

Lesson 3

by Bro James Ong (30 minutes)

CONTEMPLATION OF BODY

(PART 2)

Section on Bodily Postures, Primary Elements and Others

3.1 Introduction

Welcome to this 3rd lesson of Satipatthana Meditation Discourse series. Today, I will continue with the rest of the sections under Contemplation of Body starting with Bodily Postures.

In this section of Bodily Postures, the Buddha said:

“when walking, a monks knows I am walking or when standing he knows I am standing or when sitting he knows I am sitting, or when lying down, he knows I am lying down or in whatever position his body is in he knows that position of the body”.

“Again monks, in walking forward and backward, a monk practises clear comprehension, in looking elsewhere, he practises clear comprehension”.

Then Buddha continues with all other typical daily activities of a monk:

“in bending and stretching his limbs, he practises clear comprehension”

“in wearing the inner and outer robe, and in carrying the bowl, he practises clear comprehension”

“in eating, drinking, chewing and tasting, he practices clear comprehension”

“in answering calls of nature, in walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking, speaking and being silent, he practises clear comprehension”.

How is continuous mindfulness with clear comprehension, practised, throughout the day? It is clear from the Discourse, that mindfulness meditation is not, practised exclusively in the sitting position. Continuous mindfulness with clear comprehension should therefore, be applied, throughout the day in all postures when suitable and in appropriate activities.

In a retreat centre, it is generally safe and all typical activities would be appropriate and suitable for a meditator to practise continuous mindfulness throughout the day.

If one is not in retreat centre, then, appropriate activities in general, would normally include waking up, brushing your teeth, washing, bathing, ironing, dressing, preparing your meals, eating, drinking, chewing, sweeping, wiping or cleaning, speaking, keeping silent, falling asleep and such other activities that are appropriate.

Other activities which require careful attention to avoid harm such as, driving or crossing a road would be unsuitable to place your attention on your bodily postures or movements. For the safety of oneself and others, you should be aware of the external objects such as, other drivers, pedestrians or cars on the road.

So, in contemplation of the postures mentioned by the Buddha, the meditator will eventually experience the 4 great elements, such as the motion element which is more obvious.

Before I go further as to how continuous mindfulness with clear comprehension is applied in all the postures and appropriate activities, I will first go through, what are primary elements.

3.2 Reflection on the Primary Elements

The primary elements in Pali is known as “*Pathavi, Apo, Tejo and Vayo*”.

Pathavi means the element of extension, simply known as earth element. It can be experienced through the sensation of hardness and softness in all postures. For instance, when remained seated for too long in one posture, you could experience the hardness on your buttock, or when having stood for a while, the feet that touch the floor would begin to feel hardness, or other parts of the body begins to feel stiffness, all which are manifestation of earth element.

Apo means the element of cohesiveness, simply known, as water element. It is the water element that binds all elements together. A way to explain this element would be like mixing water into the flour, which then results in a dough. The dough without water would remain in its powdery form and is dry. Just as when a person dies, the body dries up and turns into dust because the cohesive element has become weak.

Tejo is the temperature element simply known, as fire element. The hot and cold feeling that we experience is the manifestation of temperature element. Fire element has the function of maturing. When the elements are unbalanced and heat temperature becomes too strong then, the body is succumbed to fever. When the temperature of cold is strong, then the body is liable to catch a cold. It is this heat element that is the maturing and the decaying factor in the form in Pali called rupa.

Vayo is the element of motion or simply known as wind element. Wind element is present in the whole body including the abdomen which can be experienced through the rising and falling movements. The wind element is the support in the sitting and standing posture. Wind element is the motion in the body movements such as walking, bending, stretching limbs, wearing or dressing, running, combing, swimming and all other bodily movements.

3.3 How to practise continuous mindfulness with clear comprehension in all postures and appropriate activities?

Now, one of the ways to practise continuous mindfulness with clear comprehension, is to direct the mind attentively to all our postures and appropriate activities of the body.

In sitting, the meditator first pays attention to the rising and falling movements on the abdomen, which is, the wind element. As the meditator's attention becomes keen, the meditator will notice other elements present in the rising and falling movements, such as tension, hardness, softness which are actually earth element.

When the meditator remains seated for a while, he or she begins to feel hardness on the buttock – that is, earth element. In sitting posture too, one can experience strong heat element built up in the body and sweat profusely; or they could feel cold with air-cond (that is cool wind-element) blowing on the body. As for the water element in the sitting posture, it can be perceived as a lump of hardness, a lump of pain, a lump of heat which is the cohesive or water element.

