

Foundations of Mindfulness Part 5 - Mindfulness of Body Parts

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So, good evening. And I think that the air should be probably a little louder, isn't it? So how is it now? Is a good volume good? How can I? So as some of you know, many of you know that I am doing a series now of talks on the classic teachings on Buddhist teachings on mindfulness from a particular discourse. A text that is called the—usually in English—Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

And now, the first of the foundations, first of the ways in which we establish this very strong mind awareness that we call mindfulness, is on the body, and the word for body is *kāya*. And the text opens up with talking about, in order to establish this strong, heightened sense of awareness, we have to turn. We have to kind of turn away from having desire and aversion towards the world, and the word for world is *loka*. What's very interesting about the Buddha's teachings is that the word *loka* that, in this case, is used—the external world, desire and aversion for the world—is also used sometimes explicitly to refer to the world of our body, the world of our senses, the world that's right here. And the world that we actually can have contact with is always through contact in our body, through our body.

In fact, in some ways, the whole world that, as we know it, occurs in our senses, and you know how we experience everything. So he had this kind of a re-shifting way in which the Buddha talked about *loka*, world. Sometimes he talked about the external world, and sometimes the internal, the world of, you know, who we are. Now, if we go through our external world and place, notice what people are doing. A lot of people are not really connected to their world. I mean, they're connected to their phone and to that world of the world wide web.

They're connected to their fantasies and dreams and ideas about the past and the future. And it's very easy to go through the world and be disconnected. I have friends who lament

that what a difference it is nowadays to walk through cities and towns, and there's much less contact between people than there used to be, partly because people are looking at their phones when you go. You know, it's interesting to go in different places where people would have some kind of contact with each other, and they're all kind of alone looking at their device. It's quite remarkable. Coffee shops used to be a place people went to hang out together, and we walked by the big window of Starbucks recently, and there was a lot of people not together.

It was full, but it was hard to find people who were together, and they all had their computer and their device, and kind of like a solitary world connecting to that world through electronics. So even in the ancient world, people talked about teachers talking about people being asleep and not connected to the world. So the practice of mindfulness is a practice of beginning to connect this world—certainly to the world of ourselves here, but also through that, to be able to be connected more fully in the world. And it begins by understanding we have to give up a little bit, investing ourselves in wanting things in the world or wanting to get rid of something in the world. Those things can be useful, but it's not the way forward. The way forward, at least in the mindfulness practice, is to come into the world that's here, the world of us.

And it begins then with a simple exercise on breathing to connect with ourselves. It's so hard to be connected and stop the busy mind. And many religious traditions focus on breathing as a way to do that. Breathe back to the breath with the breath, and then, as we were kind of meditating on the breath, becoming a heightened sensitivity to this body, this world. That's the body, this body, which is our world. And then to relax it, to soften.

When people are disconnected from the world, they tend also to be disconnected from themselves. And so to begin waking up the body and learning how to be connected directly to the world through our senses. And this process of waking up and feeling our senses alive and feeling connected to the inner world and the outer world is a wonderful process. Some people marvel at how well this goes if they go on a residential meditation retreat. The sense of coming home and being connected to themselves and being in their body, and then being able to walk out and look at anything, and just come and marvel at what we're seeing, what we're touching, what we're eating, what we're encountering, and really feel the vividness of being alive now. It's so satisfying, and we lose it so quickly.

Even though it might be intriguing to be in the electronic world, there is a loss of a different kind of connection to the world that goes on there. So this *satipaṭṭhāna*, this practice of mindfulness, is very importantly a practice of reconnecting to ourselves. And through being

connected to ourselves, have the capacity then to have a present moment connection to the physical sense world around us. After this, an exercise in breathing, what I talked about last week there, too, these two exercises in being attentive to what you are actually doing—kind of radical idea that you being heightened sensitivity to the fact that you're sitting or standing or walking or lying down. And then heightened sensitivity to the different activities, to eating, to picking something up, to putting on your clothes, to showering, to using the bathroom, to use those as times to connect, to be present. You don't have—no one has to raise their hands. But I wonder—you know, it used to be that people had these magazine racks next to their toilets.

If you're old enough, you remember those magazine racks. I haven't seen a magazine rack in a bathroom in a very long time. So the question is, what are people reading? And on what are they reading? So, you know, this way no one has to raise their hands. But how many of you read your phone sitting on the toilet? Is that like—has it taken over?

