

## **BUDDHIST CONCEPT FOR TODAY'S LIVING (16) THE ONENESS OF BODY AND MIND**

The Greek philosopher Anaxagoras (500–426 B.C.) envisioned a principle called mind that provides matter with its order. He viewed all reality as dualistic — of two — consisting of mind and matter.

Rene Descartes, the seventeenth-century French philosopher and mathematician who famously observed, “I think, therefore I am” (Latin: *Cogito, ergo sum*), drew a strict distinction between mind and body. To Descartes, mind was an immaterial substance responsible for rational thought, imagination, feeling and will. Body was of the material realm. All matter was subject completely to the laws of physics, except for the body which was also influenced by the human mind, or will, though distinct from it. Descartes’ mind–body dualism laid the groundwork in Western thought for the separation of theology and science, of materialism and spiritualism, of body and mind. It supported the distinction in science between physical phenomena or illnesses and those of a mental or emotional nature.

The idea of body–mind separation still exists to some degree, but it is a distinction that has begun to blur as science and medicine have progressed. The discipline of mind–body medicine, until only recently rejected by mainstream medicine, is now becoming part of that mainstream.

Within the last quarter century it has been established that certain kinds of cells in blood and body, called “Natural Killer” cells (NK), play an important role in fighting cancers and virus infections by killing the abnormal or infected cells. An increase in the body’s NK level means a higher probability of defeating such diseases. There is growing evidence that mood and temperament affect the concentration of NK cells in a person’s system. A recent Indiana State University study titled “The Effect of Mirthful Laughter on Stress and Natural Killer Cell Cytotoxicity” confirms the effect of humor and laughter in reducing stress and boosting the body’s ability to fight disease. Its implications are stated as follows: “This study indicates that laughter has the potential to reduce stress and temporarily improve NK activity in a sample of healthy women. As low NK activity has been linked to poorer prognosis, humor may be a useful complementary therapy in the care of persons with cancer, but more research is needed to determine the effect of laughter on NK activity in persons with cancer” (see: <http://web.indstate.edu/nurs/mary/htmlshow>). Such research seems to confirm pioneering work on the effects of humor on health done by Dr. Norman Cousins and others, and attests to the growing scientific awareness of the mind–body connection.

We also see many clear day-to-day examples of the connection between mind and body. For instance, when we are surprised or frightened, our faces turn pale. This is because fear causes blood vessels to constrict, decreasing the flow of blood to the skin. Also, emotional stress is thought to contribute to the formation of certain kinds of digestive ulcers — lesions of the lining of the stomach, duodenum or intestine.

The above examples illustrate how a spiritual change can bring about a physical change. But even more obvious are examples in which a physical change brings about a change in the mind or spirit. A simple toothache can change our entire outlook, making us irritable or even surly. Another obvious example of a physical change having a spiritual effect is the drinking of alcohol. A chemical that directly affects the body’s metabolism, alcohol can

make an otherwise shy person outgoing, or even confrontational.

An even more direct example is that of physical injury to the brain, which can cause a person to undergo a complete and permanent change in temperament and behavior, depending on what specific part of the brain is damaged.

The fact is that every human feeling, every thought, has some sort of physical manifestation—even if only a subtle electro-chemical change in the brain or nervous system.

The “oneness of body and mind” is a core concept in Buddhism. “Body” here indicates physical phenomena, literally, that which can be seen. “Mind” means spiritual and mental phenomena, which are invisible. “Oneness” does not mean that body and mind are absolutely identical. It is a translation of a Chinese term meaning “not two,” or non-duality. This is itself a contraction of a longer term meaning “two but not two.” This means that, while body and mind—physical and spiritual—are clearly two distinct classes of phenomena, they are both aspects of the same thing. They are both rooted in the common source of life itself, in the ultimate reality or law of life.

In the “Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings,” Nichiren Daishonin states that the word “Nam” of “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo,” which derives from the Sanskrit language, is translated into Chinese as two characters, one meaning “devotion” and the other, “life.” He further states that “devotion” indicates the physical aspect, or body, and “life” indicates the spiritual aspect, or “mind.” Then he continues, “This oneness of body and mind is the single ultimate principle” (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 708) This suggests that the highest principle of Buddhism is the reality that we can manifest in our beings, in our bodies and minds, the fundamental enlightenment inherent to all life. This fundamental enlightenment is also called the Buddha nature, the Mystic Law, or Myoho-renge-kyo. When we devote ourselves to this Law through Buddhist practice, we tap into the source of cosmic life-force from which the physical and spiritual aspects of life arise. In this way, we enrich, harmonize and revitalize our physical and spiritual selves, our bodies and our minds.

In his writing “Opening the Eyes of Wooden and Painted Images,” Nichiren Daishonin states, “One’s thoughts are expressed in one’s voice. The mind represents the spiritual aspect, and the voice, the physical aspect. A person can know another’s mind by listening to the voice. This is because the physical aspect reveals the spiritual aspect” (WND, 86)

When we seriously pray for and feel concern for others (mind), our words and actions (body) toward them can uplift their spirits (mind), which can in turn lead to a positive change in their physical health and also in their own words and actions (body). At the same time, applying our voice and actions in this way enhances and develops our own spiritual state. When we continue to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with a strong prayer for our own happiness and that of others, and consistently speak and act to achieve those ends, we are living the principle of oneness of body and mind.

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