Mindfulness of the Body - The Four Elements

Greg Scharf · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 53:58

A number of years ago—it's almost eight years ago now—I spent most of a year on a long extended pilgrimage in India along with a friend of mine who's a monk. He had just completed his 25th year in robes and had arranged for a period of sabbatical from his duties as abbot of the monastery where he was living at that time here in the States. He asked me if I would be able to come along and be his companion and attendant, to take care of the things that monks don't take care of.

I invited a friend of mine to join us because I had some duties looking after my elderly parents, who were still alive at that time, and I was afraid I'd have to abandon the Ajahn. So we were kind of tag team attendants over the course of a bit more than a year in India.

Part of that time we spent in an area that at the time of the Buddha was called Sāvatthī. It's a place where he spent many of the rains retreats, and I believe that more of the discourses in the Pali canon were delivered in that location than anywhere else. He liked it there. It's amazing—some of these places, like the ancient city walls of the town of Sāvatthī, are still there, even though that town doesn't exist anymore. Some of you may have been there.

That's the location of the Jetavana Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's park it was called, where the Buddha had his kuṭi and eventually a monastery grew up. There was a beautiful park there outside the city walls.

During the time we were spending the rains period there—this period of twelve weeks, three lunar months you could say—we stayed at a small temple. Every morning we would get up. Our morning ritual was to rise when it was still dark and make our way over to Jetavana Park, arriving in time for the sunrise. We'd walk through the fields there. It had such a timeless feel to that landscape: people just beginning to stir in those early hours, the fields of rice, bullock carts—all the things the Buddha spoke about in many of his teachings were still going on in rural India there.

We would make our way there and spend a bit of time sitting on the foundation of what they say was where the Buddha's hut was. Who knows? Certainly an ancient place. It had an incredible feeling. We would spend the morning meditating there in Jetavana Park.

On our way walking, we would pass by the various vihāras—abiding places for pilgrims. For those of you who've been there, you notice that all of the different Buddhist countries have these. So there's a Sri Lankan temple and a Burmese temple and a Thai temple, Chinese and Japanese and Tibetan temples where you can stay, and Korean. We were staying at the Korean temple, actually.

We would walk to the park in the early morning, and often there would be some chanting coming from

one of these vihāras on our way, walking over in the early morning cool. One chant that we heard many mornings was someone chanting the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. It's a very revered, very beloved teaching, and we've referred to it many times. It's this teaching on the four foundations or abidings of mindfulness. It's the core set of instructions for our practice in the Pali Canon.

So as a special treat, I'm going to play a little bit of the chanting of it to start the talk tonight. It's not the same exact one that I heard in the mornings in India, but it's quite lovely. It's by a Sri Lankan monk named Venerable Omalpe Sobita Mahāthera.

You can listen quietly, close your eyes if you'd like, and maybe pretend that you're hearing the Buddha or one of his disciples give you a discourse in Pali. Even though we don't speak that language now, and most of us might only hear a word or two that's become familiar, I think there's a power in hearing these teachings in the original language, this ancient language that exists now only because these teachings have been carried over through centuries. There's a power just in hearing it.

[Pali chanting of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta]

I don't think I'll be able to improve on that with anything I may say now. But I have to keep going, so I will. One of these times, I'm just going to let it play—it takes about the right amount of time for one of these talks.

So as I think Joseph may have said in one of his talks, the word *satipaṭṭhāna* is usually translated as "foundation of mindfulness" or "establishment of mindfulness." Bhikkhu Bodhi, in one place where I read, equates the quality there with a mode of dwelling or abiding. He would translate it as "abiding in mindfulness."

The last section of the chanting you just heard was the Buddha speaking, naming these four abidings. The translation goes like this: "One abides contemplating the body as a body. One abides contemplating feelings as feelings. One abides contemplating mind as mind. One abides contemplating mind objects as mind objects, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, having put away desires and discontent for the world." That's a slight abbreviation of that naming of these four abidings.

