# The Four Great Elements

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 21:37

So this evening I thought we'd tackle what's known as the Four Great Elements. Actually, that's translating *Mahābhūta*. And *bhūta* means being, so it should be properly translated as the four great beings. And this goes back to an earlier time. Well, it would have been believed in by people during the Buddha's time, maybe even today, who knows. That gods, of course, govern the universe.

So, for instance, Agni, the fire god, he was the sun, but he actually governed the sun, governed the heat coming from the sun. So to appease him, if he got too hot, you'd have to do some rituals and do a bit of exorcism, a few hymns you have to chant, and he was only second under Indra who was in charge of all the gods, a bit like the Greek Zeus. But by the time the Buddha came along, they just become ordinary elements and they are earth, water, fire and air. And they become just elements, just ordinary things that we can directly experience.

Now, the great thing about these four elements is that they are self-produced. They cannot be reduced to anything else. They're not derived from everything. So when we're experiencing these four great elements—earth, fire, water, and air—we're right at the base of our experience of life, our sensual experience of life, both outwardly and inwardly. And one of our aims in meditation is to get down to this level of insight, which we'll talk about in a bit.

Now there's a discourse in the middle collection, number 28, given by Sāriputta, not by the Buddha. Sāriputta, remember, was called the general of the Dhamma by the Buddha, because he was second only to understanding the Dhamma itself. So he's understood to have really grasped the truth of things.

So earth element represents solidity, structure. Now, this is interesting because I read a physicist who was saying that there was no such thing as space, but that matter or subatomic energy created space. Space came because matter itself had arrived. So it wasn't a case of matter going into an empty place that we call space. The space was being created by matter itself. And there's a hint of that in the Buddha's teachings, but it is only a hint. It just might be me. So it includes hardness, but it also softness, and it's associated with form, occupies space.

This is what it includes in the body: head hair, body hair, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, and there's a whole load of stuff. But the important thing is that this is internal, pertaining to an individual. And then Sāriputta makes this statement: "This is called the interior earth element. The interior earth element and the exterior earth element are just the earth element." So in other words, you can't get beyond that. So it's a bit like, for instance, in physics, once we're down to subatomic energy and particles, that's it. You can't get beneath that. That's what everything is made of, we

could say.

The same happens with water element. So the water element is what is cohesive, fluidity, elasticity. And it's liquid in the body, of course. So he says the water elements may be interior or exterior. And what is the interior water element? Anything that is water, watery and appropriated that's internal pertaining to an individual. It includes bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears and all the rest of it. So it's not as though we're short of the water element in the body. In fact, I think we're mostly water. So then again, it finishes with that phrase: "This is called the interior water element. The interior water element and the exterior water element are just the water element."

So then he talks about fire. So this is, of course, warmth, the metabolic processes. And it also means the process of aging. That's interesting. So the fire element may be interior or exterior. And what is the interior fire element? Anything that's fire or fiery and appropriated, that's internal, pertaining to an individual. This includes that which warms, that which ages, that which heats you up when feverish, that which properly digests food and drink, and anything else that is fire, fiery, and appropriated, that's internal, pertaining to an individual. This is called the interior fire element. The interior fire element and the exterior fire element are just the fire element.

And the final one is, of course, air, sometimes translated as wind. It's to do with movement and it's opposite of being still. And what is the air element? The air element may be interior or exterior. And what is the interior air element? Anything that is air or wind and appropriated, that's internal, pertaining to an individual. This includes winds that go up and down, winds in the belly or the bowels, winds that flow through the limbs, in breath and out breath. Now that winds that flow through the limbs, I think that's referring to *prāṇa*—the energy that's within the body. And so the winds include both literal gas and movements of energy. This is called the interior air element. The interior air element and the exterior air element are just the air element.

Now, at the end of all those four elements, there's a refrain, and I've left it out because it's an important little bit to understand, because this is why we are investigating the four elements. "This should be truly seen with right understanding like this: This is not mine, I am not this, and this is not myself. When you truly see with right understanding, when you truly see this with right understanding, you reject the air element, detaching awareness from the air element."

So in other words, when we're actually experiencing this, there's a moment of reflection where we can say to ourself, well, look, that is not me, it's not mine, and it is not myself. And in so doing, we're separating what it is that's actually thinking that, that's actually saying that. And that's, of course, your intuitive awareness. And although Sāriputta doesn't mention it here, it's at that level that you can see impermanence. You can see the changing nature of things much more easily. We'll come to that again in a little bit.

So we can see now why they're used as meditation objects. In order to get down to that level of experience,

you've got to focus in on it. So it's very good for getting the mind to be very still and focused. And of course, what's driving it is your interest. Remember that the whole process of investigation is the process of liberation. We're not taking anything on faith. We don't have to believe anything. And that, in fact, will be a hindrance because everything that the Buddha is putting to us is to be investigated.

It helps with the concentration. And what we're trying to understand, apart from that, is how we construct the world. And we'll come to that a little bit more down the line. And in that way, we're developing this insight—the insight of *vipassanā*. So it's a process of seeing things as they are.

