Tracking Elements

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 56:50

This morning we're going to look at tracking elements as part of mindfulness of body.

When the Buddha talks about body, he includes two meanings or two aspects. In a broad sense, body refers to all the five physical senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching. Anything that comes via the physical senses is body, in a broad sense. The first satipaṭṭhāna is tracking the body, and this includes all physical experience.

Then you get body in the narrow sense, which is the fifth of the five senses—essentially sensitivity to touch, which can be either internal or external. External touch would be things like the contact of the body against the chair, the cushion, the bench, and so on. Internal touch would be any sensation within the body that you might feel—for example, the movements of the breathing or physical pain. These are obvious ones.

Today we're going to focus on body in this narrow sense of sensitivity to touch, and we're going to look at it in terms of the four mahabhuta, the four great elements.

Before we get into this, at a more general level, the relationship to body is extremely important in meditation practice, particularly the way the Buddha talks about it. We tend to think of meditation as a spiritual activity. People in Western Buddhism sometimes talk about their spiritual practice, and this is a concept which I think the Buddha himself would not recognize because he has no concept of the spiritual. There's body and there's mind, and there's what completely transcends body and mind, which is the unconditioned, which is nibbana or liberation. But the realm of the practice is the realm of the body-mind. In other words, it's physical. Meditation practice is a physical activity.

Anyone whose body hurts when they meditate knows this. But we tend to bury this. We tend to push this aside. We tend to imagine that the body hurting is somehow extraneous—some accidental intrusion in our spiritual activities. But it's not. It's actually central. It's fundamental to it. So the relationship of body to the practice is absolutely central.

Where does the practice take place? It happens here. And body—one of the things that characterizes body is location. The body is here. The here-ness of experience is inherent with its physicality.

Think about being distracted by thinking in a state of total distraction. Have you ever had the experience of being in a meditation hall in a rather unpleasant situation where you're stuck in this hall and it hurts and it's getting pretty tedious by this stage and you really want to be anywhere but here, and then ten minutes later you wake up out of a fantasy in which you were, in fact, a long way away?

The mind has this capacity to be not here. In fact, it would be anywhere but here. We discover this as children and we've been using it ever since.

The body is relentlessly here. Has anybody ever had a physical experience which has not been here? I can be far, far away in my mind, but then I trip over, for example, and as soon as the awareness comes back to body, it's here. And it's now. It's not past, it's not future, it's not somewhere else.

When we talk about this as a physical practice, it's obvious, but it's more than obvious. The here-ness and the now-ness that the body provides is absolutely central to our whole relationship to this practice. So the relationship to body is absolutely central.

Now this relationship tends to be sabotaged by the mind, particularly in this culture, much more so than in the Buddha's time. When we're practicing according to the Buddha's instructions, one of the problems that we have is cultural translation. We live in a completely different culture, in completely different circumstances. We live in circumstances that the Buddha himself would never have even imagined. And we have difficulties grappling with this practice that I think people in the time of the Buddha did not have. One of the crucial ones is this whole relationship to body.

Our culture is utterly obsessed by body image. And it comes out in ways like various disorders.

our obsession with supermodels and the particularly strange body type required to be a supermodel. It emerges in our obsession with mirrors. How many of us would go twenty-four hours without looking into a mirror? One? Two? You're part of a cultural minority. Most of us look into a mirror practically every day.

In the Buddha's time, mirrors were very rare, very expensive, and by our standards, quite poor quality. Most people's sense of their appearance would come from occasionally seeing their reflection in water. That would probably be it. What would it be like to go through life without a completely ingrained sense of what we look like?

How many people have seen photographs of themselves? We have a really clear sense of what we look like, and through the advertising industry, what we're supposed to look like. We're constantly measuring the difference. Sometimes when I'm in a doctor's waiting room, I pick up a magazine—I don't know if the title is ironic or not—called *Men's Health*. It's all about what you're supposed to look like if you're a man.

