

# Mindfulness of Breathing (11) Earth, Water, Fire, and Air

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

elements, four elements, sensations, experience, earth, consciousness, body, atoms, qualities, space, holding, life, concepts, support, air, meditation, beauty, water, fire, concentration, cohesion, connected, self, doubt, grounded, Buddha, Bodhi tree, *vipassanā*, Mahāsi

## Gil Fronsdal

For this Sunday morning talk, what I have in mind is continuing the theme of the 7 a.m. morning talks on mindfulness of breathing. We've come to the part in the series of mindfulness of breathing that emphasizes being aware of the body as we breathe. This wonderful and challenging body is a very important locus or place for mindfulness practice. The question of how to have a deep, full relationship with the body is very important for *vipassanā* practice. Many of the western teachers and I trained in a tradition of *vipassanā* called the Mahāsi technique. It was very much a body practice in that it focused on what's called the "four elements." It was mindfulness of the four elements in our experience. The four elements can also mean the four qualities or the four dimensions. I like to think of them as sensations.

It's a sensation meditation – an element meditation – that we're doing. Classically in *vipassanā*, one of the ways of really going deep in this practice is to tune into the sensations of our experience. This works as a very wonderful alternative to excessively focusing on the concepts, ideas, and stories of our life, and even the concepts and ideas of our body. To drop our stories, ideas, and judgments, put them aside, and be infinitely forgiving and accepting of our direct, immediate, sensory experience – without any overlay of, "It should be different," or "I need to be different," or "Something's wrong with me, because I'm somehow this way or that way with my body." Those are all stories and concepts.

To drop down into really feeling the directness and immediacy of the body in itself – or as I like to say, "the body's own experience of itself." Not the experience that's mediated through a thick layer of concepts and ideas. But the experience of the body that comes through sensing – the felt sense of sensations, the way that sensations are experienced in the body.

The classic way of talking about this in Buddhism is to call it a four elements meditation. The four elements are earth, water, fire, and air. It's an ancient idea that the basic building blocks of experience and the world is earth, water, fire, and air. I find this idea – that the building blocks of the world are found in us – delightful and somewhat profound. As we tune into these qualities in ourselves, we're also tuning into the deep, natural elements of the world.

There's a wonderful sense of mutuality, interconnectedness, resonance, or continuity between ourselves and the natural world. It doesn't take a lot of reflection to think that our physical body is completely made up of recycled materials. The atoms, which our body is built from, have come together and formed all kinds of different things over time. They've been shaped, dissolved, and reformed. There was a time back at the beginning of the universe, I think, when all of it was just helium. As the universe was created and formed, all kinds of things started to form. These atoms have had a long journey through this cosmos to us here.

When we die, our atoms and elements don't just disappear. They'll take new shapes after us. We're the recipient of all this material that the natural world has given us. It's made *us* possible. When we die, we give it back in a sense, and it becomes something else in this receiving and giving of our lives.

When we focus on the four elements in meditation, the general way that we understand this is that they're not the actual elements, like objects or atoms, but rather, they are qualities of sensations – the ways in which we feel or sense things. The qualities of warmth are the fire element. The qualities of hardness and stability are the earth element. The qualities of fluidity that we might feel inside of us are the water element. The qualities of

lifting, extension, and stretching are said to be the air element. Exactly what the correlation is between each of these four elements and the personal sensations that we experience is a little arbitrary and personal.

When I studied this, I was a bit confused because different teachers seemed to explain the four elements in different ways. To exactly make a correlation between the elements and our sensations – trying to fit everything into it – is a little hard. It's not so much that we have to get it right, but rather it's the principle that we're really tuning into these sensations. In doing so, we're developing the concentration, depth, and freedom that comes when we temporarily separate or free ourselves from living in concepts, stories, and thoughts about the future and especially self – the ways of orienting ourselves to the world around the concept and feeling of me, myself, and mine.

