

2006-07-24 The Four Elements

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SPEAKERS

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So today's talk was inspired by the

heat.

Some of you undoubtedly have to go out in the heat

of homes that have no air conditioning

experienced the heat.

And we have an expression in English being out in the elements. And so being out the elements being I think it means in English up out, usually outdoors, in a situation where the raw, elemental aspect of reality is quite clearly kind of impinges on us or makes itself present for us. So it usually implies kind of being strong wind or strong sun or strong

terrain

are strong all of those at the same time. situations where, you know, there can be landslides or some kind of you know that the elemental aspects of life are not something that's kept at a polite pastoral distance. But the rawness of life and immediacy of it is quite present. And certainly sometimes when you're out in the elements, it's also certain situations can be quite dangerous. And

as

as I found out today, I got a phone call. So my mind today that my father who's a sailor was out sailing in the middle of an ocean and was shipwrecked gotten the elements and lost his boat. So I didn't talk to him directly, but I talked to his wife and she said, Oh, he just takes these things in stride and just thinks about what's next. Now thinking about his next boat, he's already lost three now.

One out in the middle of the Atlantic, one in the middle of the

eastern side of the Pacific and now he's done in the middle of the Pacific. So my guess is more ocean so this boats and but you out there and the elements, there's some danger right there also. And then we also have the expression English of someone being in their element. And I associate that expression with the idea of being someplace where there's some sense of fluency and ease and feeling being at home in a situation. You know, a person, the waters or element that you see more at home in the water, more fluid in the water than they are walking on land, or, you know, the deserts that element certain kinds of environments. There are elements and so to be in or to be in our element, is a very nice expression. Maybe we all be in our element. So, in the Buddhist tradition, there's a category of experience that's called the four great elements, the Maha Buddha. And the four great elements are the elemental level of our experience, that, at times are very important for the mindfulness practice of Vipassana practice to really connect to the elemental aspect of our experience. So much so that we can be in the elements as opposed to being in our head, be in our body, and also to be to be in our element with them to be able to discover some fluency some sense of being at home at ease, in the changing flux, flux of movements. Have the element, elemental level of our experience. And generally people are not closely in touch with the elemental level of experience, either because you never close up behind doors or skyscrapers or places, and we're not out there in the elements, so called elements. But more so because we can be lost in our thoughts. We've been a lot of time in our thinking, conceptualizing interpreting our experience of life, and living in fantasy and dreams and projections, memories and past. And so one of the antidotes to this kind of being in this imaginary world where people can often dwell is to begin connecting to our physical embodied life. And to do that deeply Raleigh, in the immediacy of life is to connect to what Buddhism is called the four great elements and it's wonderful for Some of us, some people, when the elemental environment around us is quite strong, like heat. So it's really hot. Some of you, I'm sure we're miserable. Different people have different tolerance levels for different things. But one of the things that like the strong heat does, for many people, it puts them in their bodies. You kind of like you're right here, you know, and I've been on, you know, I've been on many retreats where the weather was so extreme that some sense people complained We're so happy about it. On the other hand, as a teacher of the retreat, this is great. Because you can't really spend half the day, three calls a day, four fifths of the day, nine tenths of the day. Lost in fantasy and thoughts, because you know, the heat is just like putting in your body you feel it so immediate, and here you are, or the coal Here you are connected, you know how to kind of deal with it and be present for it. And I actually very much appreciate how much the heat when I meditate puts me in my body really feel really the substance, the immediacy, the fullness of my body, connected to my body kind of pulls me in and down in this elemental level. And, and especially if I'm also practicing mindfulness at the same time, where I'm keeping in check little bit of proliferation of

thoughts and reactions and all that. It's I find it quite lovely, this fullness, the immediacy of it, even though some of it might be unpleasant, the fullness of it, and embodying this of it can feel so satisfying. And there's an art in meditation, to knowing how to work with cold as well. That can be very strong cold, and I've been you know, when I was in Japan, December, November, December. These cold Siberian winds blowing down from Siberia Yes.

into Kyoto

and places where I was in and being a monk in the monasteries and

having a shaved head. And, and then

they had this, you know, you'd sit this intensive retreat, extensive day practice. And then they had this very strange from my point of view of custom of late nights, optional late night sitting that was required. rhetoric was all about it being optional. But in fact, it was not. So what they would do is one monastery, very strict. rinzai Monastery. They would we all sleep in the zendo meditation hall, all these long Khatami rose Han

they would

Can't do the headcount picture who was there and then they would slam shut these big rolling doors is kinda like a garage doors, big doors, bone and you're all there in your futon bucket which way you did it was you went to bed with your robes kind of on so you couldn't see it because you were under the under the condition to this futon and as soon as you hit that big cabal, the door closed, then the optional requirement was for everybody to jump out of these beds with great enthusiasm because supposed to optionally show that we had great enthusiasm for Zen training.

