

Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammâ Sambuddhassa!

A BUDDHIST APPROACH TO THE CONTEMPLATION ON BODY PARTS - ASUBHA ¹

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The *asubha bhavana* (foulness meditation) aims to reduce [desire](#) and [attachment](#) for the [body](#), along with all the associated problems that these give rise to such as aversion, discontent, frustration, etc. It also aims to give one [insight](#) into the true nature of the [body](#), i.e. unpleasant, disgusting, ugly, [impermanent](#), [suffering](#) and [not mine](#). Once [desire and lust](#) for the [body](#) subsides, the mind tends to naturally calm down allowing for clear [insight](#) into the reality of the [body](#) and also all conditioned things (*i.* all conditioned things are [impermanent](#) and subject to [change](#), *ii.* all conditioned things give rise to much [suffering](#) when one is [attached](#) to them due to their [changeability](#) and *iii.* all things are beyond our control (as they *i.* [change](#) and give rise to *ii.* [suffering](#)) and thus cannot be considered as being ‘me’ or ‘mine’ but are actually [without a self](#), ‘me, myself or I’)² putting one in a very good position of attaining [Nibbana](#).

The Lord [Buddha](#) advised those who are ardent on attaining [Nibbana](#) to contemplate the [body](#) with its impurities at all times;³ whether seated, standing, walking, or lying down. However for the purposes of this article we shall only refer to doing this meditation in a seated posture (feel free to use all postures). Sit in the full or half-[lotus position](#) with both palms resting on the lap, with the finger nails facing towards the ground and the right palm on-top of the left palm (refer to a [seated figure](#) of the [Lord Buddha](#) for reference). Close your eyes and bring the mind to the present moment. Focus your attention on the [in and out breath](#) for a short while to calm the mind before starting this meditation.⁴

An approach of visualizing the “removal” of body parts one at a time will be used for this meditation, while using words to help with the visualization, e.g. "Remove the head hair and put it in front (of you)." This is in line with the Lord Buddha's instructions in the [Kayagata-sati Sutta](#).⁵

“Herein, [Bhikkhus](#) & Friends, the [Bhikkhu](#) contemplates the [body](#) from the soles of the [feet](#) upward, and from the top of the [hair](#) downward: This filthy frame with [skin](#) stretched over it, which is filled with many impurities consists of [head-hairs](#), [body-hairs](#), [nails](#), [teeth](#), [skin](#), [flesh](#), [sinews](#), [bones](#), [marrow](#), [kidneys](#), [heart](#), [liver](#), [vomit](#), [diaphragm](#), [spleen](#), [lungs](#), [intestine](#), [membrane](#), [stomach](#), [excrement](#), [brain](#), [bile](#), [lymph](#), [pus](#), [blood](#), [sweat](#), [fat](#), [tears](#), [skin](#), [tallow](#), [spit](#), [snot](#), [joint-fluid](#), and [urine](#). Just as if a man with good sight would examine a sack with openings at both ends, filled with various kinds of grain; paddy, beans, sesame, on opening it would recognize its contents thus: That is paddy, this is beans, that is sesame, this is husked rice: Exactly so does the [Bhikkhu](#) investigate this body.”

You can say the following words out loud or in your mind with your thoughts to help concentrate on and to contemplate the foulness of the body while *visualizing* it in your mind:⁶

(Head and Neck)

[Start of meditation.] “Remove the [head hair](#) and put it in front (of you).

Remove the [facial hair](#) and [body hair](#) from the [neck](#) and put it in front.

Remove the [skin](#), [sweat](#) and [pus](#) on your [face](#), [head](#) and [neck](#) and put it in front.

Remove the [facial fat](#), neck [fat](#) and [tallow](#) and put it in front.

Remove the [flesh](#) and [sinews](#) from the [face](#), [head](#) and [neck](#) and put it in front.

Take the **flesh** and squeeze out the **blood** and **lymph** and put it in front.

Remove the **eyes** and **tears** and put it in front.

Remove the **nose**, **snot** and **phlegm** and put it in front.

Remove the **lips**, **teeth**, **tongue** and **spittle** and put it in front.

Remove the **ears** and **earwax** and put it in front.

Remove the **skull** and **joint** fluid and put it in front.

Split the **skull**, remove the **brain** and put it in front.

