



Recognise - Mindfulness of body

14 - Mindfulness of the Body's Impermanence

"All conditioned things are impermanent" - when one sees this with wisdom, one turns away from suffering. This is the path to purification.

— Gotama, Dhammapada (verse 277), translated by Acharya Buddharakkhita

Facing the body's impermanence

We now arrive at the sixth and final lens of our first Anchor of Mindfulness - Mindfulness of the Body. Having explored breathing, posture, clear comprehension, the body's reality and the body's elements, we turn to the most searching lens of all: the body's ultimate impermanence, seen through ageing, illness, death and decay. Traditionally, this is known as the contemplation of death.

It is essential to approach this practice with wisdom, clarity of purpose and self-compassion. The intention is not to cultivate morbidity, dread or self-aversion - Gotama (the Buddha) himself cautioned against extremes, and this practice should never tip into self-affliction. Its purpose, approached skilfully, is instead deeply liberating: it helps us meet our attachment to the body and to life itself. It cultivates equanimity in the face of change, loss and our own mortality. This practice deepens our felt understanding that all conditioned things - including this body - arise and pass away. Rather than generating fear, awareness that our time is limited can awaken a healthy sense of urgency - a recognition that this life matters, and that the time to build our raft and lessen suffering is now.

Approached gently, becoming more familiar with the reality of mortality may also soften some of the fear that can grow around something we habitually avoid thinking about.

This is not a marginal practice. In The Path of Purification, the fifth-century commentator Buddhaghosa distinguishes meditation subjects suited only to particular temperaments from a small handful he calls "generally useful" - helpful to every practitioner, regardless of character. He names only two: friendliness and mindfulness of death.

In his talks on the four Anchors of Mindfulness, Gotama described what are sometimes called the charnel-ground contemplations: observing a body, at various

stages after death, gradually returning to its elements - swollen, then discoloured, then reduced by time to bone and finally to dust. At each stage, we reflect: *this body, too, is of the same nature; it will be like that; it is not exempt from that fate.* For many people today, without access to an actual charnel ground, this contemplation is done through quiet reflection on the natural processes of decay observed elsewhere - a fallen leaf, a dead insect, the fading of a cut flower - rather than through direct visualisation of human decomposition.

Many do not realise that we here must die. For those who realise this, quarrels end.

— Dhammapada (verse 6), translated by Gil Fronsdal, in *The Dhammapada: A New Translation of the Buddhist Classic*

This direct reflection aims to break through our denial and let us see the body's true nature without either romanticising it or recoiling from it. Applied to ourselves, this practice means recognising that the body itself - just like a raft built from conditioned materials - will eventually wear out and return to the elements they came from. This does not undermine the importance of building our raft carefully or making the journey; if anything, it sharpens our sense of why the crossing matters while we have the body to make it with.

Adapting the practice with skilful means

This practice may not be suitable for everyone at every time. Setting it aside if it causes significant distress is not a failure of practice, but an appropriate act of care. Given how demanding direct contemplation of decay can be, especially for anyone carrying trauma or heightened sensitivity, it is entirely appropriate to work with gentler versions of the same insight:

- **Mindfulness of ageing:** noticing the signs of ageing in ourselves and others with acceptance rather than aversion or denial.
- **Natural cycles:** reflecting on the cycles of birth, growth, decay and renewal we see in the natural world, and recognising our own body as part of that same flow.
- **Appreciating the present:** letting an awareness of life's fragility deepen our gratitude for this present moment and for the capacities we currently have.
- **Reflecting on loved ones:** gently contemplating the life cycle of someone we have loved and lost can, over time, foster acceptance of this shared and universal process.
- **Impermanence generally:** applying the same understanding to everything that changes - sensations, thoughts, emotions, circumstances - not only the body.

None of these gentler versions is a lesser practice. They point towards the same insight from a kinder angle, and any of them is enough.