And now you know,

and rinzai training in Japan is really good for 20 year olds 20 year old guys, because it's all about efforts and you run between places you don't remember walk your run was great. I love this elemental stuff and number once degress Sir. Okay. See what happens, you know, as he's trying to talk to stay with the elements and you go off into other worlds. So I remember when. So, in this rinzai Monastery, about three times a day, you'd have an interview with the teacher. And amongst the data, I didn't, I didn't because I was a visiting monk. But the resident monks had but have three times a day. And,

and the

first time when these interviews were scheduled, I didn't know about it. And it was a period of meditation and I was sitting there and zendo very, still very quiet. Everything was very quiet and still, and suddenly there was a little I could hear faithfully in the distance a little bell.

And

the next thing I knew there was an explosion, the coffin explosion of people amongst all around me. And the way they have they have their family sitting up on a platform and you have your slippers and The platform bullet below the platform. And they're all jumping down and trying to get slippers on and running out the door that flippers with slippers are flying in there. And these guys were kind of running at full truck running there to get to be in line to be the first one in line for the interview with a Zen teacher. It's a very different training than those of you who've only been on Vipassana retreats you have a hard time imagining how different it is anyway this is the way it's done. It's a very different kind of approach to spiritual life so anyway, it's 20 year old guys with a great you know so we've had an optional sitting late at night and they would close the door and then we jump out of these futons and you know we'll grab our or something because sipping sit on a futon or something else about the

time and

and we would rush out to the outside or walkway for like porch law enforcement went around the temple. It was outdoors. And we looked at this beautiful thing of you know, rock gardens nicely raked and all that. And we'd all be lined up there on a row. And Full Moon It was beautiful. Skies really clear and nice, would light down this beautiful rock garden. And you couldn't you could ask for something visually more pristine and beautiful. You know, romantically, Zan. It's great. Except for the Siberian wind blowing down this amazingly cold weather December and

then he shaved heads.

So that was it. That's an elemental. So then you have to learn to deal with that. How do you sift through that cold and so there's an art to learning how to sit with cold as well as with heat. I found that there's a way of just trying to relax really deeply. Really, it was really important to relax the body speed plays I could to manage with a cold, which really puts again put me in my body put me here.

And then

here's our optional sitting and then we would sit option as long as we wanted. But the optional thing was that you got you couldn't leave until the person who was more senior you left first. So once the more senior person left, then it was option when you went to bed. But get away it's your turn. As I was, you know, the youngest newest person in the monastery has been there for a few a couple of days.

You know, I was you know where I was at. So I would sit there and wait, you wait, you wait. And you have to look good. Relax, relax.

And then

But after like, you know, four fifths of the monks had gone back to bed. And just like three or four of us, the youngest monks were left. And we couldn't just go back to bed quickly we had to kind of optional to keep the time you know, respectable amount of time, but only three or four of us left and suddenly our postures would change and this is against the wall.

And then then you have these really long robes, asleep, the robes we take these long sleeves and you rock them through under heads.

You know, and then it's my amazement that what the what the other monks wanted to talk about was baseball. You know, with all the all the new ones had left, it was just us young and blessed. Then, you know, baseball in

