

Foundations of Mindfulness Part 6 - The Four Elements

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March 04, 2019

Keywords: satipaṭṭhāna, mindfulness, four foundations of mindfulness, dhātu, earth element, water element, fire element, air element, Mahāsi Sayādaw, equanimity

So I'll continue today the series of talks I'm giving on the discourse on the four foundations of mindfulness. As I've been saying, it's considered to be the original text, original teachings, that lays the foundation for mindfulness practice. And it goes back supposedly to the Buddha. Now, it's a wonderful text. It has a wonderful series of exercises for cultivating mindfulness, cultivating a heightened sense of awareness. Now it begins with a series of exercises around mindfulness of the body, and we'll continue that today with another.

One of the focuses is on how to be mindful of your physical embodied experience. As a way of introducing it, I want to say that our bodies are pretty precious, that it's easy to take it for granted or to ignore it. The degree to which our body supports us and carries us physically, in a sense, can be said, but it also carries so much of our suffering. If you didn't have a body, you wouldn't know you were suffering so much. You would be mentally distressed, maybe, but to feel pangs of grief in the heart, or the tightness of anger in the belly, or to feel the weight of our sadness and all these different emotions, so much is felt in the body.

The body never asked for it, and the body just holds it, receives it, bears it. So much of it has its genesis in our minds, what we tell ourselves, how the mind receives experiences of the world and interprets it and makes meaning out of it, and the mind reacts certain ways. A Buddhist image is that the mind is like a puppet with strings that go down into the muscles, and so they tug. The mind tugs on different of those strings, and then we feel tense or tight or hot or something in different places in our body. The body holds and experiences so much of our suffering. To speak about it that way, as if the body was kind of separate from ourselves, is to step back a little bit and try to get a different perspective on it than we usually have, and maybe see it in a different way.

It's possible to experience the body as something vibrant and alive and pleasant. That's quite wonderful to experience and feel and be with within. A lot of that vibrancy and aliveness of

the body, of its best experience, is without a lot of stories about it, without a lot of judgments and commentary and ideas. It's to take time to experience the physicality, the embodied experience in and of itself. Just allow it to kind of emerge and be there, and be present, and vibrate. There can be something very deeply satisfying by doing that.

But how often do we allow ourselves to do that, to feel the goodness that's there? Some of the first lessons I had when I started meditating many years ago, I had a lot of physical pain when I meditated, and I struggled with the pain. I tried to sit there with it and be present with it best I could. Sometimes it was quite excruciating, my pain, and I didn't know that I could move. Somehow I just supposed to sit there with it, and I was glad that I didn't know I could move, because at that time I wasn't happy. But I learned such important life lessons from staying with it, with the physical pain I had.

One of the really important things I learned was my mind's relationship to the pain, the stories I told myself about the pain. One of the ones that I used to have that really would get me hooked into it, or I would almost sink into it and just feel that pain so much worse, is when I told myself stories of self-pity and poor Gil, and I would just get pulled into that, and it got much more acute. The pain, and there was kind of no separation from it, it's kind of like I sank into it, or was like sinking into mud or quicksand or something. I learned that if I could not do this self-pity thing, and just sit and experience the pain without it, it was a lot easier. I learned that when I hated the pain, the hate of the pain made it actually worse. Sometimes, I think, the little micro muscles around the place I felt pain would just tighten up a little bit with the hate.

I learned that if I could stop hating it, it was just a lot easier, and sometimes it was manageable. I learned about fear, and how that fear would operate, that I feel pain, and I filled with fear. Because I was practising in a meditation center, we weren't supposed to move, it was compounded by fear that if I moved, I would be ostracized by the community. Everyone else was sitting perfectly still, and so the fear would operate. Certainly there was physical pain just from the fear, but that also involved a kind of getting glued onto it, or overly identified with it, or overly entangled with the fear. I was caught in its grip, or caught in its web or something.

