



## Mindfulness of the elements – Seeing our connection to nature

### Recognising the fundamental materials of our raft

#### Deconstructing the body into qualities

*“I see that this body—made of the four elements—is not really me, and I am not limited by this body”* Thich Nhat Hanh

As we continue to expand our practices in the service of *Recognising* what it is to be human, we move from observing the body's parts and reality to contemplating its fundamental composition through what is traditionally called '*Mindfulness of the Elements*'. This ancient practice, the fifth lens offered within the first anchor of mindfulness, invites us to see our physical form not as a solid, separate entity, but as a dynamic interplay of primary qualities shared with the entire natural world.

Like our previous contemplation on our body's physical reality, this practice aims to reduce our unhealthy clinging and foster wisdom. It involves reflecting on our body through the lens of four primary qualities (or elements):

★ **Solidity (earth element):** The earth element is defined by its inherent quality of firmness, which we perceive through sensations of texture, pressure, and resistance. Within the body, this element manifests as solidity, weight, and density. For example, as experienced in bones, muscles, skin and hair – anything solid or resistant.

By contemplating the firmness both within and outside ourselves, we recognise that this quality of 'earth' is universal and unchanging. Sensing our own solidity brings us into a deeper sense of groundedness, presence, and stability. As we feel our connection to the earth

surrounding us, we understand that we are intrinsically part of the earth, inseparable from its essence.

- ★ **Fluidity (water element):** The defining quality of the water element is its fluidity, experienced through sensations of slipperiness and wetness, and its cohesive nature, which we perceive indirectly through observation. In our bodies, water is present in saliva, blood, mucus, and various other fluids – the body's fluids that bind and flow.

By observing the flow and movement of water both within and around us, we recognise our own fluid nature, akin to that of most animals and plants on Earth. While water's cohesive property is subtler to detect directly, we observe it in action, such as when adding water to flour or soil and noticing how it binds the particles together. In our next practice, mindfulness of ageing and decay, we notice the departure and absence of the water element from the body which results in desiccation and disintegration, as the cohesive force that hold our form together decays and dissipates.

- ★ **Temperature (fire element):** The defining characteristic of the fire element is temperature, experienced as sensations of heat and cold. In the body, fire manifests as warmth or coolness, sensed through contrasts between our body temperature and the surrounding environment, and is also present in the processes of digestion and energy production.

- ★ **Movement (air/wind element):** Represents the body's motion, vibration, pressure, and change. For example, as experienced most obviously as the breath, but also includes any bodily movement, internal pressures, and the energy of motion.

The primary quality of this element is experienced as change. When we sense movement, we perceive shifts in other elements—such as alterations in texture, weight, or temperature—and recognise how each moment differs from the last, a perception grounded in memory. In the body, we directly feel the presence of air as breath and the movement

of various gases, but all bodily movements are expressions of the wind element, like the rise and fall of the abdomen with each breath.

Gotama – the Buddha – in his well known talk on the **Four Anchors of Mindfulness**, said:

*“... a practitioner reflects on this very body, however it be placed or disposed, by way of the material elements: ‘There are in this body the element of earth, the element of water, the element of fire, the element of wind.’”*

It’s important to understand that these ‘elements’ are best approached as *experiential qualities* rather than literal substances matching modern chemistry. In Gotama’s time, this was the model for understanding the physical world. For our practice, the value lies in recognising these fundamental qualities within our own direct sensory experience.

