

The Body as Obstacle and Instrument to Liberation in Early Indian Buddhism

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Early Buddhist soteriology presents a complex relationship with the body, simultaneously identifying it as the primary locus of suffering (*dukkha*) and the essential foundation for liberation. Texts within the Pali Canon consistently portray the body as impermanent, subject to decay, and a source of attachment, fueling the cycle of rebirth. This perspective informed early ascetic practices, initially embraced as a means to subdue desire, but ultimately rejected by the Buddha as unproductive and even detrimental. However, the body was not simply to be negated. Ethical discipline (*sīla*), a cornerstone of the Eightfold Path, fundamentally relies on bodily conduct, establishing a framework for skillful action. Crucially, meditative practices, particularly those emphasizing mindfulness (*satipatthana*), directly engage with bodily sensations as objects of observation. This mindful awareness, rather than suppression, allows practitioners to dismantle habitual patterns of craving and aversion. This tension – the body as both obstacle and instrument – is central to early Buddhist thought. Liberation is not achieved through annihilation of the body, but through a transformative understanding of its nature, utilizing it as a vehicle for cultivating wisdom and ultimately transcending suffering. The body, therefore, remains integral to the path, even as the goal is its ultimate dissolution into *nibbana*.