

Mindfulness of the body – its reality and composition

## **Understanding the true nature of our physicality**

### **Seeing the body clearly**

*“When we look at the body clearly, we see it’s neither beautiful nor ugly — it’s just a bag of elements doing their job.” - Ajahn Chah*

Continuing our exploration of mindfulness of the body, in the service of recognising what it is to be human, and building upon Mindfulness of Breath, Posture, and Clear comprehension, we now engage with a deeper, sometimes challenging, aspect of body awareness: ‘Mindfulness of the reality of the body’. This traditionally includes the practice known as mindfulness of the ‘unattractiveness’ or ‘foulness’ of the body; through the lens of what Gotama presented as thirty-two constituent parts – its ‘bits and bobs’.

It is essential to approach this topic with care and clarity about its purpose. The aim is *not* to cultivate disgust or hatred towards our bodies, which would be unskillful and unhelpful. Rather, the intention behind this traditional practice is to challenge and counteract our obsession and vanity – our ‘clinging’ to an idealised self image. But also as an antidote to our hatred, dislike and aversion of our body and our craving to change our appearance.

These attachments are significant sources of suffering and often deeply intertwined with our addictive patterns. By examining our body's true nature – its composition, its impermanence, its vulnerability to decay and disease – we develop a more balanced, realistic, and objective view.

Gotama sought to counteract clinging by fostering a clear-sighted understanding. In the well-known talk on the **Four anchors of mindfulness**, he suggested a type of body scan as follows:

*“Again, a practitioner reviews this same body up from the soles of the feet and down from the top of the hair as full of many kinds of repulsive parts, thus: ‘In this body there are head-hairs, body-hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews,*

*bones, bone-marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, midriff, spleen, lungs, bowels, entrails, gorge, dung, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, spittle, snot, oil of the joints and urine”*

While our earlier practices served to establish a connection with our bodies, these instructions warn us against attachment to our physical body, and all the suffering that brings. It introduces us to a balanced view of our physical body.

The previous practices – mindfulness of breath and mindfulness of posture – encouraged us to connect with our body's felt sense. This contemplation of the reality of the body, gently challenges our *attachment* to it, particularly to its appearance or its capacity for fleeting sensual pleasure. It helps us recognise Gotama's first realisation, (the *pain, difficulties and disappointments of life*) as it manifests directly in our physical form – the realities of aging, illness, and death become less abstract. This clear seeing helps us to dismantle the delusions that might fuel our destructive compulsive behaviours (for example, seeking ultimate satisfaction through physical sensations, fixating on our appearance, denying our mortality).

The practice of mindfulness of the body's composite unattractiveness, helps us to recover from the many ways we lose ourselves, by training the mind to see through the allure of substances and our addictive behaviours – to see that they offer only fleeting and ultimately unsatisfactory rewards.

In terms of our RAFT to Freedom, this practice is like meticulously examining the very substance of our embodied existence. We look closely to understand our body's true nature: it is composed of different 'bits and bobs', subject to the elements, prone to wear and tear, not eternally solid or pristine. This realistic assessment prevents unrealistic expectations, reduces our attachment to our body's appearance, and allows us to use our body more wisely and effectively on the journey towards the safe shore, appreciating its function without being fixated on its form.

**Benefits & modern adaptations: finding balance**

While the traditional ‘foulness’ mindfulness practice can be challenging for modern practitioners, its underlying principles offer significant benefits when adapted appropriately:

- ★ **Reducing vanity & attachment to appearance:** When we acknowledge our body's biological realities and impermanence, we lessen our obsessive concern with superficial appearance and unrealistic beauty standards, fostering a greater self-acceptance.
- ★ **Understanding impermanence :** This practice starkly highlights our body's transient nature, subject to constant change, aging, and eventual decay. Accepting this reduces our clinging to youth or health.
- ★ **Developing equanimity:** When we face uncomfortable truths about our body's vulnerability, we cultivate emotional balance, helping us respond more calmly to both pleasant and unpleasant physical experiences.
- ★ **Reducing fear of aging and death:** Gently familiarising ourselves with our body's natural processes, including our inevitable physical decline, can lessen our anxiety around our own aging and mortality.
- ★ **Increasing compassion:** As we begin to recognise the universal nature of our physical fragility, and eventual death, we begin to actively cultivate empathy and compassion for ourselves and others.
- ★ **Deepening non-attachment:** Seeing our body more objectively, as a complex biological process rather than a solid ‘identity’ or object of ultimate desire, weakens our self-obsession and self-clinging.

Remember to remember that this practice is about developing balance, not aversion. If these traditional contemplations feel overwhelming or lead to negativity, you may find it helpful to adapt them. Try to focus on:

- ★ **Objective body awareness:** Cultivate neutral awareness of the body's composition (bones, muscles, organs) and biological processes (digestion, breathing, circulation) without judgment.
- ★ **Mindfulness of impermanence:** Reflect on how our bodies constantly change – moment to moment, day to day, year to year.
- ★ **Interconnectedness:** Contemplate our body's sensations of existence, (solidity, fluidity, temperature, and vitality), which we will explore further in the next practice and how these depend on our surrounding

environment (food, water, air), fostering connection rather than separation.