I learned that if I wasn't afraid, it was much more manageable. So I learned to settle the fear, relax the fear, and not believe it. I had a lot of experience going back and forth because I would get pulled into it, and then I would pull myself out somehow, and that was fine for a second and a half, and then I'd get pulled into it, and try to be there. Slowly, slowly, I learned some distance from it. I learned also one of its interesting lessons was the stories we tell

ourselves, so we don't know we're telling ourselves stories. But we often have a framework, a perspective, an idea of what it's all about that really is just a story that's so deeply internalized we don't even see it as a story.

Sometimes I would play around with it, coming up with a unique new story, and see what that effect would have. One of them, I remember, I had sometimes migraines, and I wasn't meditating, but I was lying in bed with a migraine, and self-pity operated big time, and all kinds of things operated there. Also, the other thing that operated was a story that this really hurts, this is bad, was reasonable, you know? For some people it is sometimes pretty bad, but laying in bed, you know? So I'm not, I don't go to bed easily around pain right there. I was in bed with my migraine, and then I thought, Well, why don't I change this?

What if I imagine that all this pain, sharp pain I feel in my head, is just simply growing pains, like somehow I'm just stretching and getting bigger, my brain is getting bigger or greater capacity, and this is the cost of kind of stretching to greater capacity? So I lay there imagining, Yes, oh, yes, stretching, and it wouldn't feel so bad. It's like, Oh, this is great. This is good. I can live with this because it's going to be good. Good stuff is happening. I'm getting a better person because of it.

And you're laughing at me, and it is kind of silly, right? That means, you know, it's kind of silly to think, however, it made a difference. It wasn't so bad. So what now, what's the pain? Is the pain real? Is the pain, the intensity of the pain, like a fixed thing, like the universe has a fixed intensity of pain? And I have that fixed intensity, and that's what I have to live with as long as the universe is pushing that button, it's fixed, or is the intensity of pain variable depending on many factors, depending also on the story I'm telling myself?

If I'm telling myself self-pity stories, I am sinking into it, Oh, this is hopeless. It's bad. It's terrible. What a bad day, ruined. That's kind of a story. Maybe it's true enough. Let's say it's a hundred per cent true. So you're kind of justified to tell yourself that story. But if you stop telling the story, maybe made up another story that was better, the intensity wouldn't be so bad.

If you throw up from the migraine, and if you tell yourself a different story, and then you feel much better, what's the best medicine? Go along with the true story about how horrible and depressing and bad it is? It's bad enough. It's possible to change the story, the ideas, the mental landscape that we have in relation to what goes on in our body, and it makes a difference. I'm not advocating that we should always go make up new stories, but it's a dramatic lesson of how much what goes on in the mind affects what we experience in the body. What we can learn to do with mindfulness practice is not just make up new stories,

great stories, nor feel better, but we can learn. We don't have to tell the stories. We don't have to operate around some of the interpretations, some of the perspectives that we're operating under.

Some of those perspectives we have, a lot of them have to do with me, myself, and mine. Poor me, of course. You know, I really blew it. I knew that I shouldn't have eaten that food that I'm allergic to, and now I'm having my migraine, and I just really am a lousy food eater. So we tell ourselves a story that's kind of like depressing. It makes it worse. But what happens if we just sit there and practise mindfulness instead?

A kind of use of attention, a focus of attention that tries to see things in and of themselves, independent of interpretations, independent of predictions, independent of a story that connects it to me, myself, and mine. It becomes a different body we live in, and the whole experience of being in a body can shift dramatically. So I want to do a little exercise with you to give you a sense of this. Maybe I did this recently, so you'll forgive me if I just did it somewhere recently. Did I do the hand thing here? No, I didn't know if you did it, but doesn't hurt to do it again.