The core purposes of this practice are:

- ★ **To understand impermanence:** Seeing our body as a dynamic interplay of changing qualities, reinforces its temporary, transient and ever changing nature.
- ★ **To see interconnectedness:** Recognising that the ‘earth, water, fire, and air’ within us are the same qualities found externally helps us to dissolve the illusion of our separation from nature.
- ★ **To develop insight into our self-identification:** By deconstructing our body into these impersonal ‘elements’, we weaken our belief that our bodies are a solid, permanent ‘*me*’ or ‘*mine*’. Gotama used the analogy of a butcher cutting up a cow – once dissected into parts (‘flank’, ‘shoulder’), the concept ‘cow’ disappears. Similarly, seeing the body through the lens of ‘elements’ helps us to dissolve the fixed notion of ‘*my body*’ or ‘*I*’. Gotama suggested we reflect that *“This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.”*

In relation to our RAFT to Freedom, contemplating the ‘elements’ is like examining the fundamental raw materials from which our raft is constructed. We see that these qualities – solidity, fluidity, temperate, movement – are not unique to ‘us’ but are borrowed from and shared with the entire universe. This

recognition fosters humility, reduces our possessiveness (*'my'* body, *'my'* addiction), and helps us to understand our deep dependence on external conditions (air to breathe, food/water for sustenance, and so forth). It allows for a more realistic and less self-identity focused navigation.

## Two further elements

Some of Gotama's talks expand this model to six elements, adding:

- ★ **Space element:** Represents the body's openness, emptiness and the gaps between things. Within the body, space can be sensed in various cavities – the nose, ears, mouth – or felt as the sense of size and volume through proprioception. By becoming aware of space, we perceive proximity, position, distance, and volume. As with all elements, reflecting on space invites us to release self-identification with any aspect of what we sense.
- ★ **Consciousness element:** Represents the body's capacity for awareness, for example, the 'knowing quality' – clear comprehension – that recognises sensations, feelings, and thoughts. It is the capacity to be aware of sensations, feelings, and experiences. It is consciousness that discerns the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality of any experience and allows us to recognise and know what is happening as it unfolds.

One of the most challenging aspects of mindfulness of consciousness is refraining from self-identifying with it. Consciousness can feel like the centre of the observing *'self'*, and our language reinforces this impression through phrases like "I saw," "I know," or "I feel." Yet consciousness, like all elements, is subject to change, dependent on conditions, and impersonal.

When we remember these additional 'elements', we challenge our idea of being a fixed self that is an *'observer'* – realising that our existence is conditional and impersonal. We can look at this teaching on two complementary levels:

- ★ Contemplating that our bodies are constructed from anatomical elements — organs, chemicals and hormones, cells, molecules, atoms, subatomic particles to energy.
- ★ Contemplating our experience of the body as these elements.

## **Benefits and applications in daily life**

Contemplation of the ‘elements’ can be a powerful tool in our journey from suffering to freedom, by helping us to reconnect with a sense of self-awareness, self-balance, and dis-identification from our cravings. Here’s how each element can support our journey to freedom:

- ★ **Grounding through the Earth Element:** Focusing on our solidity and our connection to the ground provides us with an anchor during cravings or emotional storms, enhancing our stability and self-balance.

**Body Awareness:** Noticing the sensations of weight, density, and texture in the body can help us to reconnect to physical presence, providing an anchor in the present moment rather than being swept away by urges or emotional turbulence

- ★ **Flexibility through the Water Element:** Reflecting on our fluidity encourages us to be more adaptable and accepting of our changing states (emotions, cravings, compulsions and urges), reducing our rigid resistance that often fuels conflict and struggle.

**Acceptance of Fluidity:** Water’s qualities of fluidity and adaptability mirror our need for flexibility. Just as water moves and adapts to its environment, we can benefit from learning how to flow with changes, let go of rigidity, and embrace a non-judgmental attitude toward setbacks. It helps us to ‘*go with the flow*’ with difficulties, rather than fight against them.

**Cohesion:** Water also symbolises cohesion and connection, reminding us of the importance of relationships and support systems in our journey. Recognising the support around us can help us to feel connected and nurtured.

- ★ **Empowerment through the Fire Element:** Observing the ‘heat’ or intensity of cravings as simply the fire element – a temporary energetic

sensation – can make them feel less personal and overwhelming. It fosters an objective observation rather than an impulsive reaction.