I think this is important, this sense of dwelling or abiding in these four ways, because of the way it emphasizes the quality of awareness, of being aware, over any kind of emphasis on the particular object. It is this quality of abiding there, this focus on the awareness, the mindfulness, that's the key. We can learn from any object. So the object is, in some ways, less important than the quality of mindful awareness.

Simply put, these four abidings, these *satipaṭṭhānas*, take the entirety of what we can experience—everything—and look at it in terms of four kinds of categories, four spheres of attention. Joseph calls them "four frames of reference." The beauty of the practice is that nothing is left out. Our whole life is there. And that's really important. Our practice will not come to completion if we exclude any

aspect of our life from it.

If we distill this teaching down to its essence, you could say what the Buddha is saying is: pay careful attention to your experience and know what's really happening. See what's really happening there.

These four establishments, just to refresh for us, are mindfulness of the body, *kāyānupassanā*; mindfulness of feeling tone, *vedanā*—this pleasant, unpleasant, or neither one of those—*vedanānupassanā* ; mindfulness of mind, *cittānupassanā*; and mindfulness of objects of the mind, *dhammā, dhammānupassa nā*. You could say these are patterns that occur in the mind, like lenses we can look through, different ways of seeing experience.

For the most part, our practice is not so much that we are deciding to place our attention in one of these areas. The practice really is a shifting flow between them, a natural process—although at times we may highlight one or the other, or some aspect of one or the other may present itself to our attention. For the most part, it's an organic process and not so much a doing on our part.

I'm going to stick mostly with the first foundation, the first establishment of mindfulness: mindfulness directed to the body, *kāya*. This is a rich field, and we spend a lot of time here. The Buddha praised mindfulness of the body very highly in different places. I'll read a few things from a part of the Aṅguttara Nikāya called the Kāyagatāsati Vagga:

"Even as one who encompasses with his mind the mighty ocean includes thereby all the rivulets that run into the ocean, just so, O monks, whoever develops and cultivates mindfulness directed to the body includes thereby all the wholesome states that partake of supreme knowledge."

"One thing, O monks, if developed and cultivated, leads to mindfulness and clear comprehension. What is that one thing? It is mindfulness directed to the body."

"One thing, if developed and cultivated, leads to the realization of the fruit of knowledge and liberation. What is that one thing? It is mindfulness directed to the body."

"If one thing, O monks, is developed and cultivated, ignorance is abandoned. Supreme knowledge arises. Delusion of self is given up. The underlying tendencies are eliminated, and the fetters are discarded. What is that one thing? It is mindfulness directed to the body."

So it seems from that passage that this is a useful place to put our attention at times. It sounds like it has quite a lot of potential for us.

In the elaboration on the section on mindfulness of the body, there are a number of ways that we're instructed to practice. It begins with mindfulness of the breathing, this section. There are four ways we might pay attention to the experience of breathing. The first is simply knowing. One knows one is breathing in, and one knows one is breathing out. One knows an in-breath and out-breath. One knows if that in-breath or out-breath is long or if it is short. And when breathing in and out, one breathes in and

out experiencing the whole body.

This can be seen in a couple of ways—in terms of the whole body of a breath, the beginning, the middle, the ending of an in-breath and of an out-breath, the fullness of an entire breath—or being mindful of the breath within the entire body system. Both of those ways, or either of those ways.

And then one breathes in, calming the bodily formation, and breathes out, calming. A little more active in that way, actually using the breath to calm the body.

The second way of mindfulness of the body is in terms of the postures, the four postures. We've been instructing in these to some extent: sitting, standing, walking, and lying down. One knows the body in these postures.

And then in terms of activities, bodily activities: going forward and returning, looking ahead, looking away, looking behind, flexing and extending the limbs, moving the arms and legs, wearing clothing, carrying things, eating, drinking, tasting, defecating and urinating, standing, sitting, going to sleep, waking up, talking, and keeping silent—all these activities of the body.

Another contemplation involves the anatomical parts of the body. Traditionally, there are thirty-two parts used for this contemplation, beginning with hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, bones, and so forth—skin, organs, bodily fluids. We see the body in terms of its component parts, all that go to make it up.