I think all of us here have hands, and some people have a relationship to their hands. If their hands are getting older, they remember when they were younger, or the hands are getting older, or the hand is too chubby, or too thin, or too short, or too long, or too wrinkled, or too this or too that, too many freckles, too many age spots. It's pretty easy to kind of feel like something's not quite right with the hands. Some of you hopefully haven't got on thinking about your hands too much like this, but you can have ideas about hands or some other body parts. There's a lot of suffering in the world about body parts, that somehow they're too big, they're too small, they're too long here, too short, too much, too little, too wide, too narrow. It just goes on and on, right?

People get depressed and upset and worse and worse, and some people really get pulled down when they think about their body. So if you close your eyes and take your right hand and try not to think about any ideas you have about your hand, instead, how does the hand experience itself? What are the sensations that are showing up in the hand? Is there any tingling or vibration or warmth or coolness? Is there pulsing? What are the sensations in the palm of the hand? Are there whatever sensations in the palm of the hand, do they stay fixed, or are they dancing and flashing in and out?

What happens in the back of the hand? Are there different sensations in the back than in the front of the hand, than the fingers? What happens there to feeling the sensations of the hand? If you really feel intimately the sensations of the hand, you probably don't feel any

boundaries, sharp lines, boundary to the hand, edges of the hand. You might have some general sense of where the edges are, but there's no sharp edges. Diffuse with your eyes closed, and you might feel that the sensations of your hand just appear, come and they go, and vibrate and pulse, the vibrancy of it. There might be some aching, but without any stories, just ache bouncing around.

Chances are, because of the focus of this exercise, you are much more aware of the sensations of your hand than you would have been if we just kept talking and gave a riveting talk, and you wouldn't have noticed your hand. You might not have thought about your hand for minutes the whole time, maybe. But now there's lots of sensations. As you feel those sensations of your hand, the sensations themselves in and of themselves, do they contain within them any of your judgments and ideas, concepts about you, about your hand? I hope you say no. Sensations are, in and of themselves, just vibrating and pulsing and doing their thing, quite independent from this is an old hand or new hand or big hand, small hand, it's just sensations, vibrancy and aliveness of sensations.

With your eyes still closed, put your hand down. What would happen to you if you experienced your body this way, almost like experiencing your body from the inside out, the body's experience of itself, the sensations of your body pulsing and vibrating and tingling and appearing and disappearing, separate and distinct from any judgments and ideas of your body, any thoughts of what's wrong with your body, or even what's right with your body? Just a vibrancy of physical sensations in your body, and to the degree to which you can feel the physical sensations of your body in and of itself, and feel the simplicity of that, the immediate immediacy of your physical sensations, your body. You're not carrying with you a lot of the baggage of your judgments and thoughts and stories and comparisons to other people, just a body by itself. Why do some of the baggage, extra things that you've put down for these few minutes about your body? What's not operating when all you're doing is feeling the aliveness and tingling and sensations pulsing of your body?

Can you notice some of the things that for these few minutes weren't operating? The thoughts you had about your body. So then, if so, we can end the exercise. You can open your eyes. If some of you would be willing to say, did you, could you notice the difference between just sensing your body in and of itself, versus some of the baggage through which you usually interpret the body or judge it or something, and what was put aside for those few minutes to just experience the body? Was it a lot easier than experiencing it with your judgments and stories you have? Anybody want to share what was put down a little bit?

Yes, please. I was able to feel my body relax in a way that I haven't relaxed physically in quite

a while, so you can relax just feeling the sensations in themselves, fantastic. So there was no tension that you are used to having there. Other things you noticed about that, and what was not operating that might usually be operating, that makes it more difficult to relate to your body? My ideas about my emotional state disappeared. My ideas about my emotional state disappeared. So you still had an emotional state, but I had sensations. You have sensations, yes?

