



The first anchor of mindfulness: grounding mindfulness

Mindfulness of body, meeting life where it happens

“Your body is a piece of the universe you’ve been given. So mindfulness of the body is not just a practice, it is a celebration.” ~ Thich Nhat Hanh

The island of Grounding Mindfulness

This chapter is an overview of the ‘First Foundation of Mindfulness’, as outlined by Gotama (the Buddha). Traditionally, the ‘Four Foundations of Mindfulness’ are: Mindfulness of ‘body’, ‘feeling-tones’, ‘mind’, and ‘processes’. We will present these as the ‘Four Anchors of Mindfulness’ that ultimately stabilise our raft and provide safety and security on our journey.

Having set off from the dangerous shore on our basic raft, made up of five foundational planks – the ‘Five Gifts’ – bound together by the rope of compassion, our first stop on our journey will be the ‘Island of Grounding Mindfulness’. As we continue the vital work of grounding ourselves by recognising the reality of being human. Understanding that life is painful, difficult, and disappointing (*dukkha*), and meeting this reality with compassion – we now explore where this human life is actually experienced: through our bodies.

This mindfulness practice is fundamental to securing our ‘RAFT to Freedom’. Our bodies are the most immediate material we have at our disposal – the very substance of our vessel, always in contact with the water of experience. This awareness directs us towards collecting our first anchor – mindfulness of body.

Why begin our mindfulness training here, with the body? Because the body is our anchor to the present moment – the tangible reality we inhabit from birth until death. While our minds can easily wander into past regrets or future anxieties, the sensations of the body are always happening in the present. By grounding our awareness in physical experience, we move away from abstract concepts and directly engage with life as it unfolds before us.

We frame this first foundation as **Grounding Mindfulness** because it's through our bodies that we directly experience birth, ageing, illness, and eventually death – the core components of *dukkha* outlined in Gotama's first realisation. It is in our bodies that we feel physical pain, pleasure, and the constant flux of sensations, providing a direct field for observing 'impermanence' – the temporary and ever-changing nature of all experience.

Conditioned existence

Everything in life happens because of causes and conditions. Nothing exists on its own or stays the same forever. In other words, all things – our thoughts, feelings, bodies, and experiences – come into being because of other things, and they constantly change depending on those conditions.

Both our mind and bodies are *conditioned* by past and present experiences, and it is through investigating our body's changing nature that we can gain insight into our sense of self – seeing it as ultimately beyond our control, thereby loosening our grip on 'me', 'mine' and 'myself'. Mindfulness of the body isn't just about relaxation or physical awareness; it's a profound practice for recognising and responding to the fundamental reality of our existence.

This overview introduces the significance of cultivating body awareness as part of the first stage of our journey. We will touch upon the different aspects of body mindfulness that Gotama taught, which will then be explored in much greater detail in the six subsequent chapters as we continue to explore this island:

1. **Mindfulness of breathing** – Observing the breath as it comes in and goes out, noticing its length and quality
2. **Mindfulness of postures** – Noticing whether you are walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, and being aware of transitions between these postures
3. **Mindfulness with clear comprehension** – Being mindful during all daily actions-moving, eating, dressing, speaking, and even using the toilet
4. **Mindfulness of the body's anatomy** – Contemplating the body as made up of various parts (hair, skin, bones, organs, and so forth), to see it as a collection rather than a unified self
5. **Mindfulness of the bodily elements** – Seeing the body as composed of solidity (earth), fluidity (water), heat (fire), and movement (air), just like all physical things
6. **Mindfulness of the body's impermanence** – Reflecting on the body's ageing, decay, and eventual death, reminding ourselves of our own mortality

These practices, built upon the foundational planks of the 'Five Gifts' and held with the attitude of 'Compassion' – the rope binding our raft – help us see the body clearly, without aversion or clinging. This clear seeing is essential for understanding that life is also helpful in dismantling our delusions about permanence, control, and our body as a reliable source of lasting pleasure or a solid 'self' – delusions that often fuel cravings and compulsions. This understanding helps us to locate the 'First Anchor of Mindfulness' – mindfulness of the body.

Self-reflections - initial body awareness check-in

- ★ Take a few moments to gently check in with your current relationship with your body:
- ★ Right now, without changing anything, can I feel the physical sensations present in my body? (for example, points of contact, temperature, tingling, pressure, tightness, ease?)
- ★ How aware am I generally of my body's posture and movements as I go about my day?
- ★ What is my habitual attitude towards my body? (for example, critical, ignoring, appreciative, anxious, neutral?)

- ★ How do I physically experience strong compulsions in my body? (For example: cravings, withdrawal symptoms, tension, numbness?)
- ★ Does the idea of paying closer attention to my body feel inviting, intimidating, or neutral? Why?