So, if we take an example now. If we take an example, an easy one, say of pain or discomfort. So as soon as that feeling of pain arises and we become aware of it, the first port of call, remember, is to see how we're reacting to it. So we want to move, we want to get rid of it. So that's the first thing. And we wait, we have to wait until that reaction begins to fade away. Then we can feel the pain more equanimously, patiently. So we can just be with the pain. And our noting word, our reflection on it is that this is pain and we can still do the same thing. We can say, this is not me, not mine, not myself. You can actually say things like that to yourself.

And then once that's very clear to you and it's distanced from the awareness, like it's a real object, that's when you can plunge into the object. So this is a phrase that my teacher Sayadaw U Paṇḍita would often say. And it actually is trying to express what the Buddha says in the discourse on how to establish right awareness. He uses a form which translates as to feel feelings in feelings. That's what he says. To feel the body in the body. So he was having problems getting across to people, to his students, that you have to get into things, you have to sink into the object.

So here you are. You see the pain. So you then sink into that pain with the intention of seeing what it's made of. In other words, you're deconstructing that experience. And what we discover, of course, is things like heat, pressure and so on. Little different words will come to mind. And when that's clear and distanced, and it's quite clearly an object, you can always say to yourself, look, that's not me, not mine, and not myself.

And then you recognize that when you come to the next level of perception, which gives these sensations meaning, the word pain arises. Ah, so now we know that pain is a mental construct. It doesn't actually exist. What actually exists are these sensations. And now it doesn't mean to say that you can forget what pain is. You need to know when to go to the doctor. But now we know that pain is a mental construct. And then the third level is to see our relationship to pain. And that's when we have that growth of patience and forbearance with what is unpleasant. So there's a whole process there, which is just part of that *vipassanā* insight process.

And just finally, in daily life, you can always bring it to mind. It's very simple. You're sitting at a table. You pick up your knife and fork or a spoon. And just for the moment there, just recognize that there's a feeling of the steel, the sense of maybe coldness. The cutlery might be cold or you might sense the hardness of it.

When you're drinking a tea or coffee or just a juice or something, just for a moment to feel that liquidity, the way that the liquid is moving around in the mouth. When you're outside, occasionally this summer, you might feel the warmth of the sun, at least in the UK. You'll be very lucky these days. And you can feel the warmth of the sun on your skin. When walking, you get that feeling of movement, the body moving through space, you might say. So these things we can actually experience. You can also see it on a sort of second hand, like the trees moving with the wind and so on. And it's just this constant recognition that everything that we're experiencing at a physical level is based on these four elements.

Now, I must say that when it comes to the more animal elements of smelling and tasting, there's no real understanding as to what creates the various subjective tastes within the mouth of sweetness, sour, salty, all those sorts of things. But it's like the photons that hit the eye. That would be seen as a fire element. But what the eye actually sees are all these very different shapes and colors. But it's still at the base of the eye, just a fire element. And in the same with the ear, all we're getting is pressure waves. And that's all that's actually being picked up by the sense base. And you can actually experience that, that there's no sound. It's just a sensation of touch. And then that enters into the mind, and it's the mind which turns it into a recognizable sound.

So we're going to do a little exercise, and then we'll sit for a while. So if we sit comfortably and just close our eyes a little, and I'll just mention some parts of the body that you can contact according to these four elements.

So we're just sitting there quietly, and we want to find something which is hard. So it could be that your one thumb is feeling the hardness of a nail, or you could be having your hand on your knee, just the kneecap there, and just get a feel of the hardness of it. Now, at this point, we can just say to ourselves, well, you see, that's not me, it's not mine, and it's not myself. Now, the hardness you're feeling, I suppose it's better in the knee, really, if you can, is to feel it on the bone or in the bone, not in the finger itself. That's a bit difficult. You can, of course, feel it on the finger. That's not a problem either.

And then if we try to find something which is warm or cool, the heat of the body, perhaps you can feel a part of the body that's warm. Or it could be if you put one hand on the back of the other hand, you might find that the fingers are cooler and you can feel that there's a change of temperature there. And the palm of the hand being warmer. And just get into that feeling of warmth or coolness. So at the moment I can feel the coolness of my fingers and the warmth of my palm. And I can also feel how the energy is moving. The palm feels cooler and the fingers are beginning to feel warmer. I'm right there at the base of my experience.

And then the next one would be liquidity. So you can fill your mouth with a little saliva. There's also you can squeeze a muscle of your thigh or your biceps or whatever, or a muscle in the hand, the muscle at the thumb. And just as you press it, you can feel it squeezing that way.

And then finally, there's movement. So we can make that very simple by just lifting your hand and placing

it back onto your knee. Or observing the falling and rising of the breath in the body, the chest, the stomach or the abdomen. And all you're trying to be aware of, to get down to, is that feeling of just movement. That's more easily done when it's neutral. And again, you can say to yourself, this is not me, not mine, and not myself.

So that's a quick introduction. The last thing is that, of course, you can also do this with your emotional life. An obvious one would be anger. If you feel a bit angry about something, irritated about something. So when you come off the fantasy and you come into the body, then you feel, first of all, that there is anger. But as you go into the anger, there is just this energy, just heat that's going on and movement, heat movement mainly. So it's just deconstructing what we're actually experiencing, always taking away that sense of something being substantial, being real. And that's how we use these four great elements.

Very good. I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that I have not caused confusion, and that by your careful investigation of the four elements, you will liberate yourself from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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