



Recognise - Mindfulness of body

08 - The First Anchor - Mindfulness of Body

Grounding mindfulness

... this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realisation of Nirvāṇa - namely, the four foundations of mindfulness.

— Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), translated by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi

This chapter is an overview of the first foundation of mindfulness, as outlined by Gotama (the Buddha). Traditionally, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness are body, hedonic tone, mind and principles. We present these as the four Anchors of Mindfulness that steady our raft and provide safety and stability 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 is what we call grounding mindfulness. Having recognised the reality of being human - that life is naturally painful, difficult and disappointing, *dukkha* - and having met this reality with compassion, we now explore where this human life is actually experienced: through our bodies.

These practices are fundamental to securing our raft. 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 gathering our first anchor: mindfulness of the 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 engage directly with life as it unfolds within us and before us.

We frame this first foundation as grounding mindfulness because it is through our bodies that we directly experience birth, ageing, illness and eventually death - the core components of *dukkha* named in Gotama's first realisation. It is in our bodies that we feel physical pain, pleasure and the constant flux of sensation, providing a

direct field for observing impermanence - the temporary, 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: our thoughts, feelings, bodies and experiences all come into being because of other things, and constantly change depending on those conditions. Both our minds and our bodies are conditioned by past and present experience. It is through investigating the body's changing nature that we can gain insight into our sense of self - seeing it as ultimately beyond our control, and so loosening our grip on “me”, “mine” and “myself”. Mindfulness of the body is not simply relaxation or physical awareness; it is 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 on the different aspects of body mindfulness that Gotama taught, each explored in much greater detail in the six chapters that follow as we continue to explore this anchor:

- 1 **Mindfulness of breathing** - observing the breath as it comes in and goes out, noticing its length and quality.
- 2 **Mindfulness of posture** - noticing whether we are walking, standing, sitting or lying down, and the transitions between these.
- 3 **Mindfulness with clear comprehension** - being mindful during daily actions: moving, eating, dressing, speaking, and so on.
- 4 **Mindfulness of the reality of the body** - contemplating the body's anatomy as made up of various parts, seeing it as a collection rather than a unified self.
- 5 **Mindfulness of the body through the lens of the elements** - seeing the body as composed of solidity, fluidity, heat and movement, 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, help us see the body clearly, without aversion or clinging. This clear seeing is also essential for dismantling our delusions about permanence, control, and the body as a reliable source of lasting pleasure or a solid, fixed self. These are the delusions that often fuel craving and compulsion. These practices help us explore and understand the first Anchor of Mindfulness: mindfulness of the body.

Practice - an initial body awareness check-in

Take a few moments, right now, to gently check in with your body, without trying to change anything you find:

- 1 Notice the physical sensations present in your body - points of contact, temperature, tingling, pressure, tightness, ease.
- 2 Notice your posture, just as it is, without adjusting it yet.
- 3 Notice your habitual attitude towards your body in this moment - critical, ignoring, appreciative, anxious, neutral.
- 4 Take one slow breath, and let your attention settle a little more into the body as you exhale.

There is nothing to fix here. The practice is simply the noticing itself - the beginning of an honest, ongoing relationship with the body as the place where this whole journey actually begins.

Self-reflections

Take a few moments to gently check in with my current relationship with my body:

- 1 Right now, without changing anything, can I feel the physical sensations present in my body - points of contact, temperature, tingling, pressure, tightness, ease? ([view card](#))
 - 2 How aware am I, generally, of my body's posture and movements as I go about my day? ([view card](#))
 - 3 What is my habitual attitude towards my body - critical, ignoring, appreciative, anxious, neutral? ([view card](#))
 - 4 How do I physically experience a strong craving or compulsion in my body - tension, restlessness, numbness, a pull towards or push away from something? ([view card](#))
 - 5 Does the idea of paying closer attention to my body feel inviting, intimidating, or neutral? Why? ([view card](#))
 - 6 When I think of my body as “the only home I truly have in this life”, how well do I feel I currently inhabit it? ([view card](#))
 - 7 Can I recall a time when simply noticing a physical sensation - my feet on the ground, my breath - helped me feel more grounded during a difficult moment? ([view card](#))
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Journaling prompts

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

- 1 **Body as home:** reflect on the idea that the body is the only home you 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 your body may have been sending you signals - stress, fatigue, discomfort - that you ignored or overrode, perhaps in the pull of old, compulsive patterns. What were the consequences? How might listening more closely help you now?
 - 3 **Body image and reality:** explore your relationship with your body's appearance versus its felt sensations. How much attention goes to how your body looks, versus how it feels from the inside? How have the forces of craving, clinging and reactivity affected this relationship?
 - 4 **Anchoring in the present:** recall a time when focusing on a simple physical sensation - breathing, or the feeling of your feet on the ground - helped you feel more grounded or present during a difficult moment. Describe the experience.
 - 5 **A body worth trusting:** write about one small way you could treat your body as a trustworthy companion this week, rather than as a problem to manage or a source of shame.
 - 6 **Ageing and change:** notice, without judgment, one way your body has changed over the years. What does it feel like to hold that change with curiosity rather than resistance?
 - 7 **Six lenses ahead:** of the six aspects of body mindfulness listed in this chapter - breathing, posture, clear comprehension, anatomy, the elements, impermanence - which feels most relevant to you right now, and why?
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Supporting material: why body awareness matters

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

- **Neuroscience:** interoception - the sense of the body's internal state - plays a crucial role in emotional regulation, self-awareness and decision-making. Brain regions such as the insula integrate bodily signals with emotional and cognitive processing, and practices like mindfulness of the body appear to strengthen these interoceptive pathways. Chronic stress and difficult life circumstances can disrupt interoception, leading to feelings of disconnection or overwhelm; body-based practices can help restore this connection, and evidence for neuroplasticity suggests sustained attention to the body can change brain structure and function over time.
- **Psychology & Psychotherapy:** body-focused therapeutic approaches, such as Somatic Experiencing and Sensorimotor Psychotherapy, are increasingly used, particularly where unresolved distress is held physically.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention (MBRP) all place strong emphasis on the body scan and mindful movement. Disconnection from the body is common where compulsive patterns are present; reconnecting safely is understood as an important part of healing. Understanding our physical stress responses - fight, flight or freeze - helps us work with reactivity more skilfully.

- **Philosophy:** phenomenology emphasises 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 the concrete realities of human life.

These fields confirm the wisdom of starting our mindfulness practice with the body - not as physical exercise, but as 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 ourselves in 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 begin to observe the raw nature of our existence directly.

The body is where life happens. It is where we feel the ‘ouch’ of dukkha, but it is also where we can anchor ourselves as we build and navigate our vessel. Each of the six lenses that follow simply changes the angle of our contemplation, so that we can see this same terrain more clearly.

Now one of the marvelous things about the body is that it is always in the present moment. Our thoughts and our mind might be somewhere else, but the body is always here and now.

— Gil Fronsdal, *Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation*, Week 2 transcript, Insight Meditation Center, 10 October 2007

With this grounding established, we begin our exploration of the six lenses of body mindfulness with the most immediate of all: [mindfulness of breathing](#).

See the [Index of sutta references](#) (web, D8. The print books carry a consolidated sutta appendix instead.)

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