

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## *MEDITATION ON THE IMPERSONALITY OF THE BODY EXPLANATION AND INSTRUCTION*

### **FIRST STEP IS TO STUDY**

THIS EVENING WE are going to discuss the impersonality of the body, which is about the reflection on the different parts of our own body. Afterwards, we will meditate on that. In the olden days, the analysis was done in this way. The body was divided into 32 parts. We shall divide these into six groups according to the tradition. They are,

- (a) head hair, body hair, nails, teeth, skin;
- (b) flesh, sinews, bones, marrow, kidneys;
- (c) heart, liver, intestines, spleen, lungs;
- (d) bowels, stomach, undigested food, faeces (faeces, faeces) brain;
- (e) bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fats<sup>3</sup>
- (f) tears, lymph, saliva, nasal mucus, oil of the joints (synovial fluid)<sup>4</sup>, urine.

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<sup>3</sup> Microscopically fat may be found in all parts of the body under the skin. But in places like the palm, bridge of nose and ear lobes, it is not grossly present. But one may concentrate on fat situated in the abdominal area, arms and legs.

<sup>4</sup> Synovial fluid is the fluid between the bone joints. There are four types of bone joint in the body: The hinge type which is in the knees and elbows, the ball and socket type found in shoulders, the flat type found in the

There are other ways of grouping these, which, I think, work equally well for our purpose. It is important to know these parts of the body by name so that one can meditate on them through mental recitation without the assistance of reading or listening. Not only that, one should also know their colour, shape, location and their relation to other parts of body in terms of both similarity and dissimilarity. One should even know the actual odor of each part. It involves some degree of basic anatomical study to meditate on different parts of body effectively. We can understand the remark of the great commentators of Pali texts that states that to learn about these 32 parts of body in the way we have discussed would take weeks or even months. It is very much an analytical procedure in its own way.

To make this type of meditation a principal practice, one has to meditate on one group at least for fifteen days dividing it into three steps each lasting for five days. First, one should begin according to the order given above, and reverse it after five days, which makes the second step. During the last five days, one would meditate forward and backward.

## **PURPOSE OF THIS MEDITATION**

The purpose of this type of meditation is to bring to our awareness the wrong perception we have of our body. We perceive the whole body to be one *entity*. We do not usually

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skull and the spinal cord type. Synovial fluid found in the knee joints is like a lubricator for ease of movement.

think of it as different parts. Therefore, we see it as a *whole* rather than as *parts*. When we see it as an entity, we come to differentiate each body as a specific person, for example, Dr. Loe Kyaw Thinn, Dr. Maung Maung Lat, Dr. Sein Shwe and so on. We do not see it in terms of having things in common. We see each being as a *separate* entity. Because of this perception, we become proud of our own perceived entity. The *deceitfully perceived entity* is an object for *clinging*. Wrong perception of the body is a source of attachment. The ultimate aim of this type of meditation is to develop detachment through seeing and being mindful of the repulsive nature of the body. It is another meditation method of reflective nature. This technique may be used to serve the different purpose of *samatha* or *vipassana* meditation. However, we are discussing it here in the context of *vipassana*, mindfulness meditation.

As this type of meditation gains momentum, we will start seeing some small but important effects. One's fear and dread in secluded places will weaken and one will be able to tolerate different climates and enjoy different foods and places. The ultimate aim, however, is to understand the true nature of the body. As this practice brings deep insight into the nature of the body, detachment from the body will follow. Our aim is not to repress the feeling of bodily attraction by directly producing a repelling emotion but see the body as it is and consequently gain direct knowledge from the exercise. Detachment and insight into the true nature of body happen together. Direct knowing of the nature of the body gives rise to freedom from false notions of it.