the elements

in Japan, pristine, beautiful rock gardens, moonlight baseball, Like a hiker, right? So I did aggressed. So the elements so the positive practices, one way of practicing is to become very familiar with the elemental level of experience. And it's a wonderful antidote to the tendency to proliferate in your thoughts and imagination about things are. And so there are these four to four great elements. And this are and their orders. So what's important because they go from course the more subtle and is more but anyway, so the first is, earth elements. The second earth like ground Earth, the second is water. The third is fire. And the fifth is air. Earth water Fire here. And this is not meant to be a primitive kind of form of physics, but rather it's the Buddhist way, maybe the ancient Indian way of it part categorizing our physical sensual experiences, all the way all the world of sensations that we experienced them are said to be able to be somehow are subsumed underneath one of these for each of these four categories. So, for example, the earth element is the quality of hardness, or heaviness is sometimes it could be also the earth element. So, when you feel something hard like feel your bones, or if you feel your bone, you know, sometimes you've sit long enough on these very soft, nice Cape hockfield cushions. After a few hours of sitting on them, it feels like concrete. You know, you feel the hard harder element is there very strongly? Well, when you first sit down, this feels very soft. So you feel the earth, you know, that's the earth element, they say. And then the water element is said to be that which binds the cohesive quality of things. So it's a little bit hard, they say, to experience the water element. Some teachers will say that you can only experience at some level but conceptually, rather than directly, but it's the sense of fluidity or cohesiveness. So like the saliva in your mouth, with these kind of movies flying around, you can feel this cohesive quality. And that's the water element or the flow of the blood in your bodies, kind of the liquid liquids in your body. The moisture in your eyes if you

could feel that. And then there's the fire elements, which is heat, heat and cold temperature. And then there's the Last one is the air element. And the air element is the way they refer to movements. So whenever you feel movement in your body, so if you have gas, for example, the gas is that you feel movement, it's air element. Or if you move your arm actually, the movement of your arm, you're experiencing the air element, because any kind of movement is said to be an expression of the air element. So rather than thinking about, you know, how literally how this fits into these, these categories of earth, water, air, fire and air, it's more like this is the encouragement to actually drop down to this element, elemental level of our experience, and, and find yourself, find it, discover how to be in your element with it. Find out how to be resting in it, how to be at rest, in this level of our experience. And that's often then kind of the guiding guideposts for the past. No meditation is on whatever experience we're having now. No need to deny an experience or push it away. Whatever the experience we have right now. Can we find our rest in that we find a place of rest in that experience? So if we drop down into the immediacy, the rawness of our elemental experience or sensory experience, can you experience it? And then can you also find your best there? Can you find your find a sense of place of peace or best in the middle of that experience? One of the functions of this teaching of the four elements, according to the Buddha, was to help human beings overcome an excessive invocation with their body. And one way this is one of the ways we identify excessively with our bodies, take our bodies, this is mine. This is my body. And the four elements are also meant to be a kind of an analysis, we begin understanding how this what makes up your body doesn't really make sense to say Is Mine isn't what makes it up so for example sometimes there's that there's five or six elements so when you be add elements next when you add a space element of space and you know as most of us know if you took and compress the human body to the absolute limit of how far I can compress take all this space out of the human body

a pinhead would be too big you know be like you know

we you know, there's so much space in us it's mostly we are just lots and lots of space so I guess they say like the big bang someone's you know, Big Bang so when it was all you know, all began you know, all began was close back to that like nanosecond. How big was the whole universe? First nanosecond or two, you know, I know they have measurements but he got back Give us some impressive size of the universe 10 to the minus 34 centimeters 10 to the minus 34 centimeters might, might be off let's do a couple of degrees there but so if you take the, the, the tip of one of my pieces, my my hair, how many of those little would fit on that tip? How many universes would fit on top of that tip of here? So that's like a quadrillion could billion universes on top of a quadrillion universes on top of a tip of here if we compress all the universes, right? So isn't that phenomenal? I think it's phenomenal. So you know, it's mostly because it's all spin Right. So you think it's in a lot of space in there. So who are we mostly it's a space. So then, so then you have, such as, you know, space element, the fifth one. And then the earth elements. I'm fond of saying that this body of ours is made up of recycled material, you know, like this, you know, recycling is like an old, you know, it's like a, like a new thing they discover has been going on for several millions or billions of years. So, you know, we take all that we eat our food, and we digest the stuff that goes into our body and makes our bones and our flesh and our hair and all