In walking, how is element experienced? Basically, walking is the air element but when mindfulness is developed and has become strong, the other elements can also be clearly perceived. For instance, you can feel the heaviness of your body and feet when you walk – that is, earth element or the cold of the floor when your feet touch, or the body heat that could produce sweat and stickiness on the body etc.

However, if the mind goes towards too many elements in the beginning, it becomes dispersed and restless, thereby, concentration cannot be developed. In the case when the mind becomes restless and disturbed and pulls the attention away from the air element, then, the meditator should stand still, and observe the mind for some time before he returns and continues on with his walking meditation noting the air element.

It is beneficial to start noting the movements mentally in the one-step movement which is the brisk walking as, right-leg stepping, left-leg stepping. This brings the mind down to the object and prevents it from straying so much.

As the calmness sets in, the meditator can proceed onto the two-steps movement by noting the lifting-movement and pushing-movement.

Once the concentration is developed, then, the meditator proceeds onto noting of the three-steps movement that is, lifting, pushing and putting. At this point, there should be clarity of mind and movements are clearly observed. When clarity of mind and calmness sets in, then the meditator should drop the naming and just bare-experiencing the air element, without words or without concepts or without naming it.

Labels are useful in the beginning to help anchor the mind to the object but, at this juncture, it become a hindrance for further progress and prevent the meditator from experiencing the elements directly. Therefore, it should be dropped when the mind is able to perceive clearly the air element. If the meditator is able to maintain the clarity and sharpen his faculties, the meditator can experience the insight level into the

arising and disappearing of the air element. In this way the meditator is said to have gone inside into the experiential level.

In the standing meditation, the meditator could direct his attention to the predominant object, which can be either, rising and falling of the abdomen, the hardness on the sole, the body stiffness, heat element when such element manifest strongly, or the body sensations such as itchiness, pain, numbness, etc.

The body is not adapted to long periods of standing as it causes movement, vibration and shaking. Therefore, the meditator can note it for a little while and proceed onto the walking meditation. Standing too long is especially unsuitable for elderly meditators who would be more suited in the sitting posture.

Walking is still important, as in the walking, the objects are stronger and therefore, easier to build up concentration. Walking also generates energy. As such, meditators do not fall into sloth and torpor or sleepiness. Whereas, in sitting, meditators and especially elderly ones would succumb to sloth and torpor when they sit too long without moving the body.

Now, in the lying posture, the hardness and softness is predominant but one can also direct the attention to rising and falling of the abdomen. If one stays in the lying posture for a long time, one could feel the built up of strong heat element on the body parts that touch the mattress. If one cannot feel the change in the heat element but merely stagnated, it is advisable to switch over to the other bases, where one could perceive the changing that is the arising and disappearing more distinctly such as, feelings, itchiness, numbness, pain or air element.

So, we have covered the basic 4 postures in which the 4 great elements can manifest. A meditator should therefore, not presume that in the sitting – there is only rise and fall, or, in the walking, there is only motion. A meditator should also notice the other predominant element as it arises.

Clear comprehension of directing the mind to the body in all the postures: walking, sitting, standing, lying down, and changing from one posture to another posture, can be applied continuously in retreats or in daily life (except when driving, crossing the road or other risky activities).

Here, are some examples of how mindfulness with clear comprehension can be applied in daily activities:

When brushing teeth, washing, bathing, preparing for your meals, eating, drinking, chewing, sweeping, wiping or cleaning, you can direct the mind to the movements of the hands or body with bare attention, noting the air element. Even when speaking or keeping silent, you could also practise mindfulness noting the mind, so, to ensure your speech is not harsh, hurtful or connected with ill-will but is pleasant and beneficial.

3.4 Why should we train our mind to perceive body as elements, or as an ultimate conditioned reality?

I shall give an example here: in one of the meditation classes I conducted, a yogi reported to me that he could not really meditate and so he opened his eyes to look around and he noticed there was another yogi sitting next to him and there was a mosquito that had just landed on his leg. The mosquito was poking in and sucking up the blood in the process it caused the mosquito's body to turn red.

He continued to be amazed and wondered if his neighbour felt pain. Then, I said "*oh you can see it so well because it is not your leg and if it is your leg you would probably smash the poor mosquito. Since it is not your leg, you think it is quite alright*". Now in the same way, if you are able to cultivate mindfulness with detachment, objects would not easily affect your mind.

The Buddha asked: "*Monks, why is attachment to the body suffering – because monks, the body is painful by nature. Therefore, attachment to the body that is painful, brings suffering*". How is it painful? How is attachment to the body results in pain?

There is suffering in birth, old age, decay, sickness and dying.

