

Satipaṭṭhāna (25) Parts of the Body

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In this journey through the 13 exercises of the Buddha's discourse on the Four Foundations for Awareness, for mindfulness, we come to the fourth exercise. It is mindfulness or a reflection on parts of the body.

All along, we have been practicing mindfulness of the body – developing awareness that is embodied. We have been mindful of ourselves in postures and while doing specific activities. Now the focus is on bringing more specificity to mindfulness of the body by becoming aware, mindful, or focused on 31 different parts of the body.

The Pali verb for what we do in this activity is a rich word. It has connotations that can mean to visualize or to see in the mind's eye. It can also mean to review or to reflect on something. This has a double meaning in English as well. The word "view" means to look. "Reflect" also has an association with seeing. For example, we can see our reflection in water or a mirror.

Exactly how the mind is engaged in considering this depends on the person who does it. Some people have a strong ability to visualize, and some do not. Some people have a strong ability to conceptualize what is being discussed without actually seeing it.

I have done visualization practices at times, but I never felt I was particularly good at being able to visualize. It made a huge difference when I started *imagining* myself visualizing. Visualizing itself is a use of the imagination. But, somehow, when I imagined I was doing it, I was more able to get into the event – get into the ideas being held in imagination. For me, imagining was also a lighter touch in the mind. When I visualized something, I found myself working too much. But when I imagined myself visualizing something, there was no work in it. It was more of an effortless place for me.

How the words "reflect," "review," "imagine," and "visualize" should be interpreted is very individual. You are allowed to do that because this practice is about what supports *you* to develop clarity, stability, insight, and a certain freedom. We are seeing that the *Satipaṭṭhāna* uses a variety of different mental capacities for the same purpose of developing lucid awareness. As we do this, we start learning these capacities and recognizing which ones are useful in different situations.

Let us review some of the verbs that have been talked about so far. One is to know – to know we are breathing. Another is to experience – to feel the whole body. Then there is to relax or calm the bodily constructions. There is to know the different postures we are in. There is to have full awareness or full comprehension while we are doing activities. In the refrain, there is the capacity to abide and observe. Now we are using a different mental capacity – a reflection on or visualization of something. People have different strengths and capacities, but they are all about engaging the mind.

The fourth exercise of the sutta is a practice on 31 parts of the body. Later Buddhist traditions added the brain to the list, so there are 32. New monastics – at least some – cherish this practice. Often in Thailand – I do not know about other countries – when a person is ordained as a monastic, this is the first practice they are given: to cultivate the practice on the 32 parts of the body.

This practice has a variety of different functions. One is that you are supposed to memorize the list and be able to recite it with ease. There is something about the act of memorizing and then reciting things from memory that nicely engages the mind. The heightened attention or presence needed to memorize something begins to train or support the mind to have heightened attention for breathing – for present moment experience.

There is an overlap between the kind of focused present moment attention needed for memorization and the kind of focused attention needed to practice mindfulness in the present moment. By memorizing, we learn

something about a slightly activated or energized mind that does not have to be tense or stressed. It shows us how to be present in a way that is not too lackadaisical, complacent, or lazy. There is clarity and intentness. When you memorize, there is intentness in what you are doing.

For monastics, especially new ones, there is a lot of memorization. It is not just memorizing texts so you can chant them. Memorizing also trains the mind and builds up the strength of the mind. The heightened capacity for lucid awareness supports mindfulness practice.

The practice of the 31 parts of the body engages the mind in a way that helps it get concentrated. Concentration is a very important part of mindfulness practice. We started with mindfulness of the body. Now we are introducing something that for many people supports them in becoming more concentrated. We seriously undertake the 31 parts of the body meditation to develop concentration so that when we continue with the *Satipaṭṭhāna*, this concentration supports us.

The second function of the practice is to give us a different orientation for how to experience our body than what we commonly carry around unconsciously or subconsciously in our minds. Because of our culture, advertisements, popular society, and family experiences, we often have a biased or partial self-image of our bodies. It is not the full picture.

Some people have a negative self-image of their bodies. Their body troubles them or they overly focus on their body. Or they have positive views of their body and so they focus on making themselves beautiful and just right. This focus on the body is a multi-billion dollar industry in our country and maybe the world. It causes a lot of suffering and stress. It supports attachment, clinging, grasping, fears, and aversions. All kinds of things happen around how we view the body.

This practice offers a separate way of experiencing the body that is a little more concentrated. It also has a different orientation or perspective on the body. This perspective breaks up the solidity or authority of the body image we are burdened with. This old body image gets in the way of the mind settling deeply into an alternative way of being in the body – from the inside out.

The third aspect of the 31 parts of the body meditation is that they are said to be unclean. They are unpure. The theory is that if we focus on the body in this way, it breaks down not only our body image but also our excessive attachment to the body. For people very attached to their body, seeing it as unclean can break the attachment.

Many people in the West are very resistant to the idea of seeing the body as impure or unclean. Many who have seen the inside of a body say it seems quite beautiful. But imagine finding your loved one's pubic hair or snot in your food. Or imagine finding sloughed-off skin or fingernails in the stew they made.

I think for many people the sense of body parts appearing in their stew is indeed repulsive. It is unclean and not quite right. You do not want to eat the body part, even though it may be beautiful when on the other person. Something does not seem right about eating it if it is in the stew.

There is a perspective here that is healthy – and which, if we are attached to the body, can help free us. We are using the imagination for this purpose if it is needed.

I will read the list of the 31 parts of the body. I encourage some of you to memorize the list. See if you can learn about the heightened attention that comes from memorization and is useful for mindfulness.

In this body, there is head hair, body hair, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, tendons, bones, marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, large intestines, small intestines, contents of the stomach, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, oil, saliva, snot, fluid of the joints, and urine.

We will explore and practice with the 31 parts of the body for the next two days. Hopefully, rather than this being a distraction from mindfulness, you begin to appreciate the richness and range of how the mind is engaged, and how this can support the direction of the mind becoming lucidly aware and present – the movement towards freedom.

For those of you who are inclined, memorize the list. This kind of memorization supports concentration and the practice of this exercise.