



Recognise - Mindfulness of body

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

... 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

The body's raw materials

Having looked closely at [Mindfulness of the Reality of the Body](#), we move from the body's parts to its fundamental composition - the fifth lens on our first Anchor of Mindfulness, traditionally called Mindfulness of the Elements. It invites us to see this body not as a solid, separate thing, but as a dynamic interplay of primary qualities shared with the entire natural world.

Like our contemplation of the body's reality in the previous chapter, this practice aims to reduce our unhealthy clinging and to foster wisdom. It works by reflecting on the body through four primary qualities, traditionally called elements.

Solidity (earth): felt as firmness, weight and resistance - our bones, muscle, skin and hair. Contemplating this firmness, both within us and outside us, we recognise that solidity itself is universal, not something we alone possess. Sensing our own solidity can bring a deeper sense of groundedness, presence and stability - a felt reminder that we are part of the earth, not separate from it.

Fluidity (water): felt as wetness, cohesion and flow - present in our blood, saliva and the body's other fluids. Observing the movement of water within and around us, we recognise our own fluid nature, shared with almost every living thing on earth. Water's binding quality is subtler to notice directly, but we can observe it in action - as when water is added to flour or soil, and the particles bind together. In the next chapter, on the body's impermanence, we will notice what happens as this same water element departs the body: desiccation and disintegration, as the cohesive force that holds our form together decays and dissipates.

Temperature (fire): felt as heat and cold - our warmth, our digestion, the contrast between our own temperature and what surrounds us. Fire is also the element of

transformation: the same warmth that keeps us alive turns food into energy, marks the fevered work of healing, and rises and falls with exertion and rest. Sensing this quality directly, we notice how much of what we call 'me' is really a continuous process of conversion - taking in, transforming, releasing - rather than something static and fixed.

Movement (air): felt as vibration, pressure and change - most obviously the breath, but every internal shift and outward gesture besides. Movement's defining quality is change itself: when we sense it, we perceive a shift in some other quality - a change in texture, weight or temperature - and recognise how this moment differs from the last, a perception grounded in memory. We feel air directly as breath, but every bodily movement, large or small, is this same element in motion.

Gotama (the Buddha) taught this contemplation as part of his teaching on the four Anchors of Mindfulness. It's worth being clear that these 'elements' are best approached as qualities we can sense directly, not as a literal claim about chemistry. This was simply the working model available in Gotama's own time; what still holds for us now is the direct noticing itself, not whether the ancient model matches a modern periodic table.

The purposes of this practice

This contemplation serves three connected purposes:

- **Understanding impermanence:** seeing the body as a dynamic interplay of changing qualities reinforces just how temporary, transient and ever-changing it actually is.
- **Seeing interconnectedness:** recognising that the earth, water, fire and air within us are the very same qualities found outside us helps dissolve the illusion of our separation from the natural world.
- **Developing insight into self-identification:** deconstructing the body into these impersonal elements weakens our belief that it is a solid, permanent 'me' or 'mine'. Gotama used the image of a butcher dividing a cow into its parts - once it is 'flank' and 'shoulder', the idea of 'cow' has quietly disappeared. Seeing the body through the lens of its elements works the same way, loosening the fixed notion of 'my body' or 'I'. Gotama suggested we reflect: this is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.

Seen this way, the line between 'inside' and 'outside' softens too. In a related teaching, Gotama invites us to recognise that the same qualities - earth, water, fire and air - are found within the body and outside it alike, undermining any real boundary between 'my' element and the world's own.

In terms of our raft, contemplating the elements is like examining the raw materials this body is actually built from. Solidity, fluidity, temperature and movement aren't unique to 'us' - they're borrowed from, and shared with, the entire universe. This recognition fosters humility, reduces our possessiveness about 'my' body, and helps

us understand our deep dependence on external conditions: air to breathe, food and water for sustenance, and so on. It allows for a more realistic, less self-focused way of navigating.

A broader six-element teaching

Some of Gotama's talks expand this model from four elements to six, adding two further qualities.

Space represents the body's openness, its emptiness, the gaps between things. Within the body, space can be sensed in its various cavities - the nose, ears, mouth - or felt as a sense of size and volume. Becoming aware of space, we perceive proximity, position, distance and volume; as with the other elements, reflecting on space invites us to release our self-identification with whatever we sense.

Consciousness represents the body's capacity for awareness - the simple knowing quality, clear comprehension, that recognises sensations, feelings and thoughts as they arise. It is what discerns whether an experience is pleasant, unpleasant or neither, and lets us recognise and know what is happening as it unfolds.

One of the most challenging aspects of contemplating consciousness is refraining from self-identifying with it. Consciousness can feel like the very centre of an observing 'self', and our language reinforces this - "I saw," "I know," "I feel." Yet consciousness, like every other element, is subject to change, dependent on conditions, and impersonal.

Holding these two further elements in mind, we can look at this teaching on two complementary levels. One is contemplating the body as constructed from anatomical elements - organs, chemicals, hormones, cells, molecules, atoms, all the way to subatomic particles and energy. The other is contemplating our direct experience of the body as these same elements, felt rather than analysed.

What this practice offers our journey

Contemplation of the elements can be a genuine support on our journey from suffering to freedom, helping us reconnect with self-awareness, self-balance and a healthy dis-identification from our cravings. Each element offers its own particular support:

- **Grounding, through earth:** focusing on our solidity, and our connection to solid ground, gives us an anchor during a craving or an emotional storm, steadying our sense of stability and self-balance. Simply noticing the sensations of weight, density and texture in the body can reconnect us to physical presence, offering an anchor in the present moment rather than being swept away by an urge or a wave of feeling.
- **Flexibility, through water:** reflecting on our own fluidity encourages us to be more adaptable and accepting of our changing states - our emotions, cravings and urges - reducing the rigid resistance that often fuels conflict

and struggle. Just as water moves and adapts to whatever it meets, we can learn to flow with change rather than fight it, meeting setbacks with a non-judgmental attitude - to go with the flow of a difficulty rather than against it. Water also carries a quality of cohesion and connection, a reminder of the importance of relationships and support around us; recognising that support can help us feel less alone on this journey.

- **Perspective on intensity, through fire:** observing the 'heat' of a craving as simply the fire element at work - a temporary, energetic sensation - can make it feel less personal and less overwhelming, fostering objective observation rather than impulsive reaction. Fire also represents energy and transformation; it can be a useful image for the inner strength and determination this journey asks of us.
- **Impermanence in motion, through air:** recognising the constant change and movement of the air element reminds us that cravings, thoughts and emotions are themselves transient - they arise and pass, like the wind or the breath itself. This can empower us to see even our most stubborn patterns as changeable conditions, not fixed states. The breath itself, as this same element in its most direct form, is a calming tool in a moment of craving: mindful breathing can restore calm, reduce stress, and create a little space between the craving and any decision to act on it.
- **Room to observe, through space:** awareness of space, physical and mental, helps create distance from an obsessive thought or an intense craving, giving us room to observe it rather than being consumed by it. Space also represents the possibility of something new: recognising it can help us imagine a life beyond the patterns we currently carry.
- **Equanimity:** the elements themselves don't choose what they meet - earth supports both the pleasant and the unpleasant; water carries away both the clean and the unclean, without becoming horrified or repelled. Reflecting this way can help us meet our own pleasant and unpleasant experience with a little more balance, without immediately grasping at one or pushing away the other.
- **Awareness, through consciousness:** seeing body and mind - including our own cravings - as a collection of impersonal, ever-changing elements weakens our identification with any fixed sense of being defined by our struggles. This fosters the freeing insight of not-self. This same awareness lets us step back and observe our experience - cravings, emotions, memories - without identifying with it, seeing them as passing events in the mind rather than defining features of who we are. Developing this quality of awareness can also cultivate self-compassion: we learn to view our own struggles without harsh self-judgment, helping break the cycles of guilt and shame that so often deepen a difficult pattern.

Mindfulness of the elements encourages a more objective view of the body as a whole. In daily life, this can help us hold emotional balance in the face of physical discomfort or illness. Recognising that our body is made of the same elements as the world around us can foster a sense of connection with our environment - even, for some, a greater ecological awareness and compassion for other beings. Categorising bodily experience into elements can also sharpen our awareness of physical sensation generally, which can be especially useful alongside practices like mindful eating or the body scan. And seeing the body as a temporary configuration of elements, rather than a fixed possession, can loosen our attachment to material things more broadly. Understanding the delicate balance the body depends on can itself cultivate gratitude, and motivate the ordinary work of caring for it well.

Practice - contemplating the elements

This chapter offers several distinct practices, one for each element - flagged here as more than the usual single Practice section (D64), since the breadth of material this foundational contemplation covers genuinely supports several approaches rather than one. Feel free to work through all of them over time, or choose whichever element feels most alive right now. Skip any of these if you find them triggering.

1. Body scan for solidity. Lying down or sitting, move your attention slowly from your toes to the top of your head, pausing to notice sensations of pressure, weight and solidity as you go. This cultivates grounding and body awareness, helping us reconnect with physical presence and settle a busy mind. Progressive Muscle Relaxation - systematically tensing and releasing muscle groups - is a related technique worth exploring if this appeals.

2. Breath and movement for fluidity. Bring attention to the breath as a continuous flow, noticing how each breath differs slightly from the last. Feel the rise and fall of the abdomen, or the movement of air at the nostrils; when the mind wanders, gently return to the breath. Diaphragmatic or “box” breathing - a slower, more deliberate breathing pattern - can help deepen this awareness and ease anxiety.

3. Meeting a craving as sensation (temperature). When a craving or urge arises, bring mindful attention to the sensations that accompany it - warmth, tightness, agitation - rather than reacting immediately. Notice where it manifests in the body, and its qualities - heat, restlessness, tension - meeting it with friendliness and curiosity rather than resistance, recognising all the while that it is transient. This is sometimes called “urge surfing” in Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention (MBRP): acknowledging a craving and riding it out like a wave, trusting that it will eventually subside on its own.

4. Meeting emotions with openness (movement). When a strong emotion arises, let it be present without labelling it “good” or “bad,” judging it, or suppressing it. Notice where it manifests in the body, what sensations it brings,

and how it changes and moves through, much as water finds its own way. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) encourages this same stance - accepting an emotion rather than suppressing or arguing with it - which can be especially useful when a difficult feeling is bound up with an old pattern.

5. Contemplating space. Visualise the mind itself as a vast, open space, in which thoughts, feelings and cravings arise and pass like clouds drifting across open sky. This creates a felt sense of psychological distance, allowing a craving to be seen as a temporary event passing through, rather than an urgent demand. Cognitive defusion techniques in ACT - picturing a thought as a passing cloud - draw on this same quality of spaciousness.

6. Resting in awareness (consciousness, optional - a step further). Settle into an awareness of awareness itself: noticing the space within which thoughts, feelings and sensations arise, rather than the contents themselves. Observe how each is simply known, and let it pass without needing to hold on. Metacognitive Awareness Training uses a similar approach, encouraging us to observe our own thoughts and cravings as events in the mind, rather than truths about who we are.

Bringing the practices together. These six can be combined into a single, longer session, or used separately as each moment calls for. One simple sequence: begin with a body scan to ground yourself, use breath awareness to settle the mind, apply urge surfing if a craving arises, allow any resulting emotion to move through with openness, and close with a few moments of spaciousness and bare awareness. Together, they form a small toolkit for grounding, resilience and self-awareness.

Elements in daily life. The same qualities can be noticed in the middle of an ordinary day, without any formal sitting practice at all: the sensation of water on the skin during a shower; the heat generated while exercising; the solidity of bone and muscle while sitting or standing; the movement of air with every breath. The aim is never to rigidly categorise every experience, but to use this framework as one more way of noticing - a tool for mindfulness and insight, not an exercise to perform correctly.

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.
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Supporting material: scientific and philosophical perspectives

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

- **Neuroscience:** our awareness of these bodily qualities draws on several interacting sensory systems, including proprioception, touch and pressure, temperature sensing and interoception more broadly. Together, these allow us to sense the body's position, movement, temperature and internal state. Cultivating careful attention to bodily sensation in this way is thought to support present-moment awareness and emotional regulation for some people.
- **Psychology & Psychotherapy:** grounding techniques used in various therapeutic approaches often draw on exactly these qualities - noticing the feet on the ground, or a change in temperature - as a way of returning attention to the present moment when the mind is caught up in distress. Approaches such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) encourage observing bodily sensations with openness rather than judgment, which resonates with this practice's own approach to the elements; ACT's technique of cognitive defusion - picturing a thought as a passing cloud - offers a similar kind of distance. Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention's (MBRP) "urge surfing" technique, and the related practice of Metacognitive Awareness Training, both encourage observing a craving or a thought as a passing event rather than something to obey. Some research associates observing a craving mindfully, in this way, with a reduced likelihood of acting on it. Recognising the shared, ordinary nature of our physical makeup has also been associated with greater self-compassion and a reduced sense of isolation for some people.
- **Philosophy:** the pre-Socratic philosophers of ancient Greece proposed their own elemental scheme for understanding reality, a notable parallel to this teaching's own historical context. Contemplating the body's elements touches on materialism, while going further by pairing that analysis with an emphasis on impermanence and not-self. Stoicism, too, encourages living in accordance with nature, which begins with understanding our own physical place within it.

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

Having sensed the elements that make up this body, we turn next to Mindfulness of the Body's Impermanence - the return of these same elements to the world they came from.

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

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