**Igniting Inner Strength:** The fire element represents energy and transformation. During our journey, fire can be seen as a metaphor for the inner strength and determination needed to complete our voyage to the far shore of freedom.

- ★ **Perspective through the Air Element:** Recognising constant change and movement reminds us that cravings, thoughts, and emotions are transient, temporary and impermanent – they arise and pass away like the wind or breath. This perspective empowers us not to act on temporary urges and offers us a reminder that feelings, cravings, and even identity itself are not fixed. This recognition of impermanence can empower us to see our destructive compulsions as changeable conditions rather than permanent states.

**Breath Awareness:** The breath, as a manifestation of the air element, is a calming tool in moments of craving. Mindful breathing can help restore calm, reduce stress, and create space between the craving and a decision to act on it.

- ★ **Openness through the space element:** Awareness of space, both physical and mental, helps us to create a distance from our obsessive thoughts or intense cravings, allowing room to observe them without being consumed by them.

**Room for New Possibilities:** Space represents the potential for new experiences and growth. Recognising the element of space can inspire us to imagine a life beyond the subtle chains we all carry, opening us to fresh perspectives and aspirations.

- ★ **Awareness through the consciousness element:** Seeing the body and mind (including consciousness and cravings) as a collection of impersonal, ever-changing elements drastically weakens our self-identification with the label ‘addict’ or the feeling “I *am* this craving.” It fosters the liberating insight of not-identification (*‘not-self’*).

**Observing Without Attachment:** Consciousness, or awareness itself, allows us to step back and observe our experiences—including cravings, emotions, and memories—without self-identifying with them. This

perspective helps us in understanding that thoughts and cravings are events in the mind rather than defining characteristics.

**Fostering Self-Compassion:** By developing mindfulness of consciousness, we can cultivate a compassionate awareness of our struggles, viewing them without harsh self-judgment or self-blame. This shift helps break cycles of guilt and shame, which can fuel our destructive compulsions.

Mindfulness of the elements encourages a more objective view of the body. In daily life, this can help us to maintain emotional balance in the face of physical discomfort or illness. In recognising that our body is composed of the same elements as the external world we can foster a sense of connection with our environment. This can lead to greater ecological awareness and compassion for all beings. By categorising bodily experiences into elements, we can develop a more nuanced awareness of physical sensations. This can be particularly useful in practices like mindful eating or body scan meditations. Seeing the body as a temporary configuration of elements can help lessen our attachment to material possessions.

By observing bodily sensations in terms of elements, we may find it easier to detach from stressful thoughts and return to present-moment awareness. For instance, during a stressful situation, we could focus on the sensation of our breath to ground ourselves. When we understand the delicate balance of elements in the body, we can cultivate *gratitude* and *appreciation* for good health and motivate self-care practices.

### **Practices for cultivating mindfulness of the elements**

There are both traditional Buddhist practices and psychological techniques that align with insights from neuroscience and psychology on mindfulness of the elements, and these can be especially helpful for journey to liberation.

Here's a selection of practical approaches:

#### **★ Body Scan Meditation (Solidity Element)**

In a body scan, practitioners bring attention to different parts of the body, noticing sensations, tension, and points of contact with the ground. This practice cultivates grounding and body awareness, helping us reconnect with our physical presence and reduce our mental rumination. By focusing on sensations like pressure, weight, and solidity, a body scan meditation can help us to develop interoceptive awareness, which is linked to better emotion regulation and decreased reactivity to cravings.

This can be done lying down or sitting. We move our attention slowly from our toes to our head, pausing to observe sensations in each area.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) is a technique that involves systematically tensing and relaxing muscle groups, which can further promote bodily awareness and relaxation.

