

Second Foundation of Mindfulness

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Tonight I'm going to discuss the last 2 objects of contemplation in the 1st Foundation, then cover the 2nd Foundation.

Both Foundations are meant to loosen our attachment to the body. We're most strongly attached to the Body as "us." The Buddhist idea of anatta teaches that there's no enduring and separate "self." I've often had people scoff at the notion by gesturing to their bodies and saying, "Well, here I am." In the last 2 objects of the 1st Foundation, the Satipatthana Sutta seems to be asking, "Oh, really?"

These two contemplations look at anatomical parts, and corpses. Contemplating these objects also discourages sensual cravings. And ego attachment – the whole infatuation with beauty. Besides being a big component of how people see "themselves," these mind states are often interwoven with feelings of being *attracted* or *attractive*, which motivate physical intimacy. This whole part of our lives involves many other mental twists and turns that all involve attachment.

So the Body is an object that's very prone to clinging, and thus dukkha. A quick recitation of the sutta's contemplations of corpses totally does the trick for me and many others – instantly overcoming attachment. We go from being enthralled by sensual beauty to being *relatively* dispassionate about it.

Some people may think this takes the fun out of it, but we can still recognize when someone's appearance matches our notion of beauty without having it control our thoughts, emotions and actions. This mental distance lets us grow into love with someone, rather than taking impulsive actions that lead to heartache and disruption.

Last week we covered several easily observed contemplations of the Body. Now let's turn to the next contemplation, of the Body's **anatomical parts**.

Here's what the Satipatthana Sutta says:

The practitioner (quote) "reflects on this very body from the soles of the feet on up, from the crown of the head on down, encased by skin and full of various kinds of unattractive things... body hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, tendons, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, large intestines, small intestines, stomach with its contents, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, skin-oil, saliva, snot, fluid in the joints, and urine."

Did anyone identify as “me” anything on that list? Anyone think they’re pus, or snot? Or someone you know? Maybe sometimes an in-law?

A couple suttas caution that it’s possible to go overboard on this. There’s a tale of a group of monks practicing this contemplation who became so repulsed by their bodies that they committed suicide. The key to this practice is dispassion – relating to things just as they are without all the emotional baggage we’ve attached to the body. This is where the phrase we examined last week is really put to work: free from desires and discontent in regard to the world. The body is certainly part of this world. The Satipatthana Sutta compares this contemplation of body parts to examining the contents of a bag of mixed grains – this is rice, that’s beans – quite dispassionately, as I’m sure you can imagine.

Another dispassionate review is contemplation of the body in terms of the ancient list of **Elements**: earth (solid), air (moveable), fire (temperature) & water (dry/wet). This contemplation puts the body on the same level as all other material things. The sutta compares this way of contemplating the body to that of a butcher who’s chopped up a cow: now it’s not a cow but just cuts of beef.

The next object might be a bit easier to contemplate close to Halloween: **corpses in decay**. My neighbors and I cheerfully displayed “bodies” that were decayed down to skeletons “held together with sinews” or “disconnected bones scattered around.” The sutta mentions these two aspects of corpses plus many others that are a tad more gruesome.

It says we contemplate seeing, (quote): “a corpse cast away in a charnel ground — ...three days dead — bloated, livid, & festering” ... “Or again, as if [you] were to see a corpse ... picked at by ... vultures, ... hyenas and various other creatures..., a skeleton smeared with flesh & blood, connected with tendons... a fleshless skeleton smeared with blood...”

And then we consider our own bodies, (quote) “Such is its nature, such is its future, such its unavoidable fate.”

So, despite the bloodless skeletons we display on Halloween, these images still gross us out. We have a massive funeral industry to avoid seeing this stuff. Most people opt for embalming followed by a tidy burial. Often the embalmed body is dressed and made up for display to friends & family who wonder if the corpse “looks just like” the deceased did in life.

This custom is intended to help us cling to various illusions: that the body, even when dead, is the person we knew, and that it isn’t going to decay the way the sutta encourages us to contemplate. But deep down we know this is all fake, and therefore we put the body in a box

and bury it six feet under. Maybe a better contemplation for our times is what that body looks like when it's dug up years later.

This contemplation undoes our very powerful clinging to this body. So it's truly beneficial to realize directly that this body is an impermanent phenomenon. Just like flowers, it changes during our lives, eventually wilting with age until it can't continue to function, and dies. 100% of the time. Every living thing dies. And in the Buddha's time, by visiting a charnel ground, anyone could see what that looked like.

We can now, too, despite the funeral industry. I found the TV show CSI very helpful. Volunteering for hundreds of hours in a hospice ward was too. Grey's Anatomy helped with the body parts contemplation. This does more than just desensitize us to the natural and inevitable obsolescence that our bodies go through. It frees us from believing that this happens to us. In truth, it only happens to the body. As Analayo says, these contemplations "can lead to the realization that death is fearful only to the extent to which one identifies with the body."

You can probably appreciate that we're well beyond watching just the breath with these contemplations. We're focusing attention on the breath **and** on other objects, some of which we can feel internally, or we can see, or have to imagine. This array of perspectives may be related to the puzzling phrase that's repeated over & over in the Satipatthana Sutta, about contemplating things internally, externally or both. If we've worked with all of the contemplations of the Body, we can also observe our emotional reactions to these images, which can reveal many very deep attachments we have. We'll delve more into that in December.

