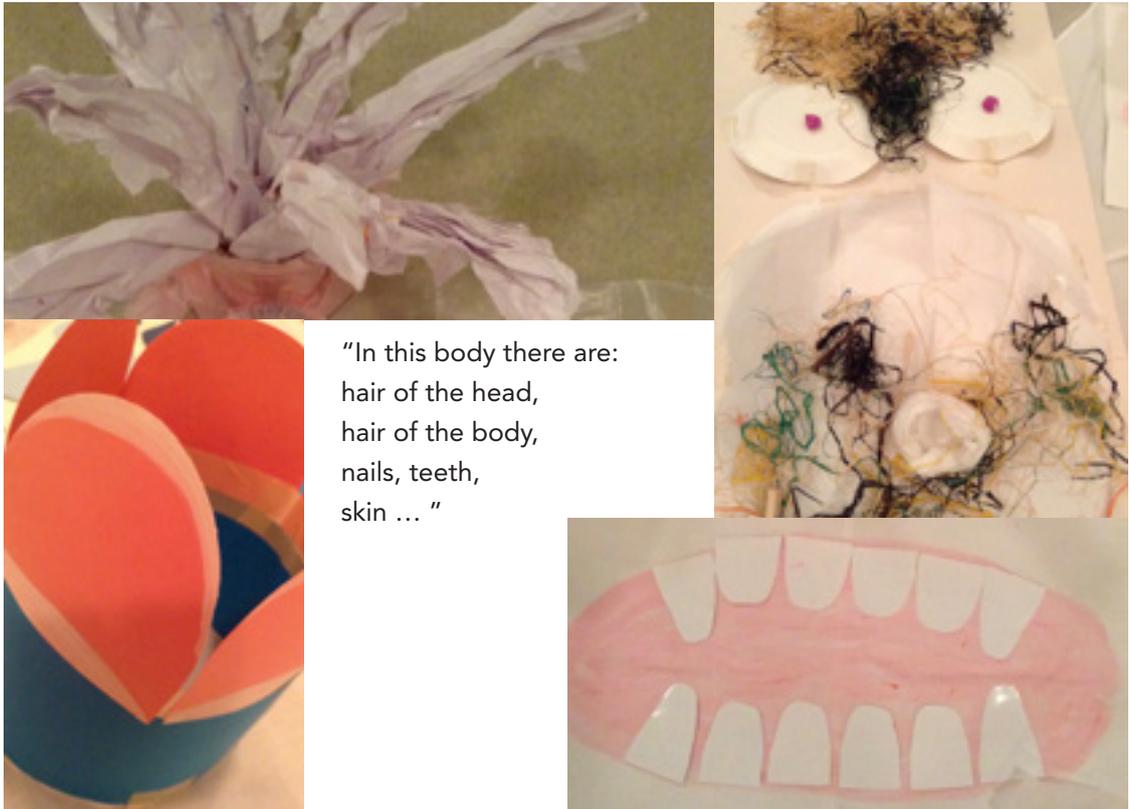


CREATIVE WEEKEND

Amaravati 22 - 24 September 2017



"In this body there are:
hair of the head,
hair of the body,
nails, teeth,
skin ... "

Looking back at the September weekend: "32 Parts of the Body"

Reflections by Aj. Cittapāla who was leading this retreat together with Sr. Tisara

What is a Creative Weekend?

Once a year, we have a Creative Weekend at the Amaravati Retreat Centre, open for anyone who is 18 or over, and who is courageous or interested enough to step into the unknown of such an adventure in which the Dhamma is explored in a rather unusual way.

This year, Sister Tisara and I had decided to lead it together and to choose a theme which is designed to look at the relationship we have to our body: Not the way we are used to see ourselves in the mirror or on photos, but to contemplate the body as "parts": hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin ...

This deconstruction of the familiar "wholeness" of our body-image is supposed to help us cut through the attachment to and identification with our body — at least that's the idea. But how to do that skilfully, without getting stuck in an intellectual idea and mere

concepts? Without getting dismissive about our bodies and feelings? We were hoping that we could find ways to explore that together as a group. And to do that in an embodied and respectful way, using teachings of the Buddha as well as body-sweeping meditation, movement, painting, sharing and dialogue ...

When we came up with this theme, we were not quite sure whether anyone would sign up for such a rather gruesome teaching. But, in July, we put the poster up on the website anyway. And to our surprise, the retreat list filled up much quicker than usual, and people were letting us know that they always wanted to learn more about the recollection of the 32 parts.

By the way, do you feel the sensations in your eyes while you are reading this?

Guided meditation:

This which is my Bottom ...

