

# ***How to practice body contemplation***

***Dhamma talk on the 14th of February 2016***

The word *buddho* which we use as a preliminary meditation object is a reminder of the Lord Buddha. We should be grateful to him for going through an unimaginably long training to attain enlightenment and for revealing the Dhamma to us 2,500 years ago. Without him, we would have no idea of *kamma*, the law of cause and effect which says that everything we do will come back to us. We would have no idea that we are caught up in an endless cycle of birth and death or that heaven and hell exist. Nor would we know that there are 31 realms of existence populated by beings who revolve through them life after life, and that there are five precepts which, if we keep them, prevent us falling into the lower realms. We should be really grateful to the Lord Buddha, not only because his teaching still exists but because it is still alive. When I say alive, I mean that the teaching is not only written down in dead books but is still being put into practice. Today, it is still producing the results promised by the Lord Buddha, namely, the attainments of the four kinds of *Noble Ones (Ariya-puggala)*\* – Sotāpanna, Sakadāgāmī, Anāgāmī and Arahant. In the Thai forest tradition, such noble beings can still be found today, and this shows that the teaching of the Lord Buddha is still alive. We should be grateful to meet with a teaching that remains alive, teaches us the four noble truths and shows us the way to freedom from *dukkha*.

The first noble truth is the truth of *dukkha*, which exists in all realms of existence; in the higher realms there is less *dukkha* and in the lower realms there is more *dukkha* or exclusively *dukkha*. The second noble truth concerns the origin of *dukkha*; all our desires cause *dukkha*, the desire to be or not to be, the desire to become or not to become, and so on. The third noble truth states that *dukkha* can be ended, and the fourth noble truth is the path of practice that leads to the end of *dukkha*. This is the path of practice that we are following in this monastery, and it consists of three columns; *sīla* (morality or virtue), *samādhi* (concentration and awareness) and *paññā* (wisdom through investigation). So, we should be grateful that we have encountered the living teaching of the Lord Buddha that shows us the truth, the truth about our existence, and that allows us to meet, here in Thailand, representatives of his teaching who have become *Noble Ones*, whether Sotāpanna, Sakadāgāmī, Anāgāmī or Arahant.

The Lord Buddha taught that there are ten fetters\*\* binding us to the realm of birth and death. If we cut the first three fetters, we attain to Sotāpanna, the first of the four stages of enlightenment. The first fetter concerns right view, and the need to overcome doubt or uncertainty, especially about the teachings. For instance, we need to be clear that heaven and hell exist and that there are beings in these realms. This is different from the prevailing view today that heaven and hell exist only on this earth. We need to accept that these realms truly exist; there are about 25 different realms of heaven and 25 different categories of hell. Believing that we have just one existence and that death is the end of everything – this is wrong view. The Lord Buddha taught that if we do not make the decision to break out of the vicious cycle of rebirth, we will have to go through life, after life, after life. He also taught that *kamma* exists, that our thoughts, speech and actions have results and that these results come back to us, whether good or bad. If you do not believe that other realms exist and that *kamma* exists, if you do not trust these teachings, you will remain bound to the endless round of birth and death.

The second fetter concerns morality and being inconsistent in keeping the five precepts, keeping them, breaking them, then keeping them for a time and breaking them again, or even

not keeping them at all. This fetter also binds us, and to remove it we need to resolve to keep the five precepts from this moment on and to keep them for the rest of our lives. Once we make this decision, this fetter does not interfere with our practice.