Then there is contemplation in terms of what are called the four great elements. This is another way we can see the body: in terms of the earth element, the water element, the air element, and the fire or temperature element.

In one section, one is suggested to contemplate a decaying corpse and all that happens as a corpse decays. This was a practice more common at the time of the Buddha. There were corpses decaying around that were more available to contemplate. Places called charnel grounds would be found on the outskirts of a village where you could go and hang out with rotting corpses, if you were so inclined. And one compares one's own body to that.

Someone once sent me a video—I think you can get it on YouTube—of a short time-lapse film of a small animal, I think it was a badger or a fox, going through the decaying process in just a few minutes, what would take days or weeks. It was amazing to watch this change from a recognizable form to earth, with things beginning to sprout from that.

Finally, the last way of contemplating is simply knowing there is a body. Joseph referred to this teaching in his very early instruction that we've been repeating, to actually bring this phrase, "there is a body," to mind. The simplicity of that knowing—bodily life in that way—and what that can open up for us in our practice.

So tonight I want to look at the four elements in a little more detail. The Pali word for the elements is *dhāt u*. They're like lenses that we look at our experience of body through, seeing it in these four different ways.

When we hear the terms earth, air, fire, and water, it sounds maybe kind of archaic, almost alchemical sounding—like some ancient, outdated, almost antiquated way of looking at things. We've all trained in science, perhaps, and we have ideas about things. We might say, "Well, I don't know if I go for this earth, air, fire, and water business." It sounds odd to us, maybe.

For this way of seeing the body to make any sense and to have any value for us, we have to look at our direct experience of body. The words themselves—earth, air, water, and fire—are not important. This isn't an intellectual exercise or something to adopt as an idea: "Okay, yeah, now I'm into earth, air, fire, and water." But in our direct experience of materiality, of this form, we can see how these things manifest, these *dhātus*.

There are clear descriptions of these in the texts. The earth element is *paṭhavī-dhātu*, and its manifestation is solidity—the range from hardness to softness, and different qualities of texture, from roughness to smoothness.

The water element has characteristics of fluidity and cohesion. You can imagine or remember the experience of flowing water, tears in your own body, or the feeling of water in the mouth. In the world: rain or running water that touches the body, this flowing quality of water. The quality of cohesion—we can imagine if you take flour, if you're baking and you take powdered ground-up wheat flour and mix it with some liquid, it coheres, it glues it together. It's that binding agent. Add water to dust to make mud.

We can imagine these bodies—I think some huge amount of it, maybe seventy-five percent, is water. If you removed the water part, you'd just have a dry heap of bits there. If we could take the water out of a Greg and pile it there, you could check it out. It would be a lot smaller. So it's that quality: it binds the other parts together and holds them in. There's a term, turgid, water-filled. It has a binding and holding together with the water in that way.

And then the fire element is the range of temperature. Fire sounds hot, but it's hot to cold and everything in between—heat and coolness.

And we see this in our own body—places of warmth and times when there's warmth in the body, and then the warmth and coolness in the world as we're touched by it.

The air or wind element, *vāyo dhātu* (fire is *tejo dhātu*), has characteristics of movement, pressure, tension, tightness. One way to think of this is when you blow up a balloon or when the lungs fill with air—there's this increase of pressure, movement, and then a sense of tightness, like the tightness in a balloon that you might blow up.

These elements in our experience don't ever really occur by themselves alone. They show up in pairs or groups. In a certain way, we could say they're always manifesting. They are. Sometimes one or another will show up more obviously, will predominate.

In our meditation practice, when we go to our direct experience below our concepts about things, we can begin to touch these directly. If we look in a mirror, we see all these parts—heads and torsos and arms and legs—and there we are standing there. But when we sit in meditation and turn the attention to the direct experience of body, we have a very different experience, don't we?

I'd like to do a short guided meditation right now. You can just sit as you are. You don't have to alter your posture necessarily. Just sit comfortably. You can leave the eyes open if you like, or let them gently close. It might be a little better with closed eyes, but not required.