In many situations, it's appropriate enough to have those kinds of thoughts and ideas, but to only have them limits our lives dramatically. It's valuable to have breakfast, lunch, or dinner, but you don't want to sit and have a meal twenty-four hours a day. It's good to have them occasionally, but not constantly. It's good to periodically have thoughts and ideas of self. It's really nice not to have them constantly. Part of the function of meditation is to get a vacation from "me, myself, and mine" thoughts. It creates a very different perspective and orientation for living our lives.

We're not only seeing it through the lens of me, myself, and mine – "What's in it for me? What's happening to me? What's right about me? What's wrong with me? What am I going to get? What happened to me yesterday?" All of these stories.

Rather, to have that part of the mind become peaceful, calm, and settled. One of the ways to do that is to have a deep, trusting awareness of the felt experience of the body – to settle into this. Now, to the uninitiated, this is maybe a boring thing to do or it somehow diminishes our life to reduce our experience just to the sensations of the body. But a number of things can happen. One is we're freeing ourselves from all these thoughts and ideas that often limit us already. It actually frees us from them, and our experience is more expansive, freeing, or relaxing. It also allows the relaxation and concentration to deepen and deepen. It becomes a fuller, deeper experience of life when we don't have thoughts that keep us on the surface.

So the four elements. The earth element is said to be sensations of hardness, heaviness, and solidity – and its function is to support us. All of us, in one way or the other are supported by the earth – standing on it, sitting on it in some way. I think it's most represented by the idea of the Buddha meditating. Classically, the Buddha, when he was sitting under the Bodhi tree to be enlightened, was sitting directly on the ground. He had some grass that he had gathered to create a seat for himself. He wasn't sitting directly on the ground perhaps, but it was pretty much like sitting on the ground. He would often teach sitting on the ground under a tree. He died lying on the ground between two trees.

This idea of feeling the earth's support – feeling connected and grounded on the earth – must have been pretty natural for the Buddha and many people of his time. They lived so close to the earth. Here I'm in a building. I'm not literally touching the earth, but I feel the earth's support. It comes through the building, its foundation, and the floor. How very different to live in touch with the ground! To walk barefoot on soil is such a great thing to do.

The earth element functions as a support or a foundation. To really touch the earth foundation that holds and supports us – the solidity of the torso, hip bones, and sitting bones against your seat, if you're sitting. The feet against the ground. The way that the lower torso supports the upper torso. The way that the shoulders support the neck, and the neck supports the head. These all have to do with the earth element – of solidity, hardness, and strength that's supporting it. It's possible to feel all this.

In feeling that support, it's possible to relax more. The earth element is a support for relaxing. We don't have to do all the work of supporting ourselves. We can begin trusting and allowing something within to support us.

An image of the earth that's very powerful in Buddhism is when the Buddha – having doubts about the appropriateness of becoming enlightened, or being challenged that he wasn't appropriate – reached his hand forward over the knee (like he is in the statue here behind me). You see his fingers reaching down towards the earth. He's going to touch the earth. Did he just touch it? Or is he about to touch it? We don't actually know. When he touched it, he called on the earth to be his witness for his right or appropriateness to become enlightened, become free.

We have so many doubts. Is it okay to be free? Is it okay to meditate? Is it okay to really release all the attachments, holdings, and connections that we have to other people and responsibilities? Is it okay? How do we know it's okay?

The Buddha then reached forward and touched the earth. The earth back then was considered almost to be a deity – the Earth Mother or a being in itself. In touching the earth, the earth responded and affirmed that it was okay for him to be enlightened.

In the same way, to really entrust ourselves to the foundation that the body provides us, and to feel that foundation. Often the tension and fear that we carry can be an upwelling, lifting up, and lifting away from the earth – kind of fighting it, or trying to get away from it. The idea of trusting the earth element within us – provides the foundation and support that we receive.

