



Recognise - Mindfulness of body

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

Seeing the body clearly

Having explored [Mindfulness of Breathing](#), [Mindfulness of Posture](#), and [Mindfulness with Clear Comprehension](#), we now turn to a deeper and, for many, more challenging lens on our first Anchor of Mindfulness: mindfulness of the reality of the body. Traditionally, this includes the practice of contemplating the body's thirty-two parts - its bits and bobs - as a way of seeing our physical existence exactly as it is.

It is worth being clear from the outset about the purpose of this practice. The aim is *not* to cultivate disgust or aversion towards our bodies - that would itself be unskillful, and would simply add a new layer of pain, difficulty and disappointment to an already difficult relationship. Rather, the intention is to loosen two things that often pull in opposite directions: our vanity and idealisation of appearance on one side, and our dislike, shame or aversion towards our own bodies on the other. Seen clearly, the body is neither something to be worshipped nor something to be despised - it is simply what it is.

Gotama (the Buddha) taught this contemplation as part of his talk on the four Anchors of Mindfulness, inviting practitioners to review the body from the soles of the feet to the crown of the head, part by part. It is as though opening a bag of mixed grain and naming what is found inside: hair, nails, skin, flesh, bone, and all the rest. Nothing here is hidden or shameful - it is simply the ordinary material our bodies are made of.

While our earlier practices helped us connect with the body's felt sense - the breath, posture, the texture of daily activity - this contemplation gently challenges our *attachment* to the body, particularly to its appearance or to the fleeting pleasures it can offer. It brings [Gotama's first realisation](#) - that life is naturally painful, difficult and disappointing - directly into our physical experience: ageing, illness and death stop being abstract ideas and become the shared, ordinary reality of having a body at all.

Why include this practice?

Sitting with the body's true nature, rather than an idealised picture of it, offers real support for our wider journey:

- **Loosening the pull towards fleeting pleasure:** much of the pull of compulsive and reactive behaviour involves chasing intense or comforting bodily sensations. Seeing the body as impermanent, composite and never a source of lasting satisfaction, gently undermines the idea that lasting ease can be found by manipulating sensation alone.
- **Reducing craving through non-attachment:** seeing the body more objectively - as a temporary, changing collection of parts and processes - loosens our identification with it, weakening the pull of cravings that arise from over-identifying with the body and its desires.
- **Building our capacity to stay with discomfort:** gently facing the less comfortable aspects of bodily reality builds our capacity to be with discomfort without needing to escape it immediately - useful whenever we notice the pull to fall overboard into old, reactive patterns.
- **Turning attention inward:** when we fixate on appearance or how we are seen, this fixation can itself become a trigger for reactive behaviour. This practice shifts our attention towards the body's inner workings, cultivating calm, self-compassion and awareness rather than relying on outward validation.
- **Softening our relationship with mortality:** contemplating the body's impermanence can clarify what actually matters to us, helping us live more fully rather than being caught in trivial pursuits or unhelpful patterns.
- **Widening compassion:** recognising that this physical fragility - ageing, illness, eventual death - is shared by every body, not just our own, can soften judgment and cultivate compassion for others as much as for ourselves.
- **Seeing our interconnectedness:** the body's most basic processes depend entirely on what surrounds it - the food, water and air that keep it going moment to moment. Sitting with this can foster a felt sense of connection to the wider world, rather than the separation that comes from treating the body as a private possession.

Caring for the body without being ruled by it

None of this is an argument for neglect. Caring well for our physical body - through food, movement, rest and ordinary maintenance - remains a vital part of this practice, and a well-recognised link between ancient teaching and modern science. Regular exercise has been linked to reduced anxiety and depression and improved mood; good nutrition supports brain health and memory. Consistent sleep is closely tied to emotional regulation, and mindfulness of the body itself has been associated with lower stress, lower blood pressure and better immune function. Three ordinary practices are worth naming directly, since a general intention to "care for the body" is easy to agree with and easy to leave unpractised:

- **Mindful eating:** paying attention to what we eat, its effect on body and mind, rather than eating on autopilot.
- **Moving meditation:** a short walking meditation, or gentle yoga or qigong, worked into the day rather than treated as a separate obligation.
- **Sleep hygiene:** a consistent sleep schedule and wind-down routine, supporting both physical rest and the mental clarity this practice depends on.

The aim is balanced care, not obsession in either direction: not chasing an idealised body, and not neglecting the body that carries us.

In terms of our raft, this practice is like carefully examining the material our body is actually made of. We look closely and see that it is composed of ordinary parts, subject to wear, weather and change - not eternally solid, not something to be either worshipped or resented. This realistic view lowers our unrealistic expectations, loosens our attachment to appearance, and lets us use this body wisely and gratefully on our journey towards the safe shore - appreciating its function without being fixated on its form. Simply noticing what this body allows us to do - breathe, move, see, feel warmth, digest food - and being grateful for that, rather than for how it looks, is itself part of the practice.

Practice - meeting the body's parts with steady attention

(skip this practice if you find it triggering)

Find a comfortable position, and let your eyes close gently or rest in a soft, downward gaze.

- 1 Bring a light, general awareness to your body as a whole - its outline, its weight, its presence in the space around you.
- 2 Gently and silently name a few of its parts as they occur to you - skin, bone, breath, blood - resting with each only briefly, without needing the experience to feel any particular way.

- 3 Notice whether any part invites ease, and whether any invites resistance. Let both be here without pushing either away.
 - 4 If at any point this feels like too much, simply return your attention to the breath, or open your eyes and look around the room, until you feel steady again.
 - 5 Before finishing, take a moment to appreciate what this body does for you, simply by continuing to function, moment to moment.
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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](#))
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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?
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Supporting material: scientific and philosophical perspectives

For those interested in the science and philosophy behind this practice, here is a brief overview.

- **Neuroscience:** research on body image involves the brain's sensory, emotional and self-referential processing networks, including the insula and medial prefrontal cortex. Distorted body image is associated with altered activity in these networks. Practices that build interoceptive awareness while reducing emotional reactivity are thought to support a more objective, less biased perception of bodily sensation, and contemplating impermanence appears to engage regions involved in perspective-taking and stepping back from self-referential thought.
- **Psychology & Psychotherapy:** the idea of gently and mindfully facing an uncomfortable truth or sensation in a safe context, so as to reduce our reactivity to it over time, and of accepting the reality of unwanted thoughts or sensations without struggling against them, both offer useful insight here. Mindfulness practice more broadly has been associated with reduced relapse rates in the context of compulsive patterns, plausibly via the same non-judgmental awareness of cravings this chapter draws on. A related, named approach - Interoceptive Awareness Training - focuses specifically on cultivating non-judgmental awareness of internal bodily sensations, and has been used to help people recognise cravings and the physical signatures of

difficult emotions. Body-focused distress, including fixation on perceived physical flaws, has been associated with a more realistic, non-judgemental body awareness as a helpful counterpart. Gratitude practices focused on the body's function have also been associated with improvements in well-being.

- **Philosophy:** Stoicism advocates meeting ageing and death with equanimity, as part of the natural order. Existentialism takes the reality of our finite, embodied existence as a starting point for creating meaning. Buddhist philosophy examines attachment to the impermanent, including the body, as a central source of pain, difficulties and disappointment (*dukkha*). Various traditions question the overvaluation of surface appearance, pointing instead towards inner qualities and a life well lived.

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

Having looked closely at the body's parts, we turn next to seeing the same body through a different lens - as the four elements that make up all physical things.

See the [Index of sutta references](#) (web, D8. The print books carry a consolidated sutta appendix instead.)

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