## **TECHNIQUES OF MEDITATION ON THE IMPERSONALITY OF THE BODY**

As discussed earlier, there is a lengthy procedure especially to practise this type of meditation. It takes about six months to complete the preliminary stage. During these months one comes to discover those parts which are clear in one's mind and those which are not clear. One then comes to the second stage only when one has gradually eliminated from the list all of the objects that are not perceived clearly in the mind. Certain parts may be clear to some meditators but not others. So, this is where people become different and individual. The process of eliminating goes on until the clearest object is found; afterwards one begins focusing on that alone object, until one can effectively control one's mind to apply it to a chosen object without any difficulty. From here, if one pursues it earnestly so as to acquire a well-developed understanding, one comes to a point where one has to choose either *samatha* or vipassana to progress further.

The 32 parts of body are placed in six groups according to their approximate nature. Some belong to the outer part and are dried; some are situated in the abdominal region; and some are of a fluidic nature. Yet, others are more of the characteristic of the earth element, which is hardness. They have been classified in this way for a purpose. The traditional practice starts from the first group and then expands to include all eventually.

There have also been many modifications to this method over the centuries especially where the practice has been unbroken. Venerable Taung Pulu Sayadaw, one of the most

famous meditation masters that Burma has produced this century, had some wonderful methods of meditation on different parts of body. He was a close friend of the Most Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw. I used to try one of such modified methods that is said to have an effect on gastric problems. I chose to try this as I have a gastric ulcer and my stomach produces more gas. I found that it could control gas within a few minutes, bringing calm and contemplation. This method is a technique, which differs from what we have discussed. It still includes, of course, five parts, small and lower intestine, undigested food, faeces and brain. One of my devotees, Emma, also reminded me of this technique, which she had read from a monthly Buddhist magazine, which described how an American Buddhist monk was cured of his gastric problem after practising this particular technique of meditation given by the Most Venerable Taung Pulu Sayadaw. This is a good example of how the Buddha's teachings are flexible and suit people of various needs.

## **INSTRUCTIONS FOR A SHORT RETREAT**

This evening, since we are only in a relatively short retreat we are going to reflect on the different parts randomly. This will give you an idea of this kind of meditation, and may even help you to discover which part could be the clearest for you. I have found this technique most useful for those who have not learnt about all the 32 parts in details as required in the Pali commentary.

We shall focus first on bones, beginning with the skull. Do not include the hair, skin, blood, and muscles yet. Just leave them for a while. Just try to see the skull without the

eyes, muscles, nerves and skin. Then come down to your shoulder, and then the arms. Try to see only the bones without the muscles, flesh, sinews, blood or even the nails. You then go right down to your toes. You form your body only in bones. There are small bones in your legs and feet. Try to see them. Sweep down slowly. Then come back to the skull again. Try to see the body in the skull and bones only.

Now after that, try to see the joints in various regions of your body, like in your neck, shoulder, elbow, wrist, etc. Try to see each joint. Go down to your toes contemplating joints in your hips, knees and ankles. You will see how vulnerable the body is when you see the joints. Now you have covered two parts already, the bones and the joints.

Next, you are going to put all the muscles on, from the top downwards, slowly through the body, the thighs, and the legs, to form a person. Put on the nerves, the sinews and the vessels in this way, also the blood. Look again at the upper part, the brain and the skin. Then you look at the hair on your head. Try not to see it as a whole, but as single strands of hair. Get to its roots if you can. Then the hair of the body. Then go to each nail. When you reflect on the nails, try to see them separately from the bones and the skin. Note each nail, all twenty of them, on both hands and feet.

The next stage is to go to the parts inside. First your teeth. Try to see each individual tooth, inside and outside. If possible, get down to the roots. Try to go around each tooth. See them as something that is not fixed to the jaw but individually and separately. The idea is to see the different

parts which fit together to make a person. Inside the mouth, you also have the saliva or sputum to observe.

Then go further down inside into the internal organs. You have the heart, the lungs, and the liver (I think being doctors, you have an advantage here). I do not know whether or not you will get frightened. This is a kind of mental operation. You use your mind to go through different parts of your body. You see the stomach, intestines, new food, the waste and all. Try to see them individually. As you see them, you name them repeatedly.

