

# Exploring the Reality of the Body: The Four Elements

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A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 2-8-2015.

In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Discourse on the Four Fields for Establishing Mindfulness, one of the fields that the Buddha tells us to work with is the body. He offers six practices for bringing mindfulness to the body. Today we will be exploring the fifth of these: the Four Elements practices.

The Four Elements is a set of practices that are rarely presented in a formal way here in the West. But they have a very powerful role to play in freeing us from the delusions, or misperceptions, about our bodies. These delusions contribute to the view that there are concrete, substantial subjects and objects, including that there is an "I" that is an independent and enduring self. This delusional view leads to wanting and not-wanting, to all the wishing that things were different, that underlies so much of the suffering in the world. When we become more free from this view, this delusion, we have more of a capacity to simply be present for each moment of our lives, and to pursue the wholesome possibilities of that moment rather than getting entangled in the unwholesome ones.

This is what we find in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta:

"... a bhikkhu<sup>1</sup> reviews this same body, however it is placed, however disposed, by way of elements thus: " 'In this body there are the earth element, the water element, the fire element, and the air element.' ...

" Just as though a skilled butcher or his apprentice had killed a cow and was seated at the crossroads with it cut up into pieces; so too, a bhikkhu reviews this same body, however it is placed, however disposed, by way of elements thus: 'In this body there are the earth element, the water element, the fire element, and the air element.'<sup>2</sup>

When, about 15 years ago, I was first exposed to the Four Elements as part of Buddhist practice, it really didn't make much sense to me. It was presented as a process of labeling one's experiences as one of these four elements. —I can see how someone might understand it that way from that quote in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta.—I can also understand that somehow that approach was supposed to help me get a sense that my body, and all other material things, were all made up of components. But it seemed very up in the head. It seemed more like an exercise in putting a name, a concept, on an experience, rather than looking more deeply below concept into one's actual experience. And, I felt I already had a Western scientific framework that provided a much better conceptual description of the

components that make up material reality. So I tried it briefly and then basically just blew it off.

But there was still the fact that the Buddha had recommended some kind of exercise with these Four Elements, and that nagged at me. So I kept reading and exploring. Since then I've learned that there is another way of working with the elements, one that is much more grounded in one's actual experience of the body. Today I want to share some of that with you, both through this talk and through the instructions that will come after the talk.

I'd like to begin by offering some context for understanding the role of the Elements within the Buddha's description of how things work to lead us to *dukkha*, to unsatisfactoriness, stress and suffering.

In the Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta, "The Greater Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant's Footprint" we find this text:

1. "...The venerable Sāriputta said this: ...

“3. “And what is the noble truth of suffering? Birth is suffering, ageing is suffering, death is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering; not to obtain what one wants is suffering; in short, the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering.”

4. “And what are the five aggregates affected by clinging? They are: the material form aggregate affected by clinging, the feeling aggregate affected by clinging, the perception aggregate affected by clinging, the formations aggregate affected by clinging, and the consciousness aggregate affected by clinging.”

5. “And what is the material form aggregate affected by clinging? It is the four great elements and the material form derived from the four great elements. And what are the four great elements? They are the earth element, the water element, the fire element, and the air element.”<sup>3</sup>

The Five Aggregates —

1. body, form or materiality,
2. feeling,
3. perception,
4. mental formations, and
5. consciousness or bare knowing—

are referred to as *khandhas* in the Pāli language and in Mahayana Buddhism in the Sanskrit form *skandhas*. You may have come across those terms in your readings. And clinging to the Five Aggregates is *dukkha*. It is an unsatisfactory experience.

The understanding of the Five Aggregates that has come down to us through the Theravāda Buddhist Commentarial tradition and later forms of Buddhism is that they are actually *what we are made of*, that we are not an enduring self because we are made or composed of these five groups of things. From this view, then, we would be trying to understand our bodies as being *made* of the elements of Earth, Wind or Air, Fire and Water.