So that's nice. It's probably comfortable, and it can help you while waiting for something to happen, but the Buddha wouldn't have done that. That was a time to be mindful, to be present. For the Buddha, everything we're doing was a time to be present, to be connected, to wake up. And maybe he had it a lot easier because he lived twenty-five hundred years ago, and life was a lot simpler, supposedly. And so it was more natural, you know, to be present and attentive.

Even so, he felt the need to teach this long text to help people get more connected. So now we come to the fourth exercise, which is an exercise on paying attention or noticing or reflecting on body parts. And the question is, what is it that reflecting on different body parts—how does that support us to wake up, to be here, to be attentive, and to begin cultivating this heightened sense of present moment awareness? That, for the Buddha, leads to liberation, leads to the freedom from clinging, leads to ability to be independent from all the cunning ways in which we get sticky to the world. So this idea of the body parts is interesting. It's the verb for what the exercise involves is to reflect or to review.

Some translators translate—so it's actually a more cognitive process than pure awareness, because, and you'll see as we go through it, that some of that, you know, has to be done as a kind of review or a kind of contemplation or kind of imagining. In order for this to work, it's to review or contemplate or focus on thirty-one different body parts systematically, one after the other. This is such an important exercise in Tibetan Buddhism that it's many times the first meditation exercise that is given to monastics when they are ordained. They get ordained, say, here is your first practice. Contemplate these thirty-one parts of the body. And

I've known people who spent years—there's a wonderful teacher in Santa Cruz, a post teacher named Bob Stahl, and he's been doing this thirty-one parts of the body, actually—or for him, it's thirty-two parts of the body meditation for about forty years, almost forty years now.

He's been teaching for twenty-six years and he's a friend. I don't see him that often, but we see each other at least once a year because it turns out that he brings his—he has a class that teaches people this meditation on the thirty-two parts of the body. And halfway through the year, a year-long class, he takes people to the Community College in Santa Cruz, to the anatomy lab, to see the human bodies that have been cut open for the anatomy students to study in the same evening that I bring the chaplaincy students there. So we overlap, and for kind of different purposes. And he takes his students so they can really go inside a body, see a real physical human body that's been cut open, and see the spleen, and the lungs, and the stomach and intestines, all these things that are part of the piece. He did a few people reviewing, and I bring chaplaincy students, because chaplaincy people have to become comfortable with death.

They have to be familiar with it, because people who are offering spiritual care, like chaplains, will end up being with people who are dying, and will be sometimes the primary caregivers of the situation when people have died. And so to be able to enter into the world of dying and be familiar with it in all kinds of ways, and their relationship to it all, is a very important part of their practice. So Bob Stahl and I, our two groups kind of meet at the anatomy lab once a year, kind of a wonderful thing. And so the body, the body parts. So some people in this world of ours, it happens from time to time, are actually already very focused on body parts. Many people are very focused on physical looks and attractive looks, or not attractive looks, or whatever kind of looks.

Or, you know, and people are concerned with their own looks, the physical appearance of people is a hugely big deal for many human beings. People spend an inordinate amount of time—I mean, the number of beauty salons downtown Redwood City, I'm just amazed. Maybe, you know, maybe I think I belong to a different world, you know, at the present moment. I don't go, don't we think? But I'm amazed at all these beauty salons down there. It must be a lot of money being spent at beauty salons.

And so, you know, looks—the hair is a body part, the face is a body part, skin is a body part. And then we talk—then there's pornography, right? I mean, probably none of you, but it's a big deal in our society. Body parts, sex—few people think about sex. Body parts are a big deal in our society, and people do cause a lot of suffering around focusing on body parts, and thinking about body parts, and criticizing body parts, and feeling they have the wrong

body parts, and the whole body part thing is a kind of a mess for many people—not everyone, luckily, but you know, ninety-eight percent of it's a high percentage. And it's very sad what people do to themselves.

And it's a way of being connected to the body parts, but it's also a way of being very disconnected from ourselves. It's very easy. It's kind of like being—you know, some people say skin deep, or just be on the surface of things. And the more people fantasize and think about, you know, skin and hair and body parts, the more we can have more connection not to the depth of life and depth of who the people are, but kind of just a surface appearance of things. It's not a particularly deep spiritual way of being connected to the world or to ourselves. It's not a liberating path, if that's what we're primarily focused on.

