



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's impermanence – contemplating change, ageing, and death

Recognising the impermanent nature of our raft

Facing life's ultimate destination

"All conditioned things are impermanent. When one sees this with wisdom, one turns away from suffering". Gotama – The Buddha

We now arrive at the sixth and final exploration within the **First anchor of mindfulness** (mindfulness of the body), serving to help us **recognise** what it is to be human. This practice delves into the profound and often challenging territory of the body's ultimate impermanence, looking at the body through the lens of ageing, sickness, death, and decomposition. Traditionally, this includes the contemplation known as mindfulness of death.

It is vital to approach this practice with wisdom, clarity of purpose, and self-compassion. The intention is not to cultivate morbidity, disgust, aversion, or self-hatred. As Gotama cautioned against extremes, this practice should not lead to self-affliction. Rather, its purpose, when undertaken skillfully, is deeply liberating:

In Gotama's famous talk on the four anchors of mindfulness, he describes the 'charnel ground contemplations' where one observes

corpses in various stages of decomposition – bloated, discoloured, festering, being eaten, reduced to bones and turning to dust. Gotama describes the practice in detail as a sequence of contemplations focused on the decomposition of a corpse. We are invited to visualise or directly observe various stages of decay to reflect on the nature of our bodies. The key passages describe observing a corpse in stages of decay such as:

- Swollen and bloated.
- Discoloured and festering.
- Gnawed by animals, dismembered, and scattered.
- Reduced to a skeleton with flesh and blood.
- Bones scattered and eventually reduced to dust.

We are advised to reflect on the reality:

“My body, too, is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.”

Self-Reflections

Approach these reflections gently, with self-compassion:

- ★ What feelings or thoughts arise when I honestly consider my own ageing process?
- ★ What are my fears or anxieties surrounding illness and death? How much mental energy do they occupy?
- ★ How strongly do I identify with my physical body as ‘me’? How does the idea of its eventual decay affect that identification?
- ★ Can I recall moments where contemplating the brevity of life motivated me to act more wisely or compassionately?
- ★ How does the reflection *“This body, too, is of the same nature...”* feel when applied to myself?
- ★ How does understanding the impermanence of the raft change how you view your journey to the safe shore?

Journaling prompts

Explore these themes in writing, remembering to be kind to yourself:

- ★ **Signs of impermanence:** Spend some time observing signs of impermanence in your body (for example, your changing hair, skin and energy levels) or in the world around you (for example, the weather and plants). Write about the feelings of constant change.
- ★ **Living values:** Given that life is finite and the body impermanent, what truly matters most to you? What values do you want to live by during the time you have? How does this reflection impact your recovery priorities?
- ★ **Gentle recollection of death:** Set aside a few minutes to sit quietly and contemplate the simple fact: *"Death is certain; the time of death is uncertain."* Notice any thoughts, feelings, or bodily sensations that arise, holding them with gentle awareness and compassion. Write about the experience.
- ★ **Adapting the practice:** If the direct contemplation of decay feels unsuitable, reflect on which alternative practice resonates more (for example, mindfulness of aging, contemplating nature's cycles, focusing on gratitude for the present). Write about why that alternative feels more supportive for you now.

Remember to remember

This practice demands wisdom, balance, and profound self-compassion. It is not about forcing ourselves into morbid states but about gently and persistently cultivating realistic insight to foster liberation. We can adapt the practice, focus on impermanence generally, or choose other methods if needed. The ultimate aim, as with all these practices, is the reduction of suffering and the cultivation of peace. Having now explored the body through

these six lenses, we gain a much clearer, more grounded recognition of our starting point, preparing us to investigate further aspects of human experience on the first stage of our journey.

"The body is like a water bubble, it is here for a moment and then it is gone. Contemplate this and you will find peace." Ajahn Chah

"With a greater sense of understanding comes a greater sense of wonder, and a greater realization that we are part of and not apart from the rest of nature. And, when the end of consciousness comes, there is nothing to be afraid of, nothing at all."

Anil Seph - Being You.

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