Why is birth suffering? The mother's womb is cramped and constricted. It is also painful to the foetus when the mother consumes food or drink, that is either too hot or too cold or which burns: example like chilli, alcohol or smoking. It is also painful for the newborn to pass through the birth canal which is narrow. This is suffering of birth.

What is suffering of old age and decay? Here, it is suffering to lose our vitality, strength and attractiveness as we age. It is suffering when our senses like: seeing, hearing, tasting etc.... are decaying. In growing old, not only does one suffer from decaying senses, the body elements too are easily imbalanced. We suffer pain of all kinds related to old age such as arthritis, dementia, Alzheimer. Now, these are suffering of old age & decay.

Not only is there suffering in old age, there is suffering in sickness too. Sickness affects people of all ages like: cancer, diabetes, hyperthyroid and all others that produce painful body sensations.

There is also mental pain in dying due to the attachment to this body as "*I, me and my*". There is fear of not knowing what is happening to oneself and one's body. Strong clinging to the body creates immense fear of death. Attachment to the body as an ego intensifies that pain.

Example: the question that I have often received is: "*Would the body feel the pain when cremated?*" So the answer is in death, the body feels no pain as it no longer has consciousness arising. The body is like a piece of log the Buddha said.

There is another question posed many times in my Dhamma talks. They asked: "*If we give our eyes away when we die, will we be reborn without eyes for example a blind ghost?*" Of course I replied: If one performs generosity by giving their eyes,

after death, surely in their next life, they would be reborn with a pair of beautiful eyes, as good begets good, meritorious actions begets happiness.

So you see, even after death, there are those who fear for their bodies. There is this suffering connected to the fear of what will happen to me when I die because of attachment to their body. The fear of dying brings great distress to the mind, because of the attachment to the body as “*I me and my*”.

During the Buddha’s time, there was a seeker of truth who approached the Buddha, and declared to the Buddha, that this body, is me, this is mine and this body is I. In reply, the Buddha asked that seeker “*this body – will it grow old, will the body get sick, will the body decay, will the body die?*” The seeker answered “*yes*” to all the questions the Buddha put to him.

So, the Buddha asked again, “*then is it happiness or sorrow?*” The seeker then said, it is sorrowful when we are sick, when we age, when we suffer decay and it is sorrowful when dying. Then said the Buddha, why should you cling to the view that this body is “*I, me and my*”. Example – why should you put your hand into the fire when you know it burns?

Not only are attached to our own body, we are also attached to external body. We recognise the external body as my parents, spouse, children, friends and enemies. If unfortunate events befall our loved ones or when separated from them, our mind falls into confusion and distress because, our mind is stuck in concepts, unable to see the ultimate reality that, it is just the body.

For instance, in the case of a nasty accident where the bodies are burnt beyond recognition, they can no longer be identified. Therefore, the true nature of the body reveals itself as merely elements, and nothing else.

Coming to back to the Discourse on the section of *Reflection on the Primary Elements*, the Buddha continued:

“Again monks, a monk reflects upon this very body, in whatever manner it is placed or disposed by way of its primary elements, there are in this body: the earth element, water element, fire element and wind element. Just as a skilled butcher or a butcher’s apprentice, having slaughtered a cow, separated into portions, were to be placed at the junction of 4 highways”.

Just as a clever butcher slaughters a cow and sells its meat in that four way junction, separating it into portions – at that point, the concept of a cow disappears. The head alone is not a cow, the liver is not a cow and the leg is not a cow.

In the same way, when meditator is trained to contemplate the body to see the body in various elements that makes up the body, the concept of self breaks up. As to how we practise contemplation of body as elements has been explained earlier.

As we constantly practise, and reflect, on the 4 portions of primary elements, instructed by the Buddha in this Discourse, the concept of ego slowly weakens. Without the concept of ego generating craving and ill-will, unwholesome states of

mind is weakened and does not manifest in gross unwholesome bodily actions such as harming, hurting or taking of life.

Wrong views manipulated by craving or ill-will are pernicious. Wrong views associated with ego could cause conflicts, disasters and misery through wars in the name of righteousness, justice or even fear.

When the ego is checked, noted and kept in place, there will be less arising of defilements, such as covetousness, greediness, ill-will, jealousy, fear, frustration, sadness and dissatisfaction. Consequently, more wholesome mental states will arise in the mind such as, wisdom, kindness, compassion, contentment, calmness, joy and happiness.

In this Discourse, the Buddha taught several methods of Contemplation of Body. Here, we have covered all the sections that would be applied in this meditation course, except Contemplation on the 32 Parts of the Body and Contemplation of the 9-Decaying Process of Corpse, as these two sections are very extensive and have a different approach altogether.

So, next week, I will go to the next section of the Discourse, namely Contemplation of Feelings, in Pali Vedanupassana.