

The Gross Body Is the Result of *Karma*

Sundari (Isabella Viglietti)

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Kat: I have a question for you. In one of Ramji's books, I read that the physical body we are given is specifically designed for the lessons we need to learn in this life. I'd like to learn more about this. Is this also in the *Vedas*?

Sundari: Vedanta does not emphasize the importance of the gross body, because it is a function of the subtle body. However, it is very important to understand what it is and to have correct knowledge on how to take care of it. Below is a fairly comprehensive teaching on the gross body, which is dealt with in much more detail in my forthcoming books on the *gunas* and lifestyle.

As you have probably read and understood, the body is just meat, it is inert, a counter across which we transact with our environment, i.e. experience. The body does not experience directly, because it is not conscious, although consciousness pervades every atom, so it appears to be conscious and to experience. The gross body is called the *sthula sharira* in Sanskrit; it refers to the five elements because it is made up of them and sustained by them. It is basically just food. It is a means for consciousness to have contact with objects and to experience pleasure and pain. The gross body and all its (apparently) experiences are objects known to you and exist as thoughts in the subtle body, and the subtle body is a thought appearing in you.

In deep sleep or when your attention is on a thought, a feeling or an experience that does not involve the body, the gross body does not exist for you. The body only exists for us in the waking state when we pay attention to it, such as a fear-thought about ill health or pain, hunger, frustrated desire sexual or otherwise, pleasure such as good sex or any satiated desire. But we feel good or bad in the body because of the thoughts that occur in the mind (subtle body); thoughts do not occur in the body. Although the body can seem to hold cellular memory of a good or bad experience, which become positive or negative *vasanas/samskaras*.

These *vasanas* can be very difficult to eradicate, as they create "holding pain patterns" in the body. Many of the studies done on pain reveal that the body can be trained to deal with pain (which becomes an addiction) and overcome it through mind control or meditation, i.e. not giving in to the pain through painkillers or other palliative substances but working at the source of the pain, the mind/subtle body.

Both the subtle and the gross bodies are the results of "good or bad" *karma* for the *jiva*. It is auspicious to be born with a human body, and a body that is strong and healthy. Although the body depends on the mind and not the other way around, a healthy body which is well taken care of nonetheless makes it easier for the mind to be peaceful. A body sick or in pain affects the subtle body, making peace of mind (*sattva*) very difficult.

The subtle body pervades the gross body, except for the fingernails and hair, which is why you can cut them without feeling anything. However, even though the gross body does not pervade the subtle body, it can affect it. For example, if the gross body gets sick, depressed, has a headache or an unhealthy lifestyle, it can take

actions to remedy this, which will affect the subtle body, making it dull (*tamasic*), extroverted (*rajasic*) or clear, calm and peaceful (*sattvic*).

The subtle body has a similar relationship to the gross body as consciousness has to *mithya* (the apparent reality). There is an interdependence from the *jiva's* perspective, but not from consciousness's point of view, because they exist in different orders of reality: The subtle body, which contains the gross body, is *mithya*, or apparently real (not always present and always changing), and consciousness is *satya*, real (ever-present and unchanging).

The gross body is "within" the subtle body, and the subtle body is "within" consciousness (you). There is no way to understand this or discriminate consciousness from the objects that appear in you unless you step out of *Maya* with Self-knowledge, i.e. discriminate between *satya* and *mithya*.

When the body experiences chronic pain, there is no point denying it. The point of understanding that nothing in the *mithya* world is real is not denial. Denial will not make the pain go away. Only knowledge, the ability to discriminate the Self from the objects that arise in you, will negate physical or mental pain. If the body is in pain, you are not in pain and you are not the pain. You are the knower of the pain. You cannot be what you know. You observe the body in pain and do what is necessary to heal it, like *guna* management or mind control, the appropriate medication, diet, exercise, etc.

Some of us must live with chronic pain, it's just part of our *prarabdha karma*. I have an old neck injury from a car accident in my youth which causes almost constant pain. I use *sattva* to manage the *rajas* to great effect, most of the time. Sometimes *sattva* is not possible, as the *rajas* is too strong, but *rajas* is an object known to me, consciousness. Other than taking good care of our health, there is nothing to be done about this kind of *karma* besides living with it as the Self, with the *karma yoga* attitude and not making an identity out of it.

The *karma* comes to the subtle body, which a *jnani* knows belongs to *Isvara*. The *dharma* field, or Total Mind (*Isvara srsti*), remains unchanged if one is "enlightened" or not, which means *prarabdha karma* will play out according to the laws that govern the *dharma* field, i.e. the *gunas*. *Prarabdha karma* is the momentum of past actions that fructify as your life experiences. But when *moksa* has obtained, you are *trigunatatita*, beyond the *gunas*, so the mind does not condition to them.

As health or illness is a result of *karma*, if we superimpose what belongs to *Isvara* onto the individual, or *jiva*, then we are thinking as a person, not as consciousness. This means that you think the *karma* comes to you, and therefore the suffering belongs to you, because you are identified with it. If you know that you are consciousness, you see the suffering taking place in the mind (subtle body). So you are free of the suffering, both mental and physical.

Karma is a difficult topic and it depends on who you think you are. *Karma* is real if you think it is real; it is often almost impossible to understand, because the one trying to understand it is in the *dharma/karma* field and part of the field. It is trying to understand the mind of *Isvara* as a *jiva*. It cannot be done. Krishna says in the *Bhagavad Gita*: "On the topic of *karma*, even sages are perplexed." There is no *karma* for an enlightened person (*jnani*). The individual, or *jiva* identified as a *jiva*, accumulates *karma* that seems to come to the body-mind-sense complex. But when *moksa* happens, the *karma* burns up. However, we must look at what "burning up"

actually means. *Karma* does not burn up for consciousness, as there is no *karma* for it, because nothing ever happened. It is not a doer. *Karma* is not real, from the perspective of consciousness.