Recollection of death and the pull of old patterns

Approached with care, this reflection offers something specific to our wider journey. Recognising the body's ultimate impermanence sits in stark contrast with the pull of compulsive and reactive behaviour towards fleeting, body-based pleasure, highlighting how little such pleasure can ultimately deliver. Understanding that all things, including cravings themselves, are transient can loosen the felt urgency of an urge - 'this too shall pass' takes on a deeper meaning here. An honest sense of life's fragility can motivate us to spend our limited time and energy on what actually matters, rather than on old, unhelpful patterns. And by loosening our identification with the body, this contemplation can also loosen our grip on whichever fixed story of ourselves we have been carrying - including any identity built entirely around our past struggles. This opens space for a broader sense of who we are, grounded instead in our values and our awareness.

Placing our own difficulties within this universal context - birth, ageing, illness, death, shared by everyone who has ever lived - can also ease their isolating sting, reminding us that we are, in this most basic sense, all in the same boat.

Practice - a gentle recollection of impermanence

(skip this practice if you find it triggering, and choose the gentlest version that feels supportive)

Find a quiet, comfortable position, and let your attention settle.

- 1 Bring to mind the plain fact that this body - like every conditioned thing - is ageing, moment by moment, and will one day die. Hold this lightly, as a simple fact rather than a threat.
- 2 If it feels supportive, silently repeat: *this body, too, is of this nature; it will change; it is not exempt.*
- 3 Notice whatever arises - fear, sadness, calm, resistance, curiosity - without needing it to be any particular thing. Let it be here.
- 4 If this becomes too much at any point, gently set it aside. Return to the breath, or turn instead to one of the gentler reflections above - ageing, nature's cycles, gratitude for the present - any of these carries the same insight.
- 5 Close by bringing to mind one thing that matters to you, and one small way you might honour it today.

An alternative practice - following the changing body

If reflecting directly on death feels too difficult, we can approach impermanence more gently by noticing how the body has already been changing throughout our lives.

Find a quiet, comfortable position and let your attention settle.

- 1 Bring to mind yourself as an infant or very young child. You do not need a clear image - simply remember that this body was once very small and completely different from the body you have now.
- 2 Let the years move gently forward: childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, middle age, or whatever stage of life you are in now.
- 3 Notice how much has changed - height, shape, strength, skin, hair, abilities, sensations - while life has continued from one stage into the next.
- 4 Rather than judging any of these changes, simply recognise: **this body has always been changing.**
- 5 If it feels comfortable, imagine that change continuing naturally into older age. There is no need to go further than feels supportive.
- 6 Finish by returning to the body as it is today. Perhaps acknowledge quietly: **this is the body I have now. How might I care for it, and how might I use this life well today?**

A gentle reflection on certainty

If the practices above feels too direct, you might prefer this simpler reflection, adapted by Stephen Batchelor from the traditional *lamrim* contemplation of death. Rather than dwelling on images of dying, it invites us to consider three straightforward questions:

- 1 **Death is certain.**
- 2 **The time of death is uncertain.**
- 3 **If death is certain and its time uncertain, what do I do now?**

The emphasis is not on fear, but on perspective and urgency. We cannot know how much time we have, so the question becomes how we want to use the life that is here now. You might sit quietly with the three reflections, allowing the final question to open gently into whatever feels most important: a conversation, a kindness, a practice, a change of direction, or simply greater appreciation of this day.

Self-reflections

Approach these gently, with self-compassion:

- 1 What feelings or thoughts arise when I honestly consider my own ageing? [\(view card\)](#)
 - 2 What are my fears around illness and death, and how much of my attention do they quietly occupy? [\(view card\)](#)
 - 3 How strongly do I identify with my physical body as 'me'? How does the thought of its eventual decay affect that sense of identity? [\(view card\)](#)
 - 4 Can I recall a moment when reflecting on life's brevity motivated me to act more wisely or more kindly? [\(view card\)](#)
 - 5 How does the reflection "this body, too, is of the same nature" feel when I apply it directly to myself? [\(view card\)](#)
 - 6 Is there a story I carry about who I am that feels fixed or permanent? What happens when I remember that it, too, is conditioned and changing? [\(view card\)](#)
 - 7 How does understanding the impermanence of this body change how I see the rest of my journey towards the safe shore? [\(view card\)](#)
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Journaling prompts