Feel into your sitting bones, the two strong bony rings at the base of the pelvis. They allow you to sit like this, thanks to thousands of years of human evolution: these sitting bones are designed to give the weight of your body down into the ground in a way that there is minimum pressure on the hip joints.

With each out-breath allow your whole weight to flow down into the ground.

With the in-breath, let the awareness slowly move from the sitting bones up to the lumbar region, the first, very strong vertebrae above the sacrum ...

And with the out-breath again, give a bit of pressure from the lumbar region down to the sitting bones, down into the ground. This will initiate an upward movement from the ground into the spine. — Feel how the spine rises, and all that is connected to the spine.

You don't have to "pull" the body upwards ... Repeat that a few times, feeling how the body immediately responds with a slight upwards movement, opening the chest, allowing you to breathe in more deeply ...

Now bring your awareness to the base of the skull, where the skull rests on the first vertebra. Here the spinal cord connects with the brain stem. Allow the uprising energy to spread into this area, releasing the habitual tension which often blocks the energy flow and makes the neck painful and the head dull.

For the next minutes, gently breathe into this connection of spine and skull, keeping your awareness soft and embracing. Allow things to relax. All tension can flow down the whole length of the spine into the ground, making space for new energy to rise. Enjoy how things are becoming lighter, more spacious, more awake, open hearted ...

***You can do that even now,
while you are reading.***





Reflection on the 32 Parts — how to do that while developing a “felt sense” of the body?

When we are given the list of the 32 parts of the body, we can pick up the words intellectually, repeating them over and over again as a mental meditation object, hoping to gain some sort of tranquillity. Or we take the concept of impermanence and, of course, agree. End of the story. How deep does that go? Does it really uproot our ingrained attachment (or aversion) to the body, our identification with it — which is one of the main purposes of this reflection on the 32 parts?

Because our western education has made us so heady, we often don't feel much of the body, unless it is very pleasant or painful. But we can think and worry about it a lot — which takes us away from present moment awareness. So many of us may need a less intellectual approach. Body-sweeping meditation is a method to bring us back to the actual sensations in the body — in this moment. How to apply that to the 32 parts?

When you sit in meditation with closed eyes, you can go through the list of the 32 parts and explore which of them you can actually feel: Are there any sensations that indicate “hair of the head, hair of the body, nails” ...? “Teeth”? Yes, you touch them with the tongue and can feel their hardness, the smooth surface, the different shapes. A reflective “felt sense”, for what is happening in the body

During this weekend, we had several guided meditations to explore different approaches to

body-sweeping. Not only to keep the mind in the present moment and let it calm down; also to develop a “felt sense” of what is happening in the body from moment to moment, a direct feeling for body sensations: the sense of weight, touch, shifts in balance, pressure, tension, relaxation, inner space and the sensations caused by the movement of the breath ... Staying with one sensation for a while and noticing how it is changing ...

Clearly, the idea of “parts” is a concept. And the “felt-sense-reality” is never what we think it is. That insight was helping to wake up and get interested, connected, reflecting on the reality of change in a very direct way: What is there that we can truly identify with? The experience of this body is changing from moment to moment. We can't hang on to it, or we are out of touch with reality.

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Connecting with the Heart

We can talk about the heart. We have gained some scientific knowledge, conceptual understanding: We know that the heart is receiving the freshly oxygenated blood from the lungs and then pumps it out to every part of the body, even to the finest blood vessels in our fingertips and toes ... We have seen anatomy-photos and drawings of the heart ... But all this is stored as ideas and mental images, strangely disconnected from our embodied sense experience in this moment.

So then, what is your direct experience of the heart? Do you feel your physical heart and how it is working?

During this weekend, we spent some time in meditation to connect with the 'felt sense' of our heart area, trying to get a feeling, how big and where in the chest our physical heart is, and to feel the heart beat, the blood rushing through.

*"I can picture my heart now, that's quite an interesting thing!"
(one of the participants after the weekend)*

But for most participants, the first experience was rather a feeling of helplessness, because they simply didn't feel their physical heart, just had a vague sense where it could be ... Breathing into the heart space and resting the hand on the heart area helped eventually to connect — until the heart responded, like a sleeping

beauty. Sometimes there was a feeling of heaviness or tension, even pain, or there was more a sense of warmth, lightness and inner space, strength ... Slowly more sensations arose and even inner images. And it kept changing.

To connect directly with one's own heart was quite a "heartwarming" experience!

