

Satipaṭṭhāna (26) New Orientation to Body

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We are exploring the fourth exercise of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. To some, this may seem like a little detour because now we are using parts of the mind that are not usually associated with mindfulness practice, such as imagination, reflection, and consideration of our body parts.

The contemplation of body parts is a time-honored practice in the Buddhist tradition. For many novice monastics, this is the first practice they are given. It is meant to set the stage and create a foundation for further developing the practice. This practice can change the mental ecology, maybe making it easier to settle the mind when we get back to a more classic practice of mindfulness.

This practice is used to cultivate concentration. Some people will memorize the list of 31 parts of the body – or 32 if the brain is added. Then they keep reciting it. Some people practice doing it forward and backward. They memorize the list forward, starting with head hair and ending with urine, and then backward from urine to head hair. To stay with the list, and keep a regular pace while reciting it, requires focus and attention, which makes it hard to wander off and think about other things.

Doing it over and over again, like a mantra, requires alertness and a certain kind of effort. Over time, the distracted mind might quiet down and settle. We gather together and focus the mind. Then, because we are stable or steady, we can stop focusing on reciting the parts of the body and focus just on the practice itself. So it is a way of building concentration.

This practice also shifts our orientation towards the body. We may have an unhelpful orientation to the body, focusing on our body image. Some people get caught up in body image. They spend a tremendous amount of time fixing their body, making it just right. Body image often involves a lot of painful comparative thinking. Comparing ourselves to others causes a lot of suffering.

Concentration is one way to shift out of that mode. But we can also begin developing a different way of understanding and perceiving the body. We can look at the body parts individually so that each one stands out by itself – rather than seeing the body as a unified whole, which can sometimes lend itself to abstract concepts.

An analogy is given in the *sutta* for the specific way of seeing the body and its parts: as a bag, like a bag of skin, filled with rice and beans. Here is the description:

Just as if a person with good eyesight were to look into a sack with an opening at each end filled with various kinds of seeds, such as fine rice, paddy rice, mung beans, garbanzo beans, sesame seeds, and husk rice. One would recognize: “This is fine rice; this is paddy rice; these are mung beans; these are garbanzo beans; these are sesame seeds.” So a practitioner reviews, visualizes, imagines this very body upward from the soles of the feet and downward from the hair of the head, covered with skin, and full of various kinds of unclean things:

“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, snot, saliva, fluid of the joints, and urine.”

So one reviews oneself in the same way. When I imagine this bag full of seeds and beans of different colors, I can see each one clearly for what it is. I can also see the difference between them. They are all different and distinct. I imagine these seeds as being quite beautiful. Fresh, dried new seeds are so beautiful to see. I admire them. There can be a positive association with how we view the body, even though it contains the idea of the body as being unclean or impure. We are shifting our orientation in a new way to the parts of the body and feeling differently about them.

We can memorize the list of the 31 parts and then use it as a body scan, simply going through the list over and over again. This is not like a chant. It is a guided meditation you give yourself. You steadily go through the body, feeling or imagining the different parts. This practice can break up the hegemony of our old body images, ideas, and challenges and move us towards new ways of experiencing the body.

This new way of experiencing the body can be more compassionate and freeing. It also begins to awaken our capacity to feel the body, to be in the body. One of the great functions of this exercise is to start feeling more connected to our body, so that it becomes easier

to practice breathing with the whole body, sensing the whole body.

The more you can feel your whole body, the more easily the body becomes a receptor or repository for some of the good feelings that develop as meditation practice continues. The pleasures of relaxation, joy, and delight come as we settle into the practice. Our practice can build on that foundation of well-being spreading through the body. This makes it easier to stay grounded and present.

So these are some of the functions of this exercise. The last function is for people who have a lot of lust – sexual imagination of partners and the creative things that human bodies can do with each other. Contemplating the 32 parts of the body is sometimes given to break up the way of viewing bodies that is required for sexual lust.

You might not feel that this practice is very interesting or valuable. But it is one of the antidotes for people who are trying to meditate – especially when doing a lot of meditation – and who find themselves repeatedly pulled into the world of sexual fantasy and desires. This practice can be less frustrating than continually working against one's sexual ideas, feelings, and desires. Remember that this practice is often given to new

monks and nuns. Young men and women may be more oriented toward sexual lust than older people.

This is a practice of concentration – developing contact with the body, awakening the body, and finding more freedom through a new connection to the body. We will spend one more day on this topic, and then we will move on to the next exercise. I hope that the contact we have here will give you some appreciation for this practice. I also hope you will have a sense of how the practice can be a beneficial resource.

So: 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, snot, saliva, fluid of the joints, and urine.

May you enjoy your body today. May you be connected to your body, curious about your body, and more familiar with your body. Thank you.