Just come to the simplicity of body in terms of the knowing of the sitting posture. Know body sitting. Feel the whole body sitting. Maybe a sense of the posture, maybe a sense of the solidity there or the earthiness of it. Feel the contact with the floor, with your feet or parts of the body that are touching the floor. And in the touching, the hardness may be apparent there. Heaviness, hardness, solidity. Earth sitting on earth, the hardness of the floor beneath you, the solidness there.

Now let the attention come into your mouth for a moment. You may feel some wetness there—a subtle sense of the water element. Bring your attention to your lips. Let your lips slowly come apart. Maybe a feeling of stickiness. The lips were touching, and then there's this sticky, cohesive quality of the moisture in the mouth, cohering in the water element there.

While the attention is in the mouth, let the tongue gently touch the teeth. Rub along the surface of the front teeth. You may notice a roughness there—back to the earth element. Or gently touch the teeth together, that hardness of earth element and the moistness of water there in the mouth.

And then back to the experience of the whole body. You may notice qualities of warmth there, or possibly coolness in parts. Maybe where the hands are touching, there's warmth or coolness. Perhaps in the area of the belly or chest, where the clothing is heavier and there's more warmth. Where the skin is exposed, there may be a quality of coolness.

And then if we bring the attention to the breath, perhaps the breath at the nostrils, we can be aware of movement there and perhaps coolness or warmth as well. Perhaps coolness on the in-breath and warmth on the out-breath at the nostrils. We may notice the movement, pressure, tension, tightness in the belly as the lungs fill with air, as the diaphragm moves to expand. Movement on the out-breath.

So then we see, just in the simplicity of letting the attention rest in the body, in this materiality—what we see there is this shift and flow of changing sensations. You could say it's like a dance of these different elements manifesting in these ways of hardness and softness and warmth and coolness and tension and stickiness.

We don't experience those parts that we see in the mirror—arm and leg and head and torso. In a certain way, these are concepts that we hold about the body. And of course, both things are true. You're sitting there, I'm sitting here, and we need to feed and clean and take care of the body. But is that somehow more real than our experience of this flow of changing sensations? Can we see that both of these experiences are equally real?

If we explore the body in this elemental way, in terms of its elemental nature, this direct experience of the flow of sensations, there's an important and really critical shift in our perspective that comes from that. Because if we stay in the realm of concepts—and this seems obvious, but it's really an important thing to notice as you go through the day.

If we stay in the realm of concepts, we're not really going to get into the realm of true insight, because concepts don't change. They're just ideas that we may hold to at certain times. But this flow of elements changing—that's in a state of constant flux and flow, isn't it? If we really look, that's all we're going to see there: change and flow. And seeing this, seeing the truth of change, opens up the whole practice. Exploring the body in terms of these elements is really a rich field of exploration, and it brings us tremendous benefit.

One way that mindfulness of the body is spoken about—something we don't think about so much probably, but it's expressed in the texts quite often—is in terms of protection. Mindfulness of the body is a kind of protection for us. The Buddha spoke about this in terms of the kilesas, the defilements of mind, the root causes of suffering: greed, hatred, and delusion, along with their manifestations—the hindrances and these difficult mental qualities. He often spoke about these things through the figure, the personification, of Mara, the tempter. He said that Mara cannot invade the mind of one in whom mindfulness of the body is well established. He spoke about how when mindfulness immersed in the body, established in the body, is not developed and pursued, then Mara can gain a foothold.

And there's this image. Suppose someone were to take a heavy rock, a stone, and toss it into a pile of wet clay—what would happen? Would the stone enter into that wet clay or not? He was asking the monks. Yes, it would. In the same way, in one who does not have mindfulness of the body well-developed and pursued, Mara can gain entry, can gain a foothold. But in whomever mindfulness immersed in the body is developed and pursued, Mara cannot gain entry, cannot gain a foothold.

