

*Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammâ Sambuddhassa!*

# A BUDDHIST APPROACH TO REVULSION - ASUBHA <sup>1</sup>

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“The body is beautiful.” This is a lie, a trick and an illusion. Because this is not widely known, especially outside Buddhist circles, the nature of the uninformed being is to take the body as beautiful, lasting, not [subject to change](#) and as “[me, mine, I and myself](#).” None of these statements are true. They are lies and tricks played on the mind by [Mara the Evil One](#) to bind the uninformed being ever tighter to the never-ending round of birth and death ([samsara](#)).

Not convinced the body is not beautiful? Consider the body in its constituent parts, the parts that come together to form the so called ‘body.’ Starting from the top, there is head hair, facial hair, skin, blood, eyes, tears, eye balls and eye ball jelly, veins, ears, ear wax, the nose, snot, the tongue, saliva, facial muscles, sweat, the skull and the brain. Taken separately, the true nature of this so called ‘body’ becomes very apparent. Can the body when taken apart like this still be called the ‘body’? This word label has lost its meaning; in the same way as when a ‘car’ is taken apart to its constituent parts it can no longer be called a ‘car.’ So if there is no body really there, what really is there? Just a combination of matter that is subject to decay, rotting and death – in other words nothing substantial.

Lets us continue on our discovery of this so called ‘body.’ There are body hair, skin, muscles, heart, lungs, veins, blood, sweat, large and small intestines, faeces, bladder, urine, kidneys, half-digested food, the rib cage, the spine and other bones. Venturing onto the outer limbs there are bones, bone marrow, muscles, blood, veins, skin, hair, sweat and nails.<sup>2</sup> Does the ‘body’ still look beautiful?

Isn’t this what we fail to see at all times? We get tricked by the *whole* and miss the real *detail* that’s there. This is what we need to regularly train ourselves to do as Buddhists, to see the true nature of this so called ‘body’ as it really is. Only then will wisdom ([panna](#)) arise in relation to the bodily form and the veil of delusion ([moha](#)) slip from the eyes (of the mind). This is referred to as the practice of [asubha](#) or the contemplation of the unpleasant nature of some topic – in this context the ‘body.’<sup>3</sup> The idea behind this practice is to also reduce [desire](#) and [attachment](#) for the physical form. When [asubha](#) is practiced regularly, both as a contemplation ‘on the go’ in daily life as well as a meditation, one will slowly become aware of the true nature of the ‘body,’ which is normally hidden from view, giving rise to detachment, peace and the arising of the all-important wisdom ([panna](#)).

The other approach to seeing the true nature of this body is to see what happens to it following death, which is referred to as the ‘cemetery contemplation.’<sup>4</sup> After death the face and ‘body’ becomes bloated and discoloured. In a few days it can become infested with worms and maggots that devour on the skin and flesh of the face, stomach and other sensitive areas. It may also be eaten by other wandering creatures such as wild dogs, crows, kites and hyenas in an open cemetery.<sup>5</sup> After a few weeks the skin, flesh and organs would have been either eat away by animals or melted away on its own, leaving either a blood smeared or white skeleton. The bones maybe scattered, especially if animals fought over it earlier. After some months the bones would become brittle and disintegrate into powder. Constant reflection over this in relation to one’s own ‘body’ as well as other’s can cause one to see the reality behind the ‘body’ and gives rise to detachment.

The ‘body’ is mistaken by almost all to be beautiful, lasting, not [subject to change](#) and as ‘[me, mine, myself and I](#).’ This is wrong or perverted understanding of the true nature of things. The true nature of the body can be seen by practicing [asubha](#), the contemplation on the foulness or unpleasantness of the ‘body.’ This can be done by taking the ‘body apart into its constituent parts’ or by utilizing the ‘cemetery contemplation,’<sup>6</sup> both of which can be practiced by mental visualization or by utilizing words. Once established in this practice, it will allow for the clear vision into the reality and true nature of the ‘body,’ thereby promoting detachment and reducing the [desire](#) for the flesh (lust), which will give rise to clear-sightedness, insight ([vipassana](#)) and wisdom ([panna](#)).

May you understand the reality of the ‘body’ and may it enable you to gain 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.

## PITY THE MORTALS

It is clear how hard it is to control [desire](#),  
only a contemplative,  
or one dedicated to the [Path](#),  
could have control like this.

It is clear now,  
pity the mortals,  
who are held tightly captive,  
by [Mara](#)'s sensuous grip.

For those who know not the power of [asubha](#) - disgust,  
almost all in this world,  
and beyond too,  
give in, fall and are tightly bound,  
by [Mara](#)'s sensuous whip!