### ★ **Mindfulness of Breath and Movement (Fluidity)**

This practice involves focusing on our breath's rhythm, observing it as a continuous flow, and noticing how each breath is slightly different from the last. Traditional Buddhist practices also involve observing the movement of the abdomen or nostrils as the breath enters and exits. Mindfulness of breath is particularly effective for managing our stress and cravings. The rhythmic, soothing quality of breath awareness activates the parasympathetic nervous system, promoting relaxation. Focusing on the impermanent, changing nature of each breath helps us see cravings as transient, which reduces the urge to act on them.

We focus on the sensations of breathing, feeling the rise and fall of the abdomen or the movement of air at the nostrils. When distracted, we gently return our attention to the breath.

In Psychological practices, diaphragmatic breathing or box breathing can help deepen breath awareness and reduce anxiety by consciously regulating breathing.



## ★ **Observing cravings as sensations (temperature)**

In this practice, when a craving or urge arises, we bring mindful attention to the sensations associated with it, such as warmth, tightness, or agitation, rather than reacting immediately.

By observing cravings as sensations – like heat, restlessness, or tension – we can deconstruct the craving into its sensory components, which reduces its power over us. Studies have shown that observing cravings mindfully reduces the likelihood of relapse, as it disrupts our automatic response to act on them.

When a craving arises, we pause and focus on where it manifests in our body. Noticing its qualities, like intensity or heat, and observing it with friendliness and curiosity – recognising that it is transient.

Urge Surfing, is a technique in mindfulness-based relapse prevention (MBRP), involving acknowledging and riding out cravings as waves, understanding they will eventually subside.

## ★ **Mindfulness of emotions with openness (movement)**

In this practice, we observe emotions and thoughts as they arise, without labelling them as “good” or “bad.” Instead, we cultivate an attitude of acceptance and openness, allowing our emotions to flow and pass naturally. By embracing our emotions with openness, similar to the flexibility of water, this allows us to respond to challenges with adaptability rather than avoidance. This reduces our emotional rigidity and encourages acceptance, both of which are linked to improved outcomes in addiction recovery.

When a strong emotion arises, we allow it to be present without judging or suppressing it. We observe where it manifests in the body, the sensations it brings, and watch how it naturally changes.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) promotes acceptance of our emotions rather than suppression or judgment, which is useful for handling difficult feelings in recovery from harmful compulsions and addictions.

### ★ **Contemplation of space for perspective and detachment (space)**

This meditation involves us focusing on the qualities of spaciousness and openness, visualising our mind as a vast space in which thoughts, feelings, and cravings arise and pass. Contemplating the spacious nature of our minds helps us *step back* from thoughts and cravings, creating a sense of psychological distance. This mental spaciousness allows our cravings to be seen as temporary events in our mind, rather than urgent needs.

We visualise our mind as a wide, open space, observing our thoughts, emotions, and sensations as clouds or bubbles that drift across it, without clinging to them.

Cognitive Defusion techniques in ACT, such as visualising thoughts as passing clouds, can help reduce our attachment to cravings by observing them as separate from our ‘self’.

### ★ **Mindfulness of awareness (consciousness)**

This practice involves turning our attention to the nature of awareness itself, observing that awareness can observe thoughts, feelings, and sensations without self-identifying with them. By becoming mindful of consciousness, we realise that thoughts, cravings, and emotions are transient events within our awareness rather than aspects of a fixed ‘self’. This insight into *‘non-identity’* supports our recovery by reducing our self-identification with addictive thoughts or cravings, empowering us to see these as temporary and impersonal.

We settle into an *awareness of awareness*, noticing the space within which experiences arise. Observing how thoughts and sensations are *known* by awareness and allowing them to pass without attachment.

Metacognitive Awareness Training encourages us to observe their thoughts and cravings as events in the mind, fostering a non-reactive stance toward them.