So with that as a reference point, people are already doing Body Part Contemplation Review. The Buddha does it for a very different purpose. Exactly what the purpose is, the text doesn't say except it's, you know, it's in the context of a text that wants people to develop a heightened sense of present moment awareness. So if there's something about contemplating the body in a deep way that heightens present moment awareness—for the monks who, monastics who are taught it after they ordain, it's partly taught as a concentration practice, and they memorize the thirty-one words for different parts. And it's not exactly like a mantra, but it is kind of like a guide to stay focused. They focus. They focus: head, hair, body hair, skin, flesh, bones, marrow. They just go through all these things, and each time they say a word, they visualize it or imagine it or feel it best they can.

And it's a way they get very concentrated. But it's not just a concentration practice. It's something about the contemplation of the body that changes our relationship to the present moment, which is what I see when I bring my chaplaincy students to the anatomy lab. It's quite something to see the reverence, the care, the silence, the attention, the focus, the concentration that people have when they have a chance to be introduced sometimes for the first time ever to the gift that someone has made of their body. They're always gifted, these bodies gifted for this purpose. And when we're taken into the anatomy lab, the anatomist talks about this as a gift, and how we're going in with reverence, with care and gratitude for what we're being offered a chance to do.

And then, with a most respectful kind of way, these bodies are opened up there. They've been cut open. And we get to look at hearts and lungs and spleens and intestines and diaphragms. And it's fascinating to see. And the students get very focused, very concentrated. Last time we went a few weeks ago, there were four different bodies on the beds that we're looking at. And then, you know, we were studying parts and studying all this. And then it

was time to leave. And I said, as before, we leave, let's all just stand here in silence for a while out of respect for these gifts, for these people, and this event, and kind of meditate and be present.

So we stood silently for about two minutes or so, just—I think most people had their eyes open, just sat very, very still. A whole different atmosphere descended on the room. And then I was inspired, and this came out of me: These are people we're training to offer spiritual care. In a way, in hospitals and places, are called chaplains. And I said, what is not in what we, what is not present in these bodies, is the domain of chaplainship, is the domain of spiritual care. What's not in these bodies, these corpses, that's the domain of spiritual care. What is it that's not in these bodies, what is it that animates it? The consciousness and the vitality. What is that? And we know, and to have it gone in a present absence of this consciousness and vitality. What is that? And to feel that, and then to feel it in ourselves. Well, I'm still right now. We're conscious right now. There's a vitality. It's a blink of the eye in terms of cosmic time. But this is the time that we have to be aware, this amazing, precious thing, to be aware, to be attentive, to know we're alive, not to be lost in Facebook here and alive.

So the Buddha talks about this, reviewing these. He has thirty-one parts that he lists, and it starts on the surface, and some writers talk about how it starts at the surface, and then it goes in deeper and deeper and deeper. And it's kind of a path or journey to get us really connected here. And it's attentive, maybe. So I'll read it to you. And now, these thirty-one parts. And maybe you can imagine what it's like to maybe even close your eyes to actually—let's do it a little differently. Let's do a little exercise.

So first we'll do an exercise that I like, which is with your hand. So kind of look at one of your hands, and some of you've had a long history together, and you might have had all kinds of thoughts about your hands, that the fingers are too short. They're too long. They're too stubby. They're too thin. The hand is maybe too wrinkled, or it's too this or that, or maybe your thumb's never been thought about—it's just your hand. So you can have the relation. It's your thought hand. You can think about it. Now close your eyes and, with your eyes closed, feel that hand.

Feel the sensations of the hand. Feel sensations on the back of the hand, the palm of the hand, the fingers. Feel the tingling and the warmth and coolness, the vibration, the hardness and softness, the weight, heavy or light. Maybe there's little movements that you can feel. And if you hold your hands really still to just feel, just sense with the idea that you are going to feel, sense the body's, the hand's experience of itself. Not your idea of it, not your history with it, your concepts of it, your judgments of it. But how does the hand experience itself? If

you're really quiet, the hand doesn't even feel like it's a hand. It just feels tingling and warm and cold and tautness, tightness, looseness, heavy. All these sensations are swirling around, jumping around, moving around. It's a very different relationship. Open your eyes.