The last of the first three fetters is the belief that the body is ‘me’ – and this is the most problematic fetter. To remove this fetter, we have to investigate the object that we are most attached to, namely, the body. As I said before, the cause of *dukkha* is wanting; wanting to be or not wanting to be, so wanting or not wanting a body is also *dukkha* and comes under this fetter. We have to investigate the nature of the body and understand that it is nothing but a biological robot that we inhabit. We drive it, we move it and we make it do things, but it has nothing to do with the *citta* that sits inside. The *citta* tells the body to move, to open and close its eyes, to sleep, eat and drink. Without the *citta* there would be no movement. Attachment to the body is one of the more difficult fetters to deal with. To overcome it, the Lord Buddha taught *asubha* practice – seeing the loathsomeness of the body. This does not mean that we have to *make* the body loathsome as some people think, but rather that we need to *see* its loathsomeness. The body is the biggest hindrance in our practice, particularly for people from the West. When they come to the monastery, all their questions and all their problems are related to the body, whether walking or sitting meditation, being tired, hungry, hot or cold – these are all problems related to the body, problems that start with the body. They say, “I can’t sit long enough” or “I can’t walk long enough”, but this has nothing to do with the training of the *citta* that sits inside the body. Attachment to the body really is a big problem for people. Of course, this attachment can also be in the negative direction; some people really loathe their body, but that does not release the fetter, for disliking the body is just as much of a fetter as loving it. For example, older people tend to dislike their bodies because they do not work as well as they did before, but they would still be happy to have another younger body that did whatever they wanted it to do. Release from this fetter comes about only by investigating the body as the Lord Buddha advised, asking the question, “What is this body?”, and seeing it as loathsome and decaying. We have to observe it. What is the body? Is it earth, air, water or fire? These four elements make up the body, and to understand its true nature we have to investigate the body in all its aspects.

The practice of investigation of the body continues during the first three of the four stages of enlightenment. The results of this practice enable us to break through to the first stage of enlightenment, Sotāpanna, when the fetter consisting of mistaken identity view – the view that this body is ‘me’ – is broken. The second stage of enlightenment is Sakadāgāmi (once-returner). To attain it, body investigation is necessary in order to understand that the body is the pot in which the plant of greed and hate is rooted, so that the illusion of the body can be destroyed. If someone has destroyed greed and hate by 50%, he will have attained to the stage of Sakadāgāmi. Only the Anāgāmi (non-returner) has finished the task of investigating the body because he has completely destroyed the illusion of the body and has destroyed greed and hate. The Anāgāmi has destroyed the pot in which greed and hate are rooted; he has seen the nature of the body as it is. He has seen each part of the body broken into the four elements – earth, air, water and fire; he has seen it as loathsome and as not-self. He has understood both the nature of the body and the nature of greed and hate that are rooted in the body, since greed and hate are attachment to the body, whether wanting it or not wanting it.

Most of the work we undertake to develop wisdom on the spiritual path is concerned with investigation of the body. We have to do it thoroughly, year after year after year until we know we have finished the task and advanced to the stage of Anāgāmi. The Anāgāmi

still has another five fetters to overcome, however, and still has to complete of the work, which involves investigation of the four *nāma* khandas (mental feeling, memory and association, thought and consciousness). He has finished with the investigation of the first of the khandas, body (*rūpa*) together with bodily feeling, but still has to investigate these remaining four mental groups, and he does this in the same way that the body was investigated, by seeing how they work and seeing them for what they really are.

Body investigation constitutes a large part of the practice, yet it is something we do not like doing. The body is the favourite toy of the *kilesas*, and they know that if we break through and see it for what it is we will never, ever return – not to the heavenly realms, not to the human realm and not to the hell realms. So, the *kilesas* will make it very difficult for us to break through, and that's why we have to put lots of effort and lots of determination into the practice. We also need to develop *sati* (awareness) – this is most important. *Sati* is like a flashlight that looks inside the body and sees it as it is. We all know that when we open up the body, we don't like what we see. This is a natural response, so we don't have to teach ourselves that the body is loathsome, the feeling just comes up. In fact, we don't even have to open the body up; we just have to look at what comes out of it. We like, love or think beautiful whatever we put into the body or onto it, but we are disgusted by whatever comes out of it. This seems natural to us and accords with our views. We don't like to see the excrement coming out but we like to stuff the food in, and we don't like the urine that comes out but we like to drink. We don't like the sweat that comes out, the dirt that comes from the pores of the skin, because it stinks. The dirt doesn't come from outside, it comes from inside – the grease, the smell and the rotten odour of a fart coming from the intestines. Do we like these things? No. And why not? Because they destroy the idea that the body is something beautiful, perfect and desirable.

