

Mindfulness of the Body (4 of 4) The Four Elements

June 24, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

sensations, element, clouds, movement, earth, water, fire, air, solidity, liquidity, temperature, hardness, softness, weight, lightness, cold, heat, stickiness, *vipassana*, hand, abstraction

Gil Fronsda

I will introduce today's topic with a simple poem I saw many years ago. I do not remember all the verses. "If you are running, walk. If you are walking, stand. If you are standing, sit down. If you are sitting, lie down." There is a progressive movement to get quieter and quieter – stiller and stiller – to less activity and energy in doing.

That could describe the movement in meditation. We are moving from a mind that is very active, busy, abstracting, and thinking – to letting that abstracting, thinking mind become quieter. The mind becomes not just quiet and calm but also clearer. So clarity of attention goes along with no longer being so involved or caught up in the thinking world.

We might attribute much of the stress we experience to the world around us. There is some truth to that. But it is processed through the world of our thoughts. Thoughts get transformed into emotions. Emotions come back and feed the thoughts. There can be a complicated Möbius loop where we can never get out of thoughts, feelings, and spinning.

But as we sit down to meditate, some of this process quiets down. Thinking about the future quiets down, and we are just thinking about the present. Thinking about the present in terms of me, myself, and mine – how I am feeling, my resentments and dreams – quiets down. We become progressively quieter in the mind. We realize we can give the mind a vacation from incessant thinking.

I remember once lying on the grass looking at the clouds drifting by and feeling content, happy, and peaceful. I was watching the patterns of the clouds as they moved through the blue sky above me. After a while, much of my daily life concerns fell away. I was so absorbed watching the changing patterns and movement that I was not even thinking there are clouds. I was just aware of movement, color, and shapes shifting and changing.

It was elemental and basic – the relief, peace, simplicity – the quiet of the mind that could do that. With clarity of seeing – not numbed out – the mind became so peaceful. It was a wonderful break – a little vacation – from being caught up in things.

With that experience, we can have a new appreciation for how the mind gets caught, preoccupied, and spins. If all we ever know is a busy mind, it feels normal. The stresses of a busy mind become taken for granted. They are not known. They become so normalized that we do not even know they are there.

But with a very strong, radical experience of the mind becoming really quiet, we can have more consideration and care for what the mind is doing. We begin getting a feeling for what freedom and peace are. It is not in chasing more thoughts – not by thinking better – but by quieting the thoughts. It is not to numb out or disconnect from the world – but rather, to have a different kind of intelligence that is not so centered in thinking.

In this context, I would like to talk about the next exercise – mindfulness of the four elements. It is a very simple instruction for mindfulness practice:

One considers, one contemplates this same body, however it is disposed, in whatever way the body is sitting, standing, walking – whatever way we are – as consisting of elements thus: "In this body, there are the earth element, the water element, the fire element, and the air element."

It is supposedly an ancient Indian idea that all physical matter is made up of four different elements, qualities, characteristics, or processes – earth, water, fire, and air. Earth is the foundation for oceans and rivers. Fire is the

kitchen fires and campfires of the ancient world. Higher than that is air. It goes from the most solid to the most ethereal or light. How this applies to the body is it is aware of the raw, basic, physical sensations that make up our experience of the body. Not necessarily what the body is but how we experience our body from the inside out. It simplifies all possible experiences we have into four categories – those of solidity, liquidity, temperature, and movement. Solidity is the earth element. Liquidity is the water element. Temperature is the fire element. Movement, the wind, is the air element.

You do not have to remember or try to fit everything into these ideas of the four elements. Instead, it is to try to understand the sensations they point to. To feel the solidity – hardness, softness, weight, lightness – of the body. To feel the temperature of the body – cold and heat. To feel the movements of the body – the movements of the chest and diaphragm as you breathe, the blood coursing through you, the movements of the heart.

The water element is all the things that are fluid and sticky. It is what creates stickiness. I associate the water element with the muscles being tense. Other people might have different associations with the elements. As the muscles get tight and sometimes sticky, you can unstick them. Sometimes you have to massage your muscles a lot to get them to unstick. Saliva, when we swallow, is fluid.

The idea is to drop into the raw, fundamental simplicity of the body like you are looking at clouds and letting everything else go. Trust this very basic aspect of human life – sensing the body. To get concentrated and quiet requires letting go of the complicated world of our thoughts and ideas – then becoming more attuned to the world of our sensations. As we do that, the mind gets quieter and quieter, stiller and stiller.

There are two great benefits of this. One is that the mind gets quieter. We have a whole different vantage point to be wise about the thinking mind and not be lost in it. The other advantage is that as we become more deeply absorbed, in a concentrated way, into a world of just a basic flow of sensations – the river of sensations moving through us, coming and going – we relate to them less and less as abstractions.

The idea that there is a hand is true enough, but it is an abstraction compared to the sensations of the hand. Close your eyes and feel the sensations of your hand as they are buzzing, glowing, pulsing, and tingling. The idea of a hand falls away because that is a concept we overlay. Just being with the sensations of the hand lends itself to the mind letting go. The idea of a hand is, in a subtle way, an attachment. It is holding on to something that is not needed in deep meditation.

The elemental sensations of the physical body are the raw foundation from which we build so much of our lives. The idea of dropping into those sensations and becoming concentrated on them is a very key aspect of *vipassana* practice. It allows us to see the impermanent, inconstant nature of phenomena – and that leads to freedom.

So, may you spend time in the garden of your body with the basic foundational ingredients from which we build so much of our complicated lives. Perhaps, stop eating processed food for a while. Eat elemental ingredients, like vegetables – feeling and sensing their rawness – and your days will be full of nutrients.

May the raw, elemental sensations of your body nourish you with some of the best nutrients that we can have. Thank you very much.