But the *jiva* lives in *mithya* and must live with the laws that govern the Field of Existence. *Karma* is just an idea in the subtle body that causes suffering. So “burning up” *karma* happens when the *jiva* is no longer identified with the subtle body and knows that it is consciousness. This does not mean that the *karma* does not still play out for the *jiva*. Remember, the body belongs to *Isvara*: it is *prakriti*, matter, made up of the five elements. For more on the grossification of matter, read up on the *panchikarana* teaching in *Panchadasi*. The momentum of past actions, *prarabdha karma*, which is *Isvara* delivering the fruits of *jiva*’s actions, plays out as long as the *jiva* is alive. When *prarabdha karma* is finished, the body dies.

Karma “burns up” for the subtle body because it is only ever “in” the subtle body, not the physical body or the Self. Because the body is just meat and inert, there is no *karma* for it either. It seems to take place in the physical body because the physical body is “attached” to the subtle body. Because *Isvara* is consciousness, from its point of view (causal body) there is no *karma*. *Isvara* is called *karma phala datta*, which means “the one who delivers the fruits of the action,” which implies that *Isvara* is a doer, which is incorrect. *Karma* is simply the endless playing out of the *gunas*.

Problems arise when the doer thinks it can make the body “whole” through its own actions, which one can, to some degree. Modern medicine has made great strides in many areas of health (as well as causing problems). It is become mainstream knowledge now that if you do not take care of the body with healthy eating and lifestyle choices, you will suffer not only physical but mental ill health. But there are many illnesses that are not the result of one’s state of mind and are not in the control of the individual. Take Ramana, for instance: he was a great saint who lived a pure, *sattvic* life and had a great state of mind, yet he died of cancer.

Of course it takes extreme dispassion to deal with chronic illness or any pain. This is where dispassion and *karma yoga* are so important; it is the only way to deal with chronic pain (or anything else) from the *jiva* or *jivanmukta* level. One can work with *Isvara* regarding illness and body pain by one’s attitude to the thoughts that give rise to illness/pain and to the thoughts which come as a result of illness/pain. Coping with chronic pain, which is *rajas*, makes the mind dull, *tamasic*. Even though it is very difficult to maintain a *sattvic* mind when the body is in a lot of pain, it can be done with the right attitude and knowledge. There is appropriate action to be taken, but that still does not guarantee any particular result. The results of any action depend on the nature of the action and NOT necessarily on the state of mind of the person taking the action; it is possible to get a negative result from a positive action and vice versa. Very importantly, the results of actions ALSO depend on the nature of the field, i.e. *Isvara*.

One of the most popular formulations of the causal mechanism in recent years is Eckhart Tolle’s “pain body.” He presents it as an organic entity that feeds on painful experiences, which is to say that pain itself becomes a *vasana*, then a *samskara*, and then a *pratibandika*, a deeply entrenched obstacle. There is some truth to this, as explained above, but it misses the main point: physical pain is always in the subtle body and not the gross body. There is no “entity” living in us creating pain other than ignorance inspired desire and fear. The process of causality is purely unconscious, although it seems conscious because of the proximity of the causal

body to the Self. The causal body is a technical term that refers to the conditioning that causes us to act and to interpret our actions. It does not assimilate experience, it produces experience. The intellect assimilates experience.

The Self is not the causal body, although there is a belief in the spiritual world that it is. As the Self, we are always free of the structures in the Field of Existence set up by *Maya* that originate in the causal body. However, the causal body is the Self in its subtlest manifestation as the cause of everything. Separating it and its effects from the Self is the subject of James' book on the *gunas*. The sense that pain is conscious and seeks to renew itself is certainly understandable because the causal body, like the gross and subtle bodies, is pervaded by consciousness. For many who have made pain an identity, pain becomes a cop-out, a way of justifying how hard-done-by the doer is, legitimizing complaint, blame and victimhood.

There is always something "wrong" with the body, even when we are experiencing good health. It is not static but fluid, like a river, always changing and in a state of flux, and in a constant symbiotic relationship with the environment (*Isvara*, the *gunas*). It is a product of the *gunas*. The body you had a year ago, a month ago or yesterday is not the same body you have today, because the *gunas* are always changing, constantly revolving. Thus nothing in *mithya* ever stays the same. We have no control over it other than to look after it to the best of our ability.

With knowledge about healthy lifestyle, and especially *guna* management, we can do a great deal to maximize health, well-being and therefore peace of mind. But no matter how well we look after the body, *Isvara* is the final (and only) determiner of how long the body will sustain life. What use is control?

The body is on loan to you; you are not meant to and (definitely) will not be allowed to keep it! Take appropriate and timely action to look after it but surrender it to *Isvara*, who will take care of it. The right attitude, which is an attitude of gratitude for the gift of life "in a body," is the best and sanest approach to the body and to life. It is a privilege to be born with a human body because only in a human body can *moksa* obtain. And when the time is right, the body will be withdrawn and returned to the five elements from whence it came, and you as consciousness will not be affected by that one bit.

Our problems as a *jiva* do not come from the body, its good or bad health. They come from ignorance, from fear-thoughts, the main one being fear of death. Resistance is futile. All egos must face this fear of death, of non-existence, if they believe they are the body. Death of the body/ego is inevitable, so we say why not die now? Die to fear and live with impunity, with the confidence that as the Self we are beyond life and death. We are unborn, and therefore do not die.

~ Much love, Sundari