



Recognise - Mindfulness of body

13 - Mindfulness of the Body Through the Lens of the Elements

This document is an extract from the full chapter, which is available for download in the table via this link: <https://raft2freedom.org/raft-to-freedom-downloads/>

... 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.'

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

Having looked closely at Mindfulness of the Reality of the Body, we move from the body's parts to its fundamental composition. Gotama taught this contemplation as part of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. It invites us to sense the body through four raw qualities it shares with the whole of the natural world - solidity, fluidity, temperature and movement. Tradition calls these earth, water, fire and air. Some teachings extend this list to six, adding space and consciousness. Here we keep our attention chiefly on the four we can sense directly, as qualities to be felt rather than claims about chemistry. That was simply the working model available in Gotama's own time.

Sensing these qualities does real work for us. It reinforces how impermanent and ever-changing this body is. It also dissolves some of our sense of separation from the world, since the very qualities we find 'in here' are the same ones found 'out there'. They are borrowed rather than owned - not mine, not I, not myself. In terms of our raft, this practice is like examining the raw materials this body is actually built from - shared with, and borrowed from, the world around us. Seeing this reduces our possessiveness about 'my' body, and softens the drives to protect, promote and satisfy that so often centre on it. It also offers real steadiness: grounding when a craving or emotional storm arises, flexibility to meet our changing states, and a little more distance from any single sensation's intensity.

The self-reflections that follow invite us to sense each of these qualities directly, right now - solidity, fluidity, temperature, movement and space, felt in this very body. They are the same ordinary qualities found everywhere in the world around us.

Self-reflections

Tuning into my body right now, can I sense these qualities?

- 1 Where do I feel *solidity* - bone against chair, muscle tension, the press of my teeth? ([view card](#))
 - 2 Can I sense *fluidity* - moisture in my mouth, on my skin, perhaps the movement of blood? ([view card](#))
 - 3 What do I notice of *temperature* - warmth at the skin, coolness of the breath, warmth within? ([view card](#))
 - 4 Where do I notice *movement* - the rise and fall of breath, my pulse, any small shifts? ([view card](#))
 - 5 Can I sense *space* within my body, or the space my body occupies right now? ([view card](#))
 - 6 Can I recognise these same qualities - solidity, fluidity, warmth, movement - at work in the world outside me, not only within? ([view card](#))
 - 7 How does seeing my body as a shifting, borrowed arrangement of shared qualities, rather than a fixed and separate 'me', change how I hold it? ([view card](#))
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Journaling prompts

Explore the elements a little further in your journal:

- 1 **Elemental body scan:** sit quietly and mentally scan your body for each of the four main qualities in turn. Write about where you noticed each one most clearly, and what that was like.
- 2 **Interconnectedness:** reflect on how these qualities within you connect to the same qualities outside you - breathing links your air to the world's air; your temperature shifts with what surrounds you; food and water from outside become, in time, part of your own body. Write about this sense of dependence or connection.
- 3 **'Not mine, not I, not myself':** choose one quality - the warmth in your hands, say. Sit with the thought: 'this warmth is simply the fire element, present because of conditions. It is not mine, I am not this warmth, this warmth is not myself.' Write about whatever feelings or insight arise.
- 4 **Elements in daily life:** notice the elements as they show up in an ordinary activity - water while showering, earth while walking, air on your skin, warmth or cold against it. Write about how this changes your experience of something otherwise unremarkable.

- 5 **A borrowed body:** write about what shifts, even slightly, when you think of your body's materials as borrowed from the world rather than owned by you.
- 6 **The quality of knowing (optional, a step further):** spend a minute simply noticing that you are aware - not what you're aware of, just the fact of awareness itself. Write about what that was like to attempt, and whatever you noticed about how quickly attention slips back to its usual objects.
- 7 **Gratitude for the raw materials:** write a short note of appreciation to this body, for the ordinary, borrowed materials that carry you through each day.

For a printable reminder to carry this stage's practice into daily life, see the Self-Compassion card: <https://raft2freedom.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/08/appropriate-response-self-compassion.png>

Remember to remember

Mindfulness of the elements invites us to recognise our body not as a solid, separate thing, but as a shifting, borrowed arrangement of ordinary qualities - solidity, fluidity, warmth, movement, and, more subtly, space and consciousness. Sensing this directly loosens our attachment to a fixed 'me' and quietly dissolves some of the distance we feel between ourselves and the rest of the natural world.

There's nothing to master here, only to notice. The next time a craving, an ache or a strong feeling arises, we can meet it as one more passing arrangement of these same ordinary materials, held a little more lightly, and a little less personally.

Earth in my bones, water in my blood, fire in my belly, air in every breath.

— Lin Wang Gordon, 'Connecting to the Elements: Finding the Sacred in the Ordinary', Tricycle Dharma Talk transcript, April 2026

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