

# Satipaṭṭhāna (31) Skeleton Contemplation

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Today we move into the last of the six mindfulness exercises of the body. The Buddha starts with breathing, then mindfulness of postures, activities, the parts of the body, and the elements or properties of the body. Now there is mindfulness of a corpse.

This exercise begins with the words “as if” – as if we are viewing a corpse. Here we are calling upon the imagination. Some Buddhists will spend time with corpses. *Marāṇasati*, mindfulness of death, is a time-honored practice in Buddhism. Most years before COVID, I took people to an anatomy lab to spend time with a corpse. It is fascinating to see and be with a corpse in an anatomy lab, where we experience a whole different perspective on life, the body, and people.

When I was a freshman in college, I took a drawing class. Halfway through the class, the teacher took us to the anatomy lab at the university. Laid out in the lab was the corpse of a person who had died. It was the first time I had seen a corpse in that detail. We were supposed to draw it.

We were there for two days. On the first day, I drew the person’s foot because that was the furthest I could get away from having to deal with death. On the next day, I realized that I had been avoidant. I decided to really be there with it, so I drew the face.

The teacher explained that he took his drawing classes to the anatomy lab so everyone’s drawings would be stronger. I never asked what that meant, but he appreciated that something shifted for people.

So, this is a time-honored way of being reminded of our mortality, of knowing that we will die. When you are young, it is easy to think or operate as if, “No, I will never die” or, “I know I will die, but it is irrelevant.” Consider, at some point, looking death right in the eye. Take it in and consider it to become free in this life – to connect to your lived experience so that you can live freely.

The contemplation of death is not meant to glorify it. For different people, different benefits arise from contemplating death. It helps some people to show up and be present in an acute way for this life. It’s like: “Now is the time we have to be aware – to practice. Let us not put it off.”

In each of the exercises of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the direction the practice is going is to become deeply settled, peaceful, and undistracted. Settle back and observe things arise and pass away, until observing arising and passing away of phenomena – the changing flow of experience – allows something inside to let go of the clinging and grasping.

When the sutta introduces the corpse contemplation, it is for the purpose of getting concentrated and settled – being able to observe in a deep way. It is not meant to be disturbing, though it might be so initially. The corpse contemplation is meant to develop concentration and peacefulness. It does not work for everyone. But knowing that this is the purpose, we orient ourselves around this contemplation with that as the North Star.

How can we contemplate a corpse in a way that supports this idea? It is a bit of visualization. It may be a compelling one. Rather than going to a real corpse, it may be less disturbing or challenging to imagine one. So just lightly imagine a corpse in a way that is not disturbing.

It is nice for beginners to start in the middle of the nine contemplations: contemplating a skeleton. So if you come across a human skeleton in an anatomy lab or museum, contemplate it.

I practiced in Thailand with a famous teacher named Ajahn Buddhadasa. He was into practicing and teaching outdoors. Because it rains there, he had a big dharma hall with open sides and a large roof to protect people from the rain. Respectfully hanging from the rafters were a couple of skeletons. One had a sign under it that said, "Miss Thailand, 1936." I imagine it had been up all those years in the dharma hall, a place of teachings and meditation, for a good reason. I suppose it is to remind people that any attachment to physical beauty – to identify with, hold on to, and be preoccupied with that – is only temporary.

Underneath, there is a skeleton. In what way is that not gross? In what way is it not disturbing? In what way can we contemplate a skeleton so that it is beneficial and supports us on this path of freedom and liberation.

It is easy to be disturbed. It is easy to protest. It can be much more difficult to put that gently aside and not reject it. If we want to benefit from these exercises, just put that aside. We do not benefit if we protest. We benefit if we do the inner work. "How can this be helpful for me?"

The text begins:

*As if one is viewing a corpse ...*

It ends with each of the nine contemplations, reflecting:

*This body too has a nature like this, will become like this, will not avoid this.*

In other words, the purpose of contemplating a corpse is to realize that this will happen to *me* – this too will happen.

In what way does taking in the truth of this discovery, this realization, benefit us? In what way do we benefit from that? Where is the wisdom in that? How does it guide us in a good direction? How does it wake us up? How does it help us shed the distracted, preoccupied mind – the mind that is involved in things that may not be to our benefit? How does it create seriousness, aliveness, or dedication? In the context of this meditation, how does it create a love for being present now, so we can get settled here, really clear that this is the place where the meditation is – here in the present moment, here and now.

Later, I will describe more of the contemplation of the corpse. For now, I would like to encourage you to contemplate a corpse. I do not know where you live, but around here, the population of skeletons increased dramatically last Halloween. I have never seen so many Halloween skeletons in different places, some of which are still hanging. I saw one a week or so ago. Someone had outfitted a skeleton with mountain climbing shoes, belts, and other gear. It was climbing underneath the eaves up onto the roof of a house. People did all kinds of fun things with skeletons for Halloween.

Perhaps, contemplate skeletons. Consider your skeleton. Now it is clothed with tendons and flesh, but consider that someday your skeleton will be without flesh. Or someday, if you get cremated, the ashes of your skeleton will be all that is left. You might consider this and think about it.

The exercise is to consider how to do it in a beneficial way, so you are not getting depressed, upset, or horrified. To contemplate your skeleton in a way that lights some greater present moment awareness – some ability to say, "Okay, here I am – no question about it." With a skeleton, there is no animated life, no awareness, no sensations. There is nothing we see, nothing we hear. How do we rest in that – be free in that? So that is the homework if you would like to do it.

Here is the text of the skeleton contemplation:

*As if a practitioner were to see a corpse cast away in a charnel ground, [reduced to] bones not held by tendons, scattered in all directions – here a hand bone, there a foot bone, here a shin bone, there a thigh bone, here a pelvis, there a spine, here a jaw bone, there a tooth, here a skull – to this one connects one's own body, "This body too has a nature like this, will become like this, will not avoid this."*

Thank you. I look forward to our time tomorrow.