Choose at least ten different parts. The scriptures say that you should choose at least five. Nevertheless, here, I think it is nice to choose about ten and make a list. You go down this list and then up it again. You repeat this list a number of times. If you choose the internal organs, you can choose the heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, stomach and intestines. If you choose the bones, it is important to also include joints. If you choose the blood vessels, it has to be also with blood and muscles. If you choose hair, it is helpful to bring in the teeth and nails. There are many things from which to choose. You can even choose tears.

### **NOT ON DISSIMILARITY BUT SIMILARITY**

When you see these individual parts, you will come to see that the body known as Venerable Dr. Dhammasami is composed of all of these parts, and are the same as Dr. Leo Kyaw Thinn, Dr. Maung Maung Lat, Zaw Zaw, etc. They are all the same. Therefore, what we now see is different parts of the body. What we do not see is Venerable Dhammasami. Are the

nails Venerable Dhammasami? Or is it the bones, or the joints? It is only when you take them as a whole that you can name it as Venerable Dhammasami. Therefore, you get a deep insight into the impersonality of the body. Usually, we tend to personalise; we have been conditioned to perceive things in that way. We have been made to see that we are different from others.

Once, I saw a cartoon in a magazine, of two girls watching a movie in the cinema. They hated the actor. When the actor appeared, one of them said, "*Oh, no. I hate this man. Let's go.*" The other said, "*No, no. Do not go, he's going to die in the next scene.*" You see, they had been made to see the actor as different from themselves. Because of *differentiating perception* they wished him to die. This attitude is common to all of us.

When we were young and we fell on the ground, we would cry and blame the ground. I am not sure whether I did or did not! But I saw such action later when I visited a home, a child fell down and cried, not because he was badly hurt, but because he got so frustrated with the ground and thought the ground had hit him. He perceived that the ground had nothing in common with him, not part of his being, and was to blame. Then his mother could not console him; she hit the ground telling the child "*I've hit the ground.*" Only then did the child stop crying. The idea of revenge had made him see the ground *differently*, not part of his own self. In such a way, we have been led to emphasise the dissimilarities rather than similarities.

## DOWN TO FOUR ELEMENTS

The other day, Dr. S. Shwe was asking me about the four elements (*maha-bhuta*). The four elements are earth, water, fire and wind. Solid or rigid element is called the earth element (*pathavi-dhatu*). The bone is hard. This is the earth or hard element. Look, I am moving my hand now. The ability to move or stretch is the wind element (*vayo*). This includes walking as well. It is an element that makes mobility possible. We do not see anything in common between the earth and us. Although the earth has all these four elements, significantly prominent among them is the earth element, which is hard in nature. In the sea, the water element (*apo*) is prominent, but the other elements are still there. We have all of this element of cohesion that binds different parts of our body together. After sitting and meditating, we become hungry and it burns inside. That is the heat element (*tejo*) that is present. The body is made up of these four elements. You feel the hard element when you sit on the floor. It is hard because the earth element is so prominent. When you go out, you feel cold because of the weather. We do not usually consider that these four elements are with us. Although we see, non-sentient materials of being worth little, we do not, however, usually see our body, which also consists of the same four elements in the same way. We always see it as being worth more. Even between sentient beings, we say that my four elements are more beautiful than yours!

So we are now going to reflect on the different parts of our body for twenty minutes and follow it with vipassana meditation for fifteen minutes. Or if you prefer, you can do

vipassana meditation first and then do the reflection on the different parts of the body for twenty minutes afterwards.

While contemplating of these many parts of the body, if any sensation or thought arises so prominently, you may observe it as a secondary object and return to the part where you stopped. Should you feel repulsion, fear or disgust, bring in mindfulness to pay bare attention to the feelings before continuing with contemplation on the body again. *Vipassana* and this meditation technique are supportive to each other.