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

- 1 **Signs of impermanence:** spend some time noticing signs of change in your body - your energy, your skin, your hair - or in the world around you, such as the weather or a plant's seasons. Write about what it feels like to watch constant change directly.
- 2 **Living your values:** given that life is finite and the body impermanent, what actually matters most to you? What values do you want to live by with the time you have?
- 3 **A gentle recollection:** sit quietly for a few minutes with the simple fact that death is certain, though its timing is not. Notice whatever thoughts, feelings or sensations arise, and hold them with gentle awareness. Write about the experience.
- 4 **Choosing your own approach:** if direct contemplation of decay doesn't feel right for you, which of the gentler alternatives - ageing, certainty, nature's cycles, gratitude for the present - feels more supportive right now? Write about why.
- 5 **A story you carry:** is there an old identity or label you've carried about yourself that this chapter has loosened, even slightly? What would it be like to hold it more lightly?
- 6 **Someone you have loved:** if it feels right, reflect gently on someone you have loved and lost. What has their life, and its ending, taught you about how you want to live yours?

- 7 **One thing that matters:** given everything in this chapter, write about one thing you want to give more of your limited time and attention to, starting this week.
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Supporting material: scientific and philosophical perspectives

For those interested in the science and philosophy behind mindfulness of ageing and death, here is a brief overview.

- **Neuroscience:** research into terror management theory suggests that an awareness of mortality can trigger defensive reactions, but can also motivate prosocial behaviour and a renewed commitment to one's values. Mindfulness training is thought to help modulate the brain's fear circuitry and support prefrontal-cortex activity involved in emotional regulation, which may allow existential concerns like an awareness of death to be processed with less reactivity over time. This may be part of a broader pattern: regular meditation practice has also been associated with increased grey matter in regions linked to memory, self-awareness and emotional control, along with more balanced dopamine activity where craving is a recurring pattern. It is also linked with lower cortisol and greater parasympathetic activation - changes that plausibly support the same steadiness this chapter's own practices are aiming for.
 - **Psychology & Psychotherapy:** Acceptance and Commitment Therapy's (ACT) approach to accepting unavoidable realities, including mortality, in order to free up energy for living in line with one's values, offers useful insight here, as does terror management theory's account of how people cope with death-awareness through worldview and self-esteem. Facing our own finitude has been associated with clarified priorities and a greater sense of gratitude. Graded, gentle exposure to a feared idea can reduce anxiety about it over time - though for anyone carrying trauma, this kind of practice calls for particular caution, and is best approached with support.
 - **Philosophy:** Existentialism places our confrontation with finitude and mortality at its centre, arguing that an authentic life grows from acknowledging this reality rather than avoiding it. Stoicism advocates a calm acceptance of death as part of the natural order, with attention placed instead on living virtuously now. Epicureanism sought to loosen the fear of death with a simple observation: while we exist, death is not present; when death is present, we no longer exist. Buddhist philosophy treats impermanence and the recollection of death as central catalysts for wisdom and liberation, not as morbid preoccupations.
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Remember to remember

From the breath of life to the dust of death, Mindfulness of the Body's Impermanence completes our exploration of the first Anchor of Mindfulness. It is a demanding practice, aimed squarely at loosening our deepest attachments and fears by facing, directly, the truth that everything conditioned - including this body - arises and passes away. Approached with wisdom, balance and self-compassion, this is not a practice about forcing ourselves into difficult states, but about gently and persistently cultivating a clearer, more grounded understanding of where we actually stand - one that can, paradoxically, bring real peace.

Across these six lenses, Mindfulness of the Body has invited us to know the body through breathing, posture and everyday activity; to see clearly its physical composition and elemental qualities; and finally to recognise its continual change, ageing and impermanence. Together, they help us experience the body more directly and realistically - with less grasping and resistance, and with greater awareness, care and perspective.

We are part of, not apart from, the rest of nature. And when the end of consciousness comes, there's nothing to be afraid of. Nothing at all.

— Anil Seth, TED talk, "How does your brain construct your conscious reality?" (2017)

Having now surveyed our raft's materials through all six lenses of body mindfulness, we carry this clearer, more grounded recognition forward into the next stage of our journey, as we turn to [the Four Resolves](#).

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

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