All we ever do with this body is feed it, house it, clothe it and take care of it when it is sick. Our whole life is built around this body. When we look back over our own lives as the body has grown and developed, we observe that we have had to train it, make it comfortable and develop its intelligence so that it can be useful to us. After 16 to 18 years, once the body is capable, we consider ourselves grown up, and we no longer need to be looked after by our parents. Then, we start working to earn money to feed the body, house it, clothe it and take care of its health. When we look at the life of the average person, this is all they do. How much time does the average person really have to use the body for his pleasure? Very little. He works for eight hours, comes home, feeds the body, rests it, watches TV and goes to sleep, waking up the next morning to do just the same thing. He goes to work, day after day and for what? To house, clothe and feed the body and take care of its health. When we look at the 24 hours in a normal day, how long do we actually spend NOT thinking about the body, feeding it, housing it and clothing it. Very little. Even on weekends, we still have to feed and rest the body, and we still care about the body. Some people work out, training the body to be healthy by running, cycling or climbing. It's all about the body, so imagine how difficult a task it is to practice investigation of the body, to break it down and loosen our attachment to it. Think about it; it takes three stages of enlightenment to get rid of the attachment to the body, and each step is a major step. The step to Sotāpanna is probably one of the biggest – the break with the identification with the body.

The Lord Buddha gave us an analogy to help us break the attachment to the body – the example of a cart. We can take it apart and lay the bits and pieces side by side, the wheels, the planks, the nuts and bolts, and ask ourselves “Where is the cart?” When we look at the pieces, we cannot see a cart, but when we assemble them again, the cart suddenly reappears. We can do the same exercise with the body, mentally disassembling it into its component parts. Start with the hands: we can cut off the left hand, see what it is made of, and lay it in front of us.

Then, we take the next hand, cut it off, look at the bones, the flesh, the tendons, the skin and the blood vessels, and lay it in front of us. Now, there are two hands in front of us, and we should be able to visualise them clearly. Having cut them off, they are no longer our hands but simply body parts. Then, in the same way, we cut off the right lower arm, put it in front of us and look at it, doing the same with the left lower arm. Now, we can visualise two hands and two lower arms. We do the same for the right upper arm and left upper arm and place them in front of us, and then continue with the right and left feet. As we take off each part, we look at it, seeing the bones, the vessels, the skin, the flesh and the tendons. As any one part is placed in front of us, it ceases to be 'me' and 'mine', because something remains, sitting there, observing the parts. We continue doing this with other body parts, cutting them off slice by slice, piece by piece, and placing them out in front. When they are in front of us, they are no longer in the place where we are sitting, but we still have the feeling that the body is 'me' and 'mine'. So, we continue doing this until the head becomes the last part to be placed in front of us. We place it out in front with the eyes towards us so we can see it clearly. Suddenly, all the parts of the body are in front, and we find ourselves looking at the whole disassembled body. You can do this practice with the larger, coarser body parts as I have described, or you can do it in finer detail. Also, you can order the pieces nicely in front of you, or you can just throw them in a heap. But whenever you take a part off and put it in front of you, it's important that you see it there, really see it there. When you do this practice often, there will sooner or later come a sudden moment when the 'I', the *citta*, separates from the body. This insight, this sudden realisation, stemming from body contemplation of this kind is all you need to be able to cut the self-identification with the body.

This is just one method of practicing body contemplation, and I have described this method because the Lord Buddha gave the analogy of the body as a cart which can be disassembled into its component parts. Where is the cart when it is disassembled and where is the body when all its parts are laid out in front of you? But please understand that you have to make the experience *real* – really see the parts in front of you and really feel that they are no longer part of your body when you have cut them off. In the end you will see just one thing – the *citta* sitting there watching the body parts. And if you do this often enough, the illusion, the self-identity with the body, will break. Then, if you are free of the other two fetters, this fetter – the belief that the body is 'me' – will be destroyed.

