

# Everybody Loves Some Body

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I spent my first vassa under jet planes, with a housing development construction site outside my window, surrounded by seductive sights in the heat and smog of Thailand's capital city. Venerable Ajahn Piak now lived in the urban jungle as sprawling Bangkok had gradually engulfed his tiny, once remote, monastery. The airplanes roared and the neighbours snored. I struggled with mind states. And through it all Ajahn Piak radiated. Serenity. Loving kindness. He was not an average man.

One day the Sangha was given the opportunity to witness an autopsy at the police hospital. This traditional practice of contemplating a dead person is a meditation technique for taking an honest inquiring look at the ephemeral nature of our bodies and our infatuated identification with them. Undertaken with wisdom, corpse contemplation assists in reducing attachment to the body, setting down a burden of dukkha and giving rise to joy. Deeply accepting the inevitability of death helps us to make our priorities clear. Naturally we then develop an appreciation for the preciousness of our life and the opportunities it affords us to cultivate the Path.

On the car ride over I tried to arouse a suitably serious contemplative attitude as the driver blared rock music. When I first came to stay with Ajahn Piak, I had four or five different methods of meditation going, the patchwork result of years of spiritual shopping. One evening I went to consult with him and asked for advice on which direction to pursue. He stressed the importance of understanding the truth about the body through practicing kayagatasati (mindfulness of the body) <sup>1</sup> and asubha (meditation on the unattractive qualities of the body). He gave instructions on mentally dissecting it, reducing it to its component parts for objective analysis, and reflecting on its eventual demise. That was my first attempt at systematically developing investigation of this body. I was 'getting into' my body - really getting in there and it was enough to fundamentally challenge perceptions I had about who I was.

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<sup>1</sup> Kayagatasati Sutta MN 119

The car stopped. Six brown robes, four Thai monks, one young novice and a phra farang (Western monk), paraded past white walls. Greeted with the smell of formaldehyde I entered the autopsy room prepared for gruesome and sobering sights, and there she was - our corpse, a Bangkok woman in her mid 20's. Freshly dead without a mark on her body and not the least bit blue or bloated, she looked more like Sleeping Beauty than the rotting, Mara-combating meditation object I'd expected. I feigned equanimity. The little novice had big eyes. I wanted to ask what suffering had driven her to hang herself, but the coroner and his scalpel interrupted. He made it clear this enchanted sleep was no fairy tale. With the monks standing on raised bleachers like the cheering section at a football match, the dissection began. The initial cuts shattered the perception of beauty. While retaining the mental image of her original condition for comparison, the subsequent dismantling began to take its effect. I remembered Siddhartha and his preoccupation when his enticing entertainers could not assuage his wise sadness. What is that quality that separates the living from the dead? Why do I give importance to this corpse I call myself?

Meanwhile Sleeping Beauty had looked better. I wanted a closer peek, so I climbed down from the bleachers to stand next to her, my mind rotating between the emotions of fascination, repulsion, compassion and a questioning peace. Then the smell hit me. My head began to spin, and I decided it was time to back off. As I stepped into the hallway my sight began to fade, blackness gradually coming in from the sides reducing vision to a dot and then extinguishing it altogether.

"I am not going to faint!" I determined. - It would simply be too embarrassing for everyone present if the phra farang faints. I was, however, completely blind. Holding on to a thread of consciousness with all the willpower I could muster, I could hear the others preparing to leave. I grabbed onto someone's robe to lead me out. Once outside, the others noticed I looked at least as pale as the corpse and gave me a seat. Within a few minutes vision returned.

Upon returning to the monastery the work began to integrate and internalize the day's experience. Without bringing the question of death home to



bear on my life, I would be left only with another fascinating memory, my heart remaining relatively unchanged by the autopsy. I followed Ajahn Piek's advice to visualize the different layers of my body's composition. What would I look like without hair? (an easy start for the ordained) Without skin? Without organs, sinews or flesh? Gradually specific parts of the body stood out more clearly than the rest: a full set of lipless teeth, a rib, and the hair on the back of my hand. Focusing on a single tooth or hair, simply seeing without conceptualizing, revealed physicality and mentality as interdependent yet distinctly separate processes, further unraveling the assumed notion of an inherent self. The world seemed turned upside down. A sense of spiritual urgency arose, as well as a seriousness which I found necessary to balance with regular development of loving-kindness.