As I've already noted, that is pretty non-sensical from our Western scientific view of the material world. However, Shaila Catherine, a contemporary American teacher, tells us that

"The intent of the four elements meditation is not to propose a scientific explanation of phenomena. Rather, the intent of the four elements meditation is to illuminate phenomena beyond our constructed concepts and thereby create an effective vantage point for perceiving the emptiness of all phenomena."<sup>4</sup>

I think that Sue Hamilton and Richard Gombrich, contemporary scholars of Early Buddhism, offer us a way to approach the aggregates that doesn't contradict our scientific understanding while still helping us to see the emptiness of phenomena. They have argued that the idea of *khandhas* or aggregates should be understood in terms of the intellectual culture at the time when the Buddha actually was using these terms, rather than following the meaning that the Commentarial Tradition came to centuries later. From their view, the Five Aggregates refer not to what we are made of, but to how we function, how we experience and know in the world.<sup>5</sup> From this view, then, we can ask "How do we know materiality in our bodies and in the world around us?"

The way that we *directly* experience and know the material form aggregate—materiality or the Four Elements—is through the senses of touching, or the tactile sense base, and the kinesthetic sense (through the movement of body parts).

One form of touch sensation involves the range of experiences of hardness-softness. As examples of these characteristics, we can experience hardness in our bodies by touching the teeth or touching where a bone is under the skin. We can experience softness by touching the skin around our eyes or in some protected place on the body. And we can

experience a combination of hardness and softness as we touch an area of the body that is largely fat or a muscle that isn't contracted.

Another form of touch sensation involves the range of roughness-smoothness. We can experience roughness when we touch a place with calloused skin, or the ragged edge of a fingernail or chipped tooth. We might experience smoothness when we touch our tongue to the inside of the cheek or when we rub lotion into our hands. And we can experience a combination of roughness and smoothness in touching other parts of the body.

And yet another form of touch sensation involves the range of heaviness-lightness. When we hold an arm or leg out in front of the body for some time, we can experience the quality of heaviness. We might experience the quality of lightness when we flutter our eyelids. And as we lift a piece of paper we might experience both heaviness and lightness.

These forms of touch sensation—hardness-softness, roughness-smoothness, and heaviness-lightness—are all grouped together as aspects of the Earth Element. The Venerable Sāriputta described the earth element as "solid, solidified."<sup>6</sup> Through these touch experiences we develop a perception of solidity. When we fail to see clearly the impermanence and conditionality of these perceptions, it supports the view that there is a solid body here or a solid object there that continues over time. And that contributes to the view that there is a separate and independent "I" that continues over time.

When we pay attention to our bodily experiences, we can also notice the sensation of pressure or pushing, and the sensation of being supported and stabilized. We might notice the sensation of pushing as we experience the chest or abdomen expanding to draw in air. Or we might experience it when we notice the tip of the tongue pressing against the teeth. Or, when we are walking and experience the foot pushing against the ground. We might notice the sensation of being supported or stabilized as we experience the torso of our bodies being held erect when we are sitting, standing or walking. And as we move in various ways, we can notice a combination of pushing or pressure and supporting or stabilizing. These experiences are grouped together as aspects of the Wind or Air Element. When we fail to clearly perceive the rising and falling of these experiences, the impermanence and conditionality of them, it contributes to the view that there is a continuity to this body from moment to moment.

We also have sensations involving the range of heat and cold. We can experience the sensation of heat when we exhale or when we hold our hands in our armpits. We may experience cold in our hands as we just sit here without moving for some time, or when we walk outside we may feel it on our faces. These experiences are grouped together as aspects of the Fire Element.

The final range of experiences are not tangible—we can't directly experience them—but we can observe them through noticing the other three elements and confirm for ourselves that they are an important part of our experience of materiality. The first of these is the quality of flowing. We can recognize saliva flowing in our mouths indirectly through the changes in pressure, lightness-hardness and temperature. The quality that stands opposed to flowing is cohesion. Cohesion holds things together. One way of experiencing cohesion is to grasp a part of one's body and squeeze it. We can feel the way that the body part holds together, the way it coheres, in spite of the pressure. These experiences are grouped together as aspects of the Water Element.

The Commentaries tell us that each of these four groupings of our experience of materiality, that are being called Earth, Wind, Fire & Water, do not occur independently. Rather, in each moment when we have an experience of materiality, whether in our own bodies or in another form, all four of the Elements are always present. Some aspect or characteristic of one or two of the Elements may be more noticeable, but characteristics of the other Elements are also present. The specific grouping of the characteristics that arises in each moment—such as hardness, pushing, coolness and cohesion, or roughness, hardness, supporting and cohesion—is mutually dependent. They arise together and pass away together.