Of course, you can also do *asubha* practice and see the loathsomeness of the body. For example, when you close your eyes, you can visualise yourself looking in the mirror and take off the skin to see what it looks like. But you have to make it real, not just a vague imagining. You have to feel it, as if you are taking a sharp knife and cutting through the middle of your face, cutting downwards from the top of the head and slowly pulling the skin away. What do you see? Then pull away more. What do you see? A bloody mess. Then pull away more and even more until there is no skin left, and look in the mirror. Of course, it hurts – a shiver runs down your spine when you bring the knife down, and you see blood dripping off. You need to feel it is real; all you need to do is feel it is real. When you pull away the skin you see what is underneath. You can take out your eyeballs, you can cut off your nose, take off your lips, remove the flesh and get down to the skeleton. You've all seen skeletons so you know what they look like. You can remove the skin from your head, from your shoulders and go bit by bit down the body, and then remove one organ after another. When you've removed the skin, take a close look at it – the outside and the inside. It has hair on the outside, particularly the skin of the head, it has pores and on the underside there is greasy yellow fat. The skin is the covering that protects us from seeing the

loathsomeness of the body; it is the skin which produces the form that we desire. Normally, we view the body as a fine thing – the hair on the head, the hair on the body, the teeth, the nails and the skin. These things make us think there is something beautiful and desirable, but the moment we cut into the skin we see that there is absolutely nothing desirable. If we cut open the skin of friends or lovers, we have no desire to hug them since all we see is a bloody mess with the greasy yellow fat hanging down, the flesh, the tendons and a soft, watery mess inside. Do you really want to hug someone like that? Do you feel like kissing them? Would you dream about having intercourse with someone with no skin? The moment you see the loathsomeness of the body without skin, thoughts of desire just disappear. The *kilesas* need to paint pictures full of desirable skin and beautiful forms; these are what they want, but the moment we show the *kilesas* the loathsomeness of the body – phut! All of a sudden they get disgusted. The *kilesas* that become excited are the same *kilesas* that get disgusted, and that's why we do investigation of the body, that's why we have to destroy the illusion that the body is something beautiful. Of course, if we continue doing this practice, we will irritate the *kilesas*, and they will hit back. The moment we practice body contemplation correctly, they will start to react. First of all, slight irritation arises – we become irritated about things that did not bother us before. This shows that the practice is going in the right direction, because we really have to upset the *kilesas* if we are to destroy their attachment to the body.

Continuing with body investigation, we can take away the skin, peel off the flesh, remove the tendons and muscles, saw off the ribs, take out the slimy, quivering lungs and feel them, take out the heart and feel it, and do the same with the kidneys. Then go to the stomach which has just been given something delicious to digest. Open the stomach, look inside and see what has happened to the food – smell it, feel it, dig your fingers deep into it. Please remember, though, that the point of this practice is not to make the body loathsome; disgust arises by itself. The moment we see the reality of the body, feelings of disgust automatically arise within the heart – we don't have to make the body loathsome because it is loathsome; we just don't like what we see. For example, whatever goes in seems beautiful and whatever comes out seems disgusting, so we don't have to bring up disgust as our natural instincts are to see the output as filthy.

The more we do body investigation, the more we become accustomed to it; pulling out the organs, cutting them open, seeing them, feeling them, holding them in our hands, seeing the quivering, slimy mass that constitutes each organ. Every surgeon knows what the body looks and feels like inside, but he does not associate that knowledge with his own body, and he would be reluctant to open the body of his wife or girlfriend. The memory would reside within him and he wouldn't be able to sleep with her or caress her body because whenever he looks at her he would see the inside and would feel disgusted. This is why surgeons only operate on other people, not on their families or partners. You don't have to tell surgeons that bodies are disgusting. The first time a doctor opens up a body he either faints or throws up, even though the older students warn the younger students that this will happen. The automatic reaction of the *kilesas* when they see an opened up body is either to faint or throw up. They want to hide the loathsomeness under the skin, but we have to look at it. This is why we really have to investigate the skin, tear it off, put it back, tear it off, put it back, and see the difference. Try it with your loved ones, with your favourite old girlfriend or boyfriend, husband or partner. The moment you see them as a whole there is lust; the moment you open them up, there is no lust. Then, when you put them back together, the lust reappears but when you disassemble them again it vanishes.

One of the most difficult things in meditation practice is battling *rāga-taṇhā* (sensual or sexual desire). This is a major battle, and the *kilesas* don't give in easily. As I've said already,

if you do body contemplation correctly, irritation comes up at the beginning, but it slowly deepens and turns into hate. Suddenly, not only are we irritated but we become spiteful; the deeper our practice digs into the body, the more the *kilesas* react and the more hate comes up. This means that you have to be careful when doing body investigation. If you practice it at home as a layperson try to keep away from other people because, without noticing it, the hate that comes up during investigation can erupt at someone else, anyone else. Hateful thoughts or words can come up, and the other person won't even know what is happening. So, be careful and be warned; really intensive body investigation brings up hate. For the practitioner, however, this is a great opportunity, as one of the reasons for investigating the body is to see the hate that arises and to learn how to deal with it.