- ★ **Gratitude for function:** These mindfulness of body practices encourage us to appreciate just what the body does. Rather than focusing solely on our appearance and imperfections, our bodies allow us to be able to move around and to experience sensations (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching) – to experience life!

### **Mindfulness of the physical body and recovery from our destructive compulsions**

This seemingly challenging but essential practice offers us specific benefits for our journey from suffering to freedom:

- ★ **Countering idealisation of pleasure:** Our cravings, harmful urges and compulsions often involve us chasing fleeting, intense physical pleasures or highs. When we contemplate our body's impermanent, composite, and ultimately non-satisfying nature (in the ultimate sense) helps undermine the delusion that lasting happiness can be found solely through manipulating bodily sensations via substances or behaviours.
- ★ **Reducing craving through non-attachment:** By seeing our body more objectively – as a temporary collection of parts and processes – bits and bobs – subject to change and decay – our attachment to it lessens. This can weaken the powerful cravings that arise from us identifying strongly with our body and its desires for specific states.
- ★ **Increasing distress tolerance:** By gently contemplating the less pleasant aspects of our bodily reality, we build our capacity to be with discomfort without needing to immediately escape from it. This resilience is vital in helping us to weather cravings, withdrawal, and difficult emotions.
- ★ **Shifting focus from external to internal:** When we excessively focus on our appearance or other external validation, this can be a trigger to our addictive behaviours. This practice encourages a shift towards appreciating our body's inner workings and cultivates inner sources of well-being (for example, calm peace, self-compassion and awareness) rather than relying on external fixes.

- ★ **Perspective on mortality:** When we contemplate our body's impermanence, we can clarify our values and priorities. Facing mortality – our own death – can motivate us to live more fully and meaningfully, focusing on what truly matters rather than being caught in trivial pursuits or harmful patterns.

## **A healthy body leading to a healthy mind**

While this chapter focuses on seeing the body's impermanent nature to reduce clinging, this understanding does not advocate for neglect. Indeed, caring for our physical reality is also a vital part of our mindfulness of body practice.

The connection between a healthy body and a healthy mind is a concept that's well-recognised in both ancient Buddhist teachings and modern science. This idea aligns closely with the holistic approach of Buddhist practice. Gotama describes the benefits of meditation suggesting that a well-prepared body (through ethical conduct and meditation) leads to a mind that's capable of insight and wisdom. He also emphasised the importance of maintaining the body to support spiritual practice.

Modern scientific research strongly supports the connection between physical and mental health. Here are a few ways this connection manifests:

- ★ **Exercise and mental health:** Regular physical activity has been shown to reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, improve mood, and enhance cognitive function.
- ★ **Nutrition and brain function:** A balanced diet rich in nutrients supports brain health, potentially improving memory, focus, and overall cognitive performance.
- ★ **Sleep and mental well-being:** Good sleep hygiene, which is often linked to physical health, is crucial for emotional regulation and cognitive function.

- ★ **Mindfulness and physical health:** Mindfulness of body practices can reduce stress, lower blood pressure, and improve immune function, demonstrating a two-way relationship between mind and body.

In light of these connections, we might consider integrating some practices that support both our physical and our mental health. For instance:

- ★ **Mindful eating:** Paying attention to our food, its nutritional value, and how it affects our body and mind.
- ★ **Moving meditation:** Incorporate walking meditation or gentle yoga/qigong into our daily routine.
- ★ **Sleep hygiene:** Develop a consistent sleep schedule and bedtime routine to support both physical rest and mental clarity.

While cultivating non-attachment, we should simultaneously recognise the importance of caring for our bodies, as this is our vessel that supports our mind and practice as we navigate on our voyage to the far shore. This isn't a contradiction. We care for our body, not because we are attached to its appearance, but because a well-maintained body functions better for the journey. Integrating mindful eating, appropriate exercise, and adequate sleep supports both our physical health and the mental clarity needed for our journey to wellness and insight. The goal is balanced care, not neglect or obsession.

## **Self-Reflections**

Gently consider your relationship with the physical reality of your body:

- ★ How comfortable am I with the natural processes of aging, illness, and the idea of my own mortality?
- ★ How much of my self-worth or mood is tied to my physical appearance or health state?
- ★ Do I tend to idealise the body (my own or others') or focus primarily on its attractive aspects?

- ★ What feelings arise when I consider the less 'glamorous' aspects of bodily existence (e.g., digestion, illness, decay)? Is there aversion, neutrality, acceptance?
- ★ How might a more balanced, less attached view of my body support my recovery?
- ★ How can I care for my body in a way that supports my mental and spiritual well-being?
- ★ What small changes could I make to my daily routine to better align my physical habits with my practice?
- ★ What happens when I look after my body? What happens when I have ice-cream for breakfast?

