

Satipaṭṭhāna (28) The Four Elements Perspective

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Today I will introduce what is classically called “the four elements” – the four *dhātu* in Pali. They are aspects of our felt experience that can be associated with elements of the physical world around us. The four elements practice can have very profound meanings and associations owing to that connection to the world.

I prefer to translate *dhātu* as “property” because this points to a property *of* something, as in the properties of our body and the sensations we are experiencing. The word “element,” to me, implies something molecular or very essential or elemental, although it does not have to mean that.

The four properties are always listed in a particular order: earth, water, fire, and air. This order derives from the belief in ancient Indian cosmology that the earth is on the bottom and water floats on the earth. Above that are heat and fires that flare up into the air. And then there is the air. There is a progression.

Meditating on the four properties means using a very different lens or taking a different perspective on our direct experience than the concepts and ideas in which many of us normally live. For example, I have a big bell here. I can think about it as a bell, and what a great bell it is. I remember who gave it to us and how wonderful it was to receive this gift. I think about how long we've had the bell and the places and ways we have used it. I can be in that world – in the mind of memory, thoughts, and ideas.

Or I can change the lens of my experience to not be in the ideas, the history, the memory, and what this proves about IMC – that IMC is a worthy meditation center because it has a good bell. Instead, I can just feel the bell's weight, smoothness, and temperature. It feels cool in my warm hands. I feel some smoothness and little indentations on the sides. It's fun to rub my hands across the indentations as they come and go.

I can get into the sensations, independent of it being a bell. The bell-ness of it does not need to be relevant. I close my eyes and can just be with the sensations. It does not have to be a bell. It could be something very different.

So we can have different lenses and perspectives. I think of them as different magnifications that we use. I remember my sons had a kids' book with pictures of the same location at different magnitudes of focus. It went by magnitudes of 10. The book started with the universe and then zoomed in closer as you turned the page. You saw the earth and then a little town, a lawn, grass, cells, and atoms. Depending on what magnification you use, you see different things.

Imagine, for example, a satellite video you could watch and zoom in on the neighborhood where you grew up. It would be fascinating to see: "Oh, it's changed. That house is no longer there, but that house has not changed at all. There is the tree I used to climb. There is the house of my neighbor who was so unjust. I broke his window when I threw a baseball at it, but he never returned it – my favorite baseball! And there is the neighbor who used to give us cookies, and we always felt so safe playing in the tree in front of that person's yard. I have come so far in my life since then." Or: "I haven't gone anywhere in my life since then, and all my problems derive from that time."

All these ideas come into play at a certain magnification. If we drop in on just the tree where we used to play, a whole set of thoughts come up. But if we zoom in closer to just a leaf on the tree, and progressively closer to the leaf's cells, atoms, and subatomic particles, then suddenly there is all this space and vastness between all the particles. It is amazing – like looking into the great night sky at the amazing size of the universe.

Depending on the magnification, we have a different relationship to what is going on. If we are always at the level where it is all about me, myself, and mine – my ideas, my history, what was done or not done to me, what I should do – it can be exhausting. This level tends to be a place with a lot of attachment and stress. It can be a labyrinth.

That level can also be, in Buddhist terms, a cycle of stress. The very attempt to resolve and get out of the cycle on that level of practice – that level of magnification – just spins the wheel more and more. By doing more and more, it is like we are rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. It is as if we are always trying to solve things and make them better. But as long as our effort is based on ideas of me, myself, and mine, there probably is no real solution or final happiness.

One way to find real change is to change the magnification level – to change the lens through which we see our experience. This is not an easy thing to do because our attachments keep us at a certain magnification – the level of thoughts, histories, and ideas.

We are training ourselves to begin letting go of that lens – not dismissing or abandoning it – so that we are not so attached to it and can see in a fresh way. We can learn to be free. We can connect to ourselves at a different magnification level. This reveals a level of experience and processes that are much more freeing. They are much more helpful for experiencing something vast, freeing, and liberating. It is like getting down into the particle level of the atoms and seeing, “Wow, this is amazing!”

The four elements meditation is a shift of magnification – a shift to a different lens of experience. It is very important to understand that this is not a dismissal of other magnification levels. For many of us, it is an expansion of the lenses we can use, so we are not always stuck in one magnification level. We gain the ability to go between different lenses.

When it is helpful, we can go into the element level. There is a lot of wisdom to be discovered here. There is also a fair amount of healing. Some stresses that we

apply to our system limit the healing abilities of our body and mind. But once we drop into the elemental level of the properties of sensations, there is a freeing of stress. Our whole physical and mental system can operate much more harmoniously, and it is remarkable what can start happening.

So, in the four elements practice, we shift our attention to the level of sensations. This is really a sensation meditation – sensory awareness that we do.

In the vipassana practice taught to many of us – the Mahasi practice from the teacher Mahasi Sayada – the instructions were to experience the movements of the belly as we were breathing. People thought that meant breath meditation. But in fact, the emphasis was not on breathing. The emphasis was on the sensations that come into play as the body breathes. To feel all the sensations that come into play and get closer and more intimate. To get into the magnification level where we are just there with the sensations. We are not there with the ideas, concepts, and stories around them.

It can be quite relaxing and easeful to drop all the stories and just be with sensations as they come and go. This is the core aspect of vipassana practice. So the four elements meditation is very central to this tradition, although it's not always explicitly stated.

We will explore, for a few days, the four elements and sensations and how to work with them. Hopefully, you will be able to appreciate this particular lens or magnification level of your experience and will find some fascination, delight, and maybe even some freedom in it. Thank you very much.