This is also interesting, the idea to which we can have emotions often come with sensations, but we make up stories and ideas about what those emotions are, and then we have a relationship with those emotions, and they have meaning and purpose and all kinds of things, and it gets a complicated little universe in there. Some of the stuff is not required. You're not required to make it so complicated. Maybe a couple more, if you are willing. Over here, I sensed a fullness in the latter word. You said more fullness, more fullness. My hand, especially my hand, not so much my body, but my hand just felt large because I was aware of more things going on there than normal. Great, great, the fullness of it all.

In feeling that fullness, what if you're willing to say something? You can say something minor. But what happens in your mind when you are reflecting about your body, where you lose the fullness? I think it's just not the lack of attention to that, the hand or the body. By putting the attention on it, I experience more things going on, and it just enters my mind as though it were an expansion. Great, beautiful. So I'm right next to you. I was just in the background. I felt like my thoughts felt much more real when my body sort of receded to the background. It was kind of interesting to be like, now that the body is what's real, and then, like, the mind went into the background.

The more you are in your body, the more the thoughts that you have aren't so substantial, or so strong, or so invested in, and they don't dominate exactly now. If you are like most people, chances are your thoughts are not a hundred per cent accurate. Okay, great. So I hope that gave you some sense. It's possible to experience one's body in different ways. One can experience it through the filter or the lens of our concepts and ideas, and it's also possible to drop those concepts and ideas and experience it much more in the immediacy of the sensations as they occur.

If we have it as concepts, those concepts might not be so accurate or so useful. One of the less useful ones, from a Buddhist point of view, are concepts that have a lot to do with me, myself, and mine, self. The conceit, for example, around the body, ideas of what it means for me, all kinds of, you know, I am in the body, that the body defines me. Then if it gets overly identified with the body, that has its own suffering. To do that, if we want to cultivate the

heightened awareness of mindfulness, we have to find out some way to put down always experiencing our life through the filter, through the lens of all these concepts and ideas and conceits and me, myself, and mine, and predictions that we have, and start being willing to be much more simple and direct.

Not only so we can feel the fullness not only of the sensations, but the more fullness we can feel of our experience immediately, the richer and bigger in a sense awareness is, the more lucid it becomes. That lucid awareness gets clouded over when we start living in these thoughts and ideas and concepts we have, which are usually less than a hundred per cent accurate. But more importantly, they're not needed all the time. For this practice of four foundations of mindfulness that the Buddha taught, he is really interested in taking awareness, cultivating it strongly for a particular purpose. In modern society, when we teach, mindfulness is taught almost everywhere now, mindfulness is being presented as something that's useful in everyday life, which it is, and it's supposed to be applicable in all situations. You bring mindfulness and it helps you out. I think the Buddha would have been happy with saying that, but he was actually interested in this text, in using mindfulness to cultivate a very heightened kind of awareness that's not really so useful for walking around in everyday life and filling out your taxes and getting your car oil changed, figuring out what to buy at the supermarket.

He wanted to develop such a heightened sense of awareness that the mind or how we perceived experience becomes very, very simple, without a lot of concepts and ideas and judgments, just the simplicity of the experience in the moment. Not because we're supposed to live that way all the time, but because in meditation, especially, if you can have this very radical simplicity of just the immediacy of the experience, that turns out to be a very good means to cultivate a very stable, peaceful, autonomous mind, a mind that is not troubled by anything, a mind which is not bothered by anything, a mind that's not being pushed around by desires and wanting something, a mind that's not being pushed around by aversion and not wanting things. To be able to drop into a mind that has that level of peace and equanimity and stillness, it really helps not to be spinning around a lot of these thoughts and concepts and judgments that we have. If we can have that level of equanimity and stillness of the mind, that's when we can discover something about the mind's capacity for a radical experience of not clinging to anything, not being attached to anything. That is very healing. It's a very powerful lesson that our mind, that we take for granted as the way it is, has a potential for a wonderful sense of happiness and peace that's independent of anything at all.