What you're supposed to look like falls into a very narrow category. For a start, you're supposed to be young—you're really not supposed to be old. You're supposed to have no excess fat whatsoever, which I imagine would make you particularly cold in winter. Certain muscle groups that are especially visible are supposed to be highly developed, particularly in the chest and shoulder area where you're supposed to be enormous.

According to these images, if you don't look like this, you're apparently not really healthy. You start to get

worried. I feel reasonably healthy—I only go to the doctor once a year for a checkup—but obviously I'm not, because I don't look anything like this.

All of this obsession is very much part of our culture, which was missing in the Buddha's time. The result is we have a mind that can create a world which is not here, which is not now. And then we view the body through this mind. Most of the time we do not have a direct relationship to the body. What we relate to is our concept of the body—what we think the body is or should be. We approach the body from outside the body, and we do this habitually.

When we're doing the stretches in the morning, I keep saying: don't push too far, don't try to reproduce what you think the posture is supposed to look like. You know how you look at yoga books and see some model demonstrating the perfect asana? The message you're receiving is that you're supposed to look like that.

I came across this in my early meditation years when I got into Zen. I was preoccupied—because I had so much pain when I sat—with developing good posture. I saw photographs of Zen monks in perfect postures, and they looked really good: always young men, nicely shaped, beautiful uniforms, sitting perfectly. This was presented as correct meditation posture. So naturally I thought I was supposed to look like that.

I struggled to get my body into that shape so it would look like that. I struggled for years. Of course, this is going about it completely the wrong way, because it's working from the outside to the inside—starting with a mental image, then wrestling with the body to make it conform to the image. This is completely opposite to the right approach.

The way to work with the body is to start from the inside and move out. If the awareness of sensation is right, the body will arrange itself the way it's supposed to arrange itself. The image is entirely up here—it has nothing to do with the body. The body knows what to do. Its understanding is being buried by our conceptualization, but it knows what to do.

To get there, we start from the inside. What does it feel like? What is the sensation? At what point is the body showing signs of distress? When does it panic?

And we can see the distress particularly in the breathing and any sense of panic or disturbance in the mind. We can also see the limits when we reach a point where we cannot move any further. I can move this limb this far, but then there's a wall and I can't move it any further.

But these are signals that come from inside. They don't come from out here. They don't come from mental image. They come from inside, and in order to read them I have to be inside. If I'm doing something as basic as a stretch, and I'm coming at it from the outside—this is what it's supposed to look like—that's when I will injure myself. But if I drop that, and I'm simply with it from the inside—this is what it feels like now—I will not injure myself. It just won't happen.

When we work with posture in the meditation practice, we have to learn to come to it from the inside. In other words, we need to learn to relate to the body through sensation and awareness rather than concept. When the Buddha talks about this, he talks about it in terms of the elements, the elemental qualities of physical experience. This is what we're interested in—not what we think the body is.

Any of this making sense?

So we're re-educating our whole relationship to the body where we are not concerned with what it looks like or what we think it looks like or what we think it should look like, but we are concerned only with what it feels like.

This social aspect, the social image of the body, comes up in retreats as well. You think it wouldn't, but it does, particularly when people do walking meditation. If you go to a place where you have people who are very experienced with walking meditation and you see them doing it, it's like they're creeping along really, really slowly.

One of my friends and teachers, John Hale, who some of you knew—when I first saw him do walking meditation in Burma, I had to stand and look at him for a while to figure out if he was in fact moving. He was so slow.

But we think, how do I do walking meditation? Ah, we look at someone who is doing walking meditation. I'm supposed to do it like that. What is this person doing? They're creeping along at zero kilometers per hour. Therefore, my job is to creep along at zero kilometers per hour. So I start to do it, and it feels terrible. The conclusion—the completely distorted conclusion that I draw from this—is, I don't like walking meditation. I think I'll just forget about it and focus on the sitting, rather than concluding, maybe I'm doing it wrong.