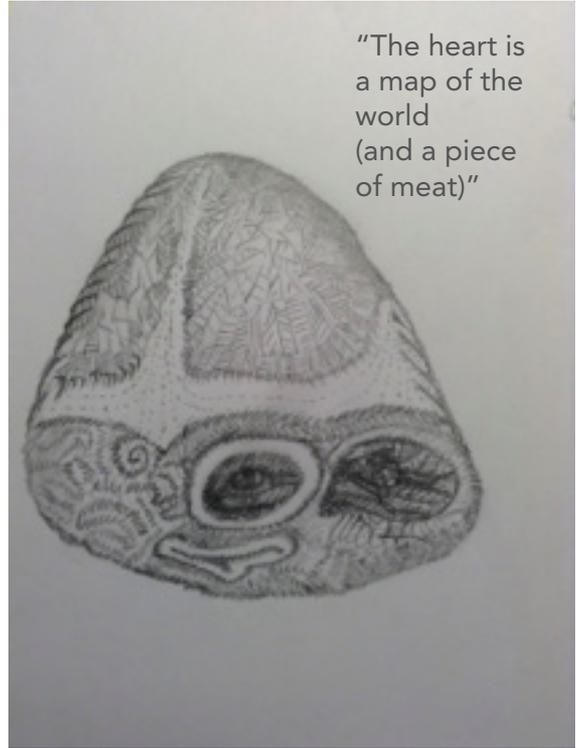


And then a real heart, a pig's heart, appeared ...

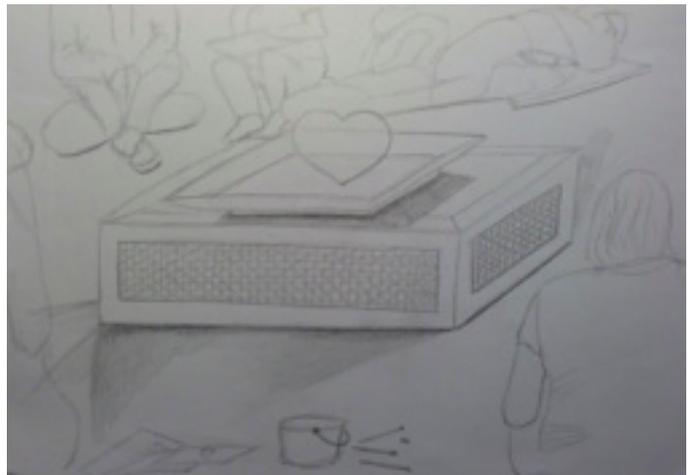
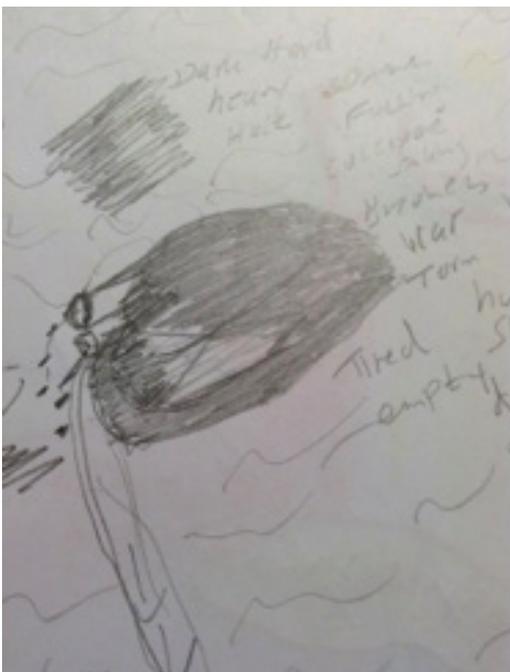
Have you ever held a heart in your hands? Pigs' hearts are big, similar to human hearts. In one Sutta, the Buddha recommends to look at the human organs similar to a cow's organs being displayed for sale by a butcher. So we decided to get at least one organ for contemplation, a pig's heart, from the butcher. We planned to have a session with making drawings, studying the heart from different sides and contemplate the effect that has on us.

When the pig's heart was revealed in the middle of the shrine room, it had a big impact. While we were drawing in silence, all participants went through their own emotional responses to the fact that this heart came from a slaughtered animal. Also, to look at a real heart so similar to a human heart seemed to be a bit overwhelming for some participants, so that they had to make pauses to digest the experience. For some, it revealed our human vulnerability ...

After sharing about this experience, we buried the heart in the Buddha Grove and shared the merit of our practice with the pig. That ceremony of well-wishing came as a relief. And it left us with a question: would I possibly want to eat meat again?



Some drawings of the pig's heart, of the effect it had on the group ... and personal notes



Burial ceremony for the pig's heart in the Buddha Grove



Parts of the body being displayed like by a butcher ...

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What I find amazing to observe during the recent Creative Weekends is that even difficult topics seem to be accepted and dealt with with ease and depth when they are processed with creative means. The creative process seems to give us the freedom to find out for ourselves what feels right and what doesn't. And in that process, especially when done in a group, we can open up to explore, and sometimes enjoy, new territory and eventually new insights.