Split open the **skull** remove the **bone marrow** and put it in front.⁷

All these things are disgusting to look at, let alone go near or touch. They have a disgusting smell. Even if they are left here for a day they will begin to decay, fester and rot. They are subject to **change**, ageing, decay, disease, death and cause much **suffering** when **clung** to and thought of as ‘**me, myself, I, mine or as belonging to me.**’ They are **impermanent**, causing much **suffering** when **clung** to, are not within my control and therefore **cannot be considered as ‘me, myself, I, mine or as belonging to me.’** This is the reality of the body which I did not see before that I see now.

(Arms, Forearms and Hands)

Remove the **body hair** from both **arms**, **forearms**, and **hands** and put it in front (of you).

Remove the **skin**, **sweat** and **pus** and put it in front.

Remove the **nails** from both **hands** and put it in front.

Remove the **body fat** and **tallow** and put it in front.

Remove the **flesh** and **sinews** and put it in front.

Take the **flesh** and squeeze out the **blood** and **lymph** and put it in front.

Remove the **bones** and **joint** fluid and put it in front.

Split open the **bones**, remove the **bone marrow** and put it in front.⁷

All these things are disgusting to look at, let alone go near or touch. They have a disgusting smell. Even if they are left here for a day they will begin to decay, fester and rot. They are subject to **change**, ageing, decay, disease, death and cause much **suffering** when **clung** to and thought of as ‘**me, myself, I, mine or as belonging to me.**’ They are **impermanent**, causing much **suffering** when **clung** to, are not within my control and therefore **cannot be considered as ‘me, myself, I, mine or as belonging to me.’** This is the reality of the body which I did not see before that I see now.

(Body Trunk)

Remove the **body hair** from the **body trunk** (torso) and put it in front (of you).

Remove the **skin**, **sweat** and **pus** and put it in front.

Remove the **body fat** and **tallow** and put it in front.

Remove the **flesh** including the **diaphragm** and **sinews** and put it in front.

Take the **flesh** and squeeze out the **blood** and **lymph** and put it in front.

Remove all organs including the **heart**, **lungs**, **spleen**, **stomach**, **kidneys**, **liver**, **bladder**, **intestines** (bowel) and **membrane** and put it in front.

Split open the **heart**, **lungs**, **spleen**, **kidneys** and **liver** and remove the **blood** and put it in front.

Split open the **stomach**, remove the **bile** and **vomit** (half-digested food) and put it in front.

Split open the **intestines**, remove the **faeces** (excrement) and put it in front.

Split open the **bladder**, empty out the **urine** and put it in front.

Remove the **collar bones**, **rib cage**, **spine**, **hip** bones and **joint** fluid and put it in front.

Split open the **bones**, remove the **bone marrow** and put it in front.⁷

All these things are disgusting to look at, let alone go near or touch. They have a disgusting smell. Even if they are left here for a day they will begin to decay, fester and rot. They are subject to **change**, ageing, decay, disease, death and cause much **suffering** when **clung** to and thought of as ‘**me, myself, I, mine or as belonging to me.**’ They are **impermanent**, causing much **suffering** when **clung** to, are not within my control and therefore **cannot be considered as ‘me, myself, I, mine or as belonging to me.’** This is the reality of the body which I did not see before that I see now.

(Thighs, Legs, Ankles and Feet)

Remove the **body hair** from both the **thighs**, **legs** and **feet** and put it in front (of you).

Remove the **skin**, **sweat** and **pus** and put it in front.

Remove the **nails** from both feet and put it in front.

Remove the **body fat** and **tallow** and put it in front.

Remove the **flesh** and **sinews** and put it in front.

Take the **flesh** and squeeze out the **blood** and **lymph** and put it in front.

Remove the **bones** and **joint** fluid and put it in front.

Split open the **bones**, remove the **bone marrow** and put it in front.⁷

All these things are disgusting to look at, let alone go near or touch. They have a disgusting smell. Even if they are left here for a day they will begin to decay, fester and rot. They are subject to **change**, ageing, decay, disease, death and cause much **suffering** when **clung** to and thought of as ‘**me, myself, I, mine or as belonging to me.**’ They are **impermanent**, causing much **suffering** when **clung** to, are not within my control and therefore **cannot be considered as ‘me, myself, I, mine or as belonging to me.’** This is the reality of the body which I did not see before that I see now.