The water element has to do with the sense of fluidity and cohesion. They say the function of the water element is to intensify our experience or to hold it together. An ancient analogy for the water element is dry flour, which as you lift it up and throw it to the wind, falls apart and scatters. But when the flour is mixed with water, the water makes it cohesive, and the flour particles stick together. In ancient physics, water is what holds things together – a sense of cohesion.

In our own experience, the water element can be a sense of fluidity, flow – anything that seems like it's flowing. It's a little different from movement. It *is* a movement, but it is a certain kind of movement, of flowing. You can get a sense of flowing vibrations or energies through the body. Or sometimes you can feel the flow of blood through the body. Or you can feel the flow of saliva in the mouth as you swallow, or as you move saliva around in your mouth. Or the flow of snot. All of these senses of flowing, and then cohesion holding it together.

I think the sense of cohesion is also felt as we breathe in and the torso expands. What holds it together are the cohesive forces of our cells and atoms – whatever's there that's holding us so we don't just fall apart. Something's holding us together – the bag of skin that we have around us. That feeling of cohesion, of being held together and in place, is the water element.

They say the fire element is temperature, especially warmth and heat. When we feel heat, we're feeling the fire element. One of the functions of heat is to soften things. When we cook things, they get soft. When we sit in a sauna, the body softens. It also has a function – maybe with the softening – of aging. Heat is what ages us. The activities of life, the functioning of everything that we do – all the active, biochemical, physical functionings – produce heat in the body. In the ancient world, it was said that's also the function of aging – to mellow, soften, and age things. When you feel warmth or temperature in your body, that's said to be the fire element.

The air element has to do with a different kind of movement than the fluidity of water. It has to do with movement where there's pushing, lifting, or a sense of extension. When you blow into a balloon, the balloon blows up, extends, and stretches. If you blow on a dandelion flower and the little, white puffs lift up in the air, it's the air element – the wind element of the air – that's lifting and pushing it up.

They say that the air element comes into play as we breathe. Lifting goes on – the lift in expanding the chest. When we walk, there's a little pushing perhaps, as the foot swings forward. Anything that's transporting, conveying, and making motion happen is said to be the air element. It is common to associate any movement we're experiencing with the air element.

There are two additional elements that make this more interesting. As we start feeling the depth of our sensations – really feeling them carefully and tuning into them – we also start feeling space – the space element. There's lots of space all around us. Some rooms are small, and some rooms are big. You step outside, and there's more space. Space makes a difference. Space changes how we relate to things. If we're in a small elevator that comfortably holds four people – but there are 12 or 15 people in the elevator – we're not going to feel very generous, safe, comfortable, or loving towards people who are just trying to breathe and survive.

Once there's more space, there's breathing room. There's space to be safe. There's space to feel, move about, and be free. That sense of space can also be internal. With the eyes closed, there's a marvelous way in which we start feeling space between the sensations.

For me, one of the great delights is the infinite, vast space that I feel in my torso, mind, and within. The deeper I go in meditation, the more space there seems to be. Sometimes I have a feeling like I'm looking into deep

space, when I'm looking into a feeling in my body. There's a feeling or sensation of much more space than there actually is.

If you ever have a chance to look inside of a corpse, it's pretty packed in there – all the organs and everything. It doesn't seem like a lot of space. But we can feel space, and that space makes so much possible.

The space element that is there when one sensation goes away and it's not there anymore – that absence is a kind of space. Space and absence are closely connected to freedom, and to not being oppressed or caught.

Sometimes the elements or qualities are considered to be four, and sometimes five or six. When there are six elements, the sixth is consciousness itself. Consciousness is an amazing thing. It is its own quality, its own characteristic, its own thing. I don't think anybody really knows exactly what consciousness is. There are lots of definitions, theories, and trends about what consciousness actually is. But whatever it is, it's a miracle, an amazing thing.

