MINDFULNESS OF THE BODY ADAPTATIONS

The component elements of the Satipatthana Sutta were composed millennia ago in a significantly different cultural setting than the complexities of the 21st century. The Buddha himself stated multiple times that each person (and, by inference, each generation) must work out his or her liberation, and that even the teachings of an enlightened being such as himself are only guidelines and must be realized by each person through direct experience. It is somewhat ironic that, even though a basic concept of historical Buddhism is *anicca* (ah-nee-chah), *the transitory nature of subjective experience*, traditionalistic commentary and teaching, especially in the Eastern parts of the world where Buddhism took root, assumes that the same conditions and practices that were prevalent in those times must still be adhered to today.

We don’t live in a pre-industrial culture and modern scientific research offers much more information to work with in formulating a path towards liberation than previously in human history; therefore, we must sort through what the Suttas have to offer and find ways to adapt our current conceptual understandings and practices to our benefit. Even so, each of us must directly experience and validate the teachings found in the Pali Canon and the subsequent commentaries. In effect, current practitioners, teachers and authors are currently adding to the long list of commentaries. Our job is to read the suttas and commentaries and then sort through whether they work under current cultural circumstances.

Below are the remaining extractions from the First Foundation of Mindfulness that weren’t reviewed during earlier talks in late May and early June, 2021, (which can be found in the archives). I will provide commentary about these remaining extractions regarding their relevancy and offer alternative views and practice suggestions that are more contemporary and supported by current scientific knowledge. This is not disrespectful of the traditional suttas imagery and concepts, which were appropriate and apparently quite effective in the context of an earlier era of human history. Here are the excerpts, followed by my observations:

**Foulness- The Bodily Parts**

“Again, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu reviews this same body up from the soles of the feet and down from the top of the hair, bounded by the skin, as full of many kinds of impurity thus: ‘In this body there are head-hairs, body-hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, large intestines, small intestines, contents of the stomach, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, spittle, snot, oil of the joints, and urine. Just as though there were a bag with an opening at both ends full of many sorts of grain, such as hill rice, red rice, beans, peas, millet, and white rice, and a man with good eyes were to open it 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, too, a bhikkhu reviews this same body…as full of many kinds of impurity thus: ‘In this body there are

head-hairs…and urine’

“In this way he abides contemplating the body as a body internally, externally, and both internally and externally…And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That too is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body.

It is confusing to me that the Buddhist emphasis on setting aside the hindrance of aversion, as reflected in the contemplation found in the Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness, builds a case for aversion and ill-will in the above-quoted contemplation on the foulness of body parts. Additionally, I value the concreteness that is embedded in contemplating the sensations of breathing and attending to the positions and actions of the body. This contemplation involves contemplating an imagined review of the organs and products of metabolism, most of which cannot be directly experienced. All the contemplations are mind-created, but I prefer those that are more substantial, such as the direct experience of sitting, standing, walking, or reclining, found earlier in the sutta. Those contemplations minimally involve mental processing, and, in fact, their purpose is to provide a tangible experience that can be contrasted with the ephemeral and rapidly changing nature of thoughts and impulses. Awareness of the fleeting aspect of mental phenomena is the most challenging task in realizing the potential of the Satipatthana Sutta. I will comment about the last stanza of the quote regarding internal and external aspect of body awareness, after reviewing the other characteristic contemplations.

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**The Primary Elements**

“Again, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu reviews this same body, however it is placed, however disposed, as consisting of elements thus: ‘In this body there are the earth element, the water element, the fire element and the air element.’ Just as though a skilled butcher or his apprentice had killed a cow and was seated at the crossroads with it cut up into pieces; so too, a bhikkhu reviews this same body…as consisting of elements thus: ‘In this body there are the earth element, the water element, the fire element, and air element.’

“In this way he abides contemplating the body as a body internally, externally, and both internally and externally…And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That too is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body.

