

This document is an extract from the full chapter, which is available for download in the table via this link: <https://raft2freedom.org/raft-to-freedom-downloads/>

12 - Mindfulness of the Reality of the Body

Again, a practitioner reviews this same body up from the soles of the feet and down from the top of the hair, bounded by skin, as full of many kinds of impurity thus: 'In this body there are head-hairs, body-hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, contents of the stomach, faeces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, spittle, snot, oil of the joints, and urine.'

- Gotama, Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), translated by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi

Mindfulness of the reality of the body invites us to see our physical existence exactly as it is - traditionally, by contemplating its thirty-two parts, from skin and bone to the ordinary, unglamorous processes that keep us alive. The aim isn't to cultivate disgust, but to loosen two things that pull in opposite directions: our vanity and idealisation of the body on one side, and our shame or aversion towards it on the other. Seen clearly, the body is neither something to worship nor something to despise - it simply is what it is.

This practice brings Gotama's first realisation - that life is naturally painful, difficult and disappointing - directly into physical experience. Ageing, illness and the body's eventual decay stop being abstract ideas and become the shared, ordinary reality of having a body at all. Meeting this squarely, with self-compassion rather than avoidance, loosens the pull of cravings that arise from over-identifying with the body and its desires, and builds our capacity to stay with discomfort without needing to escape it immediately.

None of this is an argument for neglect - caring well for this body remains part of the practice. But the aim is balanced care, not obsession in either direction: not chasing an idealised body, and not neglecting the body that carries us. The self-reflections that follow offer a direct way in.

Self-reflections

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

- 1 How comfortable am I with the natural processes of ageing, illness and my own mortality? ([view card](#))
- 2 How much of my sense of self-worth is tied to my physical appearance or health? ([view card](#))
- 3 Do I tend to idealise bodies - my own or others' - focusing mainly on what looks attractive? ([view card](#))
- 4 What arises in me when I consider the less 'glamorous' aspects of having a body - digestion, illness, decay? Aversion, neutrality, acceptance? ([view card](#))
- 5 Where do I notice craving or avoidance showing up as attachment to how my body looks or feels? ([view card](#))
- 6 What would it feel like to care for my body without needing it to look a certain way? ([view card](#))
- 7 When I think of my body as simply a collection of parts and processes, rather than a fixed "me" to defend or perfect, how does that shift feel - freeing, unsettling, or something else? ([view card](#))

Journaling prompts

With gentle curiosity and self-compassion, explore:

- 1 **Impermanence reflection:** spend a few minutes observing your body as it is right now. Notice any small sensations or changes. Reflect on how your body has changed over the last day, year or decade, and write about the feeling of impermanence in your physical form.
- 2 **Gratitude for function:** list what your body allows you to do, experience or feel that you are grateful for - breathing, walking, seeing, feeling warmth, digesting food. Write about appreciating what your body does, rather than how it looks.
- 3 **Exploring attachment:** write about any attachments you notice to your body - to it looking a certain way, feeling a certain way, or to avoiding thoughts of illness or ageing. How do these attachments show up as stress or tension for you?
- 4 **Contemplating composition, gently:** choose one neutral aspect of your body's makeup - the structure your bones provide, the fluid within you, the warmth you generate - and spend a few minutes with it, with neutral, objective awareness. Journal about the experience. Approach this gently, and avoid forcing unpleasantness.
- 5 **An old story about your body:** is there a story you have carried about your body - that it is wrong, unreliable, or not good enough? Where do you think

this story came from, and what would it be like to hold it a little more lightly?

- 6 **Caring without obsessing:** write about what caring for your body, without needing it to look a certain way, might look like for you in practice - in how you eat, move, rest or dress.
- 7 **Meeting the body's reality:** after this chapter, which part of your body's true nature - its impermanence, its vulnerability, its ordinary biological workings - feels hardest to sit with? What, surprisingly, feels like a relief?

For a printable reminder to carry this stage's practice into daily life, see the Self-Compassion card: <https://raft2freedom.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/08/appropriate-response-self-compassion.png>

Remember to remember

Mindfulness of the body's reality - its composition, its impermanence, its vulnerability - is a demanding but grounding practice. Approached with balance and self-compassion, it helps us loosen both vanity and aversion, freeing us to relate to this body with less craving and less resistance, and more of the ordinary gratitude it deserves.

This is not about learning to see the body as ugly, but about learning to see it as it actually is - neither an ornament nor an enemy, simply the body we are travelling with.

You just break the body apart in this way, and it becomes clear - yes, it's just a collection of parts.

- Andrea Fella, Mindfulness of the Body and Exploring the Elements, Dharma talk, Spirit Rock Meditation Center, 6 February 2024

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