

Mindfulness of the Body (4 of 4) Four Elements

March 10, 2023

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

sensations, element, meditation, challenges, elemental, earth, air, fire, water, molecules, connected, preoccupation, self, *dhātu*, properties

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In the Buddha's teachings on The Four Foundations of Mindfulness, he offers an exercise called the four elements in the section called mindfulness of the body. The four elements are usually described as earth, water, fire, and air.

One of the reasons for this exercise is to become aware of the sensations of our body in their elemental manifestations. Experiencing our present-moment sensations without the filter of self-identification is a classic reason for this meditation. We can experience this moment without taking it personally or making it mine. We are not so tied to believing that this is happening to me or that this is my experience.

We want to be able to experience this moment directly without the overlay of self, impersonally in a sense. Impersonally sounds cold so I made up the term, pre-personal or under-personal. Perhaps this communicates that this experience is so close in and intimate, settled, and connected. We stay with this moment at the foundational level before the mind starts bringing in ideas of me, myself, and mine. This exercise with the four elements is meant to free us from self-concerns and preoccupations.

We call earth, air, water, and fire the elements, but I am not sure “element” is the best word to use. We think of elements as referring to the elemental table. It implies something solid like atoms or molecules. They are the fundamental things that exist. A better translation for the Pali word *dhātu* is “properties.”

Many things are *dhātu* which are not elemental in terms of things. They are elemental in terms of being fundamental like the building blocks of something, but they are not things. They are processes or activities. They are things that are appearing and disappearing. They have to do with our sensations. It is not our thoughts or our feelings. They are the sensations that might be there providing the information that helps us understand, “Oh, this is an emotion.” The sensations tell us the impact that our thinking might have. The sensations stay in the realm of sensations.

The idea of the four properties – earth, water, fire, and air – is to give us an orientation for how to stay close to these different things. The earth element is solidity, hardness, softness, firmness, and maybe tightness. It is anything that feels solid or the opposite. It also might feel soft. That range is considered the earth element. Granite rock is really hard. Soil, the earth, is quite soft. We can put our hands in it.

The water element is one of the harder ones to experience. Tradition holds it to be that which is fluid. It is the fluidity where things are held together. That is what fluid is. Water has a kind of force that keeps the molecules connected to each other. The spit in your mouth has a stickiness to it. The water property refers to things that hold things together and keep them coalesced. It can be a bit hard to feel and experience, but maybe you get the idea.

Next, there is fire which refers to temperature – hot and cold. Finally, there is the air element. The literal word in Pali is not air. We say air, but it is wind. The word wind makes it easier to understand that the elemental level here has to do with movement. This refers to any movement we have in the body. If we are sitting still and there is some kind of movement, that is the wind element moving through us.

It can be delightful to be able to put to rest our self-preoccupations – all these concerns about me, myself, and mine. We become so deeply intimate with our experience that the personal-ness falls away. I have tried under-personal or pre-personal. I see in the chat, someone is suggesting using the term sub-personal. Maybe this lies underneath it all.

This is where the idea that our experience is so personal, the personal-ness falls away. We may have had the experience of being in our home or bedroom when no one is around. We are still in our pajamas and feeling cozy with a cup of tea. There is no self-concern about me, myself, and mine. We are not thinking about ourselves. We are just settled and cozy. There is no other person to compare ourselves to or be in interaction with. We are just here, feeling okay being ourselves.

Meditation can be this way. It is okay to be ourselves. This is the one place where we can drop the social world. We can temporarily drop the responsibilities we have in our lives so that we can get underneath to a deeper level of well-being, safety, and comfort. We can just be absorbed in the simplicity of the moment, in the sensations of the experience.

There is no agenda. We aren't doing it for a purpose or trying to get concentrated. We are just floating in the

sensations that come and go. We are diving or sinking into them. This can be a wonderful personal experience as an alternative to all the me, myself, and mine-ing that accompanies us through the day.

It can be exhausting how much our self-concern is part and parcel to the many things we are doing each day. Moment after moment we experience our preferences, our opinions, and others' opinions, trying to avoid what we want or don't want, how we feel about things, as well as how we are with other people. Navigating ourselves in relation to other people can be exhausting for many people.

Challenges in our lives tend to evoke a strong sense of self because the challenge often has some personal quality – “I have to figure this out. This is happening to me. I am responsible.” This emphasis on ourselves as the agent or the victim elicits more self. Some of that is okay, but it is nice to know there is an alternative. It is useful to know that there is another way where we don't have to take things personally, but it doesn't feel cold. We are present for things without measuring them against our idea of self or measuring against me, myself, and mine, and what it means for me.

When we do this four element meditation, we drop down into the sensations that this is deeper than personal. This gives us a feeling for going about the

challenges of our lives without taking them so personally. They might involve something that has to be done, but we do it without the weight of asking: “Why me? I shouldn’t have to do this. This is too difficult for me.” There is a simpler way of engaging where me, myself, and mine doesn’t interfere. It might be in the background guiding a little but it doesn’t interfere.

Some people find the four element meditation very meaningful. The heart of the insight meditation practice that I learned in Asia is this four element meditation. The heart of it is to drop down into the sensations of the experience. It is not about the thoughts, stories, or ideas of the experience. It is not how we take the experience personally, but actually dropping down and staying intimately present for the sensations.

This can be so helpful in experiencing an emotion, for instance. What are the sensations of the emotion? How do the sensations of the emotion move, travel, and feel? What are the sensations connected to thinking? What are the sensations involved in an activity or movement that we are doing? Spending quality time in this sub-personal realm of just the sensations is quite freeing. The freedom from self that it provides then becomes a reference point to better understand how much extra self we bring along as we go about our life, including our challenges.

If you feel inclined, see if you can find a way to settle in. Spend a few moments – here and there – in some nice way at home or somewhere. See if you can be so at ease that you stop taking anything personally. It is just nature operating through you – just nature operating in this body that is here. We are not taking it personally, or being aloof or cold, but rather, we dive into the sensations. We are diving into the basic fundamental building blocks of sensations from which we build our interpretation of life.

See if that teaches you anything about a less self-concerned way of being in the world. It is invaluable to do when we have challenges. The challenges we have become more difficult when they are mixed up with self-preoccupation. The less self-agitation there is, the easier it is to take care of challenges in a responsible way.

So thank you and I look forward to being here with you on Monday.