Contemplating the Four Elements seems more understandable and workable in training the mind to be less obsessed with the process of thinking, which to the untrained mind seems to be a validation of an enduring/autonomous self. The Four Elements represent the way physical reality was understood by many pre-scientific cultures but is commonly disregarded by contemporary students of physics. It is also important to understand that the Four Elements are considered to be part of any sensory experience—we can contemplate each one separately while understanding that the other three elements also exist. I can, however, contemplate the tangible aspects of the *earth element* in sensing pressure in various areas of the body, including the subtle pressure that is experienced as air enters and exits the nostrils. Regarding the *air element*, that represents the contemplation of movement, which can be noted as the abdomen expands and contracts while breathing and other behaviors such as walking. The *fire element* is represented by varying sensations of coolness or warmth, which can also be noted while breathing—the air is relatively cooler when entering the body than when exiting, and this can be concretely observed. The *water element* is the most difficult to contemplate, as it is represented as the process of cohesion, for example the feeling of density that I can note in my upper lip. Again, this contemplation is intended to provide a tangible sensation that can counter the flightiness and insubstantiality of thinking and impulses.

**The Nine Charnel Grounds Contemplations**

“Again, bhikkhus, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, one, two, or three days dead, bloated, livid, and oozing matter, a bhikkhu compares this same body with it thus: ‘This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.’

“In this way he abides contemplating the body as a body internally, externally, and both internally and externally…And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That too is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body.

“Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, being devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, dogs, jackals, or various kinds of worms, a bhikkhu compares the same body with this thus: ‘This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.’

“In this way he abides contemplating the body as a body internally, externally, and both internally and externally…And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That too is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body.

“Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, a skeleton with flesh and blood, held together with sinews…a fleshless skeleton smeared with blood, held together with sinews…a skeleton without flesh and blood, held together with sinews…disconnected bones scattered in all directions-here a hand-bone, there a foot-bone, here a shin-bone, there a thigh-bone, here a hip-bone, there a back-bone, here a rib-bone, there a breast-bone, here and arm-bone, there a shoulder-bone, here a neck-bone, there a jaw-bone, here a tooth, there the skull-a bhikkhu compares this same body with it thus: ‘This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that it is not exempt from that fate.’

“In this way he abides contemplating the body as a body internally, externally, and both internally and externally…And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That too is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body.

“Again, as though her were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, bones bleached white, the color of shells…bones heaped up, more than a year old…bones rotted and crumbled to dust, a bhikkhu compares this same body with it thus: ‘This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.’

This contemplation is the least relevant and useful contemplation. The only experience for us that is readily available is what occurs when we encounter a dead animal when walking. The impression is more impactful regarding the odor of decomposition than visually. Traditionally, the renunciate is to spend several days in an area where bodies have been discarded and then perhaps eaten by scavenging animals or otherwise rotting away. The intention of the contemplation is to impress upon the mind the impermanence of the body and the inevitability of death, which until quite recently in human history was often quite evident and often occurs when a person is rather young. The goal of the practice is to motivate one’s commitment to diligent practice and concentrate the mind. As with the first contemplation mentioned above, it also seems to elicit aversion and il-will.

**[INSIGHT REFRAIN]**

“ in this way he abides contemplating the body as a body internally, or he abides contemplating the body as a body externally, or he abides contemplating the body as a body both internally and externally. Or else he abides contemplating in the body its arising factors, or he abides contemplating the in the body its vanishing factors, or he abides contemplating in the body both its arising and vanishing factors. Or else mindfulness that ‘there is a body’ is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body.

The refrain is repeated throughout the Four Foundations Discourse and establishes a conceptual structure for practicing the contemplations. The *internal* contemplation is obviously personal and introspective. The *external* contemplation has a commentarial understanding—one can empathetically identify with another person’s bodily experience, and this creates a sense of interbeing that supports lovingkindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy. This is understandable regarding the phrasing of *both internally and externally*. As was the case with the contemplation of the body parts reviewed above, the externalized contemplations involve the characteristic functioning of the mind more than the more tangible experience of internal sensations.

the terminology of the remaining parts I find to be interesting and understandable: “Or else mindfulness that ‘there is a body’ is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.” An important stage of my vipassana practice experience involves a “whole body” awareness that simply experiences the sensations throughout the body without an interest in discerning the arrangement of the limbs, or even a distinct separation from the rest of the environment. in order for this to be experienced, a high degree of stability of attention is combined with a characteristic of detachment regarding feelings; this perspective I find more useful in contemplating the remaining three foundations.

The next topic for discussion will review *vedanupassana* (vway-duh-nah-new-pah-sah-nah; please note the first syllable is not misspelled but is a translation of how it is pronounced), *mindfulness of feelings*, a key contemplation in the four foundations model. My discussion of that will include a review of the practices taught by U Ba Khin and spread throughout the world by S. N. Goenka, one of my teachers for several retreats.