Journaling prompts - exploring embodiment

Use your journal to reflect on these broader themes related to body awareness:

1. **Body as home:** Reflect on the statement "*The body is the only home we truly have in this life.*" What does this mean to you? How well do you currently 'inhabit' your body?
2. **Messages from the body:** Think about times when your body might have been sending you signals (stress, fatigue, discomfort) that you ignored or overrode, perhaps due to destructive patterns of cravings and compulsions. What were the consequences? How might listening more closely be helpful in recovery?
3. **Body image and reality:** Explore your relationship with your body's appearance versus its felt sensations. How much attention goes to how the body looks versus how it feels from the inside? How have the forces of craving, clinging, and reactivity impacted this relationship?
4. **Anchoring in the present:** Recall a time when focusing on a simple physical sensation (like breathing or the feeling of your feet on the ground – dropping anchor) helped you feel more grounded or present during a difficult moment. Describe the experience.

Supporting material: Why body awareness matters

For those interested in the science and philosophy behind this practice, here is a brief overview:

Modern science and philosophy increasingly recognise the profound importance of embodiment and interoception (the sense of the internal state of the body):

- **Neuroscience:** Highlights the crucial role of interoception in emotional regulation, self-awareness, and decision-making. Brain regions like the

insula integrate bodily signals with emotional and cognitive processing. Practices like mindfulness of the body strengthen these interoceptive pathways. Chronic stress and trauma (often linked with addiction) can disrupt interoception, leading to feelings of disconnection or overwhelm; body-based practices can help restore this connection. Neuroplasticity shows that paying attention to the body can change brain structure and function.

- **Psychology:** Body-focused therapies (like Somatic Experiencing, Sensorimotor Psychotherapy) are increasingly used, especially for trauma and addiction, recognising that unresolved issues are often held physically. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), and Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention (MBRP) place strong emphasis on the 'body scan' and mindful movement. Ignoring or dissociating from the body is common in addiction; reconnecting safely is key to healing. Understanding our physical stress responses (fight/flight/freeze) helps us work with reactivity more skillfully.
- **Philosophy:** Phenomenology emphasizes the primacy of lived, embodied experience over abstract thought. Merleau-Ponty, for example, explored the body as the fundamental ground of our perception and being-in-the-world. Existentialism often grapples with the meaning of our finite, physical existence. Cultivating body awareness aligns with philosophies that value direct experience and understanding the concrete realities of human life.

These fields confirm the wisdom of starting our mindfulness practice with the body – it's not just 'physical exercise' but a gateway to deeper self-understanding, emotional regulation, and recognising the fundamental nature of our existence.

Remember to Remember

This overview introduces the 'First Anchor of Mindfulness' – Awareness of the body – as our primary tool for **Grounding Mindfulness** in the present reality and continuing the work of recognising what it is to be human. By turning our attention towards physical sensations, postures, and movements, held within

the ethical container of the ‘Five Gifts’ and the warmth of ‘Compassion’, we start to observe the raw nature of existence directly. This **Grounding Mindfulness** helps us to navigate away from the 'dangerous shore' with increasing clarity.

With each of these six mindfulness of body practices, we are simply changing the lens of our contemplation to help us to see more clearly. These practices are not stand alone reflections, but can be seen as complementary perspectives. Some practices will resonate more strongly with an individual than others. But it is useful to look at each one in order for us to find which elements we find most helpful within our personal practice

The body is where life happens. It's where we feel the *ouch* of dukkha, but it's also where we can anchor ourselves as we build and navigate our vessel of recovery. In the following chapters, as we continue exploring this **Island of Grounding Mindfulness**, we will systematically explore specific methods for cultivating this vital awareness – starting with the breath, moving through postures, actions, and deeper reflections on the body's impermanent nature. Let's begin this embodied exploration, gathering the essential awareness needed for our journey to the safe shore.

Sutta References

- [**Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta \(MN 10 / DN 22 - The Foundations of Mindfulness\)**](#): This is the primary discourse outlining the four foundations, with the first being mindfulness of the body.
 - *Summary*: Gotama declares the four foundations of mindfulness as the ‘direct path’ (*ekāyano maggo*) for overcoming suffering. He details the first foundation, Mindfulness of the Body (*Kāyānupassanā*), through various practices: mindfulness of breathing, postures, clear comprehension of activities, reflection on the body's anatomical parts, analysis of the four elements within the body, and contemplation of the body's eventual decay (charnel ground contemplations).
- [**Kāyagatāsati Sutta \(MN 119 - Mindfulness Directed to the Body\)**](#): This sutta specifically elaborates on the importance and benefits of mindfulness of the body.

- Summary: Gotama extols the great benefits of developing and cultivating mindfulness directed to the body. He states that whoever cultivates it encompasses skillful qualities and attains ‘the Deathless.’ He reiterates many of the practices found in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and links well-developed body mindfulness to the attainment of meditative absorptions (jhāna) and higher knowledges.
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