Our happiness is not dependent on winning a lottery or getting a good partner or having a good job. There's a radical, deep sense of satisfying, nourishing happiness, well-being that

can come from this deep letting go. That's what the Buddha was really pointing at. So in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness Practice, he's presenting these ways of being mindful, of paying attention that's supportive for getting to that place. The exercise of mind I talk about today, I think it's the sixth exercise in the body section, is called mindfulness of the elements. That's how I usually translate into English, *dhātu* in Pāli Buddhist language.

Before I tell you what these four elements are, I'll tell you the simile that the Buddha gives after he describes them. He says, it's like a butcher. This is the ancient word, this is back in the Bronze Age, long time ago. A butcher who carries a cart, there's a dead cow on the road. Somehow that's how they say it, in the road. They didn't have refrigeration then. The butcher slices up the cow to make all these cuts, then lays them all out so people come and buy the cow by meat. Once the cow is cut open and cut up in all its pieces, the butcher doesn't see a cow any more, just sees the individual cuts of meat distinct. The cow doesn't exist any more. So it's a rather maybe unfortunate simile for us.

But it's possible that rather than seeing ourselves as "I" or as myself, me and mine, it comes as a magnet for so many complicated ideas: my history and my future, and what people like of me and don't like of me, and I can be rejected. Once it's a me thing, it's quickly depressing. But what about if we don't think that way? There's some other way of experiencing ourselves. The Buddha says you can start to focus on yourself and experience here, and experience not the self who is suffering, not the self who is happy, but experience the sensations, moment living immediacy of sensations in themselves. Just like the butcher cuts the cow in four pieces, so for us there are four elements, the four categories of sensations that we can experience physically.

To start tuning in to the sensation level of all this is a means to experience fullness, a means to begin putting down and reorienting ourselves so we are not so oriented through the concepts and judgments, and get the benefit of feeling the vibrancy and immediacy and fullness of life in the simplicity of the experience. So there are four elements, and there's earth, water, fire, and air. People who teach this will often say, this is an ancient kind of physics, that this is the element of the world, it's how it's all built up on these four things, like atoms or something. The way that it's usually understood in Buddhism is that these are sensations that we experience. The earth element are those sensations of solidity that we have in our body: hardness and solidity. Anything that's hard and solid in the body is the earth element. Anything that's liquid or fluid or cohesive that holds things together like sticky stuff, that's the water element.

The fire element is temperature. Anything that has to do with temperature. The movement,

air, has anything to do with movement. So the blood moving through the veins, the heart beating. Any time you move, you are walking or something, there's the movement, the movement of air. Like the wind is the air. We say that's the movement, is the air element.

The word *dhātu*, which is translated as element, probably shouldn't be translated as element, because then we think we're talking about the ancient kind of physics. The word is used for many other things: equanimity, isn't it? *dhātu*. Renunciation is a *dhātu*. Wisdom is a *dhātu*. I think a better translation for *dhātu* is a quality. It's different qualities of experience we can have, or maybe even characteristics. So we have these different characteristics of experience, and physically we can experience a last level of sensations.

The way that mindfulness practice was taught in Burma at the preeminent, there was one particular teacher and ace in Burma from which the modern mindfulness movement exploded, a kind of the place that started in the 1940s. From there, that monastery produced hundreds of Buddhist meditation monasteries in Burma and the world. It was started by a teacher named Mahāsi Sayādaw, my grandfather in the Dharma. When he taught this mindfulness practice, he was teaching four elements meditation. That was his primary focus on what the meditation was about, and it looked like he was telling us to focus on breathing. He'd have us focus on our abdomen, and as we breathed, we'd feel the lifting and falling of the abdomen, the movement of the abdomen as we were breathing. But it wasn't supposed to be the breathing we were focusing on. We were supposed to focus on these four elements, the sensations, and really tune in to the sensations that are at play when the belly is moving: the pressure, the hardness, the tension, the release, the movement, the lightness, the temperature, all these different things that are coming into play.