The 2nd Foundation is a much shorter part of the Satipatthana Sutta than the Body, but it's also quite important. It's about Vedana, or what I'm calling our preferences for this talk. Whenever we have an experience, we have a response to it. We like, dislike, or feel neutral about it. Say you walk from a cool building into hot, humid air and a silent voice inside you goes, "ugh!" Later you return to that cool space and the voice says, "Ah!" Go from one room to another and the voice is silent; it has no opinion about that. This is Vedana and it happens constantly.

You might think this is no big deal, but it is. It creates a rut in the mind, a tendency of thought and action so that next time you might think, "I need to go outside," and before you know it the thought comes up, "I don't want to. What can I do instead?" This happens without coming to your conscious attention. We get *conditioned* into thoughts and conduct by preferences we don't even see develop.

I have always found it extremely unpleasant to eat lima beans and Brussel sprouts. Once for a big occasion I was at Chez Panisse enjoying a magnificent dinner, especially the vegetable dish, and realized to my shock that I was munching on both these despised vegetables, and enjoying them. Avoiding them had become a deeply ingrained preference. In fact I still have it, but next time I'm at Chez Panisse I'll definitely give them another try.

Analayo points out that by contemplating our preferences, we *decondition* them, gaining more control over our thinking, emotions and behavior. So this is about getting to the roots of bad habits and digging them out. This can involve habits much more serious than vegetables. How many people do you know who totally lack any annoying habits? Most of us have some edge that makes our relationships difficult, maybe an intolerance to the way others annoy us.

This is the realm of vedana, our feelings in response to all experience. It starts out as just that whisper of pleasure or displeasure and it grows into wanting or craving on the one hand and avoidance or rage on the other. I was taught to work with these preferences by Yvonne Rand, one of Western Buddhism's first women teachers. She called the forms of clinging that cause our dukkha "difficult emotions" in her 7-week course that started on the day after 9-11. So we had a lot of difficult emotions to work with.

Very gradually she explained and illustrated the steps by which our apparently innocent liking or disliking things grows into clinging. This is the teaching called Dependent Origination. We're born into these bodies with consciousness, which connects with the material world through our senses. That Contact immediately results in one of the 3 forms of Vedana. They dig deeper channels in our minds until we have Craving, like my lima bean aversion or my chocolate infatuation. If they are allowed to keep growing they become Clinging – an irresistible thirst for something other than what's in this moment, goading us to seek what we desire or eliminate what we hate.

How do we keep our preferences from growing into Craving and Clinging? The instructions are simple, although the practice usually requires a lot of repetition. When you encounter something that pleases you, recognize & acknowledge it. When you encounter something that displeases you, *know* it. The neutral stuff may be harder to recognize because it's our response to not really notice them, but when you've gone a while without any response to anything, notice *that* and how it *feels*.

In my talk on Wholesome Pleasures, I told about walking mindfully around the campground where I was on retreat and seeing a camp site that gave me a strong feeling of pleasure. I liked it, and I noticed that I did. In a nanosecond the thought arose, "I should move my camp here." If I hadn't noticed that cause and effect of *feeling* and *thought*, it might have led to some dissatisfaction with where I had already pitched my tent, which would be a hassle to

move. So I dismissed the thought. As a result, that dissatisfaction never arose, and I was quite content where I was.

Now, I had been practicing fairly continuously for over a day, so mindfulness of the body was established, which probably made it possible for me to see Vedana arise and cause a thought that could lead to suffering. There's a reason Vedana is usually called Feeling in English, because it's something we feel. So to contemplate when pleasure or dislike arises, we have to be intimately in touch with the body's sensory experience. To do this, we need to practice with the body contemplations we covered last week, so that during meditation we can experience this link between mind and body. Then we can know pleasant, unpleasant or neutral vedana by the way we *feel*, literally. It may not be at the moment of contact with an object, but we usually *can* feel it as an established *preference* growing in power.

With every breath during meditation, contemplate the sensory experience of the body. When thoughts distract us, it's a great opportunity to see if we liked or disliked what that thought was about, *not* by thinking about it some more but by turning attention immediately – and exclusively – to the way our body feels about it.

Once we're familiar with the way our body responds emotionally, we can contemplate our preferences as they affect us during daily life when we, for example, read a menu to see what "sounds good," or arrive at some event and see who's there. Just notice what strikes a chord of liking or disliking in the body, feeling pleasant or unpleasant. Try to notice the neutral, too. Sometimes it feels like being bored, especially if we had other expectations.

Yvonne Rand concentrated on thoughts and feelings farther down the chain of causation, which arise from mental habits that are already ingrained in our minds. She illustrated this with a theoretical family fight that escalated into a vase being thrown across the room and you storming out of the house. Her instruction was simple: catch this as soon as you can in the process of escalation.

So initially your goal is to realize you're angry before you leave the house in a huff. If you can't bring yourself to apologize, at least you don't leave. When this scenario repeats, you do apologize, and then the next time you pick up the vase, you don't throw it. After that, you stop as you reach for the vase, and so forth, step by step cutting the chain of reactivity. Eventually you don't get angry in the first place. This can take years. But it's worth it. Some fine day you find yourself recognizing when you first have a pleasant or unpleasant feeling. That lets you easily control any thoughts that could lead to dukkha.

Before I leave Preferences, I want to warn you against confusing neutral vedana with equanimity or Nibanna. Analayo says clearly that "neutral feeling is predominantly the result

of the bland features of the object.” It leaves us feeling bland, which may seem better than being upset. But when we have no desire or aversion needling us because we have *equanimity*, it’s a very different experience. Instead of the indifference that’s part of neutral vedana, equanimity allows us the full range of engagement with what’s true here and now. We are motivated not by likes or dislikes but by love and good will.

Thank you