

## *Mindfulness Immersed in the Body*

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Think of the bones in the tips of the fingers and the thumbs. Where are they right now? Try to locate them in your awareness and then notice if there's any tension around them. If there is, relax it. Breathe calmly. Then move up to the second joints. Do the same thing. Locate them in your awareness right now and look to see if there's any tension there. Hold in mind an image of those joints, the bones there, and of the tension relaxing. Then move up to the third joints. Same process. Then to the bones of the palms of the hands. Work your way gradually up the arms like this, bit by bit by bit, whatever you know about the bones, up to the shoulders and the shoulder blades.

Then start again with the toes. Work up the toes, the feet, the ankles, the legs, the pelvis, gradually going through the body up through the spine. Try to separate the vertebrae as much as you can. Take one vertebra at a time. Up through the back, the neck, and then to the skull. Then expand your awareness to fill the whole body so that you're with the whole skeleton. Keep that same sense of relaxation around all the bones.

Just hold that image in mind.

Then if you want, you can expand it to other organs in the body. You can go through all the different organs in the abdomen: the liver, stomach, small intestines, large intestines, pancreas, spleen, kidneys. Visualize them, have a sense of where they are, and then wherever they are in the body, think of relaxing that spot.

The purpose of this is to get you used to thinking about the organs in the body and to be relaxed about it at the same time.

This can be a topic of tranquility. Think about all the issues in life, how so many of them come around being worried about the body. Then you can ask yourself, what's there to get worried about? It's just a bunch of organs. If you take the body on its own terms, it's not much.

But we don't take it on its own terms. We have uses for it; we have plans for it. After all, it's through the body that we can experience whatever sensual pleasures the world has to offer. This is a large part of our attachment in the body, apart from lust, which is simply lust for a body itself. There are also all the other things we can access in the world through the body. If the body malfunctions, that cuts off our access.

This contemplation helps you see that our attachment of the body is not to the body in and of itself. It's to the associations we have with it. So if you're going to cut off your attachment, the contemplation has to go beyond the body itself, to thinking about all those sensual pleasures out there. How much are they worth?

Think of all the images the Buddha gives to describe sensuality. It's a bead of honey on the blade of a knife. Borrowed goods. A chain of bones thrown to a dog. There's nothing left on the bones, but the dog is going to sit there and gnaw and gnaw and gnaw on the bones. That's the mind's relationship to sensuality. It keeps gnawing, gnawing, gnawing on sensual thoughts but doesn't get any substance out of it, any real nourishment. As Ajaan Lee says, all of the flavor is in the dog's own saliva. In other words, the flavor lies in what you put into it. And is it worth putting anything into it?

The purpose of all these contemplations is to think about the allure of these things that we're attached to, and to think about the drawbacks of the attachment. These contemplations work only if you're convinced that there's something better. Otherwise, you tell yourself that you have to take the bad with the good, otherwise you don't get the good. But what if there's something better that we close off by going after what we think is good?

This is a contemplation you have to do every day, to locate where the location of your craving is. There's an interesting passage in the Canon where the Buddha says, "The things you've never seen: Is there any craving there?" He says No, but your first response might be, "Well, there are a lot of things I haven't seen that I would really like to see." But stop and think. The craving in that case is not located in the seeing of those things. It's located in your mental image of what those things are like.

So engage in these practices that go against the grain, to see where the craving is actually located. If you can't locate it properly, you really can't deal with it. Think about how much our mislocated cravings create trouble for us. In personal relationships, you might think you want the other person, but usually your craving is focused on an image of the other person. Then you're upset when the person doesn't fit in with the image.

The same principle applies to a lot of things, both outside and in. So we do these practices to locate exactly where those cravings are found. Sometimes the question arises, how many times do we have to do this before it sinks in, before it really hits home? As Ajaan Maha Boowa says, don't count. The effect of this kind of contemplation takes a while to seep in. You can't determine ahead of time that it's going to be 30 times or 100 times or 200 times. You just keep doing it again and again.

Think of how many times you've looked in the mirror. How many times was enough? We keep on looking, looking, looking, to see if there's something attractive there. Now you've got to change that habit. And because that habit is so deeply ingrained, it's going to take a while. When you look in the mirror, learn to look for the wrinkles. Not out of fear. Be avid to look for the wrinkles and the other signs of aging. Remind yourself, you wanted a body, this is what you've got. It provides you access to the human world. But at a price. Is the price worth it?

Again, if you don't see there are any alternatives, you'll say, "Sure, yeah, what else? What else could I want?" But the Buddha says there are alternatives. We create a sense of who we are, partly out of the body, partly out of our thoughts, our perceptions, our feelings. We construct an identity around these things, and then we're exposed to anything that would challenge that identity. The Buddha is basically saying we have a choice. There are other things we could identify with.

There's an interesting passage where Mahanama comes to see the Buddha. Mahanama is one of the Buddha's cousins, one of the few who didn't ordain. The tradition has it that he was a stream-winner. The Buddha was going to leave the place where Mahanama was staying. It was the end of the rains, which means he was going to go off wandering. Mahanama asks him, "What if a wise follower of the Buddha is passing away. How do I counsel him?"

The Buddha first says to reassure him that he is a wise follower. He has a good basis for going on to a good destination. Then ask him if he has any worries—about his family, about the pleasures he's going to leave behind. Tell him, "If you're concerned about human sensual pleasures, actually there're better sensual pleasures up in the heavens of the Four Great Kings. Set your mind there." Then when the person set his mind there, tell him that there are even better sensual pleasures among the Devas of the Thirty-three. He works up through the heavens, finally gets him to the level of the Brahma heavens. Then he says, "Even there, there's self-identity. It would be good if you could set your mind apart from self-identity." If the person can do that, the Buddha says, then that person's release is equal to the release of anyone who has gained full release.

So it is possible to work your way up, using sensuality, to pull yourself out of your attachment here to this body and this world. And then to remind yourself that no matter how good it gets, as long as there's an identity in a world, there's going to be an identity view—of who you are and what you're attached to. It's going to tie you down.

So you work on the body first, as a gross level of attachment, but then you have to work inward. After all, the body is not the problem. The problem is in our desires around it, and our desires are based on perceptions. You have to see what

motivates the perceptions that say the body is worth holding on to, whether you see it is worth holding on to because it's attractive or because it's useful for other purposes. You want to make sure, at the very least, that the purposes for which you hold on to the body are connected with the Dhamma. And then you have to release the mind from that.

So we work our way up. Let's start by being comfortable with seeing the parts of the body, regarding the body in this way so that it's not such a shock when you have to leave it. It's not such a shock when you realize it's going to fall apart. You realize that it's not such a great tragedy.

That allows you to look at where the attachments are in the mind. Because that's where the real work needs to be done.