## Notes

1. The latest version of this document can be found in **HTML** format here <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=revul> and in **PDF** format here <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=revulp>
2. Refer to *Establishing the Awareness of Body as Body!* here [http://what-buddha-said.net/drops/III/The\\_32\\_Parts.htm](http://what-buddha-said.net/drops/III/The_32_Parts.htm) and *Appendix A: Establishing the Awareness of Body as Body!* below.
3. There are other themes that one can and should become disgusted with to reduce [attachment](#) to them, thereby help one along the [Path](#) towards the unbinding/release/realization of *Nibbana*. A good example of this is the theme of food.
4. Refer to *Awareness of Body as a live Corpse & Skeleton!* here [http://what-buddha-said.net/drops/III/The\\_9\\_Corpse\\_Meditations.htm](http://what-buddha-said.net/drops/III/The_9_Corpse_Meditations.htm) and *Appendix B: Awareness of Body as a Live Corpse & Skeleton!* below.
5. In ancient India, and perhaps even today, there were 'charnel grounds' where corpses were left to the 'elements.'
6. Another method is contemplation of impending sickness, old age and death in relation to the body.

## Appendix A: Establishing the Awareness of Body as Body!

Source: [www.what-buddha-said.net](http://www.what-buddha-said.net)

**URL:** [http://what-buddha-said.net/drops/III/The\\_32\\_Parts.htm](http://what-buddha-said.net/drops/III/The_32_Parts.htm)

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## **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](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.accesstoinsight.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!

## **Appendix B: Awareness of Body as a Live Corpse & Skeleton!**

**Source:** [www.what-buddha-said.net](http://www.what-buddha-said.net)

**URL:** [http://what-buddha-said.net/drops/III/The\\_9\\_Corpse\\_Meditations.htm](http://what-buddha-said.net/drops/III/The_9_Corpse_Meditations.htm)

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The Blessed Buddha said:

If a [monk](#) sees a corpse 1, 2, 3 days dead; swollen, blue & festering, thrown in cemetery, he then utilizes this experience on his own body: Verily, exactly so is also my own body; it is of the very same nature;

so disgusting will it inevitably become and it cannot ever escape it...

If a **monk** sees a body thrown in the cemetery, being eaten by crows, hawks, vultures, dogs, jackals or by different worms and maggots...

If a **monk** sees a corpse reduced to a skeleton with some flesh and blood still attached to it, and held together by the sinews...

If a **monk** sees a cadaver; a blood-besmeared skeleton, but without any flesh, held together by the tendons as a chain of bones...

If a **monk** sees a carcass; just a skeleton without any flesh or blood, yet still held together by the tendons...

If a **monk** sees a skeleton of separated bones, scattered in a mess, here a hand bone, there a foot bone, the pelvis, spine & the skull...

If a **monk** sees a skeleton simply as bleached white shell-like bones...

If a **monk** sees bare bones thrown in the cemetery lying heaped up...

If a **monk** sees a stack of bones now gone rotten & turning into dust, he then applies this experience to his his own body: Verily, exactly so is also my own body; it is of the very same nature; so fragile & feeble is it, it will inevitably turn into dust and it cannot ever escape it...

Then he lives fearless, detached, and clings to nothing in this world!!!

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

[http://What-Buddha-Said.net/drops/II/Meditation\\_On\\_the\\_Body\\_Kayagata-Sati.htm](http://What-Buddha-Said.net/drops/II/Meditation_On_the_Body_Kayagata-Sati.htm)

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

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### **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](http://what-buddha-said.net/drops/II/Meditation_On_the_Body_Kayagata-Sati.htm)

### **Related Dhamma Articles**

1. *Offerings* - On making offerings to the Lord **Buddha's** supreme qualities, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=offerings>
2. *Daily Dana* - On giving and generosity, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=dailydana>
3. *Five Precepts* - Developing virtue through the five precepts, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=pansil>
4. *Buddhist Positive Thinking* - Positive thinking from a Buddhist perspective, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=posthink>

5. *Mental Purity* - Five ways prescribed by the **Buddha** for subduing mental defilements, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=vitakkasantana>
6. *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>
7. *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>
8. *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>
9. *Attachment* - An analysis of how attachment leads to unsatisfactoriness, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=attachment>
10. *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>
11. *A Buddhist Approach to Mental Health* - A Buddhist perspective and approach to mental health, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=mentalhealth>
12. *Four Noble Truths* - The essence of Buddhism, see <http://www.vihara.org.au/go?to=fourtruths>
13. *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. *Mettanet.org* here <http://www.mettanet.org>
3. *What-Buddha-Said.net* here <http://what-buddha-said.net>
4. *What-Buddha-Taught.net* here <http://what-buddha-taught.net>
5. *SuttaReadings.net* here <http://www.suttareadings.net>
6. *Buddhanet.net* here <http://www.buddhanet.net>