

Satipaṭṭhāna (27) Body Free of Stories

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This is the last talk on the fourth exercise of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. It is easy to overlook this part – I did for many years. It is easy for a western audience to dismiss because it refers to the body parts as unclean. Editors later added a title to the original text of the exercise that refers to the repulsiveness of the body. Many people in the West are even more reactive to that: “Why would you see the body as repulsive or unclean?”

Perhaps we should not guess what the ancients were thinking when they used that language. But the Buddha sometimes has very negative language for our bodily

form, bodily feelings, perceptions, mental activity, concoctions, creations, and what we in the West often call consciousness. Sometimes he says it is impermanent, empty, vain, a tumor, an illness, a burden – a long list of very negative things.

If you read this out of context, you could think, “Wow, these Buddhists are completely world-negating, opposed to the body, and treat it as a boil, blister, or just a sore.” But the teachings about how this thing is a sickness or illness use the words “as if” in a particular context. The context is the deep sense of well-being, happiness, and joy that can be experienced in meditation. It is the joy of being deeply absorbed and concentrated that comes with deep meditation.

For some people, when they are able to drop into deep, concentrated states – this is the highest pinnacle of joy and happiness they have ever experienced in their life in a sustained way. In *that* context – where there is so much well-being and happiness – be careful not to be attached to the body, perceptions, or even consciousness. Any attachment, preoccupation, or fixation in that context feels like a drag. It feels like: “Why would I agitate, muddy, or lose this deep sense of well-being? The whole body feels beautiful, glowing, alive, and settled. Finally, I am at home in my body, and it seems like a wellspring of well-being. Why would I separate myself into the world of concoctions, stories,

ideas, or shoulds and shouldn'ts? Even ones that celebrate the body – the celebration of the body is also a form of separation.”

In that context of well-being, the Buddha says to relate to the body parts *as if* they are a drag so that you can stay connected. Do not get attached to the body so that you can stay connected to the well-being that is onward leading to liberation from all attachments.

So I interpret this fourth exercise, where it talks about the 31 parts of the body being unclean, in that way. It is in the context of developing greater well-being and happiness. It feels so good to be at home in the body, feeling comfortable in one's skin, settling in, and experiencing the body independent of the concoctions, stories, interpretations, and opinions one has. Why get involved in opinions and all these things?

When is it helpful, in being present for the body, to see that there are ways of relating to the body that are undesirable or maybe unclean, because they mire or dirty the waters of our attention and experience?

As we meditate on the 31 parts of the body, we are beginning to free ourselves more and more from concoctions. We are using our imagination, visualization, and inner sense to focus on the parts of the body. If we do the practice steadily – going through

each body part systematically – we develop greater embodiment, presence in the body, and a greater sensitivity to the way the mind concocts stories and ideas. We are learning how we can let go of stories and just stay with the body.

This is phenomenally useful. As the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* keeps going deeper into the basic practice of mindfulness of body, feelings, mind, and *dhamma*, we begin to loosen the grip of stories and ideas. Some of them are very connected to the body. One function of this exercise on the 31 parts of the body is to free us from that grip. Another is to begin appreciating and becoming increasingly sensitive to the concocting nature and story-making of the mind.

As we go deeper in *Satipaṭṭhāna* practice, we are becoming freer of the concocting nature of the mind – although we will still use our imagination to some degree in the next exercise. We are still learning these lessons.

Tomorrow we will start the fifth exercise – the four elements meditation. Much of western vipassana (the insight movement that comes out of Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein, and Sharon Salzberg) is based on the vipassana instructions – mindfulness instructions – that came from those of us who went to Asia to study the Mahasi practice. It is a particular form of vipassana

practice, named for the teacher Mahasi Sayadaw. His practice was centered on the four elements. He was not always explicit about it. It was not conveyed to the western practitioners. But the foundation of the modern western teachings – Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, the teachings of Spirit Rock and Insight Meditation Society – was the four elements meditation. So it has a pedigree. The lineage we are in centers on the four elements.

I will say one last thing about the parts of the body meditation. There is a wonderful vipassana teacher in Santa Cruz named Bob Stahl. Every year, he teaches almost a year-long course on the 32 parts of the body meditation. It is very popular with people in Santa Cruz. Some people who do this practice find a great love for it.

Perhaps, you will try it out. Memorize the list of body parts or some of the list. Usually, people memorize the body parts in groups of five or six. Then practice it the way we did today – meditating on skin, flesh, and bones – but using all the different body parts.

You can find the text for the 31 parts of the body in my translation of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* [here](#). You can also find it under the Resources menu of IMC's website.

Thank you, and I look forward to starting the four elements tomorrow.