In terms of this wonderful world that we live in, we're supported by the earth, life-giving water, air, and the warmth of the sun. All four elements are essential for our lives. Space – in which to move around and take care of things – is essential for our lives. Consciousness is also essential for our lives. In fact, we don't experience any of these sensations without some degree of consciousness.

When we die, consciousness is no longer in the body. If the body is touched, there are no sensations. When a body goes into a crematory, the body gets warm. However it doesn't feel the warmth because there are no sensations anymore. There are no nerves alive to signal pain, pleasure, or anything. So every sensation that we feel is a symptom of being alive. There's consciousness – awareness – of it.

But what is this amazing world that we can be conscious of? There's a wonderful idea that turns or stops the mind a little bit – the often asked question, "When a tree falls in the forest, is there a sound if no one is there?" If there's no one there with ears to hear, is there a sound? There are certainly waves. The airwaves have been formed. But does that mean that there's a sound there? Generally I think people say that there's no sound. The sound only happens when those air waves hit the eardrums and vibrate them, starting in motion the processes that lead to hearing.

To say it in a different way, "If there is a beautiful, colorful sunset, but there's no one to see it, is it beautiful?" Is that display of color even there? Do we need to have humans with eyes, who can take in the color and process it – and then form it in the mind so that we appreciate it? Maybe there is no color.

If we look at a plant or any object with color, it's this funny thing where the object actually doesn't have color. The color we see is the light waves that are being bounced off the object – the light of particular frequencies that get absorbed, we don't see. What we see are the frequencies that bounce off. In fact, maybe we could almost say that we never see the color of an object. We just see all the color that it's not!

For example, hundreds of billions of years before there were sentient beings on this planet, I bet there were all kinds of colorful, beautiful, awe-inspiring sunsets over the ocean. But there was no one to see them – no consciousness to experience it. Was it really a beautiful sunset then? Maybe beauty is partly a product of this interaction between the world and ourselves.

There's intimacy. There's co-creation. There's a way in which we are part of the natural world – that the natural world then experiences itself in a unique way. For human beings, we experience the world differently than bats, hummingbirds, and insects. Everyone has their own way, and their own wavelengths of light they can see – ways in which they experience. We all live in a different world.

But that world is co-created. We see it in a way. To meditate on the elements and see them as elements – not just see them as solidity, hardness, softness, extension, movement, fluidity, warmth, and coolness. But to call them elements – the earth element, water element, fire element, and air element – is a representative or symbolic way of stating, "We are an intimate part of this natural world. We're an extension of it, an outgrowth of it, or a particular manifestation of it – as is this consciousness of ours."

To sit in appreciation – to feel all this, sense all this, and experience it. To not just *think* of ourselves as part of the world – but to *experience* ourselves as part of the world. To appreciate and allow this consciousness that we've been given – for whatever reason that it's been given us. To take in the beauty of this world – the beauty of a flower, a blue sky, snow, rain, ocean, and the night sky. For some reason, we can do that.

To not spend our time lost in concepts, ideas, stories, and preoccupation. To not get lost on the computer and on websites that take us down rabbit holes. But to really be able to experience the depth of this life here – to settle in, quiet – and feel the earth elements, consciousness element, and the space element. To feel the beauty and freedom that's possible. It's not a withdrawal from the world. It's actually entering into the world more deeply, so we can care for it more and live freely in it.

Our care is an expression of freedom, not an obligation of freedom. It's a way of touching in – not only to our capacity to see beauty, but our capacity to love, care, and see each other as family. We all share the same elements. In those elements, there's no difference between us. We're all families of sentient life on this earth. To see each other in that way is one of the potentials when we drop all the stories and concepts – and can really let our hearts resonate with the world around us.

So the four elements – may you appreciate how deeply these basic, natural elements can be found in you as qualities of sensations. As you settle into it and feel that, maybe you can feel some greater depth, inspiration, and awe to be alive and to live on this planet. Thank you.