It's about what it feels like. What does it feel like to move? Does the body and the mind feel at ease? Can I get—am I feeling maximum sensation as I move? Am I getting the sensation that normally I miss because I'm so busy trying to get somewhere? And you notice that when I'm trying to get somewhere, what's that somewhere? It's an image in the mind. It's got nothing to do with the body as it moves.

Is it possible to move from one end of that veranda to the other end with absolutely no understanding that I'm moving from one end of the veranda to the other end? I'm simply moving. That's all. What does it feel like to simply move? Actually, it feels magical when you do it. It's just magic.

So forget about what it looks like and focus only on what it feels like. That's the essence of it.

Now when the Buddha conceptualizes this—and of course in order to speak about it we have to conceptualize, so we have to have some kind of language, we have to have some kind of framework—the framework that the Buddha uses when he's talking about the experience of body in this narrow sense, which is sensitivity to touch, he conceptualizes in terms of the four mahādhātu, the four great

appearances, as the four elements, the dhātu of earth, air, fire and water.

This is what we're going to play around with today. These are elemental qualities of experience.

Earth element is the experience of resistance from soft to hard. For example, if I move my hand down, I have the experience of movement as the hand keeps coming down until it reaches a point that I would normally conceptualize as "my hand just hit my leg," where there's a sense of resistance. At first this is soft, but if I keep trying to move, it gets harder and harder until the resistance becomes absolute—it can't go any further. This quality of resistance is earth element, and it ranges from soft to hard.

Air element is movement—the experience of movement in all of its forms: pressure, vibration, expansion, contraction, and so forth.

Fire element is the experience of temperature from cold to hot. One thing about this retreat so far is that fire element has been pretty strong. When you step into a heated room or step outside, fire element seems to be particularly obvious here.

Finally, water element is the experience of liquidity and cohesion. Liquidity is wetness and dryness, and cohesion is stickiness and slipperiness.

So what we're going to do is take a brief tour of these elements. Again, it's very artificial because we're using concepts, but we're using a conceptual framework that hopefully, if it works—if it does what it's designed to do—will point us toward aspects of our experience that are beneath our normal conceptual framework.

When we do this practice, we are always interested in the elemental quality of the experience—that which is beneath the concept. The concepts keep floating along at the top, but we're always interested in what's underneath the concept, even when we work with thinking itself as a meditation object, which we'll be doing later on in the retreat.

Now when we do these little meditation exercises and experiments, as we did last night, rule number one: do not take them seriously. They are games. Be playful with them. Don't ever take them seriously. The more playful we are, the more we can learn from the experience.

As a more general rule, never take the Dharma seriously. The Dharma is far too important to be taken seriously. The sense of play and experimentation is really important.

Whatever happens when you do these exercises is exactly what is supposed to happen. That also is a very important principle. There is no such thing as a wrong result. What there is, is what happens. And what we're interested in in this practice is what happens.

Remember we talked about the basic principle: settle awareness in the body and then see what happens. Whatever happens is what's supposed to happen.

Any questions or comments before we get started?

"Patrick, one question. You said water was wet and dry and cohesion."

"That's the cohesion—stickiness and slipperiness. Wetness and dryness is liquidity. It's the most difficult to directly sense. Apparently the first three are more obvious, according to the books, although you get different responses when people actually do it. So rather than me trying to lay down whether it is or isn't, let's find out when we do the experiment."

So settle into your meditation posture. Establish the posture and begin by opening your awareness up to the whole body, experiencing the whole body.

Now turn your attention to those parts of the body where you feel hardness. Where can you find hardness? Look for it. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: "Hard. Hard."

Now focus on those parts of the body where you feel softness. Where can you find softness? Look for it. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it: "Soft. Soft."

