

Didactic Bodies in Indian Buddhist Story Literature

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Buddhist philosophers do not place much faith in the reliability of the human body. Like everything else in the phenomenal world, the body is subject to the law of impermanence. From the moment of birth, it is already dying. Moreover, the human body provides a breeding ground for parasites and is full of impurities even when operating in its optimal condition. Take, for example, the fifth-century Theravada scholar Buddhaghosa, who says in his *Visuddhimagga* (a compendium of Theravada Buddhism) that we should think of the human body as a leaky sieve, always oozing and dripping with various emissions. Buddhaghosa also suggests that we imagine the body as a huge boil with nine oozing suppurations. With such images of the human circulating in Indian Buddhist circles, it may be surprising that authors and editors of Buddhist story literature rely heavily on the human body as a tool for edification. And yet if we are to understand the narrative mechanisms of much Indian Buddhist story literature, we must appreciate the key roles that human bodies serve. From the dramatic self-immolations of pratyekabuddhas to the miracles of saints, the body serves as a locus of insight into the teachings of the Buddhas. This paper explores the edifying function of the human body in Indian Buddhist story literature while asking the question of what difference gender makes in the embodiment of the teachings.