In this practice, we have to be able to deal with hate, greed and lust in a manner that is wholesome. In the beginning we investigate hate because greed is difficult to get a handle on; with greed, we tend to just grab something and most of the time we give in, but hate is easier to investigate because it stays longer and it's not easy to get rid of. The way we deal with hate is similar to the way we deal with pain. When we sit for a long time, pain comes up, and the practice is simply to stay with it for however long it takes, investigating the pain and looking for its source. Body investigation also involves comparing greed and hate when they arise, investigating one then the other and asking what the difference is between them. Then, we can go back to the basic feeling of hate and the basic feeling of greed; the deeper our investigation is, the less difference we see. Greed and hate are two sides of the same coin. The mind says this is desirable (greed) and that is detestable (hate), but the difference is just an illusion created by the *kilesas*. What the *kilesas* want is greed and what they don't want is hate, but the underlying feeling is one and the same.

At the beginning, body investigation will be very, very difficult. Of course, we don't really get a knife and cut the body open, we do it in our imagination, and it's usually necessary to play with images at first as it can be hard to see the body as it really is. The *citta* already knows the body as it so, if we train the *citta*, we will eventually be able to bring up images of our own real body. We can also use images of other bodies instead of our own – it's completely up to you which you choose to use. It might be easier initially to train the *citta* to use other people's bodies, cutting them up into bits and pieces to see the loathsomeness. Or you can use the dead body of an animal like a chicken, or watch a dead rat decay over 15 days; look at these things, smell them. Our body is no different. If you visit a slaughterhouse, you are greatly reminded of your own body hanging there. The body parts called flesh and meat that we love to cook, grill or fry, and love to put in our mouths, are not so different from our own. If you hang up your own body in a slaughterhouse and cut off the head, arms and legs it doesn't look very different from the torso of any other animal. The animals that we love to eat all have hearts, stomachs and kidneys – where is the difference?

At the early stages of practice, the *citta* or the *kilesas* are not willing to reveal true images, so we may have to rely on anatomical images that we find disgusting from books or other sources. We can choose one that we find most disgusting, stare at it for five minutes, close our eyes and, in meditation, reproduce the mental image until we can hold it still and see it clearly. Once we have learned to use images in this way, we can take the next step to see the real nature of the body. We take a tour through the body, looking at the 32 parts; one part will become more interesting than the others, and you can take it as your subject. If you are really interested in the liver, for instance, instead of using the word *buddho* as a meditation object, you can think "liver, liver, liver", trying to produce the image of liver in your mind until it becomes clear and you begin to see it. It might take some time to do this, not just

one or two days but months or years. So, don't give up and say, "This is not working for me"; don't say that to yourself. In fact, it is working, but it might take some time depending on the ability of the *citta* to visualise. We need to be able to visualise images to investigate the body, even at the early stages when placing bits and pieces of the body out in front of us. We have to train ourselves to visualise somehow; there are books of *asubha* images, or pictures showing the result of accidents, which are sometimes shown in graphic detail in Thai newspapers. Once you have trained yourself using such images until you can visualise them internally, you can then visualise your own or someone else's body and proceed to cut it up. You can take a different part each time; if today you are investigating hair, you can focus on a strand of hair, mentally repeating "hair, hair, hair" until you see the image, and then cut it up, seeing it for what it is, seeing its true nature. Any body part will do – hair, kidneys, heart, teeth, lungs etc. Again, you can take the whole body, visualise it decaying and light a fire underneath it; as it burns, see the substances that exude at various stages, and observe what is left at the end. You can choose to work with the whole body or part of the body – whatever interests you on that day. Any one of the 32 body parts will do, and you can take a different one each day or stay with one of them for several days. Whichever you choose, pick it up, feel it, smell it and understand its nature. You could, for instance, see how it falls apart into the four elements of earth, fire, air and water, to realise that every body part is made out of the same four elements.