So there's a very different relationship, the relationship between the thoughts, ideas we have about, and judgments we might have about something like a hand, and feeling it directly for itself. So in this regard, you have all kinds of ideas about yourself, your body, who you are, your bodies. Do this, do that. Not enough this, not enough that. And all kinds of ideas people have, you know, their bodies. But what if we deconstruct a little bit and step away from the thoughts and ideas, judgments? We have the grand picture we have, the idea we have of the body, the concepts. What if we step away from all those, and really allow ourselves to connect in a deeper way, from almost like from the inside out, for the body itself.

So now close your eyes again, and I'll read this passage slowly. And as we get to these thirty-one parts of the body, kind of like you did for the hand, but maybe with some imagination, some ability to kind of imagine or feel or sense this particular body part in and of itself, as if it stands alone, just its experience of it, the reality of it, by itself standing out in highlight. And the Buddha said a practitioner reviews the body from the soles of the feet, from the soles of the feet all the way to the top of the hair, held together by skin and is filled with many kinds of unappetizing parts. This body—in this body there are head hairs, hairs of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, large intestines, small intestines, stomach, and the contents of the stomach: feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, saliva, mucus, oil of the joints, and urine. Before you open your eyes, what is it to contemplate or consider the body from this point of view—that it is made up of many different parts? And what would you imagine would it be like to, every day, to spend a period of time really connecting and reviewing and reflecting that this is what makes up the body, what impact you think that might have on you. OK, so you can open your eyes.

So that's the simple exercise that Buddha gives—review. It's called reviewing the thirty-one parts of the body. And he doesn't really explain here too much about why to do this or what the purpose is. But now, that we've done this little exercise, what do you think some of the useful purposes are of spending time reviewing these body parts or just going through them? And could you do—did anything that happened to you here that you can imagine points to some benefit from doing this? When I was doing it, I just thought that my mind—I sometimes think of my mind and body as a sort of entangled, singular piece. And I guess what went through my mind is that I'm not aware of a lot of my body, that my mind only extends through

a very few parts as a very superficial idea of the body. So it filled it out, yet art simplifies it. Image kind of covers over parts. You know, I think my mind thinks it's in touch with a body, but it actually is very ignorant of all parts of the body.

Someone else, please? It has a humbling effect, thank you. A humbling effect. I think it begins to point to the fact that we're often made up of different pieces, and that we're not just a single whole thing. So it deconstructs the idea that we're just not a singularity, but we're made up of all these different parts. And what do you think the advantage is to realize we're made up of many parts rather than one single thing?

Well, I think ultimately it points towards *anattā*, and the realization that our concept of self is not a single coherent entity, but rather it's a collection of different parts and systems that work together. So your suggestion gets very—seem to have a singular idea who we are and we're kind of—which is often a concept or idea, and that it's interesting to break that singular idea apart and see we're actually made up, we're constructed of all kinds of little different parts. So in the back quarter, you know, one of the important goals is detachment. And so it helps us detach by trying to investigate the body in terms of where the attachments might be. So you entered it. So by going through the body, I may start noting—we notice where you, where you get stuck, where the attachments are. You might be, for instance, very much about appearance, I say. You might be like, really attached to your face. Grand, I get nothing on. And that has something about that. He says that it's a very important exercise to do because it helps liberate. Yes, that's great, it helps liberate.

So where is the other microphone there close by? Oh, it's over in the seat. Let's make it, bring it over here. That all away. Well, first I was some really—I was thinking about those corpses, and how without, as you said, without the animation, without that, the spirit, we're kind of just piles of flesh and meat and everything. But when you were doing the—when I was listening to the thirty-one parts, and really thinking about each part, and realizing, well, right now, each and every one of those parts is embodying some of that animation, some of that spirit. And I was realizing, I don't often, you know, think about—is my spleen talking to me today? You know, I, you know, I definitely, you don't work on my hair, you know, but not too well. But I don't. I realized, oh, my gosh, there's probably all kinds of messages that are within me and in all those body parts that—it made me want to, you know, kind of salute my liver or gall bladder—that one's gone anyway. Some of them, you know? So I—so sounds like a wonderful appreciation of this. I enjoyed that very much. Nice, nice, okay?