This whole **body** is filthy, disgusting and filled with many impurities. There is no single part in the **body** that can be considered beautiful, pleasant, charming or as having a pleasant smell. This **body** is subject to constant **change**, old age, decay, sickness and death. It is **impermanent**, causing much **suffering** when **clung** to, are not within my control and therefore **cannot be considered as ‘me, myself, I, mine or as belonging to me.’** This is the reality of the **body** which I did not see before that I see now.”

Now scan the body up and down from the top of your head down to the soles of your feet and back up again. Examine the various bodily impurities that exist within the body that were just contemplated. Do this for as long as required and then end the meditation. **[End of meditation.]**

May you gain **insight** and **understanding** into the true reality of the **body** and may it enable you to attain the lasting peace of *Nibbana*!

THE BODY

There are just bones,
flesh and waste,
tied together by skin;
this is all the body is.

As a whole attractive,
taken apart disgusting,
behold its true nature,
with its 32 parts;
a disgusting bundle of waste.

All parts impermanent,
subject to disease,
decay (old age),
and death.

Notes

1. The latest version of this document can be found in **HTML** format here <http://tinyurl.com/bzs6h2> (or <http://sites.google.com/site/dhammadgroupweb/pubs/asubhaparts>) and in **PDF** format here <http://tinyurl.com/d7z5bs> (or http://sites.google.com/site/dhammadgroupweb/pubs/A_Buddhist_Approach_to_the_Contemplation_on_Body_Parts-Asubha.pdf).
2. *i. Sabbe sankhara aniccatai, ii. sabbe sankhara dukkhatai and iii. sabbe dhamma anattati*, viz. *i.* all conditioned things are **impermanent** and subject to **change**, *ii.* all conditioned things give rise to much **suffering** when one is **attached** to them due to their **changeability** and *iii.* all things are beyond our control (as they *i.* **change** and give rise to *ii.* **suffering**) and thus cannot be considered as being 'me' or 'mine' but are actually **without a self, me, myself or I**. According to the **Lord Buddha**, it is by contemplating these three universal characteristics/truths that all beings who attained *Nibbana* in the past, present and yet to attain it in the future will do so. This indicates the importance of these three for constant recollection (especially when the mind is very calm and capable of realizing things quickly after meditation for example) for anyone who is intent on *Nibbana*.
3. Refer to *Establishing the Awareness of Body as Body!* here http://what-buddha-said.net/drops/III/The_32_Parts.htm and *Appendix A: Establishing the Awareness of Body as Body!* below where the **Lord Buddha** describes this:

“Exactly so does the **Bhikkhu** investigate this body...While *always* thus aware & clearly comprehending, & thus removing any lust, urge, envy, frustration & discontent rooted in this world, the intelligent **Bhikkhu** keeps contemplating & regarding any & all **body** as an remote carcass of filthy foul form. As something bound to emerge, decay & vanish... **Not as mine, belonging to me or my self!**”
4. You can to start (this) *asubha* meditation after calming your mind with the *anapanasati*, *metta* or another such meditation; experiment and see what works best for you.
5. Refer to *Establishing the Awareness of Body as Body!* here http://what-buddha-said.net/drops/III/The_32_Parts.htm and *Appendix A: Establishing the Awareness of Body as Body!* below where the **Lord Buddha** describes this.
6. Some body parts have been logically grouped together in one sentence for conciseness. Feel free to separate these out to distinct sentences as required.
7. You will notice that there are body parts in addition to the ones mentioned by the **Lord Buddha** in the discourses. The main point of this meditation is to see the true nature of the body. So feel free to add any other body parts to this as required. However some prefer to just focus on a few or even just one body part (e.g. bones) while going into great detail about them for the whole meditation. Experiment and see what works best for you.

Appendix A: Establishing the Awareness of Body as Body!

Source: www.what-buddha-said.net

URL: http://what-buddha-said.net/drops/III/The_32_Parts.htm

How, Friends, does one view any Body only as a Form?

Herein, **Bhikkhus** & Friends, the **Bhikkhu** contemplates the body from the soles of the feet upward, and from the top of the hair downward: This filthy frame with skin stretched over it, which is filled with many impurities consists of head-hairs, body-hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, vomit diaphragm, spleen, lungs, intestine, membrane, stomach, excrement, brain, bile, lymph, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, skin, tallow, spit, snot, joint-fluid, and urine. Just as if a man with good sight would examine a sack with openings at both ends, filled with various kinds of grain; paddy, beans, sesame, on opening it would recognize its contents thus: That is paddy, this is beans, that is sesame, this is husked rice: Exactly so does the **Bhikkhu** investigate this body...

