

The three Satipaṭṭhāna practices with the body that we covered this week: - awareness of anatomical parts, the elemental characteristics of the body (earth, water, fire, and air), and corpse contemplations- are specifically designed to shift our perspective on the body. They aim to reduce our attachment to the body as 'me' or 'mine', and to view it simply as nature, subject to the laws of arising and passing away. These practices can potentially transform our relationship with our bodies, inspiring us to see them in a new light.

The first two of these can be practiced during a body scan, attending to each part of the body as we scan through with our awareness. Anatomical parts can be practiced outside of formal sitting by just taking an interest in anatomy itself. Even our intellectual knowledge of the body can help our practice. Is my artificial hip still "me"? How about the titanium rod in my back? Or the fillings in my teeth? When did the fillings become me? In traditional Buddhist practice, the monastics contemplated 32 parts of the body. With the benefit of even a high school biology book, we could probably identify 32 parts of a single cell. The key is bringing your "Dharma glasses" to your knowledge of the body and its workings. It's a beautifully functioning set of interconnected systems when it's healthy; but whether healthy or not, it's 'not me or mine', It is subject to change and age in ways that 'we' can't control, and there are also natural body fluids and odors that we are repulsed by.

The body's elemental qualities allow us to notice solidity, cohesion, and flow; warmth and coolness; and internal and external energy. I have added [a reading on the elements from Ajahn Sucitto](#) as a resource at the end.

The corpse contemplations drive home how the body, step by step, will return to dust. For the corpse contemplations, I suggest that, as you are on a walk, bring awareness to any dead animals you see. Most often, that will probably be roadkill. How long has this squirrel, rabbit, or other animal been dead on the road? If you see a fresh animal carcass, do you feel repelled? How about if there is only a small patch of fur left, the same reaction? Imagine the animal in all its aliveness, right before it was killed. All living creatures, ourselves included, will die, as death is unavoidable, and the moment of our death is unknown.

Practices:

1. As you do your sitting, standing or lying down meditation this week, be sure to start, as we normally do anyway, by feeling the solidity of the "earth element" of the body: How the body is supported in space and how the gravity of the earth continues to connect us to the earth. You might then connect to the other elements of flowing breath and energy and notice warmth and coolness.
2. Use your imagination to play with our views of the body: Imagine you are 100 years old and you are looking at yourself in the mirror. What has changed? Imagine someone you are physically attracted to, with transparent skin, and organs, where you can see every internal organ, the blood, bodily fluids, and waste products. How does that change their attractiveness?
3. Spend some time with an anatomy book. Look at the pictures as being you. You are like this. You have this collection of parts and systems. If you don't have a book handy, there are several free websites. I am not endorsing any particular one, but you can get a free starter account at this one: www.biodigital.com
4. Maintain awareness throughout the day, tuning in frequently to the feeling of the body as it moves through postures and activities. Relax tension in the body whenever you are aware of it. Enjoy having a body.

ELEMENTS – from the Ajahn Sucitto book, On Your Own Two Feet, the chapter on “Harmony”

ELEMENTS

You can follow a fine-detailed way into this state of harmony by referring to very basic qualities that determine how things, internal and external, appear. They’re called ‘elements’ (dhātu). There are four primary elements and two secondary or mediating elements.

The primary elements are **earth, water, fire** and **air**.

Earth refers to anything that feels solid, holds a form, is static and resists pressure.

Water is the element that is experienced as fluid, and changeable, has no fixed boundaries, and merges with whatever it contacts. It dissolves differences.

Fire is the quality of heat and vitality; it lights things up.

Air is the element associated with movement; it penetrates and pushes.

You can experience these qualities in the land, rivers, sunlight and wind.

And you can also experience these in the firmness, fluidity, vitality and breathing of your body.

At a psychological level, we have the same qualities: we can be firm, flexible, bright, and breezy. Ideally, these elements balance each other; then the result is harmony. On the other hand, when harmony is lost, our firm earth gets rigid, or we get watery and indecisive, hotheaded, or blustery. In this case, one element dominates and isn’t balanced by the other three.

Air loses contact with earth and we get blown away. The fire of our enthusiasm isn’t moderated by the cool water of including the whole picture (and other people), and so on. Worse still, personality habits develop around that imbalance: we may err towards being fiery and righteous, or stodgy and inflexible. You might know people in whom the water element is so dominant that decision-making is difficult; and there are those who blow this way and that and never settle. A balanced person, however, isn’t distinctly any of these; in them, the elements blend into unity.

As I’ve suggested, in terms of energy, body, heart and mind are not separate: a fiery heart inflames the body; a depressed mental state muddies and constricts bodily energy. But when the elements are in balance, they correct these conditions. Accordingly, in standing meditation we detect and work on these elements, through mediating them in the presence of the secondary elements of **space** and **consciousness**. I’ve mentioned space before; it’s a quality that, although essential, is easily overlooked. When we are fully aware of it, it’s the openness that allows experience. **Space** reduces pressure and allows stuck energy to settle and flow. If we detect this open absence of pressure and extend awareness from it to any other element, space moderates the imbalance that makes earth rigid, water abysmal, fire blazing and air restless. When this effect is felt and transfers to the heart, then the reflexes of defensiveness, apathy, aggression/frustration and agitation are transmuted into more balanced emotional forms.

Consciousness is equally crucial. In this respect, ‘consciousness’ is the location of awareness at any given moment. By default, it locates awareness within a field of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and ideas, with its mental aspect stitching the varying sense impressions together to form a known object. Obviously seeing an apple is nothing like tasting an apple (and perhaps not quite as we imagine it would be), but mental consciousness spreads over and combines these impressions to make up the knowable ‘apple’, then taps the ‘agreeable/disagreeable’ button on the heart. Thus aroused, heart-energy shifts, recoils or (rarely) suffuses awareness – and we experience an apple that we like the look of, and eat (or not).

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