metaphors of rebirth (*saṃsāra*) and immaterial release (*nirvāṇa*) take flight. Or, as a canonical text has it (*S* I 62): 'in this fathom-long carcase, with its perception and reflection, there is the world, the arising and cessation of the world, and the way leading to the cessation of the world'.

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