While always thus aware & clearly comprehending, & thus removing any lust, urge, envy, frustration & discontent rooted in this world, the intelligent **Bhikkhu** keeps contemplating & regarding any & all body as an remote carcass of filthy foul form. As something bound to emerge, decay & vanish... **Not as mine**, belonging to me or my self!

Not as lasting, stable & safe! Not as pleasant beauty or happiness!

In this way the intelligent **Bhikkhu** keeps reviewing any & all body whether internal or external and he notes the cause of its arising and the cause of its ceasing, or he just know: There is this body! In this way he comes to live not clinging to & independent of body!

This is the way to contemplate the body only as a **transient** shell...

Source Text: *Majjhima Nikaya 119: Kayagata-Sati Sutta*

http://What-Buddha-Said.net/drops/II/Meditation_On_the_Body_Kayagata-Sati.htm

The reward is Fearlessness of Death & thereby Fearlessness of All!
Without fear there is the mental elevation of gladness and free joy!
It detaches and relinquishes from body & form and frees thereby...

See also: *Bag of Bones: A Miscellany on the Body* compiled by Bhikkhu Khantipalo:

<http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/khantipalo/wheel271.htm>

Just a painted puppet!

A chain of bones plastered by skin with 9 oozing holes!

A heap of sores & rotten excrement with evil intentions!

Related *Suttas* (Discourses)

1. *Majjhima Nikaya 119, Kayagata-sati Sutta, Mindfulness Immersed in the Body* see <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.119.than.html> and http://what-buddha-said.net/drops/II/Meditation_On_the_Body_Kayagata-Sati.htm
2. *Digha Nikaya 22, Maha-satipatthana Sutta, The Great Frames of Reference* see <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.22.0.than.html>

Related Buddhism (*Dhamma*) Articles

1. *Daily Dana* - On giving and generosity, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=dailydana>
2. *Five Precepts* - Developing virtue through the five precepts, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=pansil>
3. *Buddhist Positive Thinking* - Positive thinking from a Buddhist perspective, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=posthink>
4. *Mental Purity* - Five ways prescribed by the Buddha for subduing mental defilements, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=vitakkasantana>
5. *A Buddhist Approach to Disillusionment* - A Buddhist approach to seeing past the trickery and into reality, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=disill>
6. *A Buddhist Approach to Disenchantment* - A Buddhist approach to becoming disenchanted with all that gives rise to stress, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=disench>
7. *An Introduction to Buddhist Meditation* - Basic instructions for doing the meditations of loving kindness (*metta*), awareness of breath (*ana-pana-sati*) and foulness of the body (*asubha*), see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=intromed>
8. *A Buddhist Approach to Revulsion - Asubha* - A Buddhist approach to bodily revulsion (*asubha*), see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=revul>
9. *A Buddhist Approach to the Awareness of In-and-Out Breath Meditation - Anapanasati* - A Buddhist approach to the awareness of breath meditation (*anapanasati*), see <http://tinyurl.com/d6uwxr> or <http://sites.google.com/site/dhammagroupweb/pubs/anapanasati>
10. *Attachment* - An analysis of how attachment leads to unsatisfactoriness, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=attachment>
11. *One Hour of Unsatisfactoriness* - The unsatisfactoriness that can be felt within the space of an hour, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=onehour>
12. *A Buddhist Approach to Mental Health* - A Buddhist perspective and approach to mental health, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=mentalhealth>
13. *Four Noble Truths* - The essence of Buddhism, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=fourtruths>
14. *Noble Eightfold Path* - The path for ending stress and suffering, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=noblepath>

Online Resources

1. *AccessToInsight.org* here <http://www.accesstoinsight.org>
2. *What-Buddha-Said.net* here <http://what-buddha-said.net>
3. *What-Buddha-Taught.net* here <http://what-buddha-taught.net>
4. *Buddhanet.net* here <http://www.buddhanet.net>
5. *Vihara.org.au* here <http://www.vihara.org.au>
6. *DhammaGroup.tk* here <http://www.dhammagroup.tk>