Don't get frustrated or upset that it doesn't work the first day or the first week or even the first year. You have to do it every day, and you also need *sati* (awareness). If *sati* is not strong enough, body contemplation will take a very long time, but if it is keen the practice will be faster. So, when doing investigation of the body don't forget to sharpen *sati*, to sharpen the knife that you use to cut up the body. In fact, this practice is similar to developing *samādhi* when you repeat the word "*buddho, buddho, buddho*" internally over and over again. In the early stages of body contemplation, we repeat "hair, hair, hair" and try to visualise hair – it's similar to *samādhi* practice but with visualisation. Later on, however, the image becomes clearer, and we cut the body up, let it burn, or do anything to it in order to understand its nature. We can investigate anything in this way; pain, greed, hate – what is their nature? It is particularly important to discard any medical knowledge you have about the body. In this practice, you want to be like a newborn baby; whatever it sees it touches, puts in its mouth and plays with in order to understand. In body investigation, we have to become like this newborn baby who touches and plays around with an object until its function is understood and everything about it is known. Normally, we know the names of things, such as liver, but we really don't know what 'liver' is. What is the difference between the liver and the kidneys, between greed and hate, between lust and hate, between pain and ecstasy? You have to investigate, to come to know these things and understand their true nature.

We have to put in a lot of effort to do this practice, and how long it takes depends on each person's character. But please don't tell me that it doesn't work. It will work. It will work in its own time. For one person progress will be fast, for another slow. For some it might take a whole lifetime, for others a few years. For Luangta Mahā Bua, whose *samādhi* was excellent, it took eight months; his *samādhi* was super-sharp, like a laser, but it still took him eight months. Wherever he put his attention, it cut through. Our attention becomes diffuse within one or two seconds, so we don't see what we are investigating objectively; if this is the case, we will not understand the true nature of the body. Also, we get deluded by our views and opinions, especially medical views and opinions about the body that are useless for this kind of investigation. People with medical backgrounds tend to have a hard time investigating the body because all that they see is an anatomical atlas, but this is not what we want to know or understand. So, people with medical backgrounds will have to make the investigation more

real; taking a coarse saw and cutting up the body, really feeling the pain; only then can they investigate the body.

To summarise, body investigation will reveal the true nature of the body and destroy greed and hate, especially sexual or sensual desire. This practice takes us through the first three stages of enlightenment: Sotāpanna, Sakadāgāmī and, finally, Anāgāmī or non-returner.

**\* Note**

Sotāpanna: Stream enterer. A person who has abandoned the first three of the fetters that bind the *citta* to the cycle of rebirth and has thus entered the 'stream' flowing inexorably to *nibbāna*, ensuring that one will be reborn at most only seven more times, and only into human or higher realms.

Sakadāgāmī: Once-returner. A person who has abandoned the first three of the fetters that bind the *citta* to the cycle of rebirth, has weakened the fetters of sensual passion and resistance, and who after death is destined to be reborn only once more.

Anāgāmī: Non-returner. A person who has abandoned the five lower fetters that bind the *citta* to the cycle of rebirth, and who after death will appear in one of the *Brahmā* worlds called the Pure Abodes, there to attain *nibbāna*, never again to return.

Arahant: A 'worthy one' or 'pure one'; a person whose *citta* is free of defilement (*kilesa*), who has abandoned all ten of the fetters that bind the *citta* to the cycle of rebirth, whose heart is free of mental effluents (*āsava*), and who is never ever to be reborn again. A title for the Buddha and the highest level of his noble disciples.

**\*\* Note**

The ten fetters of becoming (*samyojana*) are: 1) doubt or uncertainty, especially about the teachings (*vicikicchā*); 2) wrong attitude toward precepts and vows (*śīlabata-parāmāsa*); 3) belief that the body is self (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi*); 4) sensual desire (*kamacchando*); 5) ill will (*vyapado*); 6) attachment to form, craving for form (*ruparago*); 7) attachment to non-form, craving for non-form (*aruparago*); 8) The belief that I'm better, worse or equal to others (*māna*); 9) restlessness (*uddhacca*); 10) ignorance (*avijjā*).

