



This document is an extract from the full chapter which is available for download in the table via this [link](#) and is intended for use by participants of meetings.

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.

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?
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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).*

Remember to remember

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.

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