Suppose someone were to throw a ball of string—or we could imagine a rubber band ball, a rubbery bouncy ball—against a strong door panel, against a wall. Would that ball gain entry, or what would happen? Asking the monks again: no, it wouldn't. It would bounce off. In the same way, when mindfulness in the body is well-developed and pursued, there is no entry for Mara, no foothold there. There's a quality of protection.

Seeing the body in terms of the elements can help us cut through a tendency to identify with the body as I, as me, as belonging to me, as mine—this tendency to claim ownership of it. If we investigate the elements,

we see that these elemental qualities are the same in the world as they are in the body. There's no difference in that way. They manifest externally and internally in the same manner. We can see this through our direct experience, in the same way as we did in the short guided meditation. In contact with the world—being touched by the world, touching the world—we see that these things are the same.

When we really see this directly, then it's harder to lay claim to it. It's harder to claim hardness as mine, my hardness, my heat. It sounds ridiculous: "This is my heat here." But if we stand and feel the heat of the sun, heat is heat. Hardness is hardness. The hardness in the body, the hardness in the world is just the same. We're not separate from nature.

So often in our language, the way we talk, the way we think much of the time, we see ourselves as somehow separate from the environment, separate from nature, as if it's somehow other than us. But when we look at the body in terms of the elements, we see that in a very fundamental way, we are just a part of the landscape—elements manifesting. We come from nature. We're supported by it. We're part of it. And we return to it. It's a natural flow of things, the same as all of nature.

There's a real change in our perception when we explore the body in its elemental nature. We see that it's all—internal, external—just this dance of elements unfolding lawfully, doing their thing.

When we look at the elemental nature of the body, it points to the relationship of mind and matter, of mentality and materiality, of nama and rupa in Pali. We see that mind has knowing as its function, but there's no form there. Mind has no form, but it knows, it cognizes. Body has form, but it has no knowing capacity. It's just these hardnesses and softnesses, heat and coolness.

And so what we see in our experience is a meeting of nama and rupa. We see mentality coming together with matter—mind knowing body. Seeing this namarupa-pariccheda-nana, this insight into mentality and materiality, is part of how the path unfolds in terms of our understanding and insight. We start to see the conditioned nature of things and how mind and matter influence and condition one another.

It's really interesting to see this, and it's really quite simple. Think of times when anger or shame or embarrassment arise in the mind. What happens in the body? There's a direct conditioning effect. Heat may arise, tension or tightness. The body flushes, reflecting this state of mind. And when the mind is really chilled out, concentrated, the body responds as well. It adjusts to that. If there's a lot of calm and concentration in the mind, the body may feel very light. The metabolic processes may become very fine and subtle as a response. When there's a lot of joy and rapturous quality in the mind, there can be lightness and pleasant tingling feelings—all kinds of bodily responses. Mind conditioning matter, mind conditioning body.

We can see the quality of intention arising in the mind sometimes, and then the response of the body to move. And we can see matter and materiality conditioning mind as well. For example, if there's a lot of heat in the body, there may be a mental response of aversion. Or excessive hardness—if you sit long

enough, hardness really shows up, doesn't it? Hardness, hardness. And then there may be resistance in the mind, aversion to that hardness, all kinds of thoughts arising. If it's too hot: "Oh, they should turn on the AC." Too cold: "Oh, they should turn on the heat." Materiality conditioning mind, and thoughts arising from that.

We see materiality conditioning the arising of consciousness itself. There's contact, and then consciousness arises in response. This is what contact is—contact in the body and body consciousness arising.

Exploring the elements really reveals the characteristics of anicca, dukkha, and anatta. We see that it's a flow of constant change. The elements are constantly changing. Nothing is lasting. Even things we think of as solid—some solid unpleasant sensation, for example, that feels like a lump or a block—if we look closely, it's a shifting dance of changing sensations within that, coming and going. We see that nothing there lasts for any length of time at all. We start to see that actually it's changing very, very rapidly.