During this year's Saturday evening group activity, each participant was asked to create at least one of the 32 parts of the body with paper, glue, paint ... To her initial dismay, one participant was asked to create the body part "excrement". She wouldn't have chosen that! This task brought up memories from the time when her daughter was born and when she had to deal hands-on with excrement. Yes, that was smelly and disgusting but it was also quite sweet to clean the baby she loved. In the course of this evening, she managed to find ways to manifest something that looked like excrement and had a grin about her effort to create it in a pretty realistic way.

We all went through our own experience of being challenged and also strangely amused by the disgusting aspects of what we were creating or observing. I ended up with having to make something which was supposed to look like "bile". — Right. How could that be done? I started with experimenting how to produce aggressively digestive looking green shades. Then I tried to remember how the gall bladder is connected to the liver and to the digestive organs and what is supposed to happen there. Some embodied memories of the awfully bitter and acidic taste of "heartburn" came up. Clearly, not beautiful.

Yet, I started to like my bile piece and was slightly reluctant to discover that someone else had also created a bile part. — OK, this bile is not "mine". Thanks for the reminder.

At the end of that evening, when we were displaying our body parts on the floor of the shrine room, the atmosphere was light and playful. And yet, there was also something deeper going on: "This which is my body ..." — Now, it's just separate parts lying on the floor! So the creative process allows us both, to be playful and to reflect on a deeper level.



"This then, which is my body, is a sealed bag of skin, filled with unattractive things."

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Some Parts ... and the End

Later, when we were sharing some of the photos of the body-parts which have been created during this Weekend with people who haven't been on the weekend, some suggested to make these photos more publicly accessible, because they were so

inspired by these ways of creative and often very personal investigation. So here are some more examples.

And also some photos of the last activity of the weekend, the cremation of "the bag of skin".



skin and flesh, heart, undigested food, lungs ...



Is the body beautiful or foul ?

Contemplating the Verses of the Elder Bhikkhuni Sundarīnandā (Nandā)

On Sunday morning, we were contemplating the verses written by the Bhikkhuni Nandā after her enlightenment. Her full name was Sundarīnandā (Pleasing Beauty). According to the commentaries, when she became a nun, she was not only very beautiful but also highly identified with her beauty, conceited. She avoided to go to the Buddha for advice, fearing that he would see her attachment. Finally, the Buddha called and instructed her how to contemplate and practise with the non-beautiful aspects of the body (the first 2 verses). She followed his advice, and that helped her to realise full enlightenment, as described in her following 3 verses (Thanissaro Bhikkhu's translation):

*“Sick, putrid, unclean:
look Nandā, at this physical heap.
Through contemplation of the foul,
develop your mind, make it one, well centred.*

*As this (your body), so that. As that, so this.
It gives off a foul stench, the delight of fools.”*

*“Considering it thus,
untiring, both day and night,
I, with my own discernment, dissecting it,
saw.*

*And as I, heedful, examined it aptly,
this body — as it actually is —
was seen inside and out.*

*Then was I disenchanted with the body
and dispassionate within:
Heedful, detached, calmed was I.
Unbound.”*

These verses sparked off a lively and fruitful discussion: “Would it be helpful or not, if we all follow these reflections?” Different feelings and views were shared, depending on the experience the participants had of their own body and also the bodies of their ageing parents, relatives or patients.

We settled the dispute with the agreement that it is most important for our practice to feel and respect our own feelings and current limitations. Not everyone can find it helpful to look at the foul aspects of the body. They are not necessarily part of our life experience.

On the contrary, in our culture we are rather alienated from the direct experience of ageing, sickness and death. It's not like in rural India where you can still see lepers and (smell) decaying bodies lying at the roadside. We are taught to believe that the body is beautiful and that it is our duty to make it look and smell pleasant. If we “fail” (and we do), we may feel ashamed and hide ... Look at the imperative behind this contemporary beauty-industry slogan:

**Ageing is a fact of life.
Looking your age is not.**

Especially those of us who have grown up with a tendency to dismiss or resent our body sensations and feelings may benefit from choosing meditation methods which cultivate body awareness in an uplifting way. We can contemplate the natural “perfection” of the body, and also of ageing, death and decay. And yes, we need to take care of our bodies and wellbeing and understand our connection with nature (see Frida Khalo's vision below).

The advice of the Buddha is to learn to include in our body-contemplation the whole time-line — from birth to ageing and dying, even to the decay of the corpse. Or, as Ajahn Chah said: “Look at the glass as already broken.” That naturally helps to see beyond. Being “disenchanted with the body and dispassionate within” doesn't mean that we have to dismiss anything. Instead, we can develop an openness to understand the nature of samsara and the calm of letting go.