As it was, tune into that more and more. If something else arose elsewhere in the body, to do the Four Elements meditation there, to really feel the sensations of it. If we went to see our teacher and said, Oh, I had a lot of pain, it was hard, it was depressing, I'm always having a hard time in my life, he didn't want to hear you. He would rather send you back to your cushion to meditate more. What he wanted to hear was, I was sitting and there was a lot of burning sensations in my knee. I felt it as burning. I felt it as tension and tightness. As I started feeling it, it started to dissolve some of the hard solidity of it, and it became more of a tingling, vibrating flow of temperature. When we came and told them, Oh, I'm having such a hard time, and I'm always having a hard time, and here I'm having a hard time again, and it has to do with my parents, that's going off into the story, that's going in the opposite direction, into a more complicated world, which has some truth to it. There's a time and place where that needs to be looked at, but it's not the direction that this practice was focused on.

When we're trying to get to this deep place of peace and equanimity, we're learning to put down these things. We're learning this radical lesson that we don't have to always experience ourselves through the filter of the standard concepts and ideas that we're operating under. Some of those have to do with me, myself, and mine. It's a radical thing to do, to learn in a whole other way, looks like learning a different language of how to experience ourselves through just sensations, a simplicity of sensations. So to just meditate and close the eyes, and just feel the immediacy of sensations independent of what it means, having those sensations independent of it being you who is experiencing them, independent of where it's going, independent of any interpretation or concept, just the simplicity of it.

It's hard, I think, to be convinced that this is important and useful to do. But there's a lot of lessons from that. A really important life lesson is to start seeing really clearly the influence of these stories and ideas we have, concepts, because they're often quite invisible to ourselves, how much they're operating and how much they cause our difficulties and suffering. To be able to do this exercise, we're trying intentionally not to focus on them, to focus on sensations, just sensations. As we get better at it, then we start noticing much more clearly the difference between the sensations and the overlay of thoughts and concepts that can creep in. To be able to see that distinction and see concepts and stories for themselves rather than having them be invisible is a fantastic life lesson. It gives us a lot of freedom, a lot of actual choice, a lot of power. It's very empowering to do that. To not see the story's interpretation is actually disempowering because we don't see where we have choice, we're stuck in this world that we're kind of constructing.

It also is very powerful to be able to have an experience of well-being, of peace, that's an experience independent of all these stories and ideas we have and identities that we live in. It's very powerful because it sets the stage for this very peaceful, autonomous mind that the Buddha was hoping people would cultivate and develop. This very simple, I shouldn't say simple mind that no one will come back to meditate again, but a very simple experience, so that the mind can start discovering it. As it can relax more, it can let go more. So these four elements, these four qualities or characteristics of our sensations, and tune into them, tuning to sensations as experienced here in the sensation level, and to feel the fullness of it.

If you're experiencing your breathing, all the sensations are coming into play as you breathe. If you have a headache, all the sensations of your headache as opposed to poor me. If you are feeling warm, all the sensations of warmth, all the detailed manifestations of the warmth, how it flashes in and out and moves around, and just all the stuff, and it becomes a rich, interesting world, to get absorbed in that, and focus on that, and be with it. So that's one of

the important exercises in these Four Foundations of Mindfulness texts. I've known people who absolutely love doing this, focusing on this. Some of the people I've known who love it a lot love it because they feel it connects them very deeply with the natural world. They know the earth, water, fire, and air, and somehow they feel that there's a kind of intimacy with the natural world that's in themselves.

People I know really kind of love the natural world, going for hikes and being with it. To feel that, realize that what they're experiencing in these sensations is kind of like the natural world as it appears and manifests in us, and they find it very comforting to feel that and be that and experience it. So that was my effort to try to convey how this is an important way of cultivating mindfulness practice. Now and then I will go on from here as we go through this text, all the exercises and approaches for cultivating mindfulness. So thank you. I hope you will spend this week enjoying your body by not thinking so much about it, but feeling it instead. Thank you.