The Buddha considered meditation on the parts of the body of central importance and it is included as part of the ordination ceremony for bhikkhus. These asubha practices are not an attempt to convince ourselves that all is ugly, but to balance the mind to see things as they truly are. The world is neither intrinsically beautiful nor ugly, but problems arise when projections of attractiveness on people, objects and ideas give rise to desire and dukkha.

In expounding the first Noble Truth the Buddha in no way denied that pleasure can be found in sensual gratification through the body. He did, however, point out that it is fleeting, carries a backlash of dukkha, and is inferior to the wholesome bliss of jhana and the peace of nibbana.

In developing kayagatasati an ability to concentrate the mind is essential to go beyond the superficial, and the contemplation of the body in turn conditions the mind to gather in one-pointedness. Even though one has seen the unsatisfactory nature of sensual pleasure, as long as one has not yet experienced the greater happiness of jhana it cannot be expected that one will be able to fully let go of attachment to those sensual pleasures. <sup>2</sup>

In the Thai Forest tradition kayagatasati is the mainstay for developing insight. Ajahn Chah's teacher, Ajahn Mun, recommended, "In your investigation never allow the mind to desert the body for anywhere else. You can examine the body's unattractiveness, view it as made up of elements, examine it to see it as aggregates or by way of the three

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<sup>2</sup> Culadukkhakkhandha Sutta MN 14

characteristics (impermanence, suffering and not-self). When any of these aspects are fully and lucidly seen by one's heart, all other exterior things will clearly manifest there too." <sup>3</sup>

It was only Ajahn Mun who could convince his eminent disciple Ajahn Tate to investigate the body. Until his 12<sup>th</sup> vassa Ajahn Tate figured that once the subtleties of the mind have been mastered why go back to investigate a coarse object such as the body. However, it was precisely due to his taking up this practice that he had a deep realization of Dhamma.

I later had the opportunity to speak with Ajahn Piek, and he explained in further detail the meditations on the body.

"First have the mind rest still, internally gathered. This is a necessary first stage. As soon as it begins to move take up an object of investigation, whichever aspect of kayagatasati you regularly use and are skilled with. Suppose you investigate the earth element (solidity) <sup>4</sup> in the body. If the mind is peaceful with enough strength it will seem as though the body disperses, dissolves and completely disappears. It will be anatta (not-self). Empty. Investigate whichever part of the body you choose. If you can't investigate all the parts of the body simply focus on one, but have it reach the point of anatta. Then reassemble it; back and forth, over and over, until it is seen very clearly: this body is only a collection of parts; it is impermanent; it arises, exists and passes away."

I asked, "Do you recommend taking one part of the body, the skeleton for instance, as a fixed object of samadhi?"

"Yes, you can certainly do that. If at first you can't visualize your bones it may be necessary to go look at a skeleton. Remember what it looks like. Then imagine yourself as a skeleton. Take the skeleton out of yourself, then put yourself in the skeleton. With increasing skill, each time you are aware of yourself you can bring up the skeleton nimitta, (in this context) visual images of the body, either created or spontaneously arisen, or actually seeing into the body with the mind's eye, knowing 'you' are bones. Then when the nimitta is clear and stable, break it up and dissolve it into dust and anatta. If you use this as your main mode of investigation, each person you encounter or think of, you must see as a skeleton. When

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<sup>3</sup> Autobiography of a Forest Monk, Ajahn Tate, page 150.

<sup>4</sup> Mahahatthipadopama Sutta MN 28

skilled, this will bring lightness and bliss. This is the way I practiced as a young monk."

"Should one investigate in the same manner each time or follow wherever the mind inclines?"

"Any part of the body is fine. If the mind goes to a particular spot then contemplate there. If distracting thoughts begin to increase, let the mind rest by returning to concentration meditation. After it has regained strength continue with the contemplation. Whichever part is clear, a tooth for example, make that nimitta as big or as small as possible. I used to take a tiny single hair and make it longer and longer until it filled all space. Then I'd shrink it. It was good fun and I'd do it for hours. This type of fun is quite useful because you are playing with the meditation objects of hair, skin, bones etc. the entire time. It is important to enjoy meditation, or else one will inevitably begin looking outside for enjoyment."

In the following years the mental image of Sleeping Beauty's far from charming lineaments remained vivid and clear. And she taught: when the grand ball is over, the last dance has come to a halt and our mask is gently rolled back, what's behind our thin facade? The kiss of the coroner's blade invites us to awaken.