### **Integrating Buddhist and psychological practices**

Combining these practices into a routine can provide us with a balanced approach. For example, we can begin with a body scan to ground ourselves, then use breath awareness to calm the mind. When cravings arise, we can apply urge surfing to observe the craving as a temporary sensation, followed by mindfulness of emotions to allow the feelings to flow without suppression. Incorporating spaciousness and *awareness of awareness* at the end of a meditation session can help reinforce detachment from our cravings and cultivate a more expansive, resilient perspective on recovery.

Together, these Buddhist and psychological practices create a toolkit for grounding, resilience, and self-awareness, essential for our long-term wellness.

To practice mindfulness of the elements in everyday life, we could:

- ★ During our daily shower, pay attention to the sensation of water (water element) on our skin.
- ★ While exercising, focus on the heat generated in our body (fire element).
- ★ When sitting or standing, notice the solidity of our bones and muscles (earth element).
- ★ As we breathe, observe the movement of air in our body (air element).
- ★ Remember, the goal is not to rigidly categorise every experience, but to use this framework as a tool for developing mindfulness

and insight. How might you incorporate this elemental perspective into your daily routines? What aspects of this practice resonate most with your current life situation?

## **Self-Reflections**

Tune into your body right now. Can you sense these elemental qualities?

- ★ Where do you feel *solidity* or *firmness* (earth)? (For example, bones against chair, muscle tension, teeth)
- ★ Can you sense *fluidity* (water)? (For example, saliva in the mouth, moisture on the skin, perhaps the sense of blood flow?)
- ★ What about *temperature* (fire)? (For example, warmth of the skin, coolness of the breath, internal heat?)
- ★ Where do you notice *movement* (air/wind)? (For example, the rise and fall of breath, heartbeat, subtle vibrations, larger movements?)
- ★ Can you sense *space* within the body (For example, inside the nostrils, mouth) or the space the body occupies?
- ★ Are you aware of *consciousness* itself – the ‘*simple knowing*’ of these other sensations?
- ★ How does seeing my body as a collection of elements change my relationship with it?
- ★ Can I observe bodily sensations with more objectivity and less reactivity?
- ★ How does it feel to consider my body as a temporary arrangement of these elements, rather than a solid ‘thing’?
- ★ How does understanding my body as part of the natural world affect my actions and choices?
- ★ Can I identify the different ‘elemental’ qualities in my current physical experience?
- ★ How can I support the balance of elements in my body through diet, exercise, and rest?

## **Journaling Prompts**

Explore the elements through writing:

- ★ **Elemental body scan:** Sit quietly and mentally scan your body, specifically looking for sensations corresponding to each of the four main elements. Journal about where you noticed each quality most clearly and what the experience was like.
- ★ **Interconnectedness:** Reflect on how the elements within your body connect to the elements outside. (For example, breathing connects internal air with external air; body temperature changes with ambient temperature; food/water from outside become body tissues). Write about this sense of connection or dependence.
- ★ **"Not mine, not I, not my self":** Choose one element (For example, the warmth in your hands). Contemplate the thought: "This warmth is just the fire element, present due to conditions. It is not mine, I am not this warmth, this warmth is not my 'self'." Write about the feelings or insights that arise from this reflection.
- ★ **Elements in daily life:** Try to consciously notice the elements during everyday activities (water in showering, earth in walking on solid ground, air in feeling the wind, fire in feeling warmth/cold). Journal about how this perspective changes your experience of simple activities.

### **Supporting material: scientific and philosophical perspectives**

For those interested in the scientific and philosophical underpinnings of mindfulness of the body's qualities, the following overview highlights some key connections.

- ★ **Neuroscience: Interoception** is key here – the brain's ability to sense internal bodily states maps directly onto sensing elemental qualities like temperature (thermoception), pressure/texture (mechanoreception), and movement (proprioception). Practices enhancing interoceptive awareness are known to improve emotional regulation and self-awareness. Grounding techniques focusing on physical sensations (like the solidity of earth) can activate the parasympathetic nervous system, inducing calm. Breath awareness (air) directly influences vagal tone and stress response.
- ★ **Psychology: Embodiment** practices help counter dissociation often seen in trauma and addiction. Grounding techniques, widely used in therapy

for anxiety and PTSD, often involve focusing on sensory input related to the elements (feeling feet on the ground, noticing temperature).