Now open your awareness up again to the whole body, experiencing the whole body. From there, turn your attention to those parts of the body where you feel heat or warmth. Where can you find heat or warmth?

Look for it and when you find it, focus on it and name it.

Hot.

Warm.

Now focus on those parts of the body where you find cold or coolness. Where can you find cold? Coolness. Look for it and when you find it, focus on it and name it.

Cold.

Cool.

Thank you.

Now open your awareness again to the whole body experiencing the whole body. And from there turn your attention to those parts of the body where you feel wetness. Where can you find wetness? Look for it, and if you can find it, focus on it and name it.

Wet.

Wet.

And now focus on those parts of the body where you feel dryness. Where can you find dryness? Look for

it. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it.

Dry.

Dry.

Thank you.

Now open your awareness again to the whole body experiencing the whole body. And from there turn your attention to those parts of the body where you feel movement. Where can you find movement? Look for it. And if you can find it, focus on it and name it.

Movement.

Now open your awareness again to the whole body experiencing the whole body and from there open up to all the elements. Be aware of the whole field of the body and accept the full flow of all the elements as they move through.

Don't try to hold onto any one particular sensation. Just allow whatever is happening to happen. Let everything flow throughout the whole body.

Okay.

With the four elements, which one did you find easiest to find, and then having found it, easiest to stay with?

Movement.

Movement. Where did you find it?

In the lungs, and the heart, and some in the gut.

Mm-hmm. Anyone else? What was...

Earth.

Earth. Hardness or softness?

Hardness.

Hardness. What about... Did you find softness?

Not as much.

So hardness is more obvious. Where did you find it?

In my base.

Sitting on it. So the foundation of the body.

Foundation. Yeah.

Yeah. Everywhere.

Everywhere. Whole body?

Yeah.

Beyond the body?

Yes.

The tradition points out that these four Mahābhūta always appear together. If you have one, you have all four. But at any given moment, one of them may be predominant—one of them stands out from the crowd. But if there's one there, they're all there. They always come as a package. Sometimes that could be quite clear in terms of the experience, and sometimes it's not clear.

One student wondered about the role of suggestion: "Whilst I was concentrating on all of that, I was wondering if some of the aspects were there because I knew it was there. Like, for example, I know my eyes are wet, so it was easy for me to feel the wetness. So there's some element of suggestion."

There's always an element of suggestion—always. That's always part of the package, I think. But for our purposes, it doesn't matter. You might wonder whether it counts because there's some element of suggestion, as if you're saying there's a valid experience of wetness and an invalid experience of wetness. But actually there's just the experience of wetness. The "valid" and "invalid" is just the mind conceptualizing about it. So don't worry about it.

This is an interesting exercise, especially when you have localized sensations. If you're interested, let's say you've got an itch. We tend to take something like an itch for granted. If you went up to someone on the street and said, "Do you know what an itch is?" they'd probably look at you very strangely and say, "Of course I know what an itch is."

But then when you look at something that you think you know, you realize, actually, I don't know. When I start to examine it, I actually don't know. And that curiosity powers the meditation. So it would be a very interesting project to try to pin it down. The closer you get to it, the more you can't find it. If you really drop beneath the conceptual level, can the itch survive?

Well, sensations rise and they fade. But what is it that's arising and fading? I just recommend we keep investigating. It can be quite interesting.

A student asked whether all experiences could be categorized in terms of the four elements. It is just a conceptual framework—it's not the actual experience. But yes, the Buddha would say that anything in the

realm of touch can be mapped in terms of the four Mahābhūta.

That's the same with respect to pain. You could spend days, weeks, months looking at pain. When you can break it up into its elemental qualities, one might ask: where's the pain? What happened? It was a concept.

This is an exercise in precision—aiming directly at what's actually there.

Precision in awareness is very important if you are practicing for the purpose of insight. As the retreat goes on, the more precise you can become with your awareness, the better.