## Journaling Prompts

With gentle curiosity and self-compassion consider:

- ★ **Impermanence reflection:** Spend a few minutes observing your body right now. Note any small changes or sensations. Reflect on how your body has changed over the last day, year, or decade. Write about the feeling of impermanence in relation to your physical form.
- ★ **Gratitude for function:** Make a list of things your body allows you to do, experience, or feel, for which you are grateful (for example, breathing, walking, seeing, feeling warmth, digesting food). Reflect on appreciating the body's functions.
- ★ **Exploring attachment:** Write about any attachments you notice regarding your body – perhaps to it looking a certain way, feeling a certain way physically, or avoiding thoughts about illness or aging. How do these attachments cause stress or suffering?
- ★ **Contemplating composition (gently):** Choose one neutral aspect of the body's composition (for example, the feeling of bones providing structure, the fluidity within the body, the warmth generated). Spend a few minutes contemplating it with neutral, objective awareness. Journal about the experience. (*Approach this gently, avoid forcing unpleasantness*).

## Supporting material: scientific and philosophical perspectives

For those interested in the scientific and philosophical underpinnings of mindfulness of the body's components, the following overview highlights key connections.

★ **Neuroscience:** Research on body image shows complex brain processing involving sensory input, emotional centres (amygdala), and self-perception areas (medial prefrontal cortex). Distorted body image, common in some disorders and potentially influencing addiction, involves altered activity in these networks. Mindfulness practices aimed at interoceptive awareness and reducing emotional reactivity can help create a more objective perception of bodily states, potentially countering negative body image biases and reducing aversion to unpleasant physical sensations. Contemplating impermanence might engage brain regions involved in perspective-taking and reducing self-referential thought.

★ **Psychology:** Studies in psychology have also shown that mindfulness practices can reduce relapse rates in substance use disorders by promoting non-judgmental awareness of cravings and reducing stress, a significant relapse trigger.

Principles from Exposure Therapy are relevant: gently and mindfully facing uncomfortable truths or sensations (like the body's vulnerability or unpleasant feelings) in a safe context can decrease reactivity over time. This helps build distress tolerance, crucial in recovery for managing cravings and difficult emotions without resorting to escape. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) encourages accepting the reality of unpleasant private experiences (thoughts, feelings, sensations) without struggle. Body dysmorphic disorder represents an extreme of negative fixation on perceived flaws; mindful, realistic body awareness offers an antidote. Gratitude practices focused on the body's function are also shown to improve well-being.

Interoceptive Awareness Training focuses on cultivating awareness of internal bodily sensations (like hunger, discomfort, or the urge to use a substance) without judgment. Often used in addiction recovery and



eating disorder treatment, interoceptive awareness can help individuals recognise cravings and identify body sensations associated with their emotions. This helps manage impulsive responses and builds detachment.

★ **Philosophy:** Stoicism advocates accepting natural bodily processes like aging and death with equanimity, seeing them as part of universal nature. Existentialism confronts the reality of our finite, embodied existence as a starting point for creating meaning. Buddhist philosophy fundamentally critiques attachment to the impermanent, including the body, as a primary source of pain, difficulties and disappointment (*Dukkha*). Various traditions question materialism and the overvaluation of superficial appearances, encouraging focus on inner qualities and ethical living.

### **Closing remarks**

Mindfulness of the body's physical reality, including contemplating its composition and impermanence, is a profound practice that supports recognising the nature of our existence. Approached with wisdom, balance, and self-compassion, it helps us cut through delusion, reduce harmful attachments, cultivate self-balance, and foster a deep self-gratitude for this precious, albeit temporary, human life. The practice cultivates a realistic understanding of the composite nature of the body, enabling us to relate to our embodied experience with less craving and aversion.

*"When we learn to inhabit our bodies fully, with acceptance, our relationship with it becomes one of a partnership rather than a conflict."*

Remember to adapt this practice to your own needs. If contemplating certain aspects feels harmful or excessively difficult, focus on more neutral awareness of the body's parts, processes, or its elemental nature (which we explore next). The key is clear seeing and reduced clinging, nurtured always with kindness and self-compassion.

### **Sutta References**

- **Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10 / DN 22 - The Four Anchors of Mindfulness):**

This sutta contains the section on contemplating the "Foulness—The Bodily Parts."

- *Summary:* As quoted earlier, this section instructs systematic reflection on the body's constituent parts (head-hairs down to urine), comparing it to identifying different grains in a bag, fostering an objective and detached view, culminating in the awareness "there is a body." It also includes the charnel ground contemplations (observing bodies in stages of decay) to underscore impermanence and detachment.

- **Kāyagatāsati Sutta (MN 119 - Mindfulness Directed to the Body):** This sutta reinforces the value of these body contemplation practices.

- *Summary:* It reiterates many practices from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, including contemplation of the 32 parts and the four elements, stating that well-developed mindfulness directed to the body leads to great benefits, insight, and liberation.

- **Asubha Suttas (e.g., AN 10.60 - Girimananda Sutta):** Various suttas discuss the perception of 'foulness' (*asubha-saññā*) specifically.

- *Summary:* The Girimananda Sutta lists ten perceptions to be cultivated for healing and liberation, including the perception of foulness in the body (*asubhasaññā*). This perception is presented as an antidote to sensual lust and attachment to the body.

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