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) encourages acceptance of bodily sensations without judgment. Recognising the shared nature of our physical makeup (common humanity, linked to natural elements) fosters self-compassion and reduces isolation. The objective stance cultivated resonates with cognitive defusion – seeing thoughts/sensations as passing events, not 'self'.

★ **Philosophy:** Ancient Greek pre-Socratic philosophers also proposed elemental theories (earth, water, air, fire) to explain reality.

Contemplating elements relates to Materialism but also transcends it by focusing on impermanence and not-self. Themes of interconnectedness and ecology are strongly supported by seeing ourselves as composed of the same elements as nature. Stoicism encourages living in accordance with nature, which involves understanding our physical place within it. The practice directly challenges mind-body dualism by investigating consciousness and physical elements together.

*“It's said that when we die, the four elements - earth, air, fire and water - dissolve one by one, each into the other, and finally just dissolve into space. But while we're living, we share the energy that makes everything, from a blade of grass to an elephant, grow and live and then inevitably wear out and die. This energy, this life force, creates the whole world.”*

*Pema Chodron*

## **Remember to Remember**

Mindfulness of the Elements offers a profound shift in perspective, inviting us to Recognise our embodied existence not as a separate, solid self, but as a dynamic, impermanent, and interconnected flow of natural qualities. By contemplating the 'earth, water, fire, air, space, and consciousness elements' within and around us, we deconstruct the illusion of inherent selfhood and lessen the grip of attachment and aversion – key drivers of our addictive suffering.

The benefits of this practice include reducing our self-identification with the body, cultivating equanimity towards both pleasant and unpleasant sensations, understanding our interconnectedness, enhancing our mindfulness of sensations, reducing our materialism, improving our stress management and resilience, and fostering an appreciation for health through understanding and cultivating balance.

This practice provides invaluable 'material knowledge' for our RAFT, helping us understand the fundamental nature of the physical body we inhabit and its intimate connection with the world that it navigates. As we continue our journey, we can experiment gently with noticing these elemental qualities in our experience, allowing this perspective to foster grounding, flexibility, and wisdom. This prepares us for the final contemplation within Mindfulness of Body: facing the reality of the body's eventual aging and decay.

### **Sutta References**

★ **Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10 / DN 22 - The Foundations of Mindfulness):**

Includes the contemplation of the four elements within the section on Mindfulness of the Body.

- *Summary:* Instructs the practitioner to examine the body according to the elements: 'In this body there is the earth element, the water element, the fire element, and the air element.'<sup>1</sup> It uses the butcher analogy to illustrate deconstruction and objectivity.

★ **Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta (MN 28 - The Great Elephant Footprint**

**Simile):** Provides a detailed analysis of the four elements and how contemplating them leads to insight.

- *Summary:* This sutta gives detailed descriptions of the internal and external elements and emphasizes reflecting on them as 'not mine, not I, not my self' to achieve disenchantment and liberation.

★ **Dhātuvibhaṅga Sutta (MN 140 - The Exposition of the Elements):**

Discusses the six elements in detail.

- *Summary:* The Buddha analyzes experience into six elements: earth, water, fire, air, space, and consciousness. He explains how

clinging to these elements leads to suffering and how understanding their true nature leads to liberation.

★ **Mahā-Rahulovada Sutta (MN 62 - The Greater Exhortation to Rahula):**

Advises the Buddha's son Rahula on elemental meditation.

- *Summary:* The Buddha instructs Rahula to develop meditation in tune with each element (earth, water, fire, air, space) so that agreeable and disagreeable sensory impressions do not take charge of the mind, fostering equanimity and non-identification.

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