

**Dharma talk on Contemplation of the four elements
For Earth Witness Retreat
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Contemplation of the four elements is described in the Satipatthana Sutta; the Sutta on the four foundations of mindfulness. It is one of the most important Theravada Suttas on how to do mindfulness meditation. The Satipatthana Sutta teaches contemplation of body, feelings, mind states, dhammas

The Buddha says the Satipatthana Sutta is

“The direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of dukkha and discontent, for acquiring the true method, for the realization of Nibanna.”

How does the Buddha say we should practice the four foundations of mindfulness?

Like this: *“In regard to the body, a monk abides contemplating the body, diligent, clearly knowing and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world...”* and same with feelings, mind states and dhammas.

The Buddha then gives various ways to contemplate the body, including mindfulness of the four elements:

“Again monks, he reviews this same body, however it is placed, however disposed, as consisting of elements thus: ‘; in this body there are the earth element, the water element, the fire element, the earth element.”

In early Buddhism the four elements are earth, air, fire and water.

These are clearly not the elements of the periodic table. **How can this ancient worldview be useful in our practice?** What is its purpose when this is no longer the way we understand the physical world including our bodies?

In the four elements contemplation, earth, air, fire and water are contemplated as the **PROPERTIES** of the material world as we sense it.

The earth, for example, is said to represent, and is felt as solidity, hardness, softness, texture, heaviness. Water is fluidity and cohesion; air is movement or pressure; fire is temperature, energy, heat.

And this is how the practitioner is traditionally advised to carry out the four elements contemplation: to become aware of the properties of the four elements as they play out in her body. For example, to recognize the air element in the rise and fall of the chest in breathing. To sense the earth element in the heaviness of the butt on the cushion or the feet on the ground. And so on.

But as I dutifully practiced the four elements, something else began to emerge and that is what I want to share with you today.

The four elements can be brought forward into our modern understanding of the physical world as representations of the interlocking natural systems and processes, great and small, planetary and microscopic that make up our bodies and the earth itself.

Looking at the four elements in this way, when contemplating the **earth element**, the first thing I might notice is gravity. The strong sense of being held down on the earth by one of the most powerful natural forces we know. Then the contemplation might lead to how my body evolved in a world with just this gravity to be just this size, buttressed against this powerful force by a skeleton of just this size, with bones of various sizes and densities to allow this creature to live and move on this planet.

Air. The breath of course, and how through breathing air enters and flows through the smaller and smaller channels to the alveoli, then ultimately the oxygen passing through the walls of the tiny structures into the capillaries that carry it throughout the body warming and nourishing it. When you think about it, what a system! {Let's take a quiet breath or two and honor this system that keeps us alive.}

Or, following the Sutta's instructions to contemplate the object both internally and externally, when a breeze touches your skin, recognizing it as a part of the movement of air around the earth, rising and sinking as it's warmed by the sun, flowing around the world ceaselessly. {take a moment to feel the air on your skin}

Fire is energy. The energy of the sun harvested by plants, eaten by you. The constant working of the tiny engines of your cells. The fossilized sunlight that got you here in your car and heats your home. {Close your eyes and turn your face to the sun}

Water. The way that water is so necessary for the workings of every system in our body. The way our skin is an envelope keeping in the water our body needs in order to live and function. The way humid air feels different on the skin than air that is dry. The amount of water vapor the air can hold at a certain temperature until the vapor changes to liquid and dew falls. The hydrologic cycle.

And so on. So what? **Where is all this taking us?**

In the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha says,

"Just as a skilled butcher or his apprentice, having killed a cow, would sit at a crossroads cutting it up into pieces, the monk contemplates this very body – however it stands, however it is disposed – in terms of properties: 'In this body there is the earth property, the liquid property, the fire property, & the wind property.'

What's the meaning of this somewhat gruesome butcher analogy? It's this. When an animal is killed and butchered, instead of thinking about "cow" we think about meat. Our view of the cow has changed from animal to meat.

So in just that way, contemplation of the four elements is meant to lead to a shift of perception from looking at this body as I, me, or mine, to looking at it as a collection of impersonal but dynamic elements: earth, air, fire, water.

Moreover, what I find most valuable in the way I've begun to practice the four elements contemplation is that awareness and contemplation of the processes of earth, air, fire, and water, large and small, inside and outside our bodies - or as the Buddha said, internal and external - leads to a shift in perception of my body, and hence of my "self."

The body is not a thing; it's a process, just as the entire earth is a collection of processes. As John Muir said, and as we ourselves can directly experience through the four elements contemplation,

"Everything is flowing -- going somewhere, animals and so-called lifeless rocks as well as water. Thus the snow flows fast or slow in grand beauty-making glaciers and avalanches; the air in majestic floods carrying minerals, plant leaves, seeds, spores, with streams of music and fragrance; water streams carrying rocks... While the stars go streaming through space pulsed on and on forever like blood...in Nature's warm heart."

So the four elements contemplation leads to direct understanding of the three conditions of existence: dukkha or suffering, not-self and impermanence. How?

Not-self - the understanding I am not a thing but an intersection of processes both large and small. And with what is recently being discovered about the microscopic community we carry around with us, from our gut to our skin, we might even see ourselves as ecosystems. Ecosystems held by larger ecosystems, like Russian dolls.

What about suffering, or dukkha? Suffering is a result of a mistaken understanding of life: it is our desperate grasping on to what is ungraspable – and this **leads to the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion – unskillful behaviors that cause suffering for ourselves and others.**

In the context of earth practice, **greed is the urge to take more from the earth than what is sustainable** More space, more resources. All the fossil fuels we can get our hands on, no matter what burning those fossil fuels does to the health of the earth and to our own health.

And **delusion**. With a scientifically and spiritually uninformed worldview, we might think we can dump all the carbon dioxide we want into the atmosphere, or toxics into our water supply. Who cares and why not? As John Muir wrote:

"The wrongs done to trees, wrongs of every sort, are done in the darkness of ignorance."

Once we understand, through study and direct experience, the way that earth's natural systems are systems – not just inert things – and once we understand that those systems interact with each other constantly to make our planet what it is – the state of the ocean affects the state of the atmosphere. The shape of a landmass affects how much rain it gets. And so on. Then we

must become more careful about what we do. **Cutting through delusion leads to care for all beings.**

Finally, **impermanence**. Those processes of which I and the earth are made never stay still. Earth, air, fire and water are always moving and changing.

Moreover, contemplation of the four elements as natural processes leads to the understanding that there is no separation between the self and the physical world. As John Muir famously said, *"When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe."*

This is not only a spiritual insight but a profoundly physical one. We are made of the same stuff as the rest of the world and there is no way we cannot interact with our world. If you think you can, just try to stop breathing or eating.

And this direct understanding of ourselves as not separate heals us. As the poet Robinson Jeffers wrote,

*Know that however ugly the parts appear
the whole remains beautiful. A severed hand
Is an ugly thing and man dissevered from the earth and stars
and his history... for contemplation or in fact...
Often appears atrociously ugly. Integrity is wholeness,
the greatest beauty is
Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty
of the universe. Love that, not man
Apart from that... – "The Answer" (1936)*