And seeing change in this way opens up the seeing of unreliability. It's not reliable. We can't ask a pleasant sensation in the body to last and be our source of happiness for any length of time. It doesn't do it. It won't do it. It's unsatisfactory in the long run if we try to hold on to it. And we see that it's all happening due to causes and conditions. It's coreless. It has this quality of not-self. We can't control it and decide to have the body only be light and pleasant feeling. It doesn't respond to our wishes in that way. It responds to the changing causes and conditions that come.

So it's an interesting exploration of the body, this elemental nature of it. You can look at it this way internally and then in the world—these elements manifesting in the body, and then the way they manifest in the world.

Just as we go through the day in our daily activities, lunchtime becomes a really interesting place. We might notice the elements there. We notice the hardness, the teeth coming together to chew, or the transforming of food becoming more liquid in the mouth—like lettuce, which is perhaps ninety-eight percent water. It just turns to water in the mouth. We notice the water element there. We might notice the water element when we're drinking liquid, or the water flowing across the body in the shower, this flowing nature. Stickiness, cohesion from the water element in the body—in our contact with the world this may show up at times.

In our various postures that we practice in—sitting, standing, and so forth—we notice qualities of solidity, of hardness, softness, textures of the clothing. Textures in the world as we walk, touch things, benches that we sit on, rocks that we might touch. They have these earth qualities of hardness, texture, solidity. Warmth and coolness manifest in the body as we're going through the day, internally and externally. Heat in the body, the warmth of the sun, the coolness of the breeze, or the movement of the breeze touching the skin—air element there. Pressure, tightness, movement within the body, the breath moving in and out. We see these elements.

It really can bring a lot of interest and happiness to us to see these things, how they happen, to recognize them in our body and mind. Seeing how our internal experience is reflected in the world, that connection, seeing how we're part of nature in this way—it can start to really loosen things up in our world, in our internal world. It can open up and loosen our tendency to claim ownership of any of it. And this really leads to great joy when we let go of owning it.

I may have used this quotation already—I don't remember. It's one I'm fond of, so forgive me if I did, but it's a good one. The great Thai forest master Ajahn Buddhadasa once said this one very simple sentence. He said, "What we're doing with this practice is giving back to nature what we mistakenly appropriated as our own."

I feel like turning the attention to the elemental nature of the body and seeing its relationship to mind really points to this. In a certain way, the whole practice comes down to that. We're just giving it back to nature, letting go of ownership of it, coming back into alignment with natural processes. The whole deal—everything that you can experience in this mind and body internally, and everything you can experience in the world—is just the flow of natural processes doing its thing. So we can just give it back. It's really relaxing. We don't have to carry that around with us. It's like we set down a burden that we didn't know we were hauling around. Give it back to nature.

I want to end this evening with a short excerpt from a longer poem—I guess you'd call it a poem. It's verses that are attributed to the Venerable Ananda, the Buddha's attendant. Having been an attendant on numerous occasions myself—somehow I have fallen into the attendant role a lot in my dharma life—I like being an attendant. It's been a wonderful thing. If you ever get the chance to be an attendant, you might consider doing it. I've gotten a lot out of it. I get to hang out behind the scenes with some cool beings.

This is from a collection of verses called the Theragatha, Verses of the Elders. And this verse is apparently from after the Buddha had passed away. Venerable Ananda outlived the Buddha, and the Buddha's two chief disciples, Sariputta and Mahamogalana, were gone. A bunch of the old gang had been dying off. So it's kind of a sad poem, but it's poignant and beautiful—a poignant reflection on the power of mindfulness of the body. So you can take the sadness of it.

These are the words of Venerable Ananda after the Buddha and a lot of the old ones have passed away:

All the directions are obscure.
The teachings are not clear to me.
With our benevolent friend gone,
it seems as if all is darkness.

For one whose friend has passed away,
one whose teacher is gone for good,
there is no friend that can compare

with mindfulness of the body.

The old ones have all passed away.
I do not fit in with the new ones.

And so today I muse alone like a bird who has gone to roost.

So we'll have a moment of silence, eloquent silence here, and let these words just drift away.

Thank you for listening this evening.

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