this stuff, and lasts for a little while, and then it kind of breaks down and gets pooped out then that becomes that gets transformed into some other thing that eats that and you know, those are the carbon and potassium and all these things end up, you know, in some other being, and so like the carbon atom that you have in your hand, if you look at your hand and look at you know that, you know, how many different living beings has that the carbon atoms in your hand seen been through it's probably been you know, something you're sharing and once you die once you kind of use shed your skin not just dogs that shed right we shed all the time, then what you know some, you know, some those carbon atoms are going to be recycled and be used again by some other beings probably and off it goes and, you know, so all the stuff that goes through us is endlessly recycled material. It was here for a little while, we get to borrow it and be the custodian of it for a little while, and then he was on and then the water element, the water element, the air element, you know, all this stuff, you know, cycling through, you know, when I was very small, my father when I was like, remember when I was like six or so five or six My father talking to me about how we were out, we were out in the woods, you know, father and son playing together. And, and some hike, and some, you know, when you excuse me for this way, but this is what he said he made an impression on me. You know, you know, you're, as you're peeing here are the plants on the ground and to be there, you know, you're probably peeing on, you know, carbon atoms that were in Julius Caesar. You know, you could mention other historical people, but then I'd probably be stuck religious. You know, so when you're, when you're breathing air, the chances are that in each breath of air you're breathing now, probably contains the oxygen that maybe went through the lungs of the Buddha, you know, because the way that there's so many of these molecules, and they get spread out and diffused and they go out in all directions, and chances are that those you know, The billions of molecules that the Buddha breathe in one day dispersed and some of the made it to us here, the nice, you know, we get to share it with the Buddha. So all the stuff you know of our life, the physical stuff or of our life, is it us is it ours is it, you know, is who we really are. And the Buddha was suggesting that it's not so useful to take this physical body as being me as being mine, but rather see something borrowed something recycled something it's passing through. And in doing that, to ease up to lighten up a little bit on this way in which we sometimes oppress ourselves by so this is me myself in mind. And the fire element also kind of fun to the idea that fire, heat, you know, makes life possible. And so much of it. The heat that makes life possible, has its source in the sun. And you know, the energy that makes me move my arm I'm going to speak has its origins and most of it, I think has their origins in the energy of the sun that somehow comes along and this little plant wonderful plants that put us in size and we eat them and off it goes. And it is the elements of life to kind of reflect a little bit of how much of our life is really below this elemental level. And we're never far far from it is very interesting. It's also interesting that when you meditate, that you begin realizing, understanding that the experience elemental x level of experience, the immediacy of physical experience, is something that is changeable, changing all the time. But it's also changed changes in dependence on your state of mind. So when you sit down to meditate, and you've had a busy, stressful day, one of the things you probably are more likely to encounter is Is the earth element, you might or and maybe the water element, you'll put your field perhaps really hard and heavy. And you might feel a lot of tension, tension and tension can be either the earth element, the hardness, the compactness, the way. heaviness or tension can also be the cohesive element, the whole the binding

element that pulls in and tightens up. And so you can feel the heaviness and tightness sometimes when you've got a stressful day, then as you meditate, the water element might give way to a sense of movement to the air elements. It's an expansion, lightness, perhaps the temperature in your body changes. Some people in the meditate and they relax, the body gets warmer, sometimes the body can get actually quite warm and concentrated. Sometimes the body gets cooler when you meditate. Especially if you kind of get overheated during the day kind of your mind kind of going 200 miles an hour and so the you can feel it you To meditate, you can sense and feel how the elements have been shifting and changing. As you sit and unwind and relax and calm. It's very interesting to watch that change in the changing flow of the sensations. And generally, the movement of the elements admitted, they move the elements change as we as you meditate. And generally they move as concentration deepens, they move from the heavier ones from the earth elements, ones, towards the lighter ones, to eventually mostly they air. And so with time the earth element kind of gets lighter and lighter. And you said sometimes the earth element sensitive body and substance and weight can disappear entirely. And same thing with a sense of cohesiveness or water, and sometimes just sense of air, very light, very expansive or spacious, since it's left. That can be a play of these different elements. As you meditate, move, one after the other. It says That all four elements always appear together. But even though they appear together, they appear in different percentages. So, you know, these last few days we've been so hot, it's mostly you know, been the heat elements we feel,