So I believe that one of these purposes of this exercise that Taylor was pointing to is that it's one of those ways that we can cut through the abstract concepts we live in, and we live

in a lot of abstract, abstract concepts about ourselves as to—we're singularities, and we're caught up or cut up in, you know, building it up, building up, or defending, or doing something with this singular thing we think we are. And sometimes it's appropriate, sometimes it's reasonable enough, but sometimes it's living in a world of very superficial or even delusion to live in it. And it's okay sometimes from time to time to be superficial and deluded. It's not like a sin—it's not the crime in Buddhism. But it's not so connected. It's not connected in some kind deeper way. And so if we want to kind of wake up and really feel and be attentive and be present, it helps to be able to cut through some of the delusions and preoccupations that we have. And one of the preoccupations we have is the attractiveness of the body, the preoccupation with the body so attractive, and the strong desire for sensuality, sensual pleasure that comes around, you know, bodies. And that's the classic, at least in the tradition, a classic one of the classic reasons for this meditation is to cut through excessive fixation on sensual pleasure, physical pleasure that young monastics might have.

And so here the word here that I translate as unattractive—in Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation, he calls it foul. We view the body as full of many kinds of—he uses impurity here—of an impurity thus. And you know, not many people, a lot of people in the West, don't want to consider that their body and body parts are impure. It's kind of like that doesn't quite compute, doesn't work, right? The word that's a synonym for this is non-beautiful, you know. Maybe that works a teeny bit better, but when they did a colonoscopy, I got to watch the TV monitor, and I thought it was quite beautiful in there. It was all clean and shiny. I was like looking at—oh, I don't like—it's like looking in the Grand Canyon. Always kind of an awe. So that idea, you know, non-beautiful doesn't work either. But so that's how I come up with the idea of unappetizing, you know, some of these things—mucus and urine and the contents of your stomach, you know?

You know, so that's one of the classic uses of this kind of meditation is to, if people are excessively preoccupied with sex and that kind of physical pleasure, the theory is that this is supposed to kind of cut through that. And so you can try it if it ever becomes an issue, and see what it does for you. But I think it has a lot of different functions to do this. And one of the functions, as we talked about already, is starting to break down the gross or the general concepts we tend to live in. And so this is, you know, seeing the body is not just a singularity, but also made up all these parts. And to be able to consider each part in its own kind of by itself is emphasized by the simile that this text then gives, and here's a simile for it.

This—just so, when we view all these different parts of the body. Just as if there were a bag with an opening at both ends, so I contemplate the human body open at both ends, a body

open at both ends with many sorts of grain, such as hill rice, red rice, beans, peas, millet, and white rice. And a person with good eyes were to open the bag and review it thus: This is hill rice, this is red rice, these are beans, these are peas, this is millet, this is white rice. So before you open the bag, it just feels inside, just feels like a lot of seeds, I suppose. But if you look in it, each of those different pieces of grain is distinct for itself, and you see them as being their own thing. So with that kind of clarity, to distinguish each of these body parts is part of this exercise in the teachings on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, this classic text that I'm going through slowly.

There are thirteen exercises for cultivating this heightened awareness, and generally most teachers will pick a few of these exercises to focus on—most teachers that I know, this is their least usual one, the one that's discussed the least. And certainly for me, also as a teacher, I don't—I think I've talked about this very little, and I've done very little of this practice for myself. So not something I speak with a lot of experience. But as we go through the text, I thought it was interesting to go through this piece as well and see what it says. And then we'll see next time—I guess next Monday—that in the text moves on to another different way of breaking through the uniformity or the singularity of the body and being able to deconstruct it down to the building blocks of our experience. And there's something about being able to kind of drop out of the concepts and ideas and get down to the kind of building blocks of how our senses pick up our experience before it begins creating its concepts. That's very powerful. And the essence of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, especially in Burma, the way it's taught there, has to do with this next exercise we're going to do under what's called the four elements.

And so, whereas this one is kind of not very popular as far as I know in much of the world, doesn't—of all these exercises, it's probably one of the least popular, the next one is actually sometimes one of the more popular ones. And we'll do that, I think, next week. So care for yourself and be more connected to your world inside. Your world is precious. You have this world of yourself for only a few short years. Be there. And the wonderful thing is that if you really become grounded and centered and aware and awake in your body, it's magical. The connection you'll have with the world around you. And it's so much richer to be connected and alive in a three-dimensional world than it is to be in the two-dimensional world of your device. Spend more time in the three-dimensional world. It's a great thing. Thank you.