Now, precision also requires a fair amount of energy. This is a high energy practice, exercise. I notice some people nodding off. Still early days in the retreat, but sometimes you go through periods of time, and sometimes it's a question of biorhythm.

For me, I wake up really slowly. When I'm doing a retreat, generally my best meditation time is about mid-afternoon through to early to mid-evening. That's when I'm at my most awake. So if I'm going to do really precise work, that's when I'm most likely to do it. Often the first sitting of the day, my meditation practice is to stay more or less conscious, more or less upright. That's my meditation practice. It's the best I can manage most of the time.

So depending on levels of energy, the nature of the practice changes. But where you can be precise, be precise. That precision stimulates mindfulness, concentration, energy, and it also stimulates the perception of impermanence. And the perception of impermanence is the gateway through which insight comes. So precision is very useful.

You notice how we're using the naming with this exercise? And it fits quite neatly. When you're being precise, it helps to name, to specify exactly what it is. So with Katie's example, oh there's an itch. So what is that? Here, using the elements. So which elements? So you're dropping the general concept, itch, and you're using a more precise concept—movement, hardness, whatever—to try to pinpoint, well what exactly is it? So you've got a higher degree of aim and accuracy allied with the name.

So the naming can be very useful for cultivating aim. That's essentially what it's for. And what name you use influences where you're sending the awareness. So be creative with the names. Name it as you feel it. And sometimes the name can be a question. Like, what is it? That also directs awareness to where you want to go. So the naming can be useful.

You notice that some things are obvious and some things are not obvious. As a general rule, you stick to the obvious. So if some aspect of experience is more clear to you than other aspects and you can hold it more readily in your awareness, that's what you work on. Because that helps stimulate the mindfulness and it gives you a sense of momentum.

So if there's some aspect of experience that you're simply not connecting with, forget it. Even if it's a hallowed, canonized and sanctified aspect of experience, like for example, breathing. If you can't find it or

if it's difficult to hold on to, just drop it. And go to something obvious like the hardness of the base of the body, for example.

So you look for what's obvious, what's clear, what you can find and hold easily, and you work on that, and then the mind will get stronger, calmer, clearer, and things will start to develop from there. So don't go after something more difficult.

And again and again, dropping beneath the concept to what is it actually. In other words, becoming more and more intimate with the experience. And this is really crucial. The further we go in this retreat, the more intimate we become with the experience. And that's always underneath our thoughts about it, our concepts of it, what's happening underneath there.

Finally, one last thing. Those of you who found movement clear... Is there a difference between movement and breathing? Or are they the same?

Different.

I had a pulse in my finger that had nothing to do with breathing." "And you stayed with that pulse?" "No, it was there. It didn't run away."

"Anyone else?"

"Breathing is definitely part of my movement—part of the movement. I had different sorts of rhythms going on, so it was one kind of rhythm."

So movement is a broader category, and breathing is a more specialized aspect of it. There's also different movement within breathing. I'm sure no one's missed that I'm a bit chesty at the moment. So within the breath there was the movement of the bubbles in the lungs. They're caused by the breath, but they're not the same thing. So you've got movement as a broader category, and inside that the breathing, and then within the breathing there's also movement, which is not the breathing.

"I can just feel—I can hear my heart and my chest, I can feel my heart and my chest pulsing."

So you get a sense of pulsation as well.

Tomorrow we're going to be working on breathing as a meditation object. But I just want to draw your attention to the question: what is the difference between breathing and air element? We'll pick that one up tomorrow morning when we work on breathing.

You notice that the most common elements used in meditation practices usually are air element and earth element—in other words, movement and touch. Let's say you're doing walking meditation. What have you got? You've got movement and you've got contact on the ground. Movement, touch. Sitting meditation: movement, breathing, touch, contact with the ground, the feel of the body. These two elements are the basic standbys for meditators.

Get to know the elements. Get to know the elemental qualities of the experience.

Any questions or comments before we close? Thank you.

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