but in the face you put your hand in warm water,

then you can sometimes feel that the water has you know, it has cohesiveness, it has liquid, it has some sense of, they say that water also has some hardness, you know, if you if you if you fall from an airplane, you'll encounter that hardness of the water, water has hardness in it also, temperature as movement the waves are moving. So, all these things can be present at the same time. So, as you meditate not only can your sense of your body change as you relax and unwind and get more expansive and lighter in meditation, but also, we what the mind focuses on can change. So, it's possible To be selective in our attention. So sometimes in meditation practice, especially when people are quite settled and calm, people will select out of their experience, different want different sensations, not because it's predominant in itself, but rather because the mind has chosen to pull this out. Some meditators will actually play with us. And I know some people who like to when it's really hot, and finally they find it uncomfortable. We'll go through their body and look for coldness. Look for it someplace in the body where there's cool, some sense of coolness, and then they'll focus their attention very carefully into that coolness, so that the mind is being conditioned or influenced or shaped by the coolness it's focusing on, rather than the heat all around. That makes sense what I'm talking about. So you know, our mind, you know, most mostly what causes us difficulty is our mind, right? The heat is not the problem. It's usually the mind when you know, and so the mind reacts and so one way, one way some people I know kind of cope with extreme elements is they actually choose to focus on the opposite. So they focus on coolness, or when it's really cold, they focus on some place in the body where it's warm, and then they bring your attention there, and it makes it easier for the mind. Some people, sometimes in some meditators will take these will select will, will, white and sometimes

the mind chooses for you. So rather than you choosing, you know, I'm going to focus on particular element here, for whatever reason, maybe we don't know, sometimes the mind will select out of the environments, a particular element to focus on for a while. So it might focus for a while on the earth element. And that becomes really strong sense of hardness and solidity. Or it might focus for a while and the water elements, its fluidity becomes really stronger. air element movement feels really strong. Sometimes This very strong presence of one element or the other. In this kind of way, meditatively is sometimes associated with a purification process, that as the body as the tensions in the holding patterns in mind and body begin to unravel and move, that this purification process in that process sometimes entails the concept of tension tension concentrates on one element or the other for a period of time. So for example, if, if you if a person carries a lot of tension in their body and feels that hardness or the tightness of that, there might be a time when the mind just takes up that as a subject of attention. As you're working through the tension. It can seem like everything's just tense for a while. And that's because you're working through that this purification process kind of resolving or dissolving the tension. Until that's finished. So Traditionally, the passing of practice the four elements meditation is very important. It's can be interpreted very simply as learning to meditate at the level of the raw sensations of your experience. So not staying at the level of your interpretations and concepts, but learning to drop down into the raw, immediate sensory experience what's happening, and then learning how to be at home in that how to find your element in there, how to rest there find a place of rest in that level of experience. As we do that, it has a number of different functions. One is to help us free ourselves from the attachment to the body and to itself, this is my body. It also can help us with a purification process that can go on and also it can show us the deepest some of the deeper places of rest or peace that can come with meditation. Come when things are when the body the sensory world is most influx and most Moving most of sense of impermanence in the body, and their physical experiences is most dramatic. There's a wonderful paradox, or wonderful there's a paradox or reversal. When the mind is most agitated, most busy and impermanent, move, you know, move with a lot. The body can seem very solid and fixed. When the mind is most Still, the body seems most impermanent.

To get that reversal.

There's something about the agitated mind, that kind of locks in things and hold things tight and interprets things in fixed ways. And when the mind is very soft and relaxed, the breeze still, then it allows us as Mike is very still, it allows the physical body to unravel and move in flux and flow and pulse and undulate and do all the different things the body can do. And so there's a wonderful reciprocal relationship. So as we drop down into the body and start feeling this elemental, physical information flow in the body moving, it helps the mind that process of doing that will also help the mind become stronger and more and more peaceful.

It's a wonderful thing.

So it and then aside from its value and helping still the mind, dropping down into the sensory physical elemental level is just fun. It can be really fun to sit here and allow this sudden change in the flux and to watch the change and see it'll move and I find that sometimes much more entertaining than some of the things you can see on television.

And it's much more healthy for you to

so the four elements, so that was my attempt to introduce to traditional concepts that's relates to our meditation practice. So hopefully, you know has some value as we continue with your practice. So, earth, water, fire in here. And then if you have it as usual thing is list four, but then sometimes there's a list of five and sometimes there's a list of six. And, and then there's and then there's those people who argue, when there's really four, there's five or six, which one's Right. I mean, six is consciousness, six elements.

So, may you be in your element. Thank you.