We can practice with the Four Elements by investigating our experiences of materiality, whether internally in our own bodies or externally in the world around us. We can ask ourselves "How do I know materiality?" "Is it true that I only *directly* know it through touch and kinesthetic sensations?"

If we confirm that, we can ask ourselves "Do I directly know materiality in any way other than through these twelve characteristics?" This means that when we notice that we are experiencing materiality, we look to see if any of these twelve characteristics is present. But we also look to see if we know materiality in any other way.

Once we are clear about this, we can look a little more closely to see if it is true in our own experience that at least one characteristic from each of the Four Elements is present in each moment of experiencing materiality. So we will see for ourselves whether it is true that these four characteristics are mutually dependent in this moment of experience. As we investigate this, we can also notice that these mutually dependent groupings of the Four Elements arise together and pass away together in each moment. In other words, we can begin to see for ourselves directly in our own experience, that our experience of, our knowing of, materiality is impermanent and not substantial or enduring.

Another way of talking about these practices is that they allow us to investigate the sense of the body as something that is a solid mass that continues over time. We can see for ourselves if it is true, or if these perceptions of the body are constructed from our experiences of these twelve characteristics of materiality combined with mental images of our bodies, and images of the edges of our bodies.

In the suttas we often find the Buddha asking his students whether something can be regarded as "I, me or mine". When we see for ourselves the impermanent, mutually dependent and constructed nature of our experiences of all material reality—whether of body parts, floor, cushions, tree trunks and so forth—all of which seem so solid and enduring, we can answer from our own deep knowing that they are truly not "I, me or mine." And when we can answer in this way, we loosen the hold of the view that leads to so much grief for ourselves and in this world.

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### Practicing with the Four Elements<sup>7</sup>

1. Investigate in your own experiences of material reality, including your body, whether it is true that you only *directly know* it through touch and kinesthetic sensations?
2. Notice in your own experiences of material reality, including your body, the characteristics of each Element in the order given below. Become familiar with these characteristics.

Pushing (Wind Element)

Hardness (Earth Element)

Roughness (Earth Element)

Heaviness (Earth Element)

Supporting (Wind Element)

Softness (Earth Element)

Smoothness (Earth Element)

Lightness (Earth Element)

Heat (Fire Element)

Cold (Fire Element)

Cohesion (Water Element)

Flowing (Water Element)

3. Investigate whether you know material reality in any way other than through these twelve characteristics.

4. Investigate whether it is true that at least one characteristic from each of the Four Elements always arises together in each moment of experiencing materiality including your own body.

5. Notice the impermanent nature of each of these momentary groups of the Four Elements.

6. Notice in your own experience whether the body and other material forms are solid and continuous or not.

7. Notice whether your experience of your body as solid and continuous is actually constructed in each moment from some grouping of these twelve characteristics combined with mental images of "your" body.

8. If your experience of the body, and other forms of material reality, is indeed constructed in this way, does it make sense to regard it as I, me or mine?

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### Notes

1. It is my understanding that in the Buddha's time, when one was speaking to a group of people of mixed statuses, one would always mention the person of highest status while actually addressing everyone. Because of this we can take the term "bhikkhu" to be a reference to all committed practitioners giving attention to or working with this teaching.

2. MN 10.12-13, Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, "The Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness," Bhikkhus Nanamoli & Bodhi (trans.) *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995.
3. MN 28.1-5, Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta, "The Greater Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant's Footprint," Bhikkhus Nanamoli & Bodhi (trans.) *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995. [my underline]
4. Shaila Catherine, *Wisdom Wide and Deep*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2011, p. 216.
5. Sue Hamilton, *Identity and Experience: The Constitution of the Human Being According to Early Buddhism*, London: Luzac Oriental, 1996.  
Sue Hamilton-Blyth, *Early Buddhism: A New Approach*. Richmond, Surrey, UK: Curzon, 2000.  
Richard Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought*, London: Equinox Publishing, 2009, p. 114.
6. MN 28.6, op cit.
7. My primary reference for these practices, though what I offer is not identical, is: Catherine, Shaila. *Wisdom Wide & Deep*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2011. – A presentation of Pa Auk Sayadaw's method which is based on the *